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The Impact of Patronage on Contemporary Visual Arts

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The Impact of Patronage on Contemporary Visual Arts

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art.

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Julie McGuire and Dr. Tiffanie Townsend

ABSTRACT

Patronage is vital to the art world and the success and notoriety of its artists. From straightforward patronage during the Renaissance of the Medici Family, the independent artists of modernism, to contemporary crowdfunding, it is important to note the changes in the art world throughout history to truly understand how artists and patrons have grown and continue to evolve in our contemporary society. Considering how patronage has changed and adapted throughout history and understanding the influence it has, not only allows a deeper understanding of the art world but also the world's culture.

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I would like to dedicate my thesis in memory of my grandfather, Baba, whose love of art history and passion for life warmed my childhood and continues to inspire me each day.

Patronage plays an integral role in the history of our world. Patrons can be seen in many forms supporting the endeavors of people such as explorers of new worlds, inventors of new machines and medicines, composers of symphonies, and visual artists of history. While there are thousands of books and articles on the recipients of patronage, the patrons themselves are often more of a mystery in the historical record. Patronage is understood to be important in supporting those who need financial assistance, and a patron of the arts is most often the first to come to mind. However, patrons have not always played the most popular role in art history. Institutions, families and individuals who have filled the role of supporter were sometimes viewed as overbearing or impeding creativity. With Western art history in particular, there has always been a complicated relationship between artist and patron. Many artists throughout history are commonly seen through the stereotypical lens as “starving” and in need of financial assistance to create, while their creative passion most often does not make a profit until after their death. Without the financial assistance of his brother Theo, for example, Vincent van Gogh would not have succeeded artistically. Earlier in art history, if artists desired financial support from a wealthy merchant or the church, they were contracted to create specific subject matters or styles as defined by their patron. More recently in contemporary society, the British collector Charles Saatchi offered to pay Young British Artist, Damien Hirst, whatever he wanted to create anything he wanted. This resulted in Hirst’s famous tiger shark floating in a tank of formaldehyde piece titled, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*.¹ Therefore, the support of

¹ Figure 1: Hirst, Damien. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991.

individual or institutional patronage is often required for artists to succeed and continue doing what they love. The most significant change in Western patronage has been the shift from supporting artists through contracted commissions to supporting artists with complete and total creative freedom.

One of the first and largest patrons of the arts was the church. This relationship has always been somewhat controversial in art history because while the church supported artists, they were paying them to create specific artwork for their chapels or monasteries. Stepping back into the 15th century and the early days of patronage, artists were often unknown and, "... history only began regularly recording the names of the artists themselves around the time of the Renaissance."² While artists names were more commonly recorded, due to the primary support of the church, artwork during this time period focused on similar subject matters. For example, Figure 2 illustrates one of the most popular Italian Renaissance scenes, a Virgin and Child Enthroned.³ Giotto di Bondone was a painter and architect from Florence during the Late Middle Ages and worked during the Gothic/Proto-Renaissance period. Although Giotto's depiction of this subject was admired and more realistically rendered than his contemporaries at the time, there was little room for self-expression with the strict patronage of the church. Although each artist has a unique style, being supported first and then creating work limits not only the artist in their art process but also the public from experiencing a wider variety of art that represents both the artists and the culture of the day. Society is constantly changing

² Mann, Jon. "From Mesopotamia to 1980s New York, the History of Art Patronage in a Nutshell." *Artsy*. 06 Feb. 2016. *Artsy*. 19 Feb. 2019.

³ Figure 2: Giotto. *Virgin and Child enthroned, surrounded by angels and saints (Ognissanti Maestà)*, 1300-1305. The Uffizi, Florence.

due to the diversity of cultures around the world.⁴ It is not possible to retain the same methods while the world changes and adapts to the times. Patrons throughout art history have shown the importance of adaptability to this change with their approach to supporting artists. From Renaissance to Impressionism, artists begin to experience more creative freedom as patrons support them for their ideas and not just for their artistic skills.

It is the second half of the 19th century that provides a major shift in the relationship between artists and patron. The French Impressionists gained more creative freedom by painting what they wanted for themselves. In an attempt to reveal the bias of critics, some French painters banded together against the annual Academy Salon exhibition.⁵ They famously rejected the institutional restrictions of the Academy by holding their own exhibition instead. Named in reference to the rejection from the annual Academy Salon exhibition, artists in the first Salon des Refusés included Édouard Manet and his famously controversial work, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, and others such as Gustave Courbet and Paul Cézanne.⁶ The Salon des Refusés created “a certain sense of security and inspir[ed] a collaborative effort to an extent heretofore unknown in the history of independent French art,” a welcome relief from the strict, classical views of the Academy the Impressionists often faced in reaction to their avant garde approach to their artwork.⁷ The shift from religious and classical scenes to scenes of everyday life and

⁴ Swaim, Richard. “To Every Age Its Art, to Art Its Age.” *Journal of Arts Management, Law & Society*, vol. 24, no. 1, Spring 1994, p. 33. *EBSCOhost*.

