

Social Change and Continuity in Renaissance Europe

The Popolo Grosso: Patronage, Social Status, and Political Power

For the noble and wealthy merchant-banker *popolo grosso* families, artistic patronage was a means of achieving and maintaining social status and political power in a society where there was a strict social hierarchy. In Florence, the economic prosperity of the city had enabled the merchant-banker families like the Medici to control the government. These newcomers were very eager to demonstrate that they belonged as a ruling class in a world of kings, princes, and popes. In addition, Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* stressed the importance of the cultured noble, one who appreciated the finer things in life like music, art, sculpture, and literature. Furthermore, civic humanism taught that the educated elite should involve themselves in public service. For these reasons then, during the Renaissance the upper class became avid patrons of artists, sculptors, musicians, and intellectuals. Commissioning a piece of sculpture which would be put on public display would not only beautify the city but would also enhance the reputation of the patron. Besides using the arts to promote their own interests, it is fair to say that most patrons were genuine lovers of the arts. The Medici, for instance, spent huge sums commissioning paintings and sculpture for the privacy of their own palace in Florence. Lorenzo de Medici was well versed in the classics and enjoyed private dinners with the humanist Pico della Mirandola.

There were two main systems of artistic patronage in Renaissance Italy. A patron could take an artist into his or her household and in return the artist would supply the patron's artistic needs. Or a patron could commission a single work from an artist and employ him until that work was finished. If the commissioned work was particularly complicated the artist could be on the patron's payroll for years. As well as individual patronage there was also corporate patronage. Guilds, monasteries, convents, and city councils frequently commissioned artists and sculptors. For instance, it was the Florence city council that commissioned Michelangelo to sculpt *David* which was then placed in the Piazza della Signoria, the main square in Florence where the Palazzo Vecchio (city hall), was located.

This trend was also present in Northern Europe where the New Monarchies, nobilities and wealthy bankers and merchants also embraced patronage. Henry VIII, for instance appointed the humanist Thomas More as his Lord Chancellor and granted a generous stipend to Erasmus. Francis I was made even more magnificent by Leonardo da Vinci.

During the Renaissance, therefore, a small, highly educated minority of literary humanists and artists created the culture of and for an exclusive elite. They cared little for the ordinary people, the *popolo minuto*.

Case Study in Patronage: The Medici Family of Florence

By 1434, a single family had emerged dominant in the city of Florence: the Medici.



Cosimo de' Medici was the patriarch of the family. As head of one of Europe's largest banks, he amassed immense wealth, and he used it to control Florence. Even though he himself never held any formal political office, he wielded influence through his "clients" who sat on the city council. These were men who were indebted to him for bank loans or other favors. Cosimo knew that, as Florence was a republic, he didn't have the hereditary power of a monarch. Therefore, he also used his wealth to win popularity with the people. He commissioned numerous works of painting, sculpture, and architecture. For instance, he funded the construction of Europe's first public library in the monastery of San Marco. He commissioned Donatello's *David* which introduced the idea of nude statues! He was the main supporter of Brunelleschi, and his prestige soared when the dome on Florence Cathedral was completed. At his death, Cosimo was lauded as "Father of his Country."

Cosimo's grandson, Lorenzo de' Medici, who took over as head of the family in 1467, continued Medici patronage. He commissioned works by Leonardo da Vinci, Botticelli, and Michelangelo, and he was a personal friend of the humanist Pico della Mirandola. Lorenzo's patronage of artists and scholars earned him the title, "Lorenzo the Magnificent."

In 1471 Lorenzo calculated that since 1434, his family had spent some 663,000 florins (approx. \$460 million in 2013) for charity, buildings and taxes. He wrote: "*I do not regret this, for though many would consider it better to have a part of that sum in their purse, I consider it to have been a great honor to our state, and I think the money was well-expended and I am well-pleased.*"

The Status of the Artist

During the Renaissance, the social status of the artist improved. Artists in the Middle Ages had been viewed as artisans – similar to masons and carpenters. On the other hand, the most talented Renaissance artists became highly paid celebrities. Lorenzo Ghiberti's salary of 200 florins a year for constructing the Baptistery's Gates of Paradise was not that much lower than the head of Florence city council. Moreover, at a time when a person could live in a princely fashion on 300 ducats a year, Leonardo da Vinci was making 2,000 annually. Michelangelo was paid 3,000 ducats for painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling. When the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, visited the studio of the famous Venetian artist, Titian, he even stooped to pick up the artist's dropped paintbrush! Renaissance artists were not only aware of their creative genius; they also boasted about it. They almost universally signed their works, and many of them incorporated themselves into their paintings. The German artist, Albrecht Dürer, went close to considering himself divine! Overall, for the artist, a lucrative career and social mobility were only possible with the backing of a patron. For instance, Michelangelo's training as a sculptor was funded by Lorenzo de Medici. While an apprentice, Michelangelo even lived in the Medici palace in Florence.

