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What Did the Renaissance Patron Buy?

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# *What Did the Renaissance Patron Buy?*

by CREIGHTON E. GILBERT

*This paper is generated by the widespread opinion that Renaissance patrons usually kept creative control over works they commissioned. It analyzes two of the few instances usually cited and adds many more, some involving single works and some implicating a wide spectrum. A considerable range emerges. At one end artists, not only famous ones, can be deferred to as better experts on how themes are shown. At the other, patrons retain tight control of such unique themes as their family histories. A conclusion speculates on possible reasons for the strength of this opinion, in view of its fairly limited basis.*

. . . the absurdity so current in romantic art history, of taking it for granted that it was the painter or sculptor who was responsible for the subject matter of the work. The employer . . . gave his orders as he would to a carpenter, tailor or shoemaker. The artist could be creative and personal to the extent of his natural and acquired capacity, but always within the conditions imposed by the person who gave the order.

—Bernard Berenson<sup>1</sup>

PATRONAGE STUDY IS AN active subcategory of current work in art history. A 1994 issue of a journal devoted to it cites recent conferences on the subject in Washington, Melbourne, and Hamburg.<sup>2</sup> It postulates that the reasons for the subjects of works of art are clarified when we have detailed knowledge of a patron's interests. Berenson is an interesting advocate for this approach because his own work is very different. It is part of the social history of art, which in a pure form (probably never actuated) might treat the object of art as an item of production and exchange, much as wool textiles might be treated in the case of Florentine merchants. More commonly, the work is viewed as a product of two energies in which the artist articulates, by rendering shapes, the message assigned by the patron. This most often makes the patron the more interesting figure, as one sees in the greater intensity of analysis of his part. A difficulty — which seems generally understood but, regrettably, little articulated — is the uniqueness of each work of art, unlike a bolt of cloth, so that with

<sup>1</sup>Berenson, 254.

<sup>2</sup>Bullard, 183.

each commission the two persons concerned address a new problem. Hence the social history of art seems less successful than other social histories in building up findings about large trends seen in objects, except when it focuses on popular production, mass art, or to use a new term assigning more prestige to it, "low art." Yet when, as is more frequent, the social history of art deals with what investigators consider aesthetically admirable, and they have to investigate all patrons, the information about them may indeed not be much trouble to collect, but is often harder to connect with the works they bought.

For Italian Renaissance painting and sculpture, the chief overt source of patron desires is in contracts, which are their purchase orders. Collections of these have been published in books on art and society, notably about fifty precis selected by John Larner and about twenty-five full texts by David Chambers.<sup>3</sup> This material seems disappointing. Meyer Schapiro, the notable social historian of art, found that Chambers's cases rarely extended beyond specifying pigments, sizes, and delivery dates — quite like what we might have found for bolts of cloth, and unchanging for most items in a given medium, in this case movable paintings.<sup>4</sup> The one variant in each contract is the subject matter, but it too is limited to a standard formula such as "Saint Jerome" in the case of a figure, or for a narrative "The Adoration of the Magi," i.e., a short title of the same kind that today we adopt for captions under the illustrations in art history books. The one further specification found fairly often is the relative placing of such elements, to the right or left of others or the like. Because we are much interested in the individual differences between one Adoration of the Magi and another, and in our present context postulate patron control over those differences, such contracts are of little help, nor do other, rarer, documents often do more. Hence it has become usual in patronage studies to turn to looking at the works, noting special distinctions of props, gestures, or facial expressions, and then assigning these to patron instructions.

Because there seems little evidence for this, one might question the foundation of these studies. The general lack of any statement of theory by social historians of art is a further difficulty. A rare presentation of one theory by Leopold Ettlinger is thus welcome, the more so in that it appears in a well-qualified study of a particular monument. He found that it was "nothing unusual" for patrons to deter-

<sup>3</sup> Chambers, *passim*; Larner, chap. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Schapiro, 227-38.

mine imagery “down to details.”<sup>5</sup> His book is based on the view that the work he discusses — the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel walls — was determined so as to propagandize for a political policy of the pope through unusual detailed features. That Ettliger wrote just as the current style of social art history was emerging may have made him more explicit. He had no contract to cite, but others who do describe the formulas about pigments and so forth as establishing “extremely detailed” “assertion of control.”<sup>6</sup> If what the contracts require is indeed being taken as the main basis for such controls, their degree of detail does seem to leave a lot uncontrolled. Berenson’s formula matches the contracts better, if they are taken to assign to the “creative or personal contribution” everything but titles. Schapiro, while also calling these contracts “minutely detailed,” added that with respect to the “taste of the time” the patron “respected the artist’s judgment,” not only in styles but in the “beliefs and values of the age.” If so — and the contracts seem in harmony — patrons diminish in interest as to art history, and the most promising focus of social art history would seem to be artists. A sympathetic discussant of the present investigation proposes to define the “current art historical assumptions on this question: . . . the patron determines the iconography of the given work” while the artist is in charge of “style and presentation.” One may accept this but still see a problem: can one separate the two roles where iconography shades into presentation? How far is the patron’s assignment of a title determinant of the image? If we do not agree that a title constitutes “detailed control,” is there a basis for deciding who usually controlled the details? This question is the theme here.

To continue with Ettliger’s case study, his hypothesis is that besides the literal theme of the lives of Moses and Christ, with its traditional message of prophecy fulfilled, the Sistine frescoes also argue for the pope’s objection to the conciliarist movement and his assertion of papal supremacy. Lacking documentary basis, Ettliger finds support, as indicated, in the differences between these frescoes and earlier ones on the same subjects. He supports the assignment of these differences to that cause by showing that the pope had this viewpoint, and on two points of broader art historical theory. One is that the details so explained have too much theological sophistication to

<sup>5</sup> Ettliger, 32.

<sup>6</sup> Humfrey, 96, 138. See also Larner, 330, who calls such a list “very precisely determined.”

have been within the artist's capabilities; hence the patron must have introduced them, quite likely assisted by a specialist from theology or humanism. That the artist would have been unable to master such things is likely enough, but the theory may be lacking when it allows only one other possible provider. Artists with unusual commissions are on record in the period as having called in their own advisors, thus diminishing patron control; this will be discussed below. The second point of theory is that we must have accepted the scholar's particular reading of the extra messages in the monument, yet consensus in such cases is rather rare among scholars, while the proposals are very numerous. To be sure, rival interpretations by others tend to involve equally sophisticated explications, yet when all readings remain less than firm, there is room to debate their common postulate.

Ettlinger offers a further more mundane support for his underlying postulate in his phrase "nothing unusual," i.e., that there are enough known cases of patronal input of complex detail to make it plausible when not recorded. In fact he cites just two cases as firm; the same two recur in other scholars' comments, raising the question whether these (even if solid) are the norm or oddities. Chambers's set of twenty-five contracts includes only one with such complexities, and it is one of Ettlinger's two. This, the contract between Isabella d'Este and Perugino, will be explored below. Ettlinger's other case, probably the most often cited of all, is the letter of 1424 that Leonardo Bruni wrote to a patron group, a major guild, offering a program for a work it was commissioning: the famous bronze Doors of Paradise of the Baptistery of Florence executed by Lorenzo Ghiberti. However, as Ettlinger does not add, the doors did not make use of this program. Within the general theme of the Old Testament a number of different stories were shown. Richard Krautheimer, in his fine book on Ghiberti, noted the discrepancy, but at once added as "likely" that the patrons would have turned to another humanist, since that was "established custom."<sup>7</sup> However, he cites no prior cases, nor is any known to me; perhaps it was a matter of general belief. He does cite, very suitably, involvement of two other humanists in this same project.<sup>8</sup> One record, probably reliable though known only from an eighteenth-century description of it, reports that the patrons went to Bruni only after being dissatisfied with "some learned men's" scheme for the stories; this might mean several pro-

<sup>7</sup> Krautheimer, 171.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 359ff.

grams or one by a group. The other record is a letter of 1424 from one Florentine humanist to another, calling the patrons hasty. "I hear they have consulted Leonardo Bruni, and from that brilliant start I guess other things." His reaction has plausibly been called sarcastic. This writer did not know of the probes before the one to Bruni mentioned in the first record. We have a series of consultations that were unsuccessful. They may represent custom, but the unique records may instead match the unique status of the doors, a monument of extraordinary cost, visibility and prestige.

One further record claims to name the inventor of the program that was used. Ghiberti writes in his memoirs for his son and collaborator that he was "given a free hand to do the door in whatever way I thought."<sup>9</sup> It is agreed that the claim means the iconography (because other factors were consistently in the artist's control in any case, and so are not mentioned by him), but Krautheimer rejected it as false. He points as his basis to Ghiberti's errors in the description of the doors that follows, but this argument seems less strong when one reflects that it would with equal force prove he did not execute them, as he did. To stipulate humanist advisors is not unreasonable, but we know from Ghiberti's other writings that he himself sought out such persons, whose information on minor classical texts and on technical problems he then copied. If one of them offered him a program, the important difference for us, as against one obtained by the patrons, would be that it would come not as an order but a proposal which he could manipulate quite freely, choosing what he thought workable.

If he did on the other hand receive a program from the patrons, the Bruni letter is our only good evidence for what it would have been like. It turns out to be just like the contracts, made up of a list of titles only. One line at the end, however, points to providing more details and symbolism. Bruni there first sets up an interesting theoretical distinction between two factors desired in good art, "pleasure in beautiful design and significant meaning"; — which sound rather like the more recent "form and content." Assigning these to two producers, he ends: "I would like to be near whoever does the design, to have him adopt every meaning that the story carries."

The formulation "more details later" recalls clauses in some contracts providing that artists would later get more instructions. Though Larner exaggerates in saying they are found "often,"<sup>10</sup> he and

<sup>9</sup> Ghiberti, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Larner, 330.

others have reasonably found in them a support for the existence of detailed instructions despite their absence from the contracts. They hardly ever survive, and may generally have been verbal as Bruni implies. Yet it is also notable that outside the contracts they would not have bound the artist with any of the legal force present in the case of the pigments and schedules, and one must ask whether, unlike us, patrons found them a less important factor.

Only two such texts are known to me. One is a supplement to Sassetta's contract for his great Franciscan altarpiece of 1439, and Banker in publishing it rightly pointed out that it fills this gap.<sup>11</sup> The contract alluded to it, noting that the artist must paint "those stories and figures as specified to him by the priors and friars, as more fully contained in the same instrument of agreements." It may then have had contractual force, and that might explain its rare survival. Further reinforcing it, the contract notes that the friars, wishing to "declare" the figures and stories to be painted, have read over the list and confirm that the artist "is held to and must" (*teneatur et debeat*) paint these same ones in the indicated places.

However, the writing turns out not to be what all this might suggest. It reports first that two friars have been delegated by the rest to arrange the stories and figures "in the way that seems good to us and to the master together" (*si come pare a noi e al maestro insieme*). The artist's duty is not to the patron's say-so, as the contract alone would indicate — and that is usually all we have — but to the agreement between them.

The text's sixteen clauses then specify the images and relevant location of the work, the Virgin Mary and forty-one saints, but all but three of the clauses once again are limited to titles and names. Thus it does not extend patronal control at all beyond what contracts normally provide, as has been suggested in the absence of any such documents.

Of the three more special clauses, two involve the front and back predellas. The one on the back was devoted to a local figure in San Sepolcro, the Blessed Ranieri. We are given no titles for the scenes in his life, contrary to the procedure used in the case of Saint Francis in another clause. Instead, the friars will send them later (*ve manderemo*), so that, uniquely, this decision is postponed to a third phase. It will be suggested below that this happened hardly by coincidence in the case of the least familiar themes. If they then sent him the same

<sup>11</sup> Banker, 11-58.

kind of instructions as for the Saint Francis stories, they would again have been titles only. The second exceptional clause, for the predella with Christ's passion, provides only for choosing the most devout stories, or, one might say, those most likely to induce devotion ("quelle che sono piu devote"). Here the absence of titles cannot be explained as in the preceding case by unfamiliarity. Because the text specifies the entirety of what the painter is obligated to do, not to be supplemented unless so provided, there seems to be only one inference as to where the responsibility lay for choosing the themes, i.e., with the artist. Even if logical, this may seem counterintuitive. Yet it is vividly supported by the discussion of "devout" imagery by Francesco Datini in 1390-91, to be discussed shortly, and within this same text by the third unusual clause. This is the very first one, providing that the Virgin and Child are to be adorned with angels in the way the master thinks best ("come al maestro parra meglio"). Besides assigning a decision to the artist affirmatively, this is the only clause that extends from titles to the way a figure is treated, in an enriching way, and the two factors seem to go together well. It is the more striking because it involves the one most prominent and holy of the images in the work for the friars; the same occurs in the second and last such supplement to a contract known to me.<sup>12</sup>

Besides such supplementary papers (conventionally described by Larner as "provided by the patron and which the artist is to follow") and the humanist instructions most often exemplified by the Bruni letter, one other support was noted above for assigning "detailed" control of themes to the patron. This was Ettlinger's proposal of a political subtext for the frescoes of the Sistine walls, as an instance of sophisticated symbolic intent. Here again, while no record of the period seems to evoke that approach, a contemporary text seems to place quite a different slant on it. This is a letter to the patron, Pope Sixtus IV, not available when Ettlinger wrote, dedicating to him a translation of a classical work. It pauses to praise the pope at much length for building the chapel, whose size, quantity of tapestries, gold, and marble make "viewers fall into wonderment." The copious and beautiful religious decorations, representing the "two laws," show balanced figures full of beauty and the felicity of art, i.e., professional skill. The brushwork makes them seem to live, with infinite lines skillfully placed, appropriate colors, everything that shows perfect art

<sup>12</sup> Gilbert, 1995, 162-70.



of painting. The survey, here reduced to a small precis, concludes with the rich floor.<sup>13</sup>

The subject occupies the single phrase *utriusque legis*, correctly noting how the Old and New Testaments are paired. That is their literal title, without other levels or ingenuity of symbolism. Without those, the text indeed might be said to address only one aspect of the work; instead, the theme has a very small part in what makes one praise the pope for ordering it. This seems significant in that the writer, at the time, had been one of the pope's two private secretaries for two years. Proposing to flatter him, he must be allowed to have known how to do that, and his text is thus as good a candidate as one could ever ask to represent what the pope was proud of asserting here: he had commissioned excellent art. A nice support for this deduction exists in the next earliest comment on this fresco cycle, well known but usually dismissed as a trivial joke. Vasari's life of Cosimo Rosselli, one of the team who painted these frescoes, assigns more than a quarter of his space to the way the pope reacted to them.<sup>14</sup> The pope had promised a prize to the painter whose work he would judge the best; among other things he was distinguishing among their individual products. Rosselli, Vasari explains, was unhappily conscious of being the least good among the colleagues (Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Perugino) and resorted to compensating with lavish gold leaf. He ended up winning, confirming the earlier praise for richness as a primary form of art criticism.

