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Patronage and it's impact on the roman art world

by Colbei Sakuma

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In 1623, artists in Italy witnessed the return of “the golden age of painting.” Fifty-five year old Maffeo Barberini had just been elected as the new Pope, and claimed the name Urban VIII. Shortly after his election, the new Pope set out on a process of “beautifying Rome,” essentially continuing the path set by the popes that had preceded him; Urban VIII, perhaps feeling the pressure to convince the world that Rome was the spiritual capitol of the Catholic community, saw these building projects as a way to “stifle doubts within Italy itself,” and saw the Baroque as a perfect instrument to use in order to reassert Rome’s importance in the world, relying heavily on “persuasion” that “is the other feature of the Baroque.”¹ Urban VIII’s presence could be felt in all artistic matters, regardless of whether he directly patronized an artist or used his influence to persuade artists to come to Rome. The following essay will examine the evolving nature of patronage throughout Seicento Rome during the reign of Urban VIII and the Barberini in order to prove that Rome was both the artistic and religious capitol of the world.

To begin, one needs to understand the status of painters in Rome during the Baroque era. Patrizia Cavazzini brings up an important point regarding the position of artists in Rome during the Seicento. She writes, with regard to the large number of “now-unknown painters” that ‘painter’ “is a word that was used to describe a wide range of activities.” As an example, “Giovanni Battista was said to be a painter even though his production was limited to paper festoons,” while “Giovanni Battista Gelletti pittore applied paint to the ceiling of a barbershop.”² Such loose interpretation of the word “painter” makes it difficult to determine whether a person was a painter by profession, like the famous Michelangelo di Caravaggio, or someone who applied paint upon necessity, like Giovanni Battista Gelletti. However, it appears that the broad

¹ Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters. Art and Society in Baroque Italy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980):31 and 33.

² Patrizia Cavazzini, *Painting as Business in Early Seventeenth-Century Rome*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008)18.

definition of the word “painter” was attractive to artists who were not from Italy, especially those coming from the Netherlands, where guild restrictions made it difficult to work independently.³ Furthermore, those that defined themselves “painters” but were actually gilders found themselves working with a painter on projects, sometimes in a lesser capacity and other times as a partner. “Such a collaboration, or even of subordination of the painter to the gilder, would be particularly easy to carry out, but there was nothing unusual in a painter’s working for a gilder.”⁴ Though gilders worked with painters and gilding and other crafts were under the category of “painting”, what set them at odds with painters was their connection with the art dealer.

In 1633 the Accademia di S. Luca, complaining that “it is serious, lamentable and somehow humiliating to the arts themselves to see works destined for the decoration of Sacred Temples...exhibited in shops...”⁵ Art dealers seemed to be looked down upon by the general public and many artists were worried that their works would be stolen or reproduced; moreover, dealers had no qualms about working with “gilders, tailors, barbers, and cobblers.” That all those who practiced these “crafts” were considered “painters” aggravated painters is not difficult to fathom, given the statement made by the Accademia di S. Luca. Painters knew that in order to become successful they ought to stand clear of any art dealer. As Haskell writes, “indeed, once an artist had made his reputation there would be no question of his ever working again for a dealer...”⁶ Thus, gaining private patronage was essential for the artist; a powerful patron meant having access to resources that would ensure that their work would be more protected against unlawful reproduction. But having a patron meant more than just having protection against

³ Ibid, 19. Another important aspect of the Seicento definition of painter is that “no one was prosecuted for working as a painter in the city.”

⁴ Ibid, 22.

⁵ Haskell, *Patrons and Painters*, 121.

⁶ Ibid, 120-121.

reproduction. Maintaining a healthy relationship with one's patron was vital to the success of an artist. Prized above all others was papal patronage. Traditionally, the family of the pope prospered and grew fantastically wealthy; moreover, they often became supporters of the arts, as in the case of Urban VIII'S nephews, Francesco, Taddeo and Antonio.⁷ Seeking and winning their favor meant obtaining financial security, as commissions would always be forthcoming.

The artist-patron relationship could take several forms, the most famous being exemplified by Bernini and Cardinal Scipione Borghese, that of *servitu particolare*. In such an arrangement, the artist lives with the patron and agrees to work solely for him and his family. At the outset, this kind of patronage is appealing, especially for foreign artists. "Arriving in Rome from some remote city, what could be more desirable than the welcome of a highly placed compatriot offering hospitality, encouragement and a regular income?"⁸ Yet, due to the fact that power shifted from family to family, which lead to the disgrace of some patrons, artists were weary of remaining with one patron for too long; moreover, few families could afford to support an artist for too long. Thus, the practice of maintaining contact with an artist through contracts was much more common in Seicento Rome. Subject matter, the dimensions of the painting and the payment that would be received would all be specified in the contracts between artist and patron and, unless stated, it was often left to the painter to determine how best to carry out the patron's wishes.⁹ Finally, a contract typically ended with the amount that the artists would be paid. Thanks to an economy that became dependent on artistic goods, artists found themselves becoming immensely wealthy during the Seicento.

