

Art history persuasive essay

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Art in Renaissance period was significantly more important as a form of investment and little emphasis was placed on the artist's own convictions. Of course there is ample room to dispute the reasons why art was made, but looking at two points of view we are able to define the essence of Renaissance artistry. We look specifically at a modern perspective based on historical interjection through the writing of Michael Baxandall as well as memoirs and writings from artists themselves. Specifically we look at the writing of Giorgio Vasari and Benvenuto Cellini.

The Renaissance was a time when a re-emergence of the pagan entered the artistic realm, as well as a new respect for logic (Dunan ed, 1981: 25). “Fifteenth and sixteenth-century intellectuals coined the term to assert the superiority of their own age over the ‘middle’ or ‘dark’ ages.” (Garraty and Gay, 1972: 481). Michael Baxandall describes that “a fifteenth century painting is the deposit of a social relationship.” (Baxandall: 1). The relationship was thus similar to a manufacturer producing a product for a client. How the client or patron pays for the product depends largely on what he wants the product to be like.

He/she is in control of the execution of the product inasmuch as the materials are paid for by the patron. Some clients pay for the work by the size of the piece, for example in the Duke of Ferrara's case, he paid for the work by the square foot (Baxandall: 1). There were also considered to be motives for the commissioning of the work. These motives include the importance of representing God as well as the purpose of representing the self and the city. The ability to spend money and for it to be seen as such is

an important motive in a time when money was more important than anything else.

For this reason, Baxandall believes that money and art are intertwined. The process of providing this service and coming up with the final product was no different in reality to producing any other commodity in that a rough draft was used initially for the patron's approval. Baxandall explains also that contracts were entered into with quotations for labor in each case (where size was not used as an indicator). The private commission often held public purposes in that the patron often wished the piece to be displayed in public places and for the public eye. An element of prestige was evident in all such instances.

Contractual obligations were outlined in correspondence between the artist and the patron and under these circumstances a patron could stipulate that the artist be involved in certain parts of the painting that would usually be left to the apprentice. In these cases choices could be made as to how the brushwork and style was executed. The contractual agreement stipulates what is to be included in the painting in terms of ornamentation; how payment is to be made and what the payment is; when the piece is to be completed by; and lastly, colors were to be stipulated in full detail (these vary from case to case).

Payment was most often made in installments and the client may provide more expensive materials for the artist and only pay for the labor. Gold became the primary color used for the framing of the pictures, as ultramarine became less popular in quotations from the period. Fashion played an important role in the way in which art became seen and the way it

was viewed. Towards the later period of the Renaissance it appeared to be less important to be opulent in undertakings and more important to display moral high ground. This movement also reflected a more political motive in terms of patron's involvement in the overall production of paintings.

There was also a shortage of gold at one stage that may have contributed to new ways of dealing with artistic subjects. The worth of a painting was not so much in its application but in its presence and was therefore seen both as an investment and a physical attribute decoratively. Both the value of the materials and the value of the skill were entertained in the payment of these pieces. The ability of the artist to produce the same effect as gold, using the brush as a tool was also considered to be admirable and desirable to the client.

This indicated a divine and discernable skill to the client who was far more interested in attaining the most worthy of pieces than he/she was in the value of the materials used. A background that was presented with composed subjects required more skill than a solid gold background would. The influence of art took on two branches however that included the contentious dual between sculpture and painting. A new distinction can be made between the two disciplines and in the writing of Vasari we are able to see a certain degree of artistic supremacy instilled in the opinion of what constituted skill in the Renaissance.

Painting is described as the use of color to “deceive the eye.” (Vasari: 98). The philosophical argument here is whether sculpture is a better representation of nature than painting is. Here we see that within the artistic realm there was a debate and competition arising within the artistic

fraternity itself. The argument surrounds the skill involved in producing the visual aspect and perspective of any subject that is represented on a flat surface. “ So it seems to me that painting is nobler and allows of greater artistry than sculpture”(Vasari: 99).

The greatness however, of sculpture was embodied in the form of Michelangelo and the subsequent payment that was clearly over and above what he quoted the patron for. In one case abuse of the artist is described by Vasari where Michelangelo himself was struck by the Pope (Vasari: 675). Clearly the artist had very little control over the contract. Baxadall looks at the artist as someone who enters into a business orientated contract but in Vasari’s description, the treatment of artists was far less desirable.

Michelangelo appeared to be maverick in his execution of the Sistine Chapel, given that instructions were explicit at that time as to how the piece was to be executed. “ Michelangelo complained at times that on account of the haste that the Pope imposed in him he was not able to finish it in his own fashion, as he would have liked; for his Holiness was always asking him importunately when he would finish it. ”(Vasari: 668). In this quotation it becomes evident that a great deal of pressure was placed on the artist as a painter and the rivalry between disciplines could be seen as a motivating factor for higher quality and speedier work.

Self-employment in these terms could not have been a comfortable existence. Cellini expresses in his writing, the hardships faced by artists and the pressure that was therefore placed on apprentices and employees of the artists. Cellini describes the frightening experience of his employees and himself when trying to cast a bronze. In essence it required a great deal

more experience and daring than it did pure artistic skill. There was therefore a different dimension added to the artistic balance. Evidently it took more than artistic prowess alone. “ Look here, Benvenuto, what you want done is beyond the powers of art.

It's simply impossible. ”(Cellini: 346). Many of the finer nuances of art in modern times is taken for granted in the sense that someone would have had to iron out the wrinkles before hand. “ When all the wax was gone and the mould well baked, I at once began to dig the pit in which to bury it, observing all the rules my art demands. ”(Cellini: 344). Cellini describes what his art ‘ demands’, something that is beyond the original idea of what the piece is going to turn out like. In Baxandall’s article there is a lot to do with the contractual basis by which art is conceptualized but does not go in to detail as to how that art is created.

It is not an easy life, nor is it simple to create the final product. Cellini also explains that there was a great deal of jealousy in the artistic world and rivalry would naturally become a very staple part of art. Surely too the business of being ones own employer becomes apparent when Cellini gets a fever is required to continue working. Cellini also explains that the patron at times did not understand the art which he had enlisted the artists help in. This made the work very difficult to execute insofar the interference of the client could hinder the artists work and schedule.

Baxandall explains the process of art in a certain way that makes it sound as if there is a product being manufactured by the producer. While this is true to a degree, the finer details of the artistic process are not known to the average person or to the historian. There is always an element of

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misunderstanding in terms of how art is created and why. Little interest was left for the artist to take their own liberties as a free spirit and their products became a workable commodity rather than a reflection of the artist themselves.

The art from the artists own perspective yields a different look at the way we perceive the process of art. References: Baxandall, Michael. (Date unknown). *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*. Cellini, Benvenuto. (Date unknown). *Autobiography*. Dunan, Marcel ed. (1981). *Larousse Encyclopedia of Modern History: From 1500 to the present day*. Hamlyn: London. Garraty, J. A and Gay, P. (1972). *The University History of the World*. New Orchard Editions: London. Vasari, Giorgio. (Date unknown). *Lives of the Artists*.