To sum up so far, support for detailed patronal control of themes and other factors of commissioned art seems to have had three bases, the hypothesized learned advisor, the contract supplement, and the sophisticated meaning. Examples brought forward as especially strong by proponents were considered for each. Enquiry, however, suggests instead more active roles by the artists than postulated (Ghiberti's memoir, the Sassetta clauses) or a far stronger concern with the artist's accomplishment by the patron (Sixtus's secretary). Because the proponents' own examples generated these negative results for the formula (the one other most frequent citation, of Isabella d'Este, will emerge below) one might conclude that it is not to be maintained, but that would be thin at best. What follows is an assemblage of lively accounts of patron-artist relationships in the period, evoking not a simple formula but a nuanced range, specifically for iconogra-

<sup>13</sup> Monfasani, 9-18.

<sup>14</sup> Vasari, 3:444-46.

phy of painting and sculpture. Although these will be presented in approximate chronological order, it may be underlined that the passage from Trecento to Cinquecento seems not to mark any big changes, and it has seemed more helpful at times to group the accounts by other criteria. *How* patrons did their ordering shows more variety than permits a summary, from market strolls to files of correspondence, but it will be argued that there is a rather better definition of *what* they preferred to obtain.

Some of the simplest, and early, references match the case of Sassetta's predella of Ranieri. In 1407 Spinello Aretino contracted in the normal way to paint the life of Pope Alexander III in the town hall of Siena. The pope had been born in the town, and this was a new theme, but the images were in most cases reducible to people kneeling before rulers and the like. However, for a sea battle the patrons voted that Spinello should use "the paper that Betto di Benedetto provided (*commodavit*)."<sup>15</sup> Much the same circumstances had arisen in 1335 when Pietro Lorenzetti was working on an altarpiece for the Siena cathedral, and the committee paid for having a saint's life translated for the artist. The need for such help, Martin Davies remarked, is not surprising, because "the Bollandists themselves have confessed that they knew practically nothing" of this saint.<sup>16</sup> In both cases special descriptive texts helped the artist face an unfamiliar text for one part of a job, and the patrons had to take steps to include this theme, as with Ranieri. To be sure, patron input here is hardly different from proposing a relatively uncommon Bible text, which the artist would also go and read. The difference is between that uncommon text and the rest of his project where evidently he did not need anything similar, to judge by these documents. The latter case is, by extension, articulated in a contract of 1461 for Benozzo Gozzoli to paint saints with their "suitable and usual" costumes and "usual decorations."<sup>17</sup> Instructions go no further, because what is usual is evidently known to the artist already, as regular professional information. To extrapolate from the Ranieri type of report to the view that figures generally were "very precisely determined" by patrons does not seem justified.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Milanesi, 1854, 2:33.

<sup>16</sup> Davies, 234.

<sup>17</sup> Ricci, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Larner, 330.

A much richer earlier record illuminates the “devout” clause in Sassetta’s contract. This is a set of letters of 1390–91 from the very wealthy merchant of Prato, Francesco Datini, to a friend in Florence who acted as his business agent there.<sup>19</sup> It offers the give-and-take of discussion about ordering a painting that would otherwise have occurred orally, as will be seen in a few later cases too. We have Datini’s side in his own words and also when the agent quotes him back to himself (including phrases from letters that do not survive) and we have the artist’s side also reported by the agent. On 22 December 1390, the agent tells Datini that his request to get a painting of Our Lord was too indefinite; did he want Him on the cross or in some other image? The artist Datini wanted is out of town, he adds, and he suggests another whom he had used himself. He reports the arrangements he had made with the latter, which once again were for titles, dimensions, and prices. A week later he reports that this painter has advised the Pietà as a theme, that is, “our Lord emerging from the tomb with Mary at his side,” and names a price to include gold leaf. Finally he notes that the artist advised including some saints, and so he asks Datini to name any particular saints he wishes. This matches the well-established pattern in which saints in paintings are the particular patrons of patrons, so that the provenance of otherwise similar Madonnas may be inferred through them; indeed one may reasonably say that a choice of saint would not seem likely to be left to an artist even if other themes were.

Datini’s reaction comes to us through the agent’s next letter, which begins: “I have absorbed what you say about your little painting, that it ought to be painted with devout and pious figures” (*divote e pietose*) so as to stimulate the viewer’s pious feelings. Indeed, the agent observes, Datini might need this more than others. Meantime he has placed the order, adopting the Pietà as the theme, as the artist had recommended. Yet two months later he has to report that the work has not started. The excuse by the artist is that the figures were too many for the small panel (the undisputed authority of the artist on adequate size in relation to number of figures will reappear). However, the artist was not being truthful, for he had agreed to the same arrangement; in reality, he was focusing on other jobs. Still, this might be to the good, the agent points out, for it would allow rethinking the plan. He brings up a possible Crucifixion again because

<sup>19</sup> Piattoli, 231ff.

then the figures could be larger in scale, and he repeats the request for names of desired saints.

Datini failed to note the real reason for the delay, as the agent next points out, for he focused exclusively on the idea of reopening the decision on the subject and on being asked to choose himself. This makes him angry, and so he cancels the whole order "because the painter does not know how to arrive at a devout theme." He ignores, of course, the request to choose some saints. The agent, instead of canceling, waited a while and then asked again about the saints. This time Datini's irritated response complained that the agent had not shopped among artists enough; plainly he supposed that others would have satisfied his demand to choose the subject. Yet Datini now did name some saints (no less than six), this time annoying the artist, who commented that Datini "wants the whole procession." The agent writes that he and the artist together will cope in settling the best choice of saints. The records stop there.

The painting thus comprised a center, a Passion scene, proposed by the artist, and side saints, picked by the patron after some urging. The role of the artist was initiated by him and the patron expected this, assuming too that other artists would do the same. Having a good proposal for a subject is part of the artist's professional service, for he knows these things better. So in the Sassetta supplement the patrons supply the list of saints and the artist has to decide what the "devout" passion scenes will be. The patron's control only appears in the ironic form, in Datini's case, of demanding that the artist decide on pain of losing the work.

Art historians seem not to have taken account of the Datini letters, but the historian Lerner has commented on them in a different aspect. Datini, as a businessman, sought someone to get his job done "without fuss," so that his own "religious duty" would be taken care of, and it involved no "enthusiasm" about art.<sup>20</sup> This is reasonable, and suggests that other merchants may have thought similarly. The artist's important role does not here relate to admiration of an aesthetic kind; indeed Datini did not even know who the artist was. We are still in a medieval pattern when the work is viewed not as art but as a vehicle for prayer. We should then evidently avoid the frequent impression that a free and independent role for the artist goes hand in hand with a status for him as an artistic creator; it happens without that.

<sup>20</sup>Lerner, 313-14.

Although documents from this period are sparse, this case is not isolated. The earliest I have encountered is from 1375, when the first recorded commission for Spinello Aretino was arranged — again not involving a famous artist.<sup>21</sup> The patron in Arezzo is a confraternity, functioning, as was common, as executor of a will. The confraternity commissions a set of frescoes for a chapel, and assigns themes in title form for three wall areas, with a Madonna of Mercy, a Stigmatization of Saint Francis, and a Saint Anthony, presumably the Franciscan one. The artist is then to paint four more Franciscan subjects “as he may wish to imagine” (“pro ut volet concepire”), thereby completing the wall surfaces. Above, presumably in the vault and lunettes, he is to do the four Evangelists, an unspecified Passion scene, and another one also “pro ut volet concepire.” Seemingly not taken into account by art historians since its publication in 1917, this document has received brief attention recently in the study of wills of this period by the historian Samuel Cohn, who analyzes all surviving wills (a total of 3,389) up to 1425 in six central Italian towns, and to our unusual good fortune reports how many mention a painting, 121. Cohn divides the wills by subperiods, and we learn that the paintings are noted without any subject in twenty to fifty percent of the cases, depending on the subperiod; the rest have simple titles, usually the Madonna.<sup>22</sup> In addition, he reports that “detailed” instructions sometimes appear, but these turn out to be limited to the requests for a figure to be placed to the left or right of another that we have seen before.

It seems a plausible view that a patron who was concerned at any time to give detailed instructions would do so in his will. He might well not use the document to present points of meaning or poses, but these are already precluded when no theme is given, and exceptional when it is the Madonna. Thus the quantitative data here tends to negate the idea that patrons commonly wanted to call for these.

With no instructions for themes in wills, their selection would fall on heirs or executors. This inference seems to be what leads Cohn to call attention to the document of 1375, a rare token of what an executor then did. It seems to fit the expectation that such per-

<sup>21</sup> Gamurrini, 88-97.

<sup>22</sup> Cohn, 1, 247, 250-65. Somewhat similarly, an order for a painting in a Florentine will of 1425 specifies just two details, the saint and the artist to be hired; Ladis, 378-79. A Florentine will of 1467, still closer, asks that a painting under the testator's tomb should show *illud quod videtur Appollonio pictori*; Kent, 246-47.

sons' involvement with making these choices would be even less than the testator's. If they did not decide, the next in line — and the last — would be the artist, and in this case that happened. It seems worth noting that Cohn's material shows no correlation between a testator's wealth and tendency to choose a theme; the distribution is random.

A similar role for the artist has been noted by Larner in a 1406 series of commissions in the City Hall of Siena.<sup>23</sup> In the first, the painter Taddeo di Bartolo was told by the civic committee to paint the chapel "with those figures . . . and in the manner and form which will seem right to him (*eidem videbitur*) for the honor of our commune and the adornment of the chapel." The point that the goal is honor, and the painter is the judge of how to gain it, will reappear. The next year he was told to destroy a Coronation of the Virgin above the altar and do new paintings, as would seem to him to be better suited ("ut sibi melius videbitur convenire"). On the other hand, he next was assigned named saints, one of whom is to be "in the place where he was" — i.e., the refreshing of an old image. In still a third variant, a work was commissioned in 1413 on a theme to be decided on by two of them as a subcommittee; they neither left it to Taddeo nor were themselves much concerned. Honor did not seem to arise from subject matter.

Larner calls the first case, with choice by the painter, "very rare," the more easily perhaps in that he had not noted the similar one when discussing Datini's painting. He suggests that an unusual event in Siena triggered it — an imminent papal visit requiring "particularly speedy completion." Indeed the visit was imminent, but it is not obvious how the open subject would save time. Southard also judges the papal visit to be "perhaps" the explanation, but adds that the assignment of "considerable freedom" to the artist may be a "too literalistic interpretation," as it does not mention any verbal agreements.<sup>24</sup> Yet the contract, unlike the Sassetta one, does not provide for further instructions, leaving it the sole agreement in force. It is hard to see how this freedom could be any sort of "interpretation" of the document, which calls for it directly, and indeed the label "literalistic" seems to accept that the contract really says this. The above suggests a reluctance to accept that this sort of thing happened, as with Krautheimer.

<sup>23</sup> Larner, 331; his unnamed source is Milanese, 1854, 2:27-30.

<sup>24</sup> Southard, 322ff., especially 327. This formulation recurs; see below, note 142 and related text.

Here, as with Datini and in the Arezzo chapel, thematic decisions are split between patron and artist. Datini, similar to a buyer today of an unfamiliar item like a computer, expects helpful counsel from the maker. Spinello's patrons seem to have soon used up what they knew of Franciscan subjects, and rightly assumed the painter would know some more. It is hardly strange that a painter who could not do this would seem incompetent. In this light Ghiberti's boast of choosing themes is not implausible. The very indications of enquiries by his patrons of humanists tell us their own views were not firm; after that, the question whether they got the solution from a humanist or an artist seems a slighter cultural distinction than the previous form of the question.

Ghiberti worked in the context of a shifting emphasis, where art as well as the devout was a factor, according to a brief exploration by Belting.<sup>25</sup> This artist was claiming status, as actively indicated by his writings and his two self-portraits. The point extends further in the perhaps surprising case of the slightly younger Fra Angelico. Again by luck we have not the simple contract but the prior discussion that is normally not available. The patrons were the lay committee that ran the cathedral of Orvieto. Their minutes survive, though published less fully than may appear.

Their concern is with a new chapel, a project that extended from around 1400 to the famous frescoes by Signorelli around 1500, and beyond. It was given a *titulus*, or consecration, to the Coronation of the Virgin, even before construction began, and its altar soon received a statue of the Virgin.<sup>26</sup> The committee in 1447 voted that it was bad "for the honor of the church" that the walls were still bare, which necessitated that they be painted "by some good and famous master" — the one in mind, qualified by being "famous beyond all other Italian painters," being Angelico.<sup>27</sup> This may be the first record of making fame a qualification for commissioning an artist. At the next meeting, on 2 June, they get a report that Angelico has accepted and will come in a few days, and are asked by their manager — presumably because Angelico had asked him — "what was to be painted there" ("quid ibi sit pingendum"). After much discussion (*pluribus colloquiis*) they vote to await the artist's imminent arrival and to decide after hearing his advice ("ipsum audiendum et deinde audito suo

<sup>25</sup> Belting, 1994, *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> Fumi, 171, 370. These aspects were changed in the Baroque period.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

consilio ordinandum"). The next record, on 14 June, is the contract, saying nothing about themes at all, which is quite strange, but saying painting will start tomorrow, *cras*, and calling for saving time by building the scaffolding while Angelico is doing the drawings (*faciat designum picturarum*).<sup>28</sup>

One after another, these provisions contravene conventional wisdom, based on less full records. The patrons, after decades of this project, and with a dedication and an altar statue, had not addressed the theme of its wall frescoes. They were not ready for the question, while they had been clear about picking the artist. Along the same lines they contracted with him without seeing any drawings, contrary to what Glasser and others, citing examples, have described as standard practice.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, as soon as the artist was on hand, the theme was firmly established within days; it was not related to the consecration (which was acceptable), but was one that Angelico had executed before.<sup>30</sup> All this indicates that his counsel, requested, did indeed become the choice, making it harder to reject something similar with Ghiberti, who claimed it.

Angelico's fame surely helped, but his religious status would not seem to have been an important factor — there were people equally qualified on the premises, and minutes rightly treat him as exceptional among artists but only ordinary among friars. Yet the case of Datini, who accepted the theme of a non-famous artist, suggests that in Orvieto fame did not necessarily make the difference.

The desire for the famous artist implies that his work was wanted in part because of its character as art. That is explicit in a very different and slightly earlier record, Lorenzo Valla's essay *On Pleasure*, a typically humanist set of counsels on ethics. The passage here cited presents activities commonplace today, thus perhaps explaining why it has not been noted, though it is possibly the first articulate description of them.<sup>31</sup> People are at a fair or market, in a mood to buy. Their looking, in Valla's analysis, has higher or lower status as it is more or

<sup>28</sup> Rossi, 153-55, omitted from Fumi's corpus, cited in part (but not these details) by Orlandi, 109-10.

