

# The Art Market

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the basics of the art market by explaining how patrons and patronage have influenced the production of works of art, describing contemporary examples of the art market and looking at examples of patronage other than direct employment. The specific areas of focus include:

1. History of Patrons and Patronage
2. The Modern Art Market
  - 2a. Auctions and Other Forms of Patronage

## 1. History of Patrons and Patronage

Patrons and patronage have had a major influence on the production of art and the related art market. A **patron** is a person who provides financial support for the arts by purchasing works of art, by paying the artist as an employee, or by other means, such as establishing a scholarship. Patronage is the act of financially supporting the arts.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** Patrons can be individuals, families, companies, countries, or other major institutions such as the Catholic Church.

Like any business, the professional **art market**, or the economic circulation of works of art, was and is driven by financial influences. The creation of works of art involves expensive materials, labor, and time to produce, so one must ask the questions:

- Who is paying for all of this?
- And why?

This is also an instance where art history and economics intersect. In some cases, we have documentation of who paid for works of art. In other cases, we do not. This has nothing to do with the quality of the work, but rather the historical documentation and evidence that supports the arguments we are able to make about the work.

Much of the art that has detailed evidence of patronage is religious, the idea being that a person who paid for a work of art was more likely to get into heaven (Catholicism) or attain enlightenment (Buddhism). Financially

sound patrons provided incentive to increase the production, which led to workshops being created to meet the production demands, but also to help train artists in artistic theory and to help them develop their skills.

The major employment and/or income potential during this time was associated with contracts between the patron and the artist.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** A member of the Medici family, a wealthy family in Renaissance Italy, contracted with Michelangelo to create the tomb pictured below.



**Michelangelo (1475-1564)**

*Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici*

In the Medici Chapel, San Lorenzo, Florence

1520–34

Marble

The court artist was another form of continuous employment, and much more of a steady job. If you could connect with a member of royalty who had an appreciation for the arts, that person could provide you with room and board and a constant stream of projects.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** The Spanish artist Diego Velázquez was the court painter for King Phillip IV of Spain. Velázquez lived in the Spanish court and painted many images of the king and his family members.



Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599 - 1660)

*Philip IV*

Spain

1623

Oil on canvas

Many art history survey texts recognize Ashoka the Great as the patron of the Great Stupa at Sanchi, in India. According to standard histories, Ashoka used monuments, including pillars and stupas (mounds) to spread Buddhism throughout India. However, recent research has uncovered the presence of hundreds of inscriptions, 631 total, revealing that ordinary people were also patrons of the Great Stupa at Sanchi.





Artist unknown

*Great Stupa (a.k.a. Stupa no. 1)*

Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India

3rd century BCE

Dirt burial mound faced with stone

Their names and professions are recorded in paving stones, in toranas (arched gateways) and many other locations. These people included Buddhist monks and nuns, but also housewives, weavers, and bankers, among others.



Artist unknown

*Detail of inscription on torana at Great Stupa*

Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India

3rd century BCE

Stone

The inscription in this image reads "Gift of Ananda, the son of Vasithi, the foreman of the artisans of rajan Siri Satakarni." These patrons most likely made these donations in the hopes that they would reach enlightenment sooner and escape the cycle of rebirth. This pattern repeats throughout India, with donor inscriptions found in caves cut out of solid rock and other monuments.

We see a similar form of present-day patronage in which the names of people are recorded on a wall or carved on bricks for a donation to pay for the construction of a building, often for charity.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Patron

A person who provides financial support for the arts by purchasing works of art, by paying the artist as an employee, or by other means, such as establishing a scholarship.

##### Art Market

The economic circulation of works of art.

##### Patronage

The act of financially supporting the arts.

## 2. The Modern Art Market

In the modern world, the job of court artist has evaporated. Royalty simply doesn't exist in the same way it used to. The modern art market does still rely on contracts as a means of employment, but it's the middle-class market that now makes up a huge percentage of the art market. This market took form during the Renaissance, particularly in northern Europe, and is driven less by the contract for hire opportunity and more by the resale of already produced artwork.



#### HINT

If you think about the downtown art scene of any medium to large city, and the **art galleries** that showcase artwork that's available for purchase, you aren't commissioning a custom work of art, necessarily, but buying something already made that catches your eye. In other words, it's simple supply and demand. If the demand skews a certain way, supply will usually adjust accordingly.

This brings up those same questions that are important to ask yourself as you're viewing any piece of art:

- Why was it produced?
- How did the motivation affect the production?



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Art Gallery**

A store or showroom where works of art are sold; a gallery could also be a room in a museum.

## **2a. Auctions and Other Forms of Patronage**

Auctions are where individuals bid on a piece of artwork, with the highest bidder receiving the artwork. This is just another part of the modern art market.

During this process, there's usually a reserve, or minimum, price accepted, but no maximum. It's strictly driven by demand, which is why you'll hear about famous works of art selling for tens of millions of dollars. This is more of an aftermarket, however, in that the owners of the artwork are looking to sell what they have to another party, rather than the artist personally selling his or her work to an individual.

↪ **EXAMPLE** The painting below by Gustav Klimt sold for \$40 million at auction.





Gustav Klimt (1862 - 1918)

*Litzlberg am Attersee*

Vienna, Austria

1914 - 1915

Oil on canvas

In addition to auctions, some modern examples of patronage would be art fairs—such as the Art Basel in Switzerland, Miami, and Hong Kong—and fellowships. Fellowships are programs in which money is awarded to an individual of artistic merit by a foundation that supports the arts.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Auction

A system of selling works of art in which buyers compete to purchase works of art by offering increasingly higher bids.





## SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned about the **history of patrons and patronage** in the art market. Patrons are people who provide financial support for the arts by purchasing works of art or by paying the artist as an employee. Because patrons have influenced the production of works of art in this way, it's important when viewing art to consider why a piece was produced and how that motivation impacted the production of the piece.

You also learned that the **modern art market** is driven less by the contract for hire opportunity and more by the resale of already produced artwork. Currently, **auctions and other forms of patronage**, such as galleries, fairs, and fellowships, are the primary ways that art is producing revenue.

Source: THIS TUTORIAL WAS AUTHORED BY IAN MCCONNELL AND ERIN ALDANA FOR SOPHIA LEARNING. PLEASE SEE OUR [TERMS OF USE](#).



## ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Gustav Klimt - Litzlