
The production of art during the Florentine Renaissance

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Introduction

The production of art in Florence during the Renaissance can be viewed as an economic system. Although the remaining evidence is scarce, there is enough available to build a relatively comprehensive picture.

The art professionals operated in workshops, which were part of a broader economic landscape. The workshops produced mass-market goods and competed for specialist commissions in three main practices: sculpture, canvas painting and wall painting. Commissions were secured and paid for through contracts between artists and patrons, in a market place partially regulated by the professional guilds.

The art professionals came from various backgrounds to enter the workshops as pupils, and were trained through a long process of apprenticeship before becoming assistants. For good artists, the profession could be lucrative, and some progressed on to become well-known and famous masters.

The Workshops

Environment

A survey taken at the end of the 1470s – which unfortunately doesn't include painters or masters of figural sculpture – indicates that there were 270 *arte della lana* workshops; 83 silk weaving firms; 84 ateliers for wood carving and *intarsia*; 54 workshops for marble and stone decoration; and 44 master gold and silversmiths. This can be compared to 70 slaughterers and butchers; and 66 spice merchants, to illustrate the breadth and depth of the artistic profession at the time.

Competition between workshops was prevented partly through monopolistic maintenance and preservation of a particular technical procedure, and also through a continually increased mastery of operation. The workshops also carried out applied art to create utensils for daily living needs.

The surviving evidence reveals the location of artists' houses and workshops, usually streets, but sometimes the particular buildings. This includes the workshops of Masaccio, Donatello, Ghiberti, Maiano and Benedetto, although all of these have subsequently been destroyed or remodelled.

Structure

With the exception of Michelangelo, the master did not work alone, but was accompanied by assistants. The master was the head, directing and producing the main work, with two, three or more apprentices and assistants; who were being trained in the process.

A common organisational structure was a temporary partnership of two beginners of about the same age. Another, longer lasting, structure occurred between members of an artistic family. Larger scale operations involved numerous personnel, such as with Ghiberti and the construction of the first bronze doors: evidence suggests that there were eleven assistants in 1403 for this operation.

The assistants sometimes made a name for themselves later with their own independent production. Also, some assistants occasionally outgrew their master artistically even during the apprenticeship period. If the master died after beginning a work, then other members of the workshops immediately took over the completion.

Practices

General

In some cases, as with Raphael and the Stanze, work was executed entirely by the one artist. In other cases, such as with Bandinelli and the colouring of his cartoons, additional specialists were involved.

For the great works, a division between design and execution was virtually

necessary because there were many laborious execution procedures, and many purely technical preparatory and subsidiary tasks.

In the succeeding Mannerist period, the workshops refined their operating techniques to become even more entrepreneurial, with an army of collaborators and specialists available to speed the execution of works.

Sculpture

In the conception, the process of sculpture began with preliminary sketches¹, followed by a model molded in soft material, such as wax or clay. In the next step, a full-size clay model was often created, and for bronze work, a cast was made. Sometimes, drawings and small sketches were used in place of a model.

In the execution, a large part of the laborious chiselwork was often done by assistants and pupils based upon the master's model. The master would carry out the essential details and the final completion. For instance, Michelangelo would use assistants for the coarse technical work, but would supervise in the process, and intervene to complete the final detail.

In bronze sculpture, professional specialists were usually needed, as a designing and modelling sculptor was rarely able to master the difficulties of the bronze casting technique.

Canvas painting

In the early period, the process of canvas painting is understood through the documentation of Cennini, who describes the methods in recipe form. Firstly, the colours, painting agents, and panels are prepared. Secondly, the picture is sketched and the underpainting is applied. Thirdly, the colours are executed: clothing parts first, then uncovered parts of the body, and finally heads.

Until the middle of the Quattrocento, sketching for practice was carried out by draughtsmen using small panels impregnated with bone meal, or covered

with parchment. Loose parchment sheets might also be used, however they were costly. The use of sketchbooks as a means of collecting pattern types seemed to come into sporadic use from the early Quattrocento, as did an increasing interest in diligent nature study.

In the later period, from the second third of the Quattrocento onwards, the process of conception is found to have three steps. Firstly, sketches were made of the arrangement and the compositional idea, often based on instructions from the patron². Secondly, nature studies were used to understand all possible details of the projected image. Thirdly, a more or less precisely detailed sketch of the whole composition was completed. Execution was then carried out either through tracing, or from a full-sized sketch, or through enlargement with the aid of a grid network.

Across these periods, there several noticeable developments in the processes, which tended to reflect a general shift from elegance to bold and simplified representations.