<sup>29</sup> Glasser, 116-20. The author notes this case in her excellent account, but not that it differs from the pattern she describes.

<sup>30</sup> This may help to explain why recent writers resort to calling this chapel "of San Brizio," a name without any basis, a shorter version of the somewhat more justified "of the Madonna of San Brizio," after a panel installed in it in the seventeenth century.

<sup>31</sup> Valla, 200.



less intellectual; philosophers contemplate the heavens while youths inspect the stalls around the square, *tabernas circumforeanas*. They see, with much else, “grace of paintings and beauty of sculptures.” The author then boasts that “I have more joy in the twinned imagery of Phidias and Praxiteles than any of these boys does, because I understand the talent (*ingenium*) and diversity of each artist, which the boy does not know.”

Two quite distinct points seem surprising at this date. One is the sale of works of art in the market rather than the artist’s shop. Recent scholarship has extended the tracing of such marketing from about 1500 back to about 1460, and always in Flanders,<sup>32</sup> with the most impressive objects offered being the elaborate wooden altarpieces found in many museums today. Other forms of sales outside a shop are known earlier. Datini in the 1390s bought paintings in Florence, a chief producer, to sell to other merchants in Avignon, a major consumer.<sup>33</sup> Import duties were paid in Rome in the 1450s on lots of up to thirty Madonnas.<sup>34</sup> In Venice in 1524 similar duties were paid on sculpture in various media, paintings on canvas, and even altarpieces.<sup>35</sup> But Venice had market sales before 1479, when a law restricted them to members of the painters’ guild.<sup>36</sup>

The corresponding shift in the buyer’s or patron’s circumstances seems not to have been explored. Coming to shop, he would be aware that he saw works in a range that now first allows ready comparisons among their producers, who may well not however be identifiable by him. While having a general notion of what he would like, he would realize that he probably will not match his image precisely; he has abandoned that degree of control, and he would buy it if he could find what he can accept as a sufficient approximation. The artists who supply this market without patron instructions have presumably learned to make an informed guess about average taste. To borrow from another trade, this art is not made to measure or bespoke but bought off the rack. Patronage study oddly seems to have passed over this area, especially in view of its base in social history (“Patronage studies typically address either the donor of a major work of art, or an individual renowned for supporting cultural en-

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, 208-29. David Farmer kindly drew my attention to further related studies, notably Ewing, 558-84.

<sup>33</sup> Brun, 241-43.

<sup>34</sup> Esch, 211ff.

<sup>35</sup> Muraro, 68, note 2.

<sup>36</sup> Favaro, 70-71.

deavors").<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it is a commonplace to say that Renaissance art is the product of commissions.

In support of that view one could say that the market showed only mass-produced objects whose aesthetic messages were slight. One might cite the woodcuts emerging at the same date, as analogous both in indifferent quality and anonymous selling. Yet Valla's text (and others) negates a limitation here to "low art." A visitor to the Antwerp fair in 1448 — a date close enough to Valla to support him as empirical — reports in detail rich works for sale there. An agent is reporting to Cosimo de' Medici's younger son Giovanni that he has, as requested, tried to buy him a tapestry. At the fair, however, the best he found was too big for the room in Florence, too gory with its dead bodies — it dealt with Samson — and very expensive.<sup>38</sup> The price, 700 ducats, was indeed far above the standard for a purchase that Giovanni might have considered analogous, the 200 that was the normal top in Florence for a complex altarpiece.<sup>39</sup> In combining Samson with dead bodies, the work presumably showed his destruction of the temple, from Judges 15-16 — a rare enough theme at any date in a large separate image.<sup>40</sup> The agent had also considered a Narcissus — also a rare theme — which was the right size but not "rich enough." Most people who wished tapestries that were not routine (*fuor di dozzina*) had them made to order (*a posta*), he observes. He concludes by seeking more instructions on the size and theme desired, and promises to order "from the best master."

By chance, two later stages in this negotiation are on record, published in different scholarly contexts and not linked to the first one or each other.<sup>41</sup> A different agent wrote to Giovanni in 1453 about two tapestry purchases. The first he had been asked to handle, and has since taken care of, was for the ruler of Faenza; the Medici seem to have taken this on as a business matter, as an act of diplomacy or as a gesture of connoisseurship, or for all three reasons. The agent has

<sup>37</sup> Smith, 448.

<sup>38</sup> Gaye, 1:158-59.

<sup>39</sup> Wackernagel, 339-40.

<sup>40</sup> I have noted just one earlier large image, a fresco ca. 1340 by Roberto Oderisi in S. Maria Incoronata, Naples.

<sup>41</sup> Grunzweig, 27-28, for the first, and for the second a citation by Thornton from a publication in Faenza of 1922 not accessible to me. De Roover, 144, very helpful on the tapestry trade, knew only the second of the three letters and erred in saying expensive tapestries were always made to order and in calling the Samson a set.

found him a Samson, sure to please, since it cost less than he had budgeted. Indeed this work then appears in 1469 in this ruler's inventory. As to the second matter, the agent is now arranging with the best master to do a set of six triumphs from drawings Giovanni has sent. As the theme — clearly the triumphs of Petrarch — was just beginning at this time to be illustrated in Italy, the Flemish weaver naturally would not have a scheme for the design.<sup>42</sup> As to the Samson — most likely the same as in 1448, unsold in the interim — the lord of Faenza is found spending on a major object whose specifications, even the basic theme, he left to others, who turned to the open market of ready-made works. In the early phase Giovanni had likewise left everything to his agent, and would have found himself owning the Narcissus had the agent, gauging his master's taste, not decided it was "not rich." The agent then, as a fallback position, asked Giovanni for a theme, as Datini was asked to name saints. It is confirmed that the market chiefly dealt with objects *di dozzina*, but it did have room for expensive objects that could remain on sale for years, like an important old master painting with Duveen.<sup>43</sup> To choose out of this array, or to let one's agent choose, means that the rise of such a market follows a preexisting readiness to use this form of purchase, one thus in existence even when the artist's shop was the only point of purchase. This in turn means a reduced concern with instructions about one's work of art.

Valla's second surprise is that one distinguishes the divergence in talent (*ingenium*) between two artists — with the stock names of Phidias and Praxiteles — by looking at their works.<sup>44</sup> This means a basic stylistic attribution or connoisseurship, not much unlike the way today museum visitors in a simple pleasure may try to guess artists' names before checking a label. In Valla, as today, such connoisseurship is linked to prices. Valla's text is the only one of this

<sup>42</sup> Carandente, 46. The weaver would need instructions for the novel theme, as seen in other cases. That they take the form of drawings is also common. For this specific case the familiar analogy is with Raphael's drawings sent as instructions to the weavers in 1516; if, as there, the weaver is not the designing artist, the degree of the latter's freedom remains to be determined.

<sup>43</sup> It may seem puzzling that anyone would consign an expensive work to a fair, a normal venue for cheap ones. The most frequent such cases, the big carved altarpieces, could not be explained as works rejected after being commissioned. It might be a recourse for a major artist between commissions. The point would call for study.

<sup>44</sup> The names might suggest that Valla was alluding to a classical text, but J.J. Pollitt kindly informs me that none like it seems to be known, nor any such market in antiquity.

precise kind to appear so early on, but there are partial analogies. Recent literature has cited court testimony of 1457 in Padua, when the amount of Mantegna's fee for part of a joint commission required determining which parts he had done. Another painter, as an expert witness, testified that he knew, even though (as he explained, no doubt in response to the court's question) he had not seen him do it. Painters can always tell, he continued, whose hand has done something, especially in the case of an "established master" (*maestro solenne*).<sup>45</sup> Michelangelo was asked in 1504 to go over another sculptor's unfinished figure, in a set on which he too was working, "so that it will not show a different master and hand";<sup>46</sup> a glaring shift of style in one image had been troublesome. Not only other artists responded to these qualities — though they did so earlier, perhaps — but connoisseurs and dilettanti such as the strollers at the fair.

Valla's two novelties are interdependent. On a simple level, the market's removal of the older way of knowing what artist produced the work in question calls for a new method of doing so. Further, one wants to judge each distinctive *ingenium* to decide whether the price is right. In 1450 the austere Archbishop Antonino of Florence was prepared to say that an artist with greater expertise (*peritia*) could ethically charge more.<sup>47</sup> That was behind Cossa's complaint in 1470 that he should be paid more than his less talented colleagues, a bid that his patron rejected.<sup>48</sup> The fairgoer's combined pleasures in making a correct attribution on style and finding a good buy are both tokens of the famous Renaissance feeling for individuality — others' and one's own — whose existence is not undoubted even if its novelty is.

Another unexpected context, again in a humanist's book on how to live, also links an artist's quality to the money value of his work. A husband, in Alberti's *On the Family*, is lecturing his wife in their bedroom against cosmetics.<sup>49</sup> Pointing to an ornate silver devotional image in a niche, he remarks that it might be made more colorful but only temporarily if "smeared" with ointments. Later it would become dirty and need washing; one could smear it again and again, but if one

<sup>45</sup> Rigoni, 1185.

<sup>46</sup> Michelangelo, 1875, 618. In 1476 the Duke of Milan berated a team of painters because the "many hands" had made the work "disforma" (Wittgens, 114); the patron is focusing on individual *ingenium*.

<sup>47</sup> Gilbert, 1959, 76-77.

<sup>48</sup> Ruhmer, 48-49.

<sup>49</sup> Alberti, 1946, 355-56.

then wished to sell it, the husband asks, how much would it fetch? Not much, the wife agrees. Quite so, the husband responds, for what buyers value is not the ointment but “the goodness of the statue” — hesitantly interpreted by the editor as the “rich material” — and the *gratia del magisterio*, the elegance of the master’s professionalism. Even a devout object gets its sale value from the artist’s input; Datini’s concern with the devout is therefore not a factor any more.

An analogous shift, where the artist replaces earlier emphases, is striking in a text that may be the earliest inventory of a contemporary art collection. The rich Florentine merchant Giovanni Rucellai left memoranda for his descendants, one of which boasts that “we have in our house many works” “by the hands of the best masters there have been, for some time past and up to now.” The list consists only of artists’ names, without the subject matter that is commonly found in later inventories drawn up by notaries and the like, making the list therefore useless for provenance studies. For Rucellai it evidently gave the best basis for estimating the works’ money value, a fact entirely in line with Antonino’s formula, and explicit in a later proud list in Venice.<sup>50</sup> If like Datini this patron considered the artist the proper selector of themes, the more so when, as the best artist, he was well paid, this effect might well result. It is tempting to guess that the artist was left to choose a theme that would represent his distinctive *ingenium*, but this is on record only in the next century. Yet already Antonino makes the artist and not the patron responsible for themes, specifically the sin of theologically improper ones, excluding significant patron input.<sup>51</sup>

Why did this culture place value on the superior artist? It should not be called art appreciation; an anachronistic presumption that such is the only possible cause may well, once duly rejected, have encouraged the belief that artists did not choose subjects. Another set of letters of the 1470s suggests an answer easier to relate to the known priorities of the time. Filippo Strozzi, like Rucellai a rich associate of the Medici, wrote from Florence to a brother in Naples about plans for

<sup>50</sup> Perosa, 23-24. In Venice in 1548 Gabriele Vendramin wrote that he had “many paintings” in his *chamerin*, “all of great worth, by the hands of most excellent men,” and was proud both because they were now worth “much more than they cost” and because they had brought peace to his mind. Just like Rucellai, he tells his heirs that the identity of the artists makes the works valuable, and names no themes, but he is more explicit as a dilettante (Battilotti and Franco, 67).

<sup>51</sup> Gilbert, 1959, 76-77.

the tomb of another brother just deceased.<sup>52</sup> He enclosed a drawing of a proposal, but did not care for it, possibly because of the low price of twenty-six ducats, for he wrote that "it would not be sufficient for our honor . . . for the honor, like the burden, gets assigned to us and not to the dead, and in making it beautiful we honor ourselves." Similar points had been made, if in a less articulate and epigrammatic way, in an earlier letter, following a talk with the artist. "Things like this, done for honor, should be such that they induce that response," he wrote, "or one should drop them, for otherwise one only gets shame from them." Thus the tomb's true theme is Strozzi honor, rather than a memorializing of the dead scion, in a remarkable twist to what is well known about the power at the time of the family image. One may recall here the Orvieto citizen committee, who wanted frescoes for the honor of the church they ran and the town itself, not mentioning the honor of God. This Strozzi tomb does not exist, but it is agreed that the family's great palazzo makes precisely this assertion, notably without any messages through imagery; the design of the forms does it.

Alberti similarly articulates honor for a family through such expenditure. Economy is good, he writes, but "sometimes it is necessary to spend on what pertains to the honor and fame of the family, including that on building at Santa Croce, at the Carmine, in the Temple of the Angels, and many places in the city and outside, at San Miniato, at the Paradiso, at Santa Caterina, and like private and public buildings." This "not necessary but reasonable" expenditure includes silver plate, clothing, and "painting the loggia."<sup>53</sup> Though painting here has a minor role, proportionate to its lesser cost relative to building, the Alberti name indeed still relates to familiar fresco cycles at Santa Croce, San Miniato, and Santa Caterina at Antella, with the latter two employing the Spinello Aretino who earlier had been left to select themes in another family chapel.

If the best artists cost the most (which Antonino agrees is acceptable) and bring the most honor (as Strozzi suggests), and if they are perhaps especially likely to be left to choose themes (like Angelico), one might wonder whether the contrary is true, that close patronal attention might appear when art is cheap; as the painter might be less trusted or less competent. A possible token along these lines might be seen when the same patron commissions major artists to work where

<sup>52</sup> Borsook, docs. 16-18.

<sup>53</sup> Alberti, 1946, 330-32.

outsider spectators may be impressed, and lesser artists in more private areas. Rucellai, whose palace façade was a showpiece by Alberti, commissioned an unknown routine painter to fresco an upper room, and its theme is complex and somewhat baffling.<sup>54</sup> The work may have been seen not as art but as moralizing wallpaper. In a trickier case, the public Medici patronage of Donatello, Angelico, and others might be contrasted with their private chapel by Benozzo Gozzoli, who otherwise failed to get any jobs in Florence all his life. Today we admire the charm of this work, and it is true that, if Benozzo was in receipt of a rare patronal reprimand asking for a figure to be revised, he successfully defended it.<sup>55</sup> This area is understandably hard to document.