⁵ Boime, Albert. “The Salon Des Refusés and the Evolution of Modern Art.” *The Art Quarterly* (1970): 411-26. Web. 19 Oct. 2016. Pg 412.

⁶ Figure 3: Manet, Édouard. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe (Luncheon on the Grass)*, 1863. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

⁷ Boime, Albert. “The Salon Des Refusés and the Evolution of Modern Art.” *The Art Quarterly* (1970): 411-26. Web. 19 Oct. 2016. Pg 416.

contemporary society of that time period has affected art dramatically. It is also reflected in artwork by the change in technique from smooth, blended surfaces to thicker paint application and visible brushstrokes.

Continuing through the history of art, there are an increase of different art periods and styles unfolding simultaneously as well as a transition from patronage dominated by institutions to individuals emerging as supporters. While patronage turns to more individuals or families, patrons become more focused in supporting a particular type of artist, whether that be by medium, art period or technique. There is also evidence of the artists themselves playing patron. An Impressionist painter, Gustave Caillebotte, “was utterly independent, ... , could do as he pleased with his considerable fortune, ... , [he] could paint what and how he wanted.”⁸ Caillebotte also used his wealth to support his friends—his fellow Impressionists. “It wasn’t until the 19th century, however, that artists could make works on their own time (and own dime) and hope that someone might purchase them,” whereas artists of the past were reliant on commissions to sell work in order to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads.⁹ Subject matter is one of the most evident examples of how the shift in patronage affected artists. Returning to Figure 2, the subject matter or depiction of the Virgin and Child is a religious scene common to the time of the Renaissance.¹⁰ However, if we look at a painting from

⁸ Morton, Mary G., George Shackelford T. M., and Gustave Caillebotte. *Gustave Caillebotte: The Painter's Eye*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 2015. Print. Pg. 124.

⁹ Mann, Jon. "From Mesopotamia to 1980s New York, the History of Art Patronage in a Nutshell." *Artsy*. 06 Feb. 2016. *Artsy*. 19 Feb. 2019.

¹⁰ Figure 2: Giotto. *Virgin and Child enthroned, surrounded by angels and saints (Ognissanti Maestà)*, 1300-1305. The Uffizi, Florence.

Impressionism, not only has the subject matter changed from religious to secular, but the figures depicted are engaged in everyday activities from portraits of family members at home to walking down city streets. Gustave Caillebotte's *Rue de Paris, temps de pluie* shown in Figure 4, is an exceptional example of an artist painting to paint in lieu of a commission.¹¹ This painting also shows the shift from predominantly religious scenes to scenes of common daily activities.

As complex and controversial as politics in the wide range of viewpoints shared by the population, patronage continues to be a topic of debate. From what constitutes a patron to whether or not institutions and individuals are using proper methods of support, the partnership between artists and their supporters continues to be a source of intrigue in the history of art. The word patron as defined by Merriam-Webster is, "one that uses wealth or influence to help an individual, an institution, or a cause."¹² While some critics or artists themselves may argue how helpful all patrons can be, this basic definition shows how patronage is the act of a patron sharing their skills or status in society with others in whatever means they view fit. As patronage shifts away from church or institutional to individual, there is a rise of art dealers and gallery owners to fill this role. In the case of the art world, patronage has seen many different approaches to the practice of patronage as institutions and individuals use their influence in a way that either benefits themselves, the artist or both. Typically, the most successful of stories include a mutual benefit while those benefits vary from case to case. Art dealers and gallery

¹¹ Figure 4: Caillebotte, Gustave. *Rue de Paris, temps de pluie (Paris Street; Rainy Day)*, 1877. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

¹² "patron." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2019. Web. 1 March 2019.

owners enter as supporters of the arts and take a personal interest in the well-being of the artists they support. A successful Italian-American contemporary art dealer, Leo Castelli influenced the 20th century world with his unique approach to patronage that continues to influence art dealers and patrons today. Castelli discovered what would become one of his most successful artists, American painter, Jasper Johns, thanks to his relationship with Robert Rauschenberg. During his first interaction with Johns and his art, “[Leo Castelli] was impressed with the creativity, and simplicity behind the work”.¹³ Jasper Johns is now well-known, among other things, for his depiction of the American flag. He understood the needs of the artists he worked with and, “...his insistence on giving each artist a stipend every month, regardless of whether their work was hot at the moment, or if they were regularly making work at all,” shows how patronage has evolved and that Castelli recognized artists as equals.¹⁴ Where the relationship between artist and patron become tricky is when one side or the other feels as though they are not being treated or compensated well. Marjorie Garber, Shakespeare specialist and professor of English, argues that “The modern patronage system has more to do with advertising and creating cultural nationalism than supporting experimental creativity.”¹⁵ Demand from or for dealers and patrons can be overwhelming at times as the young neo-Expressionist, Jean Michel Basquiat encountered. While he had many offers and had been supported by dealer Annina Nosei and then joined another, Mary Boone, “the dealer he wanted, Leo

¹³ “Jasper Johns and his paintings.” Jasper Johns - paintings, biography, quotes of Jasper Johns. 19 Mar. 2019.