Specific changes in technique included a move towards minute precision in the surfaces and the studies, along with a freer, lighter and sketchier execution of the composition designs, which tends to illustrate a refinement in the expenditure of effort. Silverpoint was succeeded by quill pen, and watercolour was succeeded by red chalk, and because of this drawing paper did not need to be tinted anymore. When drawing, there was a move towards clear structure and organic quality with an interest in anatomy and study of the nude, departing from the existing practice of setting up clay models and cloth stiffened by soaking in wax.

Wall painting

The process of wall painting is only just understood from the little information that survives about it. However, the availability of preparatory sketches, and the survival of uncompleted paintings provides some insights into the process. The most important innovation was the combining of oil painting with egg tempera.

¹ The sketches were not considered important enough to be preserved until the late Quattrocento.

² It is suspected that the sketch was used to bind the contract.

The first step in the process was the preparation of the ground for the painting, followed by a sketch of the composition. Based on this, the modelled shadow areas were executed with brush in brownish colours. This underpainting was topped with a transparent coat of local colours, which completed the painting.

The master's involvement was often confined to the essential aspects of the work, specifically the design process and the allocation and supervision of the assistants' share in the execution. Even so, the master still had to be in touch with the techniques and practices customary at the time.

Materials

There is some evidence of the utensils and materials used in the workshops during the production processes.

From one inventory, the following utensils are found: veiling with a wooden net of perpendicular threads, which was used to make grasping perspectival foreshortening easier; mirrors, that were used for self-critical examination of works; and jointed dolls with drapery, used for modelling and study.

The workshop materials were generally obtained from the spice dealers; in particular the pigments, which were created from raw materials. Gold leaf came from gold beaters or middlemen, and was sometimes provided by the patrons. Expensive azure blue was imported primarily from Venice, although many patrons would order it themselves to ensure price and quality.

The Market

Prices

Prices varied sharply until about 1470, after which they became somewhat more uniform and the reason for this is unknown. Generally, prices for works depended on various factors, including picture size, composition and materials.

A wall painting, such as a fresco, could receive 15 to 30 florins. A sculpture could receive 20 florins for smaller reliefs, to 130 florins for life-size evangelists on a façade. Michelangelo received 400 florins for his colossal sculpture of David.

By comparison, the monthly rent for a dwelling and workshop in the early Renaissance was, on average, about 1.5 to 2 florins. In addition to this, an average medium-sized household would need 2 to 3 florins per month for daily necessities.

Payments

Upon commencement of the commission, payments were often advanced to cover materials. In these cases, patrons often wanted a contractual guarantee that the work would be completed, and an assurance that the artist's liability was guaranteed by solvent citizens. Sometimes, payment was made in monthly installments or fixed annual provisions, which tended to cause the artist to maintain an uninterrupted and exclusive occupation with the commission.

Upon completion of the commission, the patron often reserved the right to have the artists' production appraised by an expert. The work was assessed in terms of both quality and quantity, taking into account any advanced payments already made. It was not uncommon for the arbiters to decide on a higher amount than was already foreseen, and this was occasionally contentious.

Payments were sometimes received not on cash, but in kind with articles such as grain, wine or oil. Frequently, artists were given free room and board, and this was calculated as part of the payment.

Payments were sometimes not received at all, because patrons fell short of funds, such as when individual merchants or whole economic groups were temporarily crippled. There are many artists' tax declarations that have references to outstanding debts for works delivered or begun, together with bitter comments about the prospect of seeing payments within a foreseeable time.

Conditions

Patrons generally attempted to determine and contractually enforce a date for delivery. In many cases, it took no more than two to three months to complete a medium-sized altarpiece in lower-level workshops. Some surviving contracts contain breach clauses and patrons had to fear, especially with prominent artists, that another patron could thwart his plans by

offering a more imposing or otherwise attractive commission.

The professionals

Origin

Some of new generation of artists came from hereditary origins, however many were descendants of craftsmen or tradesmen in fields other than art. Vasari suggests that this is due to an innate, autodidactic drive in the artistic predisposition. The decision to enter the profession must have been made early, as training usually began at the age of twelve to fourteen.

Development

Training commenced when the pupil was accepted into the master's house as an apprentice. The apprentice prepared painting materials and practiced drawing work to train the eye and the hand. The drawing models included sheets of studies by the master, plus famous works by other artists available in the locality, and young sculptors would also study, draw and model antique art works.

The area of specialisation for the apprentice could be important, as the artisan training period was an accepted route for aspiring artists: many prominent masters gained access to their 'liberal' artistic trade this way. For instance, stonemasons and decorative sculptors often advanced to figural sculpture. The most promising route for aspiring artists was through the goldsmiths' trade, and this was often the preferred choice by fathers for their sons.