How admirable art might actually make one pay little heed to subject matter is suggested vividly in the contemporary account of the Sistine walls. This situation is most fully articulated when it is complained about. In 1494 Savonarola found that “today figures are done in churches with such artifice, adornment, and virtuosity (*tirate*) that they block the light of God and true contemplation; people do not consider God, but only the artifice in the figures.”<sup>56</sup> It is a formula that we commonly assign to the Counter Reformation. Because Savonarola is not a typical witness, one may cite another text of this kind, outside Italy for once. In 1521 Emser, rebutting Protestant iconoclasm, preempted their best argument about church luxury by urging that all images be plain.<sup>57</sup> He says that the plainness had once been the norm, both to save money for the poor and to avoid distractions from images “done with art.” The *künstlicher* the execution the more it holds the gaze, and people amazed by the art do not think of the saints. This is the same broad context in which a Medici agent could be confident his purchase of art would only please if it was rich.

The Sistine walls are conventionally treated in isolation from Michelangelo’s ceiling frescoes, but patronal attitudes seem to have been little changed from one project to the other. The well known and numerous hypotheses of complex symbolism in the latter, which usually have postulated detailed patron input, have not led to any

<sup>54</sup> Malquori, *passim*.

<sup>55</sup> Gaye, 1:191-92, for the complaint; Grote, 321-22, for the agent’s letter. Glaser, 112, continues to report that Benozzo gave in, if reluctantly, perhaps on the postulate that a patron’s order would be effective.

<sup>56</sup> From his twelfth Sermon on the Psalms, quoted by Friedman, note 44.

<sup>57</sup> Mangum and Scavizzi, 86.

consensus, and there is no trace of such concerns in the record or the early commentaries. In the meantime the one record about thematic choice for the ceiling being discussed by patron and artist, though well known, has not been used in this kind of enquiry; it indicates small concern with symbolic messages and a major role for the artist. In the letter from Michelangelo to his business agent in 1523, the artist gives his side of a long argument over fees for several papal jobs.<sup>58</sup> The plan for the ceiling, he writes, was at first to show the twelve apostles in ornamental frames. "I began, but it seemed to me that to have only the apostles there would turn out a poor thing, *cosa povera*," he wrote. When the Pope asked how that was, he replied with a *bon mot*, "because they themselves were poor" — a joke that has been the focus of such attention as the passage has obtained in the scholarship. The pope thereupon, the letter continues, authorized him to do a larger project, with a larger fee, the point of the whole letter being that he received only the money reflecting the first "poor" plan. "Then he gave me a new commission," the artist continues, "and I should do what I wished, and he would content me." This memory report is always accepted as real, and is supported by two surviving Michelangelo drawings of the project with apostles and ornamental frames.<sup>59</sup> The final sentence excluding patron control for the rich project is usually handled by stipulating, sometimes with certainty, the bringing in later of a learned theological advisor.<sup>60</sup>

The first plan with the apostles is certainly not very interesting, both because it is simple and because it does not exist, though this does not fully justify the lack of attention to it. One can readily explain the banal reason why the plan arose. When figurative paintings in this period and region are on ceilings that have structural membering such as cross vaults, the imagery almost always shows a single figure within each of the sections of the ceiling, based on that membering. Thus a one-bay chapel with a cross vault, producing four triangular fields, will show four framed isolated figures, who will often be figures belonging to a natural set of four, such as the evangelists. The Sistine has twelve such units, and the single obvious set of twelve figures for it is the twelve apostles. This system works for all religious contexts, not evoking a more complex symbolic relation with the wall imagery.

<sup>58</sup> Michelangelo, 1978, 3:3.

<sup>59</sup> Tolnay, 199.

<sup>60</sup> Wilde, 58.



The apostle plan for the Sistine was thus ordinary and without complex symbolic charge. It was the plan the pope initiated (since it was not Michelangelo). That this plan had no such charge is confirmed by the fact that pope was so easily persuaded to drop it when the artist, even without naming any theme, proposed something quite different. The pope's lack of attachment to this subject is the firmest detail in the incident. The revision had to occur quite fast, later than the contract in May and the subsequent sketches with apostles, and before the actual painting began probably in September or December at the latest of the same year, 1508. Either this involved the full working out of a theme with intricate symbolism, or it retained the same approach as before, with a simple subject, but richer. The pope's agreement to change was based on the appeal of getting the same richness that his uncle Sixtus had liked on the walls. As to what "rich" meant when Michelangelo suggested it, it is to be deduced from the executed work, which departed drastically from tradition by extending the twelve figures to include major narrative scenes. Because Alberti so defined it, narrative was the great thing for painters.<sup>61</sup> Michelangelo was thus producing rich art, or what Sixtus IV's secretary had made the chief focus of his admiration for the walls, an admiration focused on the good patron.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later works of Michelangelo may be considered briefly at this point. His other most nearly complete complex project was the Medici chapel, begun in 1520 to enclose family tombs. The patron Clement VII was certainly thinking of family honor as much as Filippo Strozzi — an inference that seems to be a given in study, but not used in further social inferences. Letters offer much about the discussions between patron and artist. The earliest issue on record concerned the placing of the tombs in the space. Having received a drawing, the pope responded with admiration for it on 20 November 1520, while also mentioning a difficulty about possibly insufficient space; nevertheless, he concludes "we leave to you to do what you think will go well." Measurements were subsequently sent, and a confirmation came on 24 December through an intermediary that Michelangelo should either stick with his drawing or follow an alternate option,

<sup>61</sup> Alberti, 1950, 87.

“for he leaves it to you, and you settle it the way you think best, and let him know.”<sup>62</sup>

Here, as with the Sistine, patron and artist discuss the complex project at an early stage, and find two distinct options for proceeding, and in both cases the patron defers to the artist's choice. Such a pattern is far from Berenson's shoemaker. Scholars seem to have accepted the data here in the Medici case, but not in the Sistine, where they argue for an unknown symbolic intervenor. The difference might be traced to the greater figurative emphasis in the Sistine; architecture has less strong associations of that kind.

Another very great patron, François I of France, sought in 1546 to buy “something excellent already made” from Michelangelo.<sup>63</sup> The king understood a commission was out of the question, and acted just like the people at Valla's fair, renouncing all choice except of the artist. The collection had to include that name, as with Rucellai.

Besides Julius II, the most famous of patrons around 1500 was the Marchioness Isabella d'Este of Mantua. Her activity, as noted, is often presented as the one best example of detailed patronal instructions. Most discussions focus on a small fraction of her collecting, but a specially interesting one, the set of paintings she sought from 1495 on for her *camerino*. They indeed involved novel themes, and so might well involve instructions, even though they may perhaps have been the exception as in the case of Pietro Lorenzetti's predella panel. Despite the great interest, the vast amount of documentation over many years appears to have discouraged a full survey of her relations with the various leading artists. The chief texts about Bellini and Leonardo, who both in the end produced nothing for the project, and Perugino, who did one painting, have been helpfully made accessible by Chambers,<sup>64</sup> who also presents her discussions with Raphael (about whom it is unclear whether she would have used his work in this room) and about Giorgione. One must go elsewhere for the numerous items about Mantegna and Costa, who produced two paintings apiece, and Francia, who did not. There are no written records about the first two paintings done for the room by Mantegna, doubtless because he was a local resident. However, he was later involved in a plan for a third work, and correspondence about it will be noted at that point.

<sup>62</sup> Michelangelo, 1967, : 260, 264-65.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:1979, 229.

<sup>64</sup> Chambers, 126-50.

The first letters, of 1501, concern Giovanni Bellini, who would like to work for her, the Marchioness is informed by her agent, but not to do the story she proposed, from which “he cannot devise anything good.” (This suggests that she gave a title, from which the design had to be evolved.) The agent suggests she would do better to “let him do what he likes,” and she agrees. She is “content to leave the subject to his judgment, so long as he paints some story from antiquity with a beautiful meaning.” He seems to have agreed to that but did nothing. She then asked him for a Nativity, including Mary, Christ, Joseph, and the Baptist; he agreed to this, except that the Baptist was “out of place in the Nativity.” Because he would have been proper in the scarcely different subject of the Holy Family, as seen in Raphael’s *Madonna Canigiani*, one may guess that Isabella’s label was a bit imprecise and that he took advantage. He would substitute “an infant Christ and John and something in the background, with other fantasies.” She says yes to this, yet still hopes to “include a Saint Jerome.” She did get a picture, and began a year later to seek a second. She first asked Pietro Bembo to “invent” a theme, thus quite likely for the *camerino*, while at the same time writing to Bellini that she would “leave the poetic invention to you to make up if you do not want us to give it.” Evidently she was still trying for what she liked best while right away adding a fallback position. Bembo explained to her that whatever he might propose must be “adapted to the painter’s fantasy. He [Bellini] does not like to be given many written details, which cramp his style; his way of working, as he says, is always to wander at will in his pictures, so that they can satisfy him as well as the beholder.” This text is often cited but in isolation, making it seem an eccentric case. However, it ought, for a start, to be taken into account that it is about Bellini’s general approach in working, not just this one case. It seems possible that Bellini’s assertions rose here to unusual articulation because Isabella was such an unusually nudging patron.

In the same month that she approached Bellini, Isabella addressed Leonardo, who had drawn her portrait, with the hope he would do something for her *camerino*. She “will leave both subject and time to him,” the proposal stated, but if that does not do she would like a small Madonna. Nothing came of this. Here she has used the fallback position, preferring a work on any theme to getting nothing from the admired artist.

It was completely different with Perugino. She approached him, according to what she told her agent in 1502, because she wanted "stories by excellent painters now in Italy, among whom Perugino is famous." In the earlier cases this motive had doubtless helped to outweigh her interest in particular themes. Perugino's more amenable response may well have reflected the fact that he was beginning to lose his high status to a younger generation. Earlier, in 1495 in Perugia, a civic commission he received for an altarpiece had named the major saints but for the lunette stipulated a Pietà or another suitable figure "at his choice" ("ad electionem Magistri Petri"). The somewhat less prestigious Pinturicchio had, in the same year and city, contracted for an altarpiece whose Madonna was to be "in the manner it shall seem best to the master" — recalling Sassetta — so that Perugino might have felt this was a normal circumstance.<sup>65</sup>

The Marchioness first asked "whether" he would paint a story she would invent; doubtless taught by her experiences, she did not assume that he would do so. He answered simply that she should "write out the story" and he would name a price. The story then appeared in full detail in the resulting contract — which is rare, as Chambers rightly says, though his explanation that such instructions were more commonly "delivered to the painter separately" has rather slight basis. The theme, a Battle of Chastity and Lust, was to be evoked in the action of four main figures, Diana and Athena fighting Venus and Cupid. Details extended to such things as Athena with one hand holding Cupid by the bandage on his eyes and with the other hand lifting his lance; numerous other specifics are quite similar. There are also nymphs "seen in whatever attitude you please," along with fauns and satyrs and Cupid with arrows "of wood or iron or what you please," Jupiter and five other classical gods and the women they pursued, and myrtle, olive trees, and a body of water.

Isabella sent a drawing of all this, but then added that "if you think the figures are too many, it is left to you to reduce them as you like, apart from the four main ones." It is a large loophole, permitting the second half of the written program to vanish. In the event, however, Perugino was rather faithful in omitting just two of the classical gods and their women, as Chambers observes. Yet Isabella was unhappy, and not only because of the long delay. She wrote to another agent that Perugino was "not following the scheme" "as noted in the drawing"; he had made Venus nude, whereas she was supposed to be

<sup>65</sup> Canuti, 175; Vermiglioli, iv-v.

clothed and in a different pose, and this he did on account of “wanting to show the excellence of his art.” Her suspicion, rather like Savonarola’s, was probably right, in view of the high place beginning to be given to the nude at this time as a sign of mastery in art, later to be insisted on by Vasari. Yet nudity is normal for a Venus, and Perugino may have been correcting her error, as Bellini had disallowed her Baptist. The painter was the judge of iconographic norms. Venus in the painting remained nude, and the patron’s complaint, like that against Benozzo, had no effect. When patrons gave art high status they invited this.

The letters about Costa’s and Francia’s parts in the project have never been studied since they were published between 1886 and 1913 in a wide range of venues, but Clifford Brown has provided a most helpful bibliography.<sup>66</sup> In the first letter, from an agent in Bologna to the Marchioness on 1 November 1504, we are in midstream. He confirms his earlier promise to arrange for a painter there to work for her and asks for her “fantasy.”<sup>67</sup> She duly turns to her favorite humanist, Paride da Ceresara, on 10 November, saying she will give this painter a trial, and hoping “it will not disturb you to endure more labor to compose a new invention satisfying to you, from which our satisfaction will depend. When you have written it out, send it to us at once, you could do nothing more welcome.” She doesn’t know who suffers more from the behavior of the artists — she who has to wait for her *camerino*, or “you who have to produce a new invention every day,” one which then, because of the painters’ bizarre behavior, is not executed as “integrally” as she wishes.<sup>68</sup> This rare record of patron dissatisfaction with the way programs are realized seems to come naturally from one who was rarely demanding.

This very informative text has had an unhappy publishing history; printed in full once — in a footnote in a short-lived journal in 1909, for an article whose theme was rather different (Isabella’s relations with Julius II) — it had the first half reprinted in 1931 in a book on Perugino, reasonably enough because it does cast light on the Perugino case, but said to be previously unpublished. From there, Chambers took it as actually about Perugino. Indeed, the first half of the text does clarify a point otherwise perhaps to be obtained only from cumulating, that she found resistance to her ideas to be the

<sup>66</sup> Brown, 121ff.

<sup>67</sup> Yriarte, 331; accessible only in this French translation.

<sup>68</sup> Luzio, 1909, 863.

usual thing. The second part, further, tells us that as she relied on painters to execute, she relied on the writer to invent. The theme does not emerge from her own thought (beyond being part of the culture), contrary to the general opinion that she was at least the co-inventor.<sup>69</sup> It is after all not surprising she was acting now just as she did with Bellini, letting him do the subject, provided it was antique and beautiful. Of course the writer wrote what he thought she would like, but within quite general parameters. This calls into question the point of close studies of patron personalities. In this context it is not odd that Julius II left Michelangelo to invent something rich.

Five days later this is reconfirmed when Isabella thanked Paride for his invention, “which could not please me more,” both in the elegance of his *ingegno* and in its promptness. “We would wish to be as well-served by the painters, but the wish would be vain, one must accept from them what they want and know” (*Bisogna che accettamo da loro quello che voleno e scianno*). In order that the new painter in Bologna should not err, she is sending another painter to Paride to work up a sketch.<sup>70</sup> Then she forwarded sketch and text — the “narration of the *poesia*” — to Bologna on 27 November, with the hope not to be frustrated (*stanghezate*) “as we have been by Bellini and Perugino.”<sup>71</sup> The agent in Bologna on 1 December acknowledged the arrival of the package, reporting back that the painter was much pleased by “your *fantasia*” — it has become hers, which suggests how other patrons too could be over-credited — and “he said he wants to work in his own way, thus not privileging your fantasy in everything but improving it, and I am sure he will satisfy very well.”<sup>72</sup> Thus the new man, Costa, warned he would make modifications, but Isabella’s reaction was happy, as she wrote on 14 December.<sup>73</sup> No further materials are firmly related to this painting, which today is in the Louvre

<sup>69</sup> Glasser, 114, one of the more careful students of these matters, so judges her, a propos the Perugino contract, mentioning its “excruciatingly exact specifications” but not the permission to vary them, and the “fear that the artist would deviate” but not that he did so with impunity.