Was there a Renaissance for Women?

In the cities of Renaissance Italy, upper-class girls received an education similar to boys. With the aid of private tutors, young ladies studied the classics. Many read Greek as well as Latin, knew the poetry of Ovid and Virgil, and could speak one or two modern languages such as French or Spanish. In this respect, Renaissance humanism represented a real educational advance for women. In addition to a classical education, upper class girls also received some training in art and music appreciation and in dance. What were women to do with this education? They were to be gracious, affable, charming – in short, decorative. So although Renaissance women were better educated than their medieval counterparts, their education prepared them for the social functions of the home. An educated woman was supposed to know how to attract artists and intellectuals to her husband's home and how to grace her husband's household, whereas an educated man was supposed to know how to rule and participate in public affairs. Men, and men alone, belonged in the public sphere. Women belonged in the home.

If a wealthy woman became widowed, and if she could avoid remarrying, she had some chance of pursuing a literary or artistic career. One other avenue for a woman to pursue academics, was to become a nun and join a convent, thus forgoing marriage altogether. However, the number of female intellectuals was very small. In 16th century Italy, only about twenty-five women managed to have books published. No woman rose to the level

of Pico della Mirandola, Raphael, or Brunelleschi. The most famous female humanist was Christine de Pisan, who was born in Venice, but who spent most of her life in France. Her most widely-read book, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, highlighted the importance of women's contributions to society, and advised women how to cultivate useful qualities.

Was there a Renaissance for the Lower Classes?

The culture of the Renaissance was limited to those who were highly literate – effectively the nobility and wealthy middle class. Peasants living in small villages in the countryside, who comprised on average, about 85% of Europe's population, were untouched. The culture of the masses continued to center on religion, tradition, and superstition. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the high culture of the Renaissance and popular culture.

Religion played the greatest role in shaping the culture of Europe in the 1450s. For one thing, everybody believed in God and in the afterlife, whether they were Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, or Muslim. In fact, it would have been impossible for 15th century people to comprehend the concept of atheism. Religion provided all the answers to life's deepest questions. There were no other explanations for how the world worked, why we are here, where we came from, and what happens to us when we die. Each stage in a person's life was marked by his or her particular religion. Religious ceremonies marked one's birth, puberty, marriage, and death.

Festivals

Festivals usually had a religious basis though some people used these occasions to engage in heavy drinking, gambling and brawling. People from different social classes mixed together while participating in the various games and activities. Festivals served the important role of providing a break from the monotonous drudgery of life, especially for the lower classes. Religious festivals marked the cycles of the year. Lent was a period of forty days generally occurring during the months of February, March, and April. During this time, people were expected to lead good moral lives in preparation for the Easter celebration. The Lenten season began on Ash Wednesday when priests rubbed ashes on the foreheads of the faithful to remind them of their mortality. The day before Ash Wednesday was called Mardi Gras in France, Shrove Tuesday in England, or Carnival in the Mediterranean countries. On that day people really let their inhibitions run wild before entering into the bleak, restrictive Lenten season. People ate and drank as at no other time, tossing flour, eggs, and fruit at each other and playing games, and much more (a disproportionate number of babies were conceived during the festivities each

year!). Carnival also stood the world on its head, if only briefly. The poor acted out the misdeeds of the wealthy in elaborate plays. They also poked fun at the powerful in parades by dressing up as and spoofing the behavior of judges, nobles, and clergymen. Liberated, however briefly, from their station in life by festivity and disguise, they crowned their own “kings” and “queens” of Carnival. The other major religious festivals were Easter and Christmas. However, there were a multitude of saints’ feast-days that were also celebrated with merrymaking and days off work. For instance, the feast of Saint Firmin in Pamplona, Spain was celebrated by a parade of giant characters representing Christian knights and Moors, and the running of bulls through the streets.

Popular Folklore and Superstition

Storytellers kept oral traditions of popular culture alive at a time when most people were illiterate. The most accomplished storytellers passed on their tales during evening village gatherings. Many of these stories we know today as tales such as *Hansel and Gretel* or *Little Red Riding Hood*. (These folktales weren’t written down until the early 19th century). They were designed to teach lessons to young people. Many stories reflected the fatalism of societies in which most people died relatively young.