The remuneration for the apprentice was provided by cash payments starting in the first year at six florins, rising to ten florins in the third year. From then, the financial share in the total activity of the workshop would rise on advancement to assistant and could reach a third, and in special cases up to a half, of the net profits taken by the master. Occasionally, payment was offered in the form of room and board, or clothing.

For advancement in the studio, the best approach seemed to be practical collaboration on commissions carried out by the master. In addition, there were student days, such as holidays and

Sundays, which offered time to pursue personal drawing projects. Many masters also offered additional private training in drawing during these times.

The workshops often resembled a family affair and the training and mentoring process was often marked by close collaboration and strong personal bonds between the head of the studio, and his pupils and assistants. In many cases, artists came to be called by a new surname, derived from their first master or studio chief, not from their biological father.

Training completed, after about twelve years including time spent as an assistant. In the early Renaissance, there was no customary journey as was almost universally required for German artists of the time. To advance, in the later period, it became desirable, and almost indispensable, to stay in Rome and study.

Success

Although Donatello had an outspoken artistic indifference to money, almost all other artists of rank mention the possession of one or more houses (which they sometimes rented to someone else). There was a fairly steady, if not in fact quite sizeable income to be gained from artistic work, which made it possible to rise to a certain bourgeois affluence. For instance, Michelangelo obtained considerable wealth, and with his simple standard of living managed to invest most of it in real estate.

Status

The artist generally belonged to the middle or upper artisan class. Their increased esteem, by the middle of the Quattrocento, led to an increased self-awareness, and they tended to rebel against the low class status that had been previously adhered to them.

Nature

There is evidence of greater than average signs of piety. For instance, in surviving correspondence, Michelangelo asks to be prayed for prior to his commencement of a difficult work. Many artists pursued an extensive and universal education, most notably Brunelleschi, Donatello and Ghiberti.

The sharp wit and original freshness of many artists is noted, and many were also gifted with poetic or musical abilities. Certain artists cared for beautiful and remarkable animals in their own houses and gardens, as a reflection of their love of beauty.

Leonardo wrote about the artists' inspiration, including studies of physical nature. He also wrote about the use of imaginative powers, describing how the artists' eye could take all sorts of useful stimuli for use in inventing lively compositions.

Michelangelo was one of a number of noteworthy artists that remained unmarried. It is suspected that this was related to an old custom of monastic scholarship, in which artists renounced marriage and a personal family life in order to pursue professional goals in an undistracted manner. There were certainly many artists that did have wives and children.

The professionals' society

Relationships

There were many collegial exchanges and occasions for social activities. There was at least one lecture hall attached to a workshop, where artists could come to give talks or to listen. Additional evidence exists for other club-like exclusive societies. Surviving correspondence from Michelangelo illustrated that younger or weaker talents could receive help from mature masters outside of the teacher-pupil relationship.

Other anecdotes of society behaviour include reports of painters' mutually malicious tongues, including a high profile animosity by Michelangelo towards Raphael. Other artists devoted to Michelangelo contributed abusive comments towards Raphael.

Organisations

The artists were represented as a group by the professional guilds, and the nature of these guilds can be interpreted from the fragmentary evidence that survives.

The guilds were organised according to the type of work carried out by the artists. There were guilds for physicians,

apothecaries and spice-dealers; goldsmiths, beaters and spinners; wood, stone and marble work masters; and figural sculptors and carpenters.

The guilds had an exclusive membership, as a guild list of Florentine painters in the period 1409 to 1444 mentions 41 names, with about 8 or 9 new names added every 5 years. Lists from a later period document about 42 names, of which 30 are figure painters, and only 8 of these painters are then known in any other context. Members, officials and other notaries – such as independent assessors – were chosen every four months by voting from members.

The guilds took enrollment dues of 6 florins for natives, and 12 florins for non-natives. As such, it regulated against foreign competition, as there is evidence for frequent infiltration of artists from Germany and the Netherlands.

Guides were concerned with a diverse array of professional issues. Documentary evidence illustrates an interest in fundamental processes of education for future masters; prescriptions on the use of genuine and durable painting materials; details for conscientious work methods; general guidelines on the fixing of prices; and methods for the appointment of non-partisan assessors to settle price disputes.

Employment

Due to the extensive and continuous demand in the art market, there was a considerable supply of workers. Even skillful artists had to make a considerable effort to get into the right place. An artist that did not have an uninterrupted flow of commissions found it hard to put aside financial reserves.