<sup>70</sup> Luzio and Renier, 34:89.

<sup>71</sup> Luzio, 1909, 863-64.

<sup>72</sup> Luzio, 1913, 206-07.

<sup>73</sup> Luzio, 1909, 864-65.

with the rest of the set; nor has it been the subject of close iconographic study.<sup>74</sup>

After these single works by Perugino and Costa, and the two early ones by Mantegna, the fifth and last painting in the campaign, with a story of Comus, involved two artists. The first, Mantegna, wrote the Marchioness on 13 July 1506, just two months before he died, that he had almost finished “designing” the Comus for her, though he was not fully over an illness. He would continue, he wrote, when his *fantasia* helped him. She subsequently received from a third party a report, after a visit, that he had done ten figures. Many of the same figures appear in a painting by Costa from the *camerino* now in the Louvre with the rest; the invention is certainly the same, even if there is debate whether Costa started over on a new canvas. It is generally accepted that Mantegna invented it, based upon his letters and various earlier circumstances that are consistent with that role for him.<sup>75</sup> The agent shipping Bellini’s painting to Isabella in 1504 remarked in his cover letter that he was excellent in color but “in invention no one can match Master Andrea Mantegna.”<sup>76</sup> Long before, in 1480, Isabella’s father-in-law the Marquis Federigo had responded to a request that he get Mantegna to execute a painting from some drawings supplied, by saying he had tried, but “generally (*communemente*) these excellent masters have their notions (*hanno del fantastico*) and it is well (*convien*) to take from them what one can have.”<sup>77</sup> Isabella

<sup>74</sup> Verheyen, 44-46, and on the date, 17. He reports Costa’s freedom as “extremely limited indeed” but not his warning that he would make changes. He rightly notes that the theme was Paride’s, but not that Isabella accepted it, instead arguing that Paride “obviously” knew her wishes. He notes a “rumor” that Perugino’s Venus was nude, not that she is so (24-25, 16).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 46; Lightbown, 443-44.

<sup>76</sup> Luzio, 1909, 861. The fluidity of the term invention is well known. Luca della Robbia received part of his pay for his terra cotta Resurrection in Florence Cathedral for his *industria et inventionem ad inveniendum dictum laborium*, and a separate part for his *magisterio*, his qualifications as a professional; since the imagery is traditional, *inventionem* appears to be the compositional design (Marquand, 75). Of Giovanni Bologna’s Rape of the Sabine, famously executed with no title, the reliable contemporary Borghini reported in 1584 that since it needed one, the artist “hunted for some *inventionem*”; here it merely means a literary title. Commenting on this case, Pope-Hennessy, text 52, catalogue 83, forcefully argues that we should not equate programs and subjects, and that the work had already had the latter, its figure action. Invention in the Lotto letters discussed below usually seems to mean an original iconography with a symbolic charge, and so probably does Mantegna here.

<sup>77</sup> Lightbown, 461, discusses it under Lost Works, as if it could be presumed that Mantegna executed it, but without basis.

would use the same words in regard to other artists in 1504, and both father- and daughter-in-law extrapolated to the whole profession. A friend of Mantegna's reported in 1488 that the Pope had given him the theme of justice to paint, and he sought advice from learned men on how she should look.<sup>78</sup> It is a neat instance of a patron giving a title only, and of Alberti's advice to painters to consult writers. Receiving many incompatible answers, Mantegna developed his own solution, exemplifying the difference between writers' proposals to artists and to patrons. It would seem that to Isabella a *fantasia* by Paride and by Mantegna had the same status.

The *camerino* was not full, and in April 1505 we find Isabella in the midst of dealings with a new artist, Francia, asking a Bologna agent to return the text of "that history" which had been earlier handed to another painter and now was in the hands of Francia; she explains that she wishes to "change the meaning" (*mutare el sentimento*).<sup>79</sup> She will then return it and Francia can start. But this project soon disappears, perhaps because of this complication. Only on 29 November 1510, do we find her cautiously asking Francia whether he really wants to do this and if he can be prompt in doing so, for otherwise "we would not want to begin."<sup>80</sup> Francia answers by assuring her on 12 December that "if you give the order, we will start after Christmas."<sup>81</sup> This brings in practicalities; on 19 December she asks whether he has a canvas and stretcher or wants one sent, and "whether he has the script of the invention that we sent and whether it pleases him or not."<sup>82</sup> His next letter on 6 January only deals with measurements and lighting, frequent topics in such negotiations.<sup>83</sup> On 6 February we find her, while assuring him on those matters, again asking that "since in the letter we wrote" the agent, "we urged him to learn whether the invention of the painting pleased you, to indicate your view and opinion before we send the canvas, since we always want to accommodate your judgment and pleasure."<sup>84</sup> She asked the

<sup>78</sup> Lightbown, 157, helpfully exploring the context, rightly treats it as a report of fact even if the report is literary, and suggests that such consultations took place "often."

<sup>79</sup> Luzio, 1909, 863.

<sup>80</sup> Luzio and Renier, 38:63, note.

<sup>81</sup> Yriarte, 340.

<sup>82</sup> Luzio and Renier, 38:63, note.

<sup>83</sup> Luzio, 1886, 564.

<sup>84</sup> Luzio and Renier, 38:64.



agent the same question in a letter of the same day.<sup>85</sup> After this the story simply breaks off, and indeed no painting was done. Since things had gone so far, and Francia had worked for her before, one seeks the snag, and the only emergent one is just what the Marchioness suspected: that he did not like her invention.

The whole of this exchange contradicts the familiar idea of Isabella commanding detailed symbolic programs, not to mention her status as exemplary of her era in doing so. To be sure, the argument for such procedures being common, the view that they were always oral (at least in the same town) is as impossible to deny as to support, yet the shakiness of what is commonly held to be the best example gives pause. One would have to reject the likelihood that the rare out-of-town negotiations, which we can observe, can serve as surrogates. Isabella did get a program executed in one case, by Perugino, with qualifications (that he did make changes, and that she left him free in the minor half) and quite possibly in a second, by Costa (though he warned her he would amend it) — but even these were not her own ideas. At the opposite end she was ready from the start to let Leonardo and Raphael do anything that they wished and at a second stage to do the same with Bellini, as well apparently as with Manstegna several times. Like the older Marquis, she was not surprised by the artists' acting independently, and perhaps in this she should be taken as typical.

Isabella would have learned some of this openness from the type of collecting that occupied her far more than the commissioning of paintings. The *camerino* is today her most famous acquisition, but earlier this was not the case. It is not mentioned, for example, in a brief early biography, which instead elaborates on her grotto and its "worthy and rare antiquities."<sup>86</sup> Perhaps too obviously to have been articulated, all of these other works, just like her Bellini in the end, were bought as at the fair, with her taking any subject and making quality her sole fixed demand. She could take the same approach with modern art in perhaps her most famous effort, to buy a Giorgione just after the artist's death; she tried to get a "nocturne" by him that she had heard was available.<sup>87</sup> In general, the purchase in this period of secondhand contemporary or recent art seems not to have been

<sup>85</sup> Brown, note 47.

<sup>86</sup> Betussi, 208v-209r.

<sup>87</sup> Chambers, 149, rightly rejects the idea that the term *notte* defines the theme as a Nativity.

the topic of research. In one striking case in Florence in 1418, monks sold altar rights in their church that included the altarpiece already there, a Giotto they noted was "famous."<sup>88</sup> It was common when an altar was sold to a second family for them to commission a new altarpiece to include the family saint, but here the artist's importance would seem to have been an adequate counterweight.

Recurrent terms thus suggest that the artist's quality and fame and the rich work he supplied were desired because they provided honor. A quite explicit case was the statement by another Florentine associate of the Medici in 1485, Giovanni Tornabuoni, who was ordering a work. According to a preamble explaining his reasons, he sought to commission "superior, exquisite and ornate" frescoes in his chapel — works today famous partly for their very high price — for "the exaltation of his family and the adornment and beauty of the said church and chapel."<sup>89</sup> Neither symbolic message nor devotion was named. The apprentice boy Michelangelo worked on these frescoes, and might have imbibed enough of this ideology to use it when he frescoed a chapel.

These cases may be associated with a broader formulation, if not a full theory, in an essay by Pontano, which follows, in his collected writings, another one on magnificence, consistent with recent study on that concept in the period. Following Fraser-Jenkins's essay on Cosimo de' Medici of 1970, this study has most recently been extended by Thomson, in a book whose liveliness should not distract notice from its solidity.<sup>90</sup> The ruler validates his role by spending freely to adorn his city. Onians has emphasized the background of this formula in Aristotle, making it easy for Renaissance court humanists to articulate, and Gundersheimer has given wide circulation to a Ferrarese text of 1497 in which a courtier praises his lord's buildings at great length.<sup>91</sup>

These are nearly all about architecture, if interior ornament does have a part, and so about an implicit dialogue with the public. Isabella's *camerino* would offer nothing like this, but she might have had similar motives, which adds interest to Pontano's next essay in sequence called "On Splendor," all about smaller purchases for interi-

<sup>88</sup> Vasari, 1969, 2, *Commento*, 392-93.

<sup>89</sup> Glasser, 27.

<sup>90</sup> Fraser-Jenkins, 162-70; Thomson, *passim*.

<sup>91</sup> Onians, 123-24; Gundersheimer, *passim*.

ors, from furniture to vases, dishes and linen.<sup>92</sup> These objects should present a proper Aristotelian mean, *mediocritas*, between the ostentatious and the *sordidus*, of which the latter gets vigorous description. Pontano next turns to ornament for daily use and grand occasions, both of which signal the owner's status to privileged visitors. These include sculpture and painted panels, in a long list that also includes with about equal emphasis tapestries, beds, ivory saddles, cosmetic boxes, crystal ware, and more. Gardens, jewelry, and costumes are for display to guests only. Here then Tornabuoni's family exaltation is ratcheted up to splendor as the social reason for art.

The rather special instances of Michelangelo and Isabella d'Este broached the sixteenth century. Its range furnishes more records and more nuances, but apparently no shift. Signorelli was paid in 1505, as we learn from a document passed over until recently, for a tondo he had done with the Virgin and for such "other figures" as had seemed good to the artist. (The phrase "prout visum fuerit," seen long before in nearby Arezzo, might be a notary's standard term.) Signorelli painted various tondi with the Virgin and saints, but a famous one in which she is accompanied by small classical nudes, and the phrasing here suggests the latter, as well as the possibility that the invention in the earlier case was his too.<sup>93</sup> The document, in another unusual clause, praised the work for its subtle *ingegno*, justifying the other provision and perhaps also giving a background for the theme of the other painting paid for in the same contract. This was the high altar-piece in a church of St. Augustine, which is stated here to repeat the figures of an earlier one by the artist, which survives and shows a Deposition. The not very usual disjunction between the later high altar-piece and the patron saint of its church thus appears to be connected

<sup>92</sup> Pontano, 1:255-63.

<sup>93</sup> Kanter and Franklin, 171-92; repeating an older error, the authors paraphrase the phrase in the document not as "other figures" but "other saints" (though rightly giving "figures" on another page), and suggest that the work may be an existing tondo with saints, whom they identify as John and Anthony, this patron's saints. (They do not report the prior scholarship that more plausibly calls their "John" Joseph.) If this were so, the artist would have responded as if he had not been left free, and produced what patrons specified in ordinary contracts. Since patrons did indeed usually specify saints by name, it is the more likely that these unnamed figures were not.

with admiration for the artist, though this is a problem for more study.<sup>94</sup>

In 1524 a contract with Savoldo for a high altar explicitly leaves the choice of some of its smaller saints and scenes to the artist, which is striking because the patrons were the resident Dominican friars.<sup>95</sup> Names of the four major saints are supplied, but the artist — by no means then famous — is to place the angel at Mary's feet "where it will seem to him to fit best." In the event, Savoldo revised further, placing two angels in the clouds instead. He was also to do a lunette with a Pietà, "with the figures he thinks best" (as in Perugino's case) and fill three small predella panels with a Saint Peter Martyr and "figures or stories that seem best to him." It is hard to believe these clerical patrons ran out of topics, but no other explanation is apparent.

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Particularly rich records inform us about three situations in the 1520s and after in smaller north Italian towns. Those having to do with Lotto's intarsia panels for Bergamo cathedral, of 1524-32, again exist because the artist was elsewhere.<sup>96</sup> The material here is quite complex, because of the artist's stress — a quality often thought typical of him — and because terms like *disegno*, *inventione*, and *impresa* seem to be being used in more than one of their meanings.<sup>97</sup> The texts have gradually been published over decades, and additions have called for changed understanding.

During the eight years of his efforts, Lotto produced thirty-two colored drawings on Old Testament themes (besides others, to be

<sup>94</sup> The general rule about dedications of high altars and churches is discussed by Gardner, 10. The earlier one by Signorelli at S. Margherita, Cortona, cited as a model in the contract, also did not honor that saint. If, as seems possible, it was not actually on the high altar as the contract says, but linked to it visually, that may have made a difference; the matter needs study.

<sup>95</sup> The contract is fully reprinted in *Savoldo*, 318-19, and this aspect is discussed in Gilbert, 1992, 29-30. Humfrey, 139-40, suggests contexts that might encourage this practice.

<sup>96</sup> Cortesi Bosco's well-organized catalogue of the individual panels, 1987, keyed to the documents and the letters, may permit omitting the many small references here. Her new materials also modify earlier interpretations.

<sup>97</sup> See note 76 on the varied senses of *inventione*. Its openness in sixteenth-century Venice is further suggested in a text of 1570 (Sinding Larson, 57) on the rules for a painting competition at the Ducal Palace. It was required that "di questa inventione si doveranno fare diverse inventioni per elegere poi il meglio." The first use means the theme supplied by the judges, the second the artists' varied treatments.

noted soon). He agreed to follow the *designum* to be given him “by the reverend father Girolamo Terzi or by others,” while Terzi is paid for “writing the inventions” (*scribendo le invenzioni*). Here *designum* would seem to be the scheme as a whole, and *invenzioni* the single units. Lotto had apparently done more than half this work by the end of 1525, when sixteen scenes are recorded, since some of the thirty-two scenes are absent from dated records. Most of the sixteen images are from Genesis, chiefly such standard choices as the Creation and the Joseph story, but also rare ones, such as Tubal, Enoch, and Melchisedek; also less common as subjects are Jonah, Susanna, Amnon and Tamar, and the Maccabees. The rare choices may well signal special interests in the writer, but the lack of any imagery in them varying from tradition leaves no pointers as to what those interests might involve.