⁷ Haskell, *Painters and Patrons*, 43. A look at Francesco Barberini's influence will be examined towards the end of the essay.

⁸ *Ibidm*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid*, 11. Often, a *modello* could be drawn up at the request of the patron in order to ensure that the work was to his liking.

Painters working in Rome often found that their services were in high demand because “there was no substitute for their high-quality goods.” Starting out, an artist might receive small amounts; such as the case of Caravaggio’s *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* that was valued at one and a half *scudi* (figure one). This figure is relatively low but only when compared to the amounts that were paid for his later works. “400 *scudi* for his two lateral paintings in the Contarelli Chapel and another for its altarpiece... apparently he earned his highest fees, 1,000 *scudi* for his *Nativity and Resurrection of Lazarus*... (figure 2.)¹⁰ By the middle of the Seicento annual incomes for artists of repute, like Domenichino, could be around 1500 *scudi*.¹¹ Several factors seemed to help ensure that artists received such high wages. As stated above, the high demand for art and artists meant that people were willing to pay artists well. The Accademia di S. Luca played a significant role in elevating the status of artists. Acting much like a guild, the Academy “tried to establish fair rules of competition among artists... made forbidden the trace over of the canvas of another painter, because by doing so, both painters and canvases get damaged.” Moreover, they attempted to arrest the sale of copies and cheap images by valuing such images at a higher price.¹² Thus, a premium was put on painters and their work, since cheap reproductions would be priced just as high as an original. However, some artists, like Guido Reni and Guercino, soon realized that they could take advantage of their patrons.

Not only did having a patron mean protection and resources but having the right patron meant the difference between receiving 100 *scudi* and 10 *scudi*. Three “types” of painters existed from which a patron could choose from. There were the “painters of inferior quality, (pittori pie bassi) worth 2 or 3 *scudi* for life size figures,” the “ordinary artists (pittore ordinario) worth 15

¹⁰Richard E. Spear, “Scrambling for Scudi: Notes on Painters’ Earnings in Early Baroque Rome,” *The Art Bulletin* 85 m.2 (June, 2003) 312. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3177346> . (accessed November 22, 2013).

¹¹ *Ibid*, 516.

¹² Cavazzini, *Painting as Business*, 45,48.

scudi per figure” and “the special (straordinario), who was rewarded according to the excellence of the finished work.”¹³ Artists like Reni, Guercino and Caravaggio would certainly fall into the latter category. Patrons were willing to pay based on their reputation and quality because they needed artists to produce works that would reflect their importance. Typically, this type of patron came from rich families, like the Barberini or Borghese, who had the money to pay artists any sum they desired; furthermore, powerful families were often linked to the Papacy. Nepotism was a common tradition within the papal-states. Families linked to the Pope became fantastically wealthy. For instance, Scipione Borghese “was paid 405 *scudi* a month”. By 1633, he had amassed over 6.5 million *scudi*. Antonio Barberini the Elder had an allowance of 30,000 *scudi*.¹⁴ Thus, winning the patronage of cardinal-nephews or the Pope himself could ensure that an artist would be financially secure for the rest of his life. Papal patronage served a specific purpose in Seicento Rome during the reign of Urban VIII: reasserting the importance of Rome as the capitol of the Catholic world.

At this point it is important to understand the goal of Urban VIII in order to understand the type of works that were being commissioned during Urban’s reign. Protestantism had claimed over half of Europe; in France, religious wars devastated the country, until Henry IV underwent his famous conversion in 1593 and signed the Edict of Nantes, which allowed Protestants the right to practice their religion in certain areas of France. Yet, Rome had ever enjoyed freedom from Protestant attacks. More pressing to Urban VIII was “traditional enmity between the two great Catholic powers, France and the Hapsburg Empire, whose jockeying for position and search for allies frequently threatened the peace of Italy....”¹⁵ Furthermore,

¹³ Spear, “Scrambling for Scudi”, 316.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 312.