¹⁴ Freeman, Nate. “Why Leo Castelli Paid his Artists Even When They Weren’t Making Work.” *Artsy*. 31 July 2018. *Artsy*. 25 Oct. 2019.

¹⁵ Dearing, Stewart. “Cultural critic takes on modern-day art patronage.” *Brown Daily Herald*. 03 Nov. 2006. 17 Mar. 2019.

Castelli, rejected him as too troublesome.”¹⁶ This is where modern and contemporary patronage succeeds and the institutional patronage of the past struggled. John S. Harris, of Indiana State University, discusses in his article, “The Government and Arts Patronage,” how “Artists’ enthusiasm and professional dedication may be subjected to severe strain and their determination to achieve creative excellence falter.”¹⁷ If artists are viewed only as art-producing machines, it is no wonder they rebel against their supporters.

Having the ability to shape the world does not rest solely with inventors or artists, but instead with anyone willing to make a difference or impact in their community. Even artists as well-renowned as Claude Monet or Salvador Dali started out as a young and inexperienced and many artists only receive recognition after their deaths. The public has a limited understanding of the time, work, and supplies that go into an artwork which is one of the many reasons why patrons are so valuable to the art world. Castelli, with his emphasis on creating and maintaining a relationship with his artists, influenced his fellow gallerists in what is referred to as, “the Leo Castelli Model, ...providing [the artist]...with money for a studio and art-making supplies, and tracking his market to make sure prices don’t get too inflated.”¹⁸ He wanted to make sure that the artists he supported had both the space and material to create as well as the opportunity to sell their work to the public. Another contemporary patron and gallerist, Charles Saatchi, is best recognized for his

¹⁶ Sawyer, Miranda. "The Jean-Michel Basquiat I knew..." *The Guardian*. 03 Sept. 2017. *Guardian News and Media*. 17 Mar. 2019.

¹⁷ Harris, John S. "The Government and Arts Patronage." *Public Administration Review*, vol. 33, no. 5, Sept. 1973, p. 407. *EBSCOhost*.

¹⁸ Freeman, Nate. "Why Leo Castelli Paid his Artists Even When They Weren't Making Work." *Artsy*. 31 July 2018. *Artsy*. 25 Oct. 2019.

discovery of a group of artists referred to as the Young British Artists, or YBAs. In Saatchi's method of patronage, he rarely gives interviews thus remaining a mystery to the public.¹⁹ By doing so, Charles Saatchi is able to keep the focus on the artists he supports. Saatchi's non-traditional methods are not without its critics or conflicts. While he discovered and helped jumpstart his career, Damien Hirst once described his patron as "a shopaholic."²⁰ Patrons are often criticized by the public and those they support. For example, critics have argued that "Upper-class patrons celebrated their own accomplishments by using their wealth to support the arts."²¹ While some patrons may be more influenced to collect and support first for themselves and then to support the creative minds of the world, there is no doubt despite the idiosyncrasies of individuals, the necessity and impact a solid support has on the life and creative freedom of an artist.

The misconception about patronage as an overbearing, hindrance on creativity comes from a dated viewpoint of how it was during times such as the Renaissance. While artists were being supported, they were closer to contractors who were hired for a specific job with detailed directions to follow and left to fend for themselves once the job was complete. Patronage is still very much alive today but has taken a different approach or method of supporting artists. Artists are now able to create with more freedom and less backlash than experienced in earlier time periods. This shift is seen in a variety of ways from who plays the role of patron to how the patron or patrons are supporting. Some

¹⁹ Lewis, Ben. "Charles Saatchi: The Man Who Reinvented Art." *The Observer*. Guardian News and Media, 09 July 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2018.

²⁰ Jeffries, Stuart. "What Charles did next." *The Guardian*. 06 Sept. 2006. Guardian News and Media. 26 Apr. 2018.

²¹ Mann, Jon. "From Mesopotamia to 1980s New York, the History of Art Patronage in a Nutshell." *Artsy*. 06 Feb. 2016. *Artsy*. 19 Feb. 2019.

artists require monetary assistance as their projects can be costly with the amount and type of materials needed. Other artists need help getting their name out to the public through publicity which an affluent member of society can provide with their numerous contacts. Patronage not only helps the artists of cultures all around the world, but also the public who views the art. The support of creative minds impacts society by encouraging artists to express themselves through art, document the history of their society through creative pieces and style changes, and by doing so educates people of the world around them years after both artist and patron are gone.



Figure 1: Hirst, Damien. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991.



Figure 2: di Bondone, Giotto. *Virgin and Child enthroned, surrounded by angels and saints (Ognissanti Maestà)*, 1300-1305. The Uffizi, Florence.



Figure 3: Manet, Édouard. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*), 1863.

Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Figure 4: Caillebotte, Gustave. *Rue de Paris, temps de pluie* (*Paris Street; Rainy Day*), 1877.

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