In October 1526 Lotto then writes, surprisingly after the above, that he has started work on a theme “not given me by anyone, but to please me,” which is the Destruction of Sodom. The *reason* for his pleasure is that Lot, the protagonist, shares the artist’s own name — a reason that iconographic analysis would hardly have prepared us for. Lotto asks in the letter whether his idea would be accepted, and it was, as we know from finding the scene in the finished work. The patronal *designum* had to have some give to absorb that proposal, two years into the process. This is less puzzling, however, when it is noticed that the patrons had stopped the earlier supply of themes. Lotto repeatedly complains of not being sent subjects and yet being asked to supply more drawings for the craftsmen executing the wooden panels. Evidently the officials were unaware that Terzi was now not doing his part; they cannot have had great concern with the themes themselves. Clearly there had not been an initial scheme embracing the number of spaces to be filled; it was expected to proceed ad hoc, and now was not doing so.

In 1526 only one scene is dated, and a letter from the patrons of September 1, 1527, makes the loose situation explicit when along with their new inventions they write: “perhaps [they] will not satisfy your *ingegno*,” since all of them — there were eight — concern Samson. “So from these you should draw (*cavareti*) according to your judgment” (“secondo lo arbitrio vostro”), the letter continues, “for you will know how to make them work better than we will know how to desire them” (“meglio sapreti voi accomodarli de quello sapressimo desiderare”). Hence they defer to the artist’s decision

("remetendosi a lo iudicio vostro"). The shift from the stern initial requirement to follow the clerical plan is drastic. Recalling the case of the supplementary text for Sassetta, here too — if we had the contract only (as normally is the case) — it would be presumed that patron control was firm.

Lotto picked just one of the Samson stories and asked for alternatives. Making this less strange, he added that the other seven scenes would not fit in the vertical formats of this section of the work (framing pilasters, in the end not included). The artist's final say as to what fits on a panel was noted earlier, with Datini and with Isabella and Perugino; here it even forces a new theme. The choir today has four Samson stories, some squarish, and they may include some of the rejected seven. Meantime Lotto's letter asking for more themes again initiates a proposal of his own, the highly vertical subject of Joshua stopping the sun. He requests a text about it, in a clue that the sending of such an exegetic text to him does not show whose idea it was. In this case the reaction is not known.

Even that partial deference to clerical authority fades in Lotto's letter of 10 February 1528. He is understandably aggrieved that two of his drawings have been returned for revisions; he has continually been criticized, he writes, for *troppa manifattura*. This term, literally production or execution, may be pejorative even without *troppa*, and apparently means that he used too much detail for the wood craftsman to follow; indeed his scenes, pictorial with no concession, greatly differ from the norm for intarsia. He was asked to redo a building in the drawings, presumably by the craftsman's wish, and symbolic meaning does not seem to be signaled. Yet Lotto goes on in the next sentences: "as to the written inventions which have been sent me, you say they are more or less at the painter's choice ("ad arbitrio del pittore") in accordance with the capacity of the area, so there is no defect." This sounds again like control over what would fit. "If mine is an error," he continues, "it is not in relation to my adjusting myself" to requests but "because of the freedom given me." That, we then find, is because the freedom extends more generally to religious imagery, as "anyone who looked at the text of the Bible with the inventions given by Master Girolamo would find his" defect "greater, for I have looked and had it looked at by good men, notable theologians and preachers." Lotto thus rejects the double authority of patron and cleric, finding the patron's ecclesiastical advisor a poor scholar. He says he will not press this point, but seeks assurance that

he will not again be asked to revise, for another notable reason: "it is not an important matter. So long as it is judged and known to be that story, it is enough, without all the little details of the text of scripture or its meanings." Detailed symbolic instructions are not important, because the viewer is entitled simply to identify the general theme. The convoluted complaint weaves between reducing *manifattura* and overprecise demands in the *inventionione*. This is surely among the most remarkable texts on the issues in patron/artist relations. The artist was unusually articulate and was sometimes eccentric, but here his points are tied to central currents.

This letter then goes on to a separate topic. Lotto had signed a second contract on 16 June 1524, three months after the first, to paint *quadri*, or covers for the Old Testament stories. They were to "have correspondence in signification" with the Biblical set, as demonstrated by three samples provided, and to be in *chiaroscuro*. Later reports of their delivery always labeled them as the *chiaroscuro* pieces and never gave them titles. No written *inventioni* were involved. The intarsia maker did not execute them himself, but left them to his assistants. This lesser concern in patron and craftsman contrasts with strong concern by Lotto. He mentions the *quadri* often, starting with the earliest preserved letter of September 2, 1524, when he sends three designs to match three of the Biblical scenes which he names, "along with the mottoes you will see, done by Messer Battista Suardi." (Suardi was at the time Lotto's other major patron, an important citizen in Bergamo, former member of the cathedral board, with some claim to be a poet.)<sup>98</sup> Lotto then sent two more such batches in 1527, first eleven more "*imprese* for the covers of the stories, or rather *significati*," accompanied by a note pointing out that each was labeled on the back with the scene it matched, and later a second group with a covering letter about the "significations." A recently published letter of 1530 explains that "as to the covers, if some *fantasia* enters my head I will do it, but I think it will be hard," and a vivid one of 25 January 1531, also recently published, lists thirty-one subjects, and comments, "I have come up with all the inventions of the little panels in two days, whereas for a year I have never been able to cull from my brain the smallest thing for such a need." As the most recent editor has noted, the artist controlled the themes, while getting a literary friend's help for inscriptions.

<sup>98</sup> Cortesi Bosco, 1980, 8-12.

The images in question are *sui generis*. Intarsia panels had never had any sort of cover, and when the Bergamo patrons agreed to have these, they noted their utility for “conservation, gravity and adornment.” Visually, most of them present several isolated objects in light-colored wood on a darker field, with written mottoes in about half of them. A rather simple instance shows a severed head, a sword, and a crown, all linked by ribbons, above the motto “Glory of Widowhood.” Another, with no text, shows locks of hair and a pair of shears, again linked by ribbons, and separately a millstone, with a spout from which ground meal pours, and with a head behind it, seeming to stare. The first one “signifies” Judith killing Holofernes and the second two incidents in the life of Samson — his shearing by Delilah and his work as a mill slave. The formula is to cull major items from the Biblical images, preferring those with a still life quality, thus presenting a riddle to the viewer who from these clues then identifies the story concealed under the cover. As the first motto suggests, the clues may extend from the specific Biblical story to its wider meaning, like a moral at the end of an Æsop fable. The mottoes often are Biblical verses, from the story itself or an analogous text, though they need not be. Thus “Mercy is rare among brothers” for the cover of Joseph sold by his brothers is from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1:145). The image shows eleven hands touching each other, another offering a coin to two heads, and a tied lamb. Other mottoes refer to the outcome of the story, such as *Restauratio Humana* and an ark on dry land, the cover for the flood scene. The lonely objects, whose lack of spatial relations might be thought congruent with an abstruse meaning until the riddle is solved, are powerfully charged.

There are partial analogies in the period. Rebuses also set up riddles from isolated still life objects, but the meaning depends on puns of sound, while Lotto’s objects pointed simply to themselves. That makes them also unlike hieroglyphs, an analogue proposed but later negated as a key here.<sup>99</sup> Paintings of the symbols of the Passion, including one by Lotto, show isolated objects like relics of the story, usually around a figure of Christ but sometimes alone. From that source Lotto took the kissing heads of Christ and Judas and, with a changed reference, Judas’s hands with money. Lotto’s painting of the

<sup>99</sup> Galis, 363-75, read half a dozen sample cases on that basis, involving some slips. The millstone in the Samson cover, a literal element in his story, was misread by her as a cistern, with water pouring from it, and, noting a cistern elsewhere in the Bible, she argued for its having a symbolic meaning here.



theme (in the Berenson collection) bears a label on the back saying he painted it for himself.

The *impresa*, popular at the time, is a richer analogy. In 1556 Paolo Giovio fixed its character by defining its elements as a motto and a picture with no complete human figures, the whole being easy to understand.<sup>100</sup> Lotto shows a few whole figures and often omits mottoes, but is like this in the obvious meaning and in general. Lotto did *impreses*, and in 1542 was paid for “the invention of an *impresa* for a hat medal, for which he produced a colored drawing.”<sup>101</sup> The word, as seen above, appears in his Bergamo letters, but often with its other meaning of “the whole project” and never unambiguously in the narrower sense. Still Cortesi Bosco is not unreasonable in taking it this way. Lotto had also painted a cover for a portrait, the best known surviving one of the Renaissance, and it presented an *impresa*, the well known motif of a type with branches half living and half dead; he used this again on the intarsia cover for Lot and Sodom.<sup>102</sup> This range of analogies in the artist’s practice for many factors, found together in the panels, supports the indications that this was his project.

This gives added interest to a motif recurrent in the covers, which has been discussed in individual instances only, the role of eyes and looking. In five covers the central motif is a single eye, evidently God’s, inspecting nearby objects such as the two-branched tree mentioned. The cover for Amnon raping Tamar presents a full-face bust of a woman stared at by a male profile, a pair of spectacles reinforcing the point. The trickiest eye image might be overlooked, on the cover for the Drunken Noah, one of whose sons “sees” him naked while the other two “saw not” (Genesis 9:22-23). The cover shows vines, pitchers, and three peacocks perching on a ribbon. The middle bird spreads its tail in a grand ruff while the two others fold theirs tight, not using the peacock’s “eyes.” It is attractive to see here exegesis by a visual rather than a theological specialist. Going even further, not seeing is thematic in the “gazing” Samson at the mill and the cover for Achitophel’s Death. A man strides blindfold toward a cliff, following another who has already fallen over, leaving only his upside

<sup>100</sup> Watson, 109f.

<sup>101</sup> Zampetti, 122, 128.

<sup>102</sup> This cover was wrongly thought by earlier writers to be the cover for the story of Abel, the actual Abel cover having been omitted from surveys because it was not by Lotto, while the lack of any cover for the Sodom story was explained on the grounds it was lost. Galis then explicated the relevance of this cover to Abel by way of a hieroglyph associated with Diodorus Siculus.

down legs visible. Absalom's death will follow because he "blindly" took his advice, and the obvious but not presented motto — we are as unseeing of it as Absalom — is "if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." The Old Testament mottoes are generally verses so famous that they are proverbs; Galis has rightly suggested a reference to "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" as implied in Amnon's gaze at Tamar.

As artist's devices, the eyes work like the ribbons, forcing links between the isolated objects. Apart from these links, the austere sets of objects contrast with the narrative scenes, notably abundant for their time in fertile landscapes and fanciful porticoes. It may be permitted to recall here the current interest in art theory in the difference between visual and verbal narrative, in which the visual one (in a culture of realism) is forced to include meaningless context. Lotto's covers call for being classed with the verbal, which is free to limit its terms to what it signifies. A more common contrast in his time was between the iconic and narrative image, with the iconic often showing an isolated head on a blank background. What Lotto remarkably does is to make such imagery act out a narrative. While visual context is suppressed, objects interact a drama about the fate of heroes. This does not occur in his earlier portrait cover, which was rich in context. He may meanwhile have been stimulated by medal reverses, which on a tiny scale do something quite similar (but commonly with unclear meaning). All this suggests Lotto's extraordinary and strange visual excursus, surely much helped by his being "given the freedom," as he says, to make images "more or less at the will of the artist." The work's function as religious exegesis is integral to its age, and it notably lacks learned symbolism. Its closer kin is in ethical sermons, very possibly exemplified by the one he heard about Joshua "brought up by our preacher this last Lent," which he then proposed to add to the tarsia series.

Though the two other north Italian projects to be cited have equally rich textual material, they can be treated more briefly. Around 1530 the Bishop, later cardinal, of Trent commissioned a team of artists to paint frescoes in his palace. Being absent, he made his views known mostly by letter; over three hundred of these survive from a nine-year period, in a file so large that it would be hard to

claim that anything important to him is absent from it.<sup>103</sup> The images are quite uncommon ones, and thus one is not surprised when an art historian surmises an “invention of some scholar . . . learned but eccentric,” though no such person is in any of these records.<sup>104</sup> The letters involve, directly and indirectly, many stone cutters, carpenters, artists, building superintendents, and royal persons, as well as humanists like Erasmus, whom the Bishop consulted about buying books. The letters, however, indicate other sources for these themes, sources which, to be sure, appear rarely, with nearly all focus on cost and schedules, as in all contracts. Another text of the time, a poem praising the palace in 445 stanzas — which is analogous to the papal secretary’s account of the Sistine — is also without any mention of an advisor.

One painter, Dosso Dossi, proposed the Sack of Rome as a fresco subject in 1531, but the Bishop rejected it, first because the elaborate story would be expensive, and second because if the Pope should visit it would be diplomatically awkward (document 12). The patron can thus deny, but denial includes reasons, and it is the painter who initiates the concept. How this kind of role assignment appeared satisfying is clearer in the letter soon after, when the patron, asked about one of the rooms, says he would like something from the Old Testament “or some story from Ovid or another, as may seem *a propos* to you, so we leave it to your and his [the building superintendent’s] judgment,” and “we leave it to you and to him, painting the best way that seems suitable” (document 91), or again, of a loggia in a garden, “the figures should be suitable to the place, such as greenery, hunts and the like — Ovid” (document 145). In a more sweeping case (document 35) the supervisor is told to “arrange it as you wrote, or in some better way that might be thought up . . . you can imagine how it would be . . . we very much wish it to be beautiful, large, rich with gold, and harmonious with the rest of the room.” The professionals thus know best how to make it rich, as in Michelangelo’s case.

In Bassano, not far from Trent, the artist family of the same name kept a recently published record of all the jobs they undertook over several decades, which were 219.<sup>105</sup> Along with an interesting

<sup>103</sup> Ausserer and Gerola, *passim*; their document numbers are cited in my comments *infra*. For most of these findings I am indebted to a seminar report by Theresa Quattrochi.

<sup>104</sup> Gibbons, 52-53.

<sup>105</sup> Muraro, *passim*.

mix of such humble jobs as frames and candles for holy days, they chiefly did paintings, each of which was recorded by title. Any detailed instructions might have been absent from such a text, but as in a previous instance the completely standard themes do not suggest such instructions, and the scholarship has never argued for them in the work of these artists. Yet in three cases the opposite kind of entry appears;<sup>106</sup> the local *podestà*, who was from Venice, ordered two works in 1538 on behalf of a Venetian buyer, one a “Gospel of Luke and Cleopas” — probably an odd way of titling the Supper at Emmaus, which Jacopo Bassano painted several times — and one *quelo parera a Jacopo*. A postscript adds that in the end the buyer only wanted one picture, though which one cannot be known.<sup>107</sup> In 1548 an engineer (*inzegner*) in Venice provided a canvas on which “I should do the picture that I want” (“che a me mi par”) for a fairly high price, and in 1552 Jacopo does a picture “with a story as I wish” (“che a me parera”). What were their buyers after but — recalling Rucellai’s boast — “a Bassano,” something by the master? Art collecting in this autonomous way is thus on record in Venice from the era of Giorgione.