¹⁵ Haskell, *Patrons and Painters* 33.

dissidents like Galileo were challenging the traditions of the Bible, and brought into question the importance of the Counter Reformation.¹⁶ Urban VIII needed a way to reassert the importance of the papacy and Rome; to accomplish this he threw all of his efforts into the completion of New St. Peter's (figure 3). Through his favoring of Florentine artists, he was able to employ the most successful architect of the Seicento: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who "though born in Naples of a Neapolitan mother, was most anxious to stress the fact that his father was a Florentine."¹⁷ Urban VIII made sure that his family was forever associated with the completion of New St. Peter's; bees could be seen on columns; "suns blaze on rich columns;" even the leaves found on the columns in New St. Peter's were laurel. All of these were Barberini emblems.¹⁸ New St. Peter's became a symbol of the Barberini; throughout the Seicento; moreover commissions for the redecorating of old churches or the commissioning of new churches by religious orders like the Jesuits became part of Urban's mission to beautify Rome. Yet, as these religious groups became more common, their attempts to control church decoration brought them into conflict with private patrons.

Traditionally, church spaces offered private patrons a way to "establish monuments to themselves that not only glorified their families but also helped to ensure their salvation."¹⁹ This all changed, however, during the Counter Reformation. Fearful that the laity would readily leave the Catholic Church, the Council of Trent sought to change the way in which churches were decorated; paintings should be straightforward and easy to understand. Obscure stories or complex allegories were not permitted. A good example of this is the Marian Cycle in the S.

¹⁶ Ibid, 33. "L'Italie est pleine de libertins et d'Athees, et gens qui ne croient rien."

¹⁷ Ibid, 34. Bernini would be employed by the Jesuits; this will be examined later in this essay.

¹⁸ Ibid, 35. The cost of New St. Peter's was 200,000 *scudi*. That Urban VIII could afford this underscores how wealthy the Papacy had become during his reign.

¹⁹ Giles Knox, "The Unified Church Interior in Baroque Italy: S. Maria Maggiore in Bergamo," *The Art Bulletin* 82 n.4 (December, 2000):679. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051417> (accessed November 21, 2013).

Maria Maggiore (figure 4). Following the recommendation of Carlo Borromeo to update the church in order to max the new approach to religious scenes, the interior of the church was completely redone. Old paintings were replaced by tapestries showing “major feasts of the Virgin” which were to be hung throughout the entire church. The enormous sum of 2,357 *scudi* was paid by the Misericordia Maggiore, a local confraternity.²⁰ Throughout this process of decoration, private patrons “were excluded entirely or controlled by a powerful governing body.”²¹ While this is one example it does show that the power of private patrons was beginning to be undermined. This became more pronounced with the expansion of religious orders.

The Jesuits and the Oratorians faced serious difficulties on their route to becoming patrons themselves. For one, during Urban VIII’s reign, the majority of elite artists working in Rome were preoccupied with New St. Peter’s. Bernini, who would the Jesuits would commission to work on Andrea al Quirnarl, (figure 5) was under the strict control of Urban, and thus unavailable to either group. As far as decorating their existing churches went, the Jesuits were at the mercy of private families and their attempts to create personal spaces for themselves. Furthermore, the Jesuits were always facing serious shortages of money. In light of this, the Jesuits showed remarkable adaptability and stubbornness: for instance, rather than sacrifice control of decorating the inside of their new church at St. Ignatio, the Jesuits “turned to one of its own members to carry on with the decoration.”²² This might be attributed to the fact that Alessandro Farnese had dominated the decoration of Il Gesu (figure 6). and that it did not fit

²⁰ *Ibid*, 692.

²¹ *Ibid*, 679.

²² Haskell, 74.

their taste.²³ However, a shift does appear to have occurred after the passing of Urban VIII in 1644 and the freedom from his service of Bernini.

While disputes about how to decorate Il Gesu continued well into the late Seicento, another Jesuit Church, S. Andrea al Quirinale, was begun in 1658 and complete in 1672. The architect that completed the work was none other than Bernini, who was a friend of the Jesuits throughout his whole life. No part of the project went untouched by Bernini; this must be attributed to the demand made by Prince Pamfili: “you must do whatever Cavalier Bernini orders, even if all my substance should go in the process.”²⁴ For example, the Jesuits’ original design called for five altarpieces, to which Bernini designed a pentagon, where at each point an altarpiece would be situated. When Pope Alexander VII asked him to change the plan, Bernini seems to have acquiesced, and instead returned to an earlier plan for an older church, the S. Andrea. His final design showed “the overwhelming power of geometry to shape brute mass...if the sources of geometry are evident and rational, then to follow its dictates is more restive and beautiful.”²⁵ Bernini had constructed his masterpiece; now all that remained was to decorate it. It is here that the Jesuits asserted their authority as art patrons, independent of outside sources.

