Introduction

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Introduction

NOTARIES AND THE ACCADEMIA DI SAN LUCA 1590–1630

Laurie Nussdorfer

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Rome in the decades from 1590 to 1630 was a city of people, men for the most part, on the move. In 1600 the population burst past the 100,000 mark for the first time since late antiquity, but immigrants and visitors flowed in and out so frequently that a static census scarcely gestures at its dynamism.[1] Although we can start to measure growth only at this moment, all evidence points to a cresting wave that began around the middle of the century and broke sometime during the Borghese and Barberini pontificates (1605–1644). Among the migrants, men predominated because of the special nature of economic opportunity in papal Rome; what jobs there were, chiefly in service, construction, and bureaucracy, drew a largely male labor force. As is well known, many of these mobile men arrived in Rome seeking work in the art trades, and in the hundreds and perhaps thousands they found it.[2] The public wealth of the Roman Catholic Church and the papacy combined with the private fortunes of cardinals, bankers, and aristocrats to lure talent, skill, and brawn from as far as Flanders and as near as the Sabine hills. When the Umbrian painter and theorist Federico Zuccaro for a second time joined the throngs on the road to Rome in the early 1590s, he brought along a recent Florentine experiment, the idea of an association of selected men devoted to or skilled in *disegno*, an *accademia* where artistic education would flourish. On those same roads he probably barely noticed among his fellow travelers men with the distinctive pen and inkwell of the notarial profession, men often from the hill towns of central Italy who were hoping to find jobs in Rome.[3] We do not know whether Zuccaro paid closer attention to these quill bearers when he discussed his great plan with artists in Rome who had been pursuing a similar project since the 1570s, but we do know that the notaries were paying attention to him. They were present at the meeting of March 7, 1593, that established an academy, and at meetings before and after.[4] Indeed, scholars are discovering that much of what we can know about the early decades of the experiment to establish an *accademia* for artists in Rome we owe to the attention of notaries.

Notaries are a helpful point of entry into the history of any institution, and especially Roman institutions in this period of rapid change, because they remind us that the fixed, stable units about which we would like to write are fictions. Real institutions seldom proceed with the clarity and predictability that historians describe, and the records that we use to draw these portraits are rarely the transparent documents that they appear to be. But the organizational effervescence, indeed turbulence, of late 16th- and early 17th-century Rome was such that it would be particularly misguided to believe in the firm contours and crisp boundaries of its institutions. Because Roman notaries documented the gatherings of groups of many shapes, sizes, and aspirations, they leave a singularly authentic picture of the fragility, chaos, and mutability of associations in these decades.

Why were forms of urban collective life in such flux at the turn of the 17th century? Immigration and population increase are certainly part of the answer, but religious and political factors also played a significant role. The renewal of Catholicism both before and

after the Council of Trent (1545–1563) stimulated the founding of new sodalities for charitable and devotional activities, many of which focused their energies on the city of Rome.[5] It also invigorated existing confraternities, such as the one dedicated to Saint Luke, to which the painters and allied art workers belonged, leading frequently to new projects or ambitions and the changes in governance and procedure necessary to pursue them. This bending and stretching of corporate bodies in the 16th century has left its mark in the many examples of revised or new rules (*capitoli, ordini, institutioni*) that scholars find in Roman libraries and archives.[6] Generically but inaccurately called *statuti*—a term that, strictly speaking, should be reserved for the rarer versions confirmed by appropriate municipal or papal authorities—these documents in all their variety testify to the strong feelings invested in the few early modern institutions in which participants had a voice. For trade guilds the decades from around 1550 to 1650 stand out in particular as a period of new foundations, secessions, and aggregations with a feverish revision of regulations in both manuscript and print.

While the splintering and combining of craft organizations may owe something to the spiritual motions of confraternities, which were often their matrix, it may also reflect a canny political strategy. The pontiffs themselves intervened radically to transform many established Roman institutions in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, from the cardinalitial congregations to the municipal tribunal and its notaries. Centralization of control in the hands of the state (that is, the papal government) may have been their aim, but their means often had the opposite effect. When the popes created privileged associations in order to exploit their collaboration with policies of state, they inadvertently advertised the benefits of forming new groups. Rome's artisans and tradesmen were not slow to catch on. Institutional fluidity was favored by another paradox. Despite the concentration of authority over church and state in the hands of the pontiffs, political power in Rome was dispersed more widely among the elite than in a normal dynastic capital. The 70 members of the college of cardinals, one of the unique features of this ecclesiastical kingdom, functioned as centers of influence and patronage that royal courtiers might well have envied.[7] Competing organizations thrived where patrons multiplied.

Although this picture emphasizes the vitality of these efforts to create new forms of collective life in Rome, the agents and actors themselves must often have felt frustration and disappointment, for it was a struggle in which many aspirants failed. The corporate spectrum might range from occasional gatherings of a few like-minded men to traditional privileged bodies with their own tribunals on the Capitoline hill, but few were satisfied with their place along the spectrum. Even in this dynamic city there were not enough resources —money, influence, prestige, patronage—to go around. Moreover, arbitrary power could deal painful setbacks. How must the members of the painters' confraternity have felt when, after decades of saving to rebuild their church on the Esquiline, Pope Sixtus V expropriated the property in 1588 and sent them to the dilapidated Santa Martina near the Forum?[8] We know from the notarial protocols that some groups, such as the sculptors in 1608, tried to become independent organizations and were prevented from doing so.[9] The same sources also show us many evanescent professional associations, which never managed to move far enough up the institutional hierarchy to acquire property and a meeting place, let alone formal recognition in official statutes.[10] Institution building in Rome between 1590 and 1630 was a process with well-defined strategies and goals, but with uncertain and uneven results. It was fraught with conflict, not a neat process, and it did not advance at a regular and predictable pace. Once set in motion, it could just as easily halt, momentarily or forever.

The story that the notaries reveal about the early years of the Accademia di San Luca conforms in most of its key features with this general pattern. They gave multiple, overlapping names to their client (*universitas, collegio, congregatio, societas, accademia*), probably because it was so unclear what the identity of the group actually was. Attempts to write and rewrite the rules of the organization have left us with four or perhaps five sets

of so-called statuti in less than 40 years. Years go by when there is hardly any sign of life in the association, to be followed by months of frenzied meetings.

Yet the notaries also reveal that the Accademia di San Luca stands out from the pack for its remarkable rise in institutional status. In its first four decades, it achieved an unparalleled social ascent, leaving behind the lowly condition of the manual worker and forging an image of gentlemanly expertise. Even more significant was the fact that it broke away from the political structures that pinned down artisanal organizations and achieved the freedom of those engaged in noble and liberal pursuits. Before 1570 the painters, like the stone carvers and all other artisans, were subject to the jurisdiction of the municipality, the Senate and Roman People, with the Conservatori as their judges.[11] In 1577 Pope Gregory XIII, recognizing their sensitive theological role as makers of sacred images, shifted them to the jurisdiction of the cardinal vicar.[12] In 1624 they sought to shake off the vicar's court and achieve the privilege of relative autonomy under their own cardinal protector.[13] Such freedom demanded assiduous clientage to the powerful, especially after 1627 when the pope's nephew, Cardinal Francesco Barberini, became their protector; it was, nonetheless, the height of prestige in the Roman context. In the history of Roman institutions, therefore, the early years of the Accademia di San Luca mark an important chapter.

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Header image: Pieter Brueghel the Younger, Village Lawyer (detail), 1621, Museum voor Schone Kunsten Gent