The above may clarify some details in an otherwise curious event of 1539, when a patron and artist discussed some arrangements for a painting in Venice. A rich lay group, the Scuola della Carità, which had just installed Titian’s *Presentation of the Virgin* in one of its rooms, ordered a work from Pordenone for the adjacent wall.<sup>108</sup> The artist died soon after, and some oral agreements had to be reconstructed, again to our gain. Pordenone in his last contact had asked what story the group might like, and in turn was asked whether the preceding committee had obligated him to any particular subject. One sees that the group might have — but so might it not have. Nor was it a mere matter of the committee not having broached the matter at an early stage, for the next remarks show that perhaps it never would have. Pordenone had responded that at that prior meeting one member indeed had proposed a theme, but that he himself, thinking it over later, realized that for several reasons it would be a poor

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, catalogue nos. 96, 179, 206.

<sup>107</sup> If one starts with the premise that such freedom was an abnormality, one might think it more likely that the painting with a theme left to the artist was the one dropped. On the other hand, the standard theme of the Emmaus would generate anticipation about its appearance, which might lead to disappointment, not possible in the other case.

<sup>108</sup> Rosand, 234.

choice, since the Scuola owned another painting of the theme, the wall size was wrong (again), and the iconographic relation to the Titian would be unsuitable. Thus he proposed instead a Marriage of the Virgin. Now, after his death, the committee voted for this subject, and imposed it on the painter who was replacing him. Pordenone had been prepared to be presented with a theme but not as an order he could not discuss; the committee was prepared to defer to him, not because of artistic freedom — as we see from the treatment of the next artist — but because it was clear that he was the better expert, just as Datini expected. The resulting painting therefore would not be elucidated by a social history of this patron group.

From the same years in central Italy the largest and most complex project by Rosso was the subject of detailed records, befitting the work's complex iconography. It was neglected in study until given its due in the recent monograph by Franklin, probably because it remained unexecuted.<sup>109</sup> The drawings and Vasari's account justify Franklin's remark that the project would have had a central role in the artist's career similar to the Sistine in Michelangelo's. To give only a sample of its strangeness, the usual motifs of the Temptation of Adam and Eve additionally include the Virgin Mary extracting the apple from Adam's mouth and Apollo and Diana crossing the sky. The patron, the Confraternity of the Annunciation in Arezzo, contracted for three unspecified stories of the Virgin to be painted "in the manner and form just as and in the way it shall seem to and please the said master Rosso" ("eo modo et forma et prout et sicut Magistro Rubeo videbitur et placebit"); that is all the patron says about themes. At this date Vasari, our other source, was a seventeen-year-old painting student and, as a resident of Arezzo (though out of town at this time) he personally knew Rosso and also the priest Pollastra; it has thus been usual, and reasonable, to consider Vasari's account reliable. He first noted the efforts of citizens to persuade these patrons to hire Rosso "so that he would leave a memorial in the city"; describing the scenes very accurately, Vasari further states that they were "invented" (*trovate*) by the fine talent (*bell'ingegno*) of the canon Pollastra, friend of Rosso, for whose pleasure Rosso made a beautiful model of the whole, now in our house in Arezzo."<sup>110</sup>

Together, the two texts, contract and biography, reveal two stages of a clear story, consistent with what has been seen in earlier

<sup>109</sup> Franklin, 232-52.

<sup>110</sup> Vasari, 4:482-83.

incidents. Earlier contracts in nearby Perugia and Cortona had assigned thematic choice to painters except for the general theme of the project, while Alberti's advice and Mantegna's *Justice* evoked artists then consulting suitable friends. Franklin thus seems not quite right in his fine exposition, in finding it "complicated" to "understand" the parties' roles in creating the themes, and he is wrong in treating Pollastra as one who urged the patrons to hire Rosso. There is no basis for claiming that the patrons "allowed Pollastra to select the subjects," which would fit the conventional view about patrons. Only the artist is indicated as having given Pollastra that assignment. Indeed the artist's reputation could, as Franklin notes, "influence a patron's decision about subject," but in this case (if at all) by influencing them not to make one, leaving it to him as the Pope had with Michelangelo. Pollastra's ideas, suitable to a cleric, were about themes — "poetic inventions" as Vasari calls them — thereby excluding a reading of the contract that would argue that compositional choices alone were left to the artist (a formulation which, in any case, does not seem to be found in the period).

Kliemann has recently studied a neglected category of paintings of this period, large fresco cycles in rulers' palaces glorifying them and their ancestors.<sup>111</sup> The works have been rather inaccessible, and the unique themes have been discouraging, which might reasonably suggest a greater than usual likelihood of detailed patron instructions, and Kliemann addresses that point, with a full survey of records. He first postulates that "for the majority" of the cycles a role for a literary expert advisor is "to be supposed," even if it is "rarely documentable," and he adds at once that the recipient of the advice was the artist.<sup>112</sup> One example is Vasari's famous "room of the hundred days" in the Cancelleria, Rome, honoring Pope Paul III. Vasari tells us in his autobiography that he got advice from the humanist Paolo Giovio, who informed him about how to proceed to obtain the job. Giovio then "had him make many drawings of various inventions" to show the patron. Kliemann infers that Giovio was the creator of these inventions, and this may be so, but they do not survive so it is hard to be sure, and they did not get into the frescoes. The inventions instead show a series of rather plain historical scenes, such as the pope receiving ambassadors in one or encouraging building activity at St. Peters in another, where the compositions may be inventive but the

<sup>111</sup> Kliemann, *passim*.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

themes are less easily so. (This kind of subject recurs in the dynastic cycles.) It is in the frames at the Cancelleria that allegory is strong, and in this they could have had a role for Giovio.

After presenting these cycles through the sixteenth century, Kliemann sums up the evidence about "artists' freedom and patrons' conditions." He finds it difficult to draw general conclusions, for there are just three cases where evidence is direct and show control by patrons or literary advisors, while others suggest "notable autonomy" for the artist.<sup>113</sup> One of the three, however, offers as evidence only the difference between a set of preliminary drawings and the final frescoes, which the author finds due "without doubt" to patronal or advisor's intervention "an example of the divergence of interests between artist and patron."<sup>114</sup> No further basis is given, and alternative reasons for such divergence might be considered because it is not a rarity in artists' activities.

The second case is Vasari's huge project for the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence and the accompanying "letters of Grand Duke Cosimo," the patron.<sup>115</sup> Only one letter is in fact cited, but it does manifest control, if only partial. It first "very much" approves (*assai*) the general sketch for the largest room, but adds that the duke "needs to remind" Vasari to make two amendments. One of the images, of the planning for the war with Siena, ought not to show assistants around the Duke, because he planned this alone. One might replace them with allegories of Silence and "some other virtues" not listed. Second, Vasari should include one scene summing up all the territorial acquisitions, rather than merely showing one conquest per scene in a series. The different image without the entourage has a context in other dynastic frescoes, to be discussed below. As to the project in its entirety, however, as Kliemann fully reports, Vasari initiated the themes, then checked with qualified writers and produced drawings which, finally, the duke checked and might edit himself, as he did to the degree described.

The evidence is more decisive in Kliemann's last instance, the fairly obscure cycle at Palazzo Vitelli in Città di Castello, painted in 1571-73 by a team from Bologna led by Sammacchini.<sup>116</sup> Again there is only one letter from the patron, but it makes many points. A

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 9-96.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 67-77.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 81-90.

bishop in the images should receive less emphasis, which would still be enough. An order of knighthood given to a family member is vetoed because today the honor is given “to mayors” and is laughable — though other honors should be shown because “such is the truth,” reflecting his own connection to an ancestor. Some points are left open: of the placing of the patron’s father we read, “put him where you like, I make you a present of this,” and in addition, there should be as many landscapes “as you like.”

The exact points bearing on status and titles are found in earlier similar cases. In Pavia in 1469, instructions by ducal command called for the portrayal of the lord being handed a drink at a table, his horse held by a groom, and the duchess and ladies playing cards.<sup>117</sup> Similar long lists in 1470 called for colors of clothing, suitable gestures for hunters — including one thrown from a horse — the lord with arms on his grooms’ shoulders, and more, in a cycle for the Castello in Milan.<sup>118</sup> This instruction is more detailed than those found in any other class of imagery; it concerns protocol, the jealous circumscribing of each person’s position, backed up by reality. Duke Cosimo excluding his assistants is in this vein, though this pattern is limited to quite simple rules for a narrow range of paintings. The placing of the people indeed has social symbolism of a clear schematic kind, not unlike an official photograph today of a ceremony or a board of directors. However, it may well have conditioned Isabella, living in such an environment, to demands equally elaborate but less successful as they related to a different context.

Vasari is a rich source as always, this time through his less well known *Ragionamenti*, written from 1558 to explicate his own paintings in the Palazzo Vecchio.<sup>119</sup> This text, if noticed, has usually been studied for its often intricate symbolic explications of single works; here the concern is instead with its structure, as a dialogue, where Vasari serves as the patron’s tour guide. Like many writings in dialogue form, it is more truly an expository monologue, interrupted at intervals by the interlocutor’s approving phrases. Vasari repeatedly tells the lord what the work symbolizes, the lord approves and enquires about the next one. This perhaps bulkiest of all Renaissance texts on artist-patron interaction reduces the latter’s role almost to

<sup>117</sup> Welch, 352-74.

<sup>118</sup> Beltrami, 280-83, 365-71. After the artists are given the program they present a budget, noting that it will vary according to the degree of richness that is desired.

<sup>119</sup> The *Ragionamenti* are most readily accessible in volume eight of Vasari, 1881.



zero. Sometimes the artist confides what led him to produce an image, not only to make an allegorical point but “to display art.”<sup>120</sup> This was just what had annoyed Isabella and Savonarola and, in a very different context, Serlio, who attributed the too great richness of some buildings to the owners’ wealth and also to the designers’ wish “to show art.”<sup>121</sup> Most of the rich owners presumably approved, along with Vasari’s Medician prince.

Vasari’s most evocative instance of this perhaps is the account in his autobiography of his very first big job. It was an altarpiece, whose theme of the Immaculate Conception had not yet obtained a standard visual formulation and so was *malagevole*, awkward, but was required by the dedication of the owner’s chapel. So he and his patron jointly “got the opinion of many of our common friends, literary men.”<sup>122</sup> This further variant again leaves no room for command by the patron.

Kliemann, while drawing the same inference from the *Ragionamenti* here endorsed, adds that he may surprise his readers by crediting the themes to the artist. If he surprised himself he would be like Verheyen, who called Isabella’s willingness to defer to Bellini’s theme “surprising,” or like Haskell, who had found in his influential book of 1963 that “a surprising degree of freedom often seems to have been left to painters, even in important commissions.”<sup>123</sup> Alluding to seventeenth-century art, his word “often” may excuse the omission of that era from this study, suggesting that the Renaissance procedures here cited did not then cease. Apparently again surprised himself, Haskell suggests as an explanation the “cultural sophistication of Rome,” while the provinces showed more constraint. Yet in provincial cases that follow, assignments turn out to have been limited again to titles or basic themes, and, as with Datini, any more detail offered by the patron was by the painter’s urging. A contract in Piacenza, offered as typical, names the theme and then leaves “freedom to the artist to invent and amplify.” For the period prior to the Renaissance, a study by Sandler of a northern manuscript of the fourteenth century concludes that we should posit a “more independent role” for the illuminator than supposed, and again calls that “surprising.”<sup>124</sup> It is

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>121</sup> Serlio, folio 15.

<sup>122</sup> Vasari, 6:1987, 380.

<sup>123</sup> Kliemann, 71; Verheyen, 24; Haskell, 9.

<sup>124</sup> Sandler, 551.

evident that each writer in this group began by presuming much patron control, and changed after specific study; thus Verheyen had made the Perugino contract his base for defining Isabella's behavior, as others have for the era as a whole. Each specialist was unaware of the others, but in general one might call for an end to the responses of surprise.

For the Middle Ages in the particular area of manuscript illumination, Alexander has recently offered a valuable survey, covering a medium where relations to patrons are probably most frequently visible.<sup>125</sup> He reports that the few contracts which appear never show patron instructions, in contrast to what he posits for paintings, citing a notable but ambiguous case.<sup>126</sup> He further suggests that decisions on themes might have four other bases, a thematic tradition, simple copying, the artist's initiative, or a written program, the latter having been produced by an advisor, the patron, "or even" — evidently considered less likely — the artist himself in a case when a crew of assistants would be helped by having it in writing. When known written programs are explored, the artist's role seems to become more prominent. The most frequent type appears in jottings that sometimes survive on the manuscript pages — usually the title of a story, such as "Jonah in the belly of a whale," written next to the allotted space. Only once is there a clue as to who wrote these words, when we read: "Remiet, do not put anything in there, as I will do the miniature which should be there." That the head artist would be the writer of instructions would indeed seem sensible in a field where teams were common. Alexander offers two cases that he suggests point to instructions by patrons, both images showing one figure producing a book, and the other figure giving orders about it. However, the first image turns out to show a scribe, plainly getting dictation of text. The other includes words by the order-giver, which are: "Do it well and cleanly, for it will be shown to rich people." Not theme nor meaning but the dazzling of the customer with good technique is the issue, again suggesting master and assistant.

<sup>125</sup> Alexander, chap. 2, "Programmes and Instructions for Illuminators," 52-71.

<sup>126</sup> He cites "for example" (it is his only one), the contract of 1445 for Quarton's Coronation of the Virgin as printed by Stechow, 141-45, in whose anthology of documents it is again the only such case. The contract (fullest text in Sterling, 38-58), indeed calls for themes in very great detail, but then credits these as insistently to the artist. The phrase *selon l'adviz dudit maistre Enguerrand* recurs a quite startling thirteen times. Evidently the contract resulted from a planning discussion like those with Sassetta and Fra Angelico, but here the role of the artist is completely articulate.