There was much of which to be afraid. People believed in magic and the presence of the supernatural on earth. By such views, sorcerers or saints could intervene between people and the bad luck that might befall them. Primitive healers were believed to stand between disease and survival. People believed that rubbing certain saints’ images could bring good fortune. When the wine harvest failed in some parts of France, it was customary for villagers to whip the statues of the saints who failed them. People believed that it was a good sign to encounter a deer; that a stork landing on a house assured its occupants of wealth and longevity; that meeting a white-robed monk in the morning was a bad omen, a black-robed one, a good omen; that a crow cawing over the house of an ill person meant death was on its way. Such beliefs helped most people cope with a world in which droughts, harvest failures, accidents, and well as a myriad of fatal illnesses, could bring personal and family catastrophe.

The belief in the supernatural translated into a belief that conjurers, “cunning folk”, and witches could determine earthly events. Many people in need covered their bases by turning to such people, as well as to God. Magic, it was commonly believed, might help expectant parents determine the sex of their child. Likewise, a cunning man might discover the identity of a thief by placing papers with names inside little clay balls; the guilty party’s name would be the first to unravel inside a bucket of water. If an accused murderer was forced to touch the body of the victim, it was believed that blood would rush from the corpse if he or she were guilty. Of course, the Church too believed in

supernatural power on earth. The priest performed a kind of magic every time he changed the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. The Church taught that prayers to certain saints and pilgrimages to certain shrines could gain God's aid to cure a particular illness or gain good fortune. The Church also taught about the presence of evil in the world in the form of Satan and his host of witches. These, too, could perform magic – black magic. Anybody who was not a member of the clergy and who claimed to have supernatural powers ran the risk of being branded a witch by the Church.

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The painting on the next page is titled *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* and was painted in 1559 by Pieter Bruegel the Elder who lived in the Netherlands (Northern Renaissance). The two sides of this time of year are symbolized by the inn (the merrymaking of Carnival) on the left and the church (the piety of Lent) on the right. In the foreground are two competing floats. The Carnival float has a fat man riding on a beer barrel wearing a pie on his head and holding a skewer of meat. The Lent float, being pulled by a monk and a nun, has a thin woman seated on an ordinary chair with an empty basket on her head. She holds two fish which was a traditional Lenten food. Various festivities are depicted throughout the painting.

In the center of the painting, with their backs to us, is a man wearing a hat with his arm around a woman. They are being led by a jester carrying a torch. On the woman's back is an unlit lantern. Art historians have interpreted this as Bruegel's commentary on how the lower classes were still led by ignorance and superstition, untouched by the light of humanism.



The Social Impact of the Rise of New Monarchies

As we have already studied, the rise of New Monarchies reduced the power of the nobility and the Church while benefitting the educated urban middle class. But what, if any, effect did they have on the lower classes? In short, increased taxes! The business of centralizing power was expensive and monarchs relied heavily on taxes. Peasants, who comprised about 85% of the population, were not educated or organized and so were an easy social group to tax. Other than paying higher taxes, peasants were only marginally impacted by the centralization of political power.

The Social Impact of Overseas Expansion

We have also studied how overseas expansion impacted the monarchies and nobilities of Spain and Portugal, the Catholic Church, wealthy merchant-bankers, and humanist intellectuals. But, again, what about the lower classes? Perhaps the biggest impact was the 16th century Price Revolution. The influx of vast quantities of silver from Spanish mines in the Americas combined with a naturally rising population (finally returning to pre-Black Death levels by the mid-16th century) created significant inflation. This affected the urban lower class and the rural lower class (peasants) in different ways.

Rising inflation at a time when the economies of European states were not growing very much meant that the wages earned by many urban lower class people bought far less food and clothes than before. In the countryside, peasants, who did not generally work for a wage, were affected in a different way. Because of inflation, their taxes and rents increased. Those who fell behind in their payments were often kicked off the land.

Records show that, as a result of the Price Revolution, poverty increased in the second half of the 16th century. The number of beggars wandering the streets and sleeping rough were a problem for town councils which alternated between providing some temporary relief and expelling them from the town. Some religious institutions (especially monasteries and convents) believed it was God's will that they help the poor. There was no "state" system of poor relief until the late 19th century. Due to the increase in poverty, there was a general decrease in family size as poor couples delayed marriage and limited the numbers of children they had.