Camillo Pamfili and the Jesuits faced a dilemma that once again revolved around how the church would be decorated. On the one side was Camilo Pamfili and those that supported him wanted to spare no expense in decorating S. Andrea al Quirinale; on the other side were the more conservative of the Jesuits, who believed that the church should be left bare and unadorned.²⁶

Although more support was given to the Pamfili camp, the Jesuits did assert themselves in terms

²³ Ibid, 85. Disputes over the handling of Il Gesu continued well into 1669.

²⁴ Ibid, 87.

²⁵ Joseph Connors, “Bernini’s S. Andrea al Quirinale: Payments and Planning,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 41 n.1 (March, 1982): 25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/989760>.

²⁶ Ibid, 20-21. Pamfili and his group paid for the adornments while the more conservative groups paid for the masonry. Connors calls the former the “party of material splendor” and the latter “the party of austerity.”

of who would paint the multiple altarpieces in the church. Pamfili and his family might have paid for their decoration, the Jesuits made “the actual arrangements with artists” who would paint the altarpieces. Their choice consisted of both Guglielmo Borgognone, who painted *The Martyrdom of St. Andrew* (figure 7) in 1668 and Gaulli, who painted the *Death of St. Francis Xavier* (figure 8) in 1676.²⁷ The Jesuits had transitioned from being dependent upon outside patrons to furnish their churches to patrons themselves, which afforded them considerable control over the affairs of their churches. Just as religious orders became important patrons of the arts, convents too were becoming major players in the art world.

A source commonly overlooked in the world of art is that of women. One might be disinclined to believe that women ever acted as patrons of the arts, given their inferior status to men. Yet, as it turns out, women, especially those who were part of covenants, became just that. “Among the significant patrons of art in Seicento Rome were convents that commissioned numerous works of art...”²⁸ Interiors of churches, such as the stuccoes and frescoes “designed by Giovanni Battista Gaulli at S. Marta al Collegio Romano...were commissioned and financed by the nuns of the convents adjoining these churches.”²⁹ Nuns, though supposed to observe a vow of poverty, found ways to raise private funds through the *vitalizi*, an “allowance that during the life of the nun could be used for her religious needs...she often employed for special expenses such as the decorations of the church.”³⁰ Because of this income, nuns could commission artists to decorate their respective convents. Some women dedicated their lives to

²⁷ Haskell, *Patrons and Painters*, 87-88.

²⁸ Marilyn Dunn, “Piety and Patronage in Seicento Rome: Two Noblewomen and Their Convents,” *The Art Bulletin* 76 n. 4 (December 1994): 644. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3046061> (accessed November 20, 2013). For a more in depth look at women as patrons see also Carolyn Valone’s “Women on the Quirinal Hill: Patronage in Rome, 11560-1630,” *The Art Bulletin* 76 n.1 (March, 1994):129-146.

²⁹ Marilyn R. Dunn, “Nuns as Art Patrons: The Decoration of S. Marta al Collegio Romano,” *The Art Bulletin* 70 n.3 (September 1988):451. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051177> (accessed November 17th, 2013).

³⁰ *Ibid*, 451.

the cause; one notable example is Anna Colonna Barberini, the papal niece of Urban VIII. In her quest to establish a convent dedicated to S. Maria Regina, Anna Colonna did all in her power to win a dispute that had arisen with Innocent X over the building of such a convent as well as “spend 8,000 *scudi* to liberate it” from the obligation of paying a land lease. Even her will reflected her dedication to her cause, setting aside enough money, and “spelling out to the architect, Contini, and *scalpellino* (stonecutter), Gabriele Renzi, her wishes regarding the design and materials to be used,” showing that she was “obviously aware of the problems created when a patron died without leaving sufficient funds.”³¹ The case of Anna Colonna shows that women were active, not passive, players in the art world in Rome and were significant patrons of the arts.

The Seicento art world in Italy radically changed during the pontificate of Pope Urban VIII. Because Urban VIII sought to maintain Rome as the religious and cultural center of the world, artists and architects were brought from all over Europe and patronized by Urban VIII. Bernini, for instance, starts making a name for himself under the Barberini Pope, whereas under the previous pope he had been a minor sculptor. Economically, Rome was stable and going through a period of prosperity that allowed for the buying of paintings and the commissioning of art in general. Artists sought out patrons to protect their works from being copied as well as upping the value of their works. With the undertaking of New St. Peter’s, redecorating or updating old churches caused a shift in the relationship between private patrons and religious orders, as the latter sought to wrest control of their church from the former, thus becoming patrons themselves. Even women became important patrons of the arts, as in the case of Anna Colonna Barberini. Such increase in the number of important patrons solidifies Rome’s place as the

³¹ Dunn, “Two Noblewomen and their Convents,” 648.

cultural center of Europe because without them, painters, and Rome generally, would not have prospered.