How has the impression arisen that detailed instructions were usual, when instead they were few enough to be what might be called surprising? The impression has profited too much from citing instructions not used, or those much modified by the artist. The good cases have involved novel subjects or parts of subjects, suggesting that the phenomenon of the dominant patron is real in that rather narrow area; these cases include the dynastic cycles mentioned, and the very special cases of patrons who happen to be also theologians or humanists.<sup>127</sup> Some cases can also reasonably be proposed when the evidence is imperfect, as at Schifanoia, an astrological program at a court that had an astrologer, even if no records link them. Yet then one must also notice that the whole program was available in an older handbook of astrology. If the patron or advisor simply handed the book over to the artist, it would hardly have been more notable than assigning a story from the Bible — which we seem not to label instructing. Even with all these cases, the firm list seems quite short.<sup>128</sup>

Like the Perugino contract around 1500, one text seems to have been made exemplary for the later years of the century, Annibale Caro's letter to Taddeo Zuccaro detailing a full program for a room

<sup>127</sup> In Florence, a theologian patron was Matteo Palmieri, whose heretical ideas have been reported since Vasari to be visible in a painting he commissioned; this is well-treated by Davies, 94-98. A humanist patron, Bartolommeo Scala, commissioned a set of reliefs for his courtyard illustrating his own writings. This was definitively discussed by Parronchi, who rightly remarked, 125, that they had been thought to have abstruse symbolism before being matched to the right texts, whereupon they turned out to be elementary moral saws.

<sup>128</sup> In a study related to the present one but of a much narrower compass I sought to collect all Quattrocento cases when programs were provided to artists (Gilbert, 1988<sup>2</sup>, 19-22); a public call for more elicited none. The rather small total of seven included the letter by Bruni not used, the presumed but undocumented one at Schifanoia, and two that the artists notably modified when they did the work, one by Guarino for a set of muses and one given to Mantegna for an altarpiece; these four were the total that came from the humanists. The Isabella type in which a patron brought in a programmer had no earlier examples. The other three were provided by patrons alone, including that by Scala cited in note 127, one involving only a specific detail within a work, and, the most interesting, a program for a belt buckle, with a novel subject. The list indeed was less by one than in the first edition of my book, which had cited praise to a patron for providing a learned program for sculpture, a program for which there was no direct evidence. It later emerged that the patron had been flattered, since the program, in part at least, existed in earlier texts, including the Guarino program for muses. Such undue praise to patrons, as by Titian to his duke for offering Ovid, can easily make the list seem longer, if taken seriously.

of frescoes.<sup>129</sup> The writer Caro invented this program on request of the patron, as we saw with Isabella, and the letter's 4500 words give no sign of patron input. It is indeed very detailed, with allegorical figures holding objects that closely anticipate the approach of Ripa's *Iconologia* thirty years later. Few options are left to the artist, and these are minor, appearing where the author seems to have become exhausted. Caro's expertise has a vivid analogue when a local learned academy in 1560 asked the senate of Venice for a subsidy, on grounds including its having provided programs for government painting;<sup>130</sup> the senators did not provide them.

Is the Caro letter typical of its age (as often viewed) or exceptional? Its fame comes from having been reprinted in full in one of Vasari's *Lives*, which never happens in Vasari's work otherwise.<sup>131</sup> The letter was thus perhaps as special as some works of art to which Vasari gave much space. Other passages in the same *Life*, of Zuccaro, evoke other relationships with patrons; in one the artist does "caprices, well carried out as to invention" and his brother in another produces "beautiful capricious inventions" in the same villa where the Caro program was realized. At the same time, Caro's correspondence shows no second similar letter, but it does include one of the opposite kind. Vasari had offered to paint a picture for him and asks him to name a theme. Caro answered that he should paint "whatever story and attitude you like," only asking for a male and female nude. If Vasari really pressed for a choice, he would like a Venus and Adonis, or a Leda if he could do only one figure. Again the specifics extended at most to the title, but Caro did give the exact size he wanted, as in the contracts.<sup>132</sup> Vasari had been very courteous but implicitly boastful that he could do anything, and Caro too showed standard courtesy, as when Isabella told Perugino he could omit what she also requested. Perugino, also proper, did what she asked, or almost all. A later pope ordered a Last Supper from Barocci, but understood (as with Lotto) that the high narrow space was a real difficulty and assured him that some saints would do instead — and this is a pope, about a work for a church! Barocci of course took the dare and

<sup>129</sup> Burke, 96, in a discussion of the problem of the education of artists offers the cases of Isabella and Caro as his sole examples. Caro's letter is most readily accessible through Vasari's life of Taddeo Zuccari, its recipient. (Vasari, 1984:5, 576-85).

<sup>130</sup> Chambers and Pullen, 365.

<sup>131</sup> Vasari, 1984: 5, 558, 568.

<sup>132</sup> Caro, 380-83; this text seems never to be cited in patronage studies, in great contrast with Caro's other letter.

did a Last Supper, showing himself to be a good artist and a good courtier.<sup>133</sup> Caro's wish for two nudes, which could be named later, matches Giambologna's virtuosity in the single block with two sinuous nudes; it got a reasonable name, as the Rape of a Sabine Woman, but its actual theme was his art.<sup>134</sup>

The Ettlinger hypothesis about anti-conciliar second meanings in the Sistine frescoes exemplifies the phenomenon that proposals claiming detailed instructions are often linked to others claiming second intended levels of meaning; perhaps the second hypothesis needs the first. The Solomon and Sheba panel of Ghiberti's *Doors of Paradise* is held to allude to the Council of Florence in 1439. Piero della Francesca's *True Cross* cycle to the campaign for a crusade against the Turks, Botticelli's *Primavera* to four levels, the final one being the Last Judgment, and Giorgione's *Tempest* to the defeat of Venice in battle in 1509. The proposals are often about extremely famous works and about the rare events in the time that still resonate somewhat today. They evidently reinforce the social importance of the art. None of them, however, in this or in any other in the period, seems to be firm. Exceedingly elaborate known programs like Perugino's and Caro's still have just one meaning; when the work is an allegory, that is its literal sense, and when gods personify some principle, it is what they most usually mean.<sup>135</sup> Hidden meaning in Renaissance images is frequent, but it is blatantly hidden, as on medal reverses. In no known case is a standard theme like the true cross shown in a traditional way but assigned a new subtext.<sup>136</sup> Political art

<sup>133</sup> Emiliani, 221f.

<sup>134</sup> See above, note 76.

<sup>135</sup> Thus Ridolfi, 48, reasonably says that Tintoretto's Mercury with the three Graces teaches that intelligence ought to oversee the distribution of favors. This combination of four figures has only that meaning, to judge from the popular handbook of mythology of that era. See Cartari, 565, with illustrations.

<sup>136</sup> Several writers have held that a recently edited text of 1510 assigns "complex programs and layers of meaning" to paintings, and that there is no "clearer contemporary statement that painting was intended for the learned" (Weil-Garris and D'Amico, note 109). Indeed the passage in question is translated as "the more erudite are the paintings in the cardinal's chapel, the more easily the soul can be excited to imitation"; the Sistine walls and a chapel by Filippino Lippi are then named as examples. If it seems puzzling that the soul is most excited by the erudite, it is more so when we note in the preceding sentence the sole themes offered as examples from which (*ex quo*; omitted in the translation) this stimulus emerges: Saint Louis washing pots, Saint Thomas Aquinas hoeing vegetables. The dilemma disappears if we translate *eruditius* not as "more erudite" but in the way *eruditione* was translated one page earlier, "lesson" (Ibid., 90-93). The simple actions of the saints shown excite us to imi-

is common, and is plainly so presented, from the town hall frescoes of Siena by Ambrogio Lorenzetti to the simple allegorical women of the Ducal Palace in Venice; the availability to the era of these procedures makes it questionable that in other cases similar points would be veiled, to less effect, behind another known theme.<sup>137</sup>

Literary historians and others do not hypothesize close patronal control as art historians do; apart from obvious special instances, Ariosto and Spenser are not thought to have been assigned stanzas. As the patrons were the same in both arts, they were familiar with subsidizing the unsupervised.<sup>138</sup> Nor do literary historians so often predicate levels of symbolism where such symbolism is not overt. Such a Warburgian or specifically Panofskyan approach, in combination with social art history, seems to offer an eclectic Marxian-Panofskyan historiography as a vernacular habit. If the Marxian general rule of socio-economic stimulus is in a given case not plain, the hidden message has it. The patrons in the instances proposed not only scrutinize closely, but like the scholars prefer socially important topics. It is true and supportive of this scenario that close patronal control has been a reality in some loci of history, most clearly in the twentieth century. The Soviet Union's extreme form involved not only the support of socialist realism but an active rejection of what was not, illustrated in the ends of the careers of Malevich, Solzhenitzin, and the like. It extended from commissions to what the artist made for himself, and to punishment — always surely on the basis of virtue — in a context that accorded importance to art. Art historians have shown rather slight interest in socialist realism, no doubt because it was dull and because they disapproved of that syn-

tate their good ways; this rationale for images goes back to Thomas Aquinas (Gilbert, 1992, 24) and is here being applied to the Sistine. "Lesson" is the basic sense of the word. Indeed there may be no better statement that painting should be learned, and, if so, there isn't any. Meantime the text has been extrapolated further from "erudite" to report that it endorses "veiled" meanings (Lewine, 54, cf. xvii) and more (cf. Gilbert, 1994, 101-02).

<sup>137</sup> Leonardo's drawing of a wolf steering a boat while an eagle perches on a globe is generally agreed to be a political cartoon (and nothing else); Popham, fig. 125. Popular political prints of the time are similar in imagery, and paintings in which concealed political messages have been posited are not.

<sup>138</sup> A humanist's advice to a king, ca. 1500, to gain fame through "painting, sculpture, buildings" is taken by Trinkaus, 300, to mean that motifs praising him would be incorporated in the works. A slight shift to a formula found in the era would have it that fame derives from patronizing such works, as in the case of Cosimo de' Medici.

drome; yet its real existence could help support hypotheses about other eras, chiefly for Marxian art historians but for others too.

Social art history is not rare in its failure to deal with its own social construction. Apart from the above suggestions, there is a career advantage in research postulating widespread symbolic close supervision in the very factor of the absence of supporting data, since it increases the number of possible theories and leaves them relatively immune to disproof. Meanwhile value may be found in detaching art and art history from the frivolous and making them closer to central social forces — all the more so when visual or formal factors are not considered. It seems mistaken, however, to regard this as a “new” art history because it blanks out the series of writers from Burckhardt forward who focused on the social nexus of Renaissance art, such as Antal, Wackernagel, Chastel, or Meiss, to name only some specialists on Tuscany. This tendency may have been helped by the educational pattern in which an art historian moved into a specialty without broad humanistic prerequisites.

In this syndrome a notable detail is the intense response when one of its postulates is treated with doubt. In one of the best known proposals of extra meanings in Giorgione’s *Tempest*, the author ties the questioning of his view by others — including the present writer — to a social context where rich collectors and dealers pay for corrupt formalist attributions, wishing to establish aesthetic detachment from the workaday world.<sup>139</sup> Elsewhere the same study provides a very good social analysis of Giorgione’s patrons, who were aesthetes of a rather similar kind, though it does not link this with what was said earlier. To do so might suggest that the actual social background of Giorgione could evoke formalist works. Other books, moreover, report the doubting of extra meanings in an incorrect way which, if correct, would allow for a dismissal of the doubters as foolish. The present writer and others are said to posit an “opposition” between patrons and artists — something which would presumably have killed patronage, as it tended to do in the romantic era — and to have advocated banishing even the discussion of “learned advisors.”<sup>140</sup> A book

<sup>139</sup> Settis, 1-18.

<sup>140</sup> In the volume of essays edited by Kent and Simons, 17, 221, 250. It seems suitable to consider these citations and those in the next note, as tokens of a habit, rather than individuals’ findings. The study in which I was said to “banish” advisors from “discourse” in fact gave full play to Bruni, Guarino, Mantegna’s consultants and more. That readers could tune them out seems puzzling; a possibility is that, given a conviction that advisors are pervasive and dominant, any showing that they were few

review of 1995 reports that currently such advisors are being “denigrated” and are “unfashionable”—their low status a matter of bias or fashion, not increased information on their lesser role. In fact their fashion does not seem in decline, to judge from the symposia and the semi-popular books appearing in various languages (as well as the absence of counter-symposia); what is puzzling is the point of such a claim.<sup>141</sup> Views of hidden meanings in Botticelli and others have long been supported by the presence of neo-Platonic writers in Lorenzo de’ Medici’s court, though with no firm instance and no consensus for a meaning being given. Lorenzo, to us the most famous patron, offered one statement in very simple terms about what he liked in paintings, but it was long unnoted, and its validity then rejected on the ground that to accept it would take him literally.<sup>142</sup>

What these patrons wanted to buy from the artists, it seems, was enhancement of their honor and splendor.<sup>143</sup> This is not to exclude social art history, but perhaps to strengthen it, with a better evidenced hypothesis than the other. Patrons usually indicated themes in a general way (for example, in offering the titles) but would seem chiefly to have sensibly thought the professionals could handle the details better. This would have led in some cases to leaving even the themes to the artists, as seen. At the opposite end, patrons sometimes had their own ideas, and, perhaps more often, hired for this purpose a parallel professional, a writer; but this quite often led to the artist raising objections, also a natural outcome. Many other anecdotal cases may, it is hoped, be evoked by this enquiry into a limited number, and other whole areas, such as the signature as a point of pa-

and uninfluential would not count as discoursing about them.

<sup>141</sup> *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, 195. Kempers, translated from Dutch into German and English after 1990, and Hollingsworth, 1994, are semipopular books taking close control as axiomatic.

<sup>142</sup> Dempsey, 138, notes correctly that the author compares paintings to what love has painted in his heart, so they are a simile. Yet it then needs to be added that for similes to work, to explain the matter compared, as in “My love is like a red rose,” the new compared thing, the rose, must hold its plain literal character. It is also relevant that the statement standard for this era about levels of meaning, by Dante in the *Convivio* (1:2) insists that we can only go to allegory after first firmly understanding the literal.

<sup>143</sup> Goldthwaite, 249-50, concerned with somewhat different materials, also cites Pontano on Splendor for a conclusion quite congruent with this one.



tron/artist contact,<sup>144</sup> may be opened up if this survey serves its intended purpose.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> The raw data on signatures is highly accessible, from connoisseur scholarship, but seems not to have been at all exploited for its social indications. It seems contrary to our suppositions that the tomb of a potent cardinal in 1299 shows his name and the artist's adjacent to each other in the same scale (Garms, 83-87, fig. 78). Why would that be acceptable? The idea that having this artist brought honor seems nicely supported by a nearly contemporary description of the tomb as *muuy noblemente obrada*. Mantegna signed the Camera degli Sposi as a gift to his patron, an overlooked statement of the artist/patron relations that seems to be in harmony with the material here.

<sup>145</sup> A famous debate in medieval art turns on whether everything is symbolic or some things, such as plant ornaments, are not. Both sides postulate that the symbolic represents the patron's wishes, anything else the artist's freedom. Yet this seems crosscut when a bishop in 1230 specifies that some work should be without symbolism and have only beauty (Gilbert, 1985, 125-32). I am grateful to colleagues who continued to suggest related materials after this text had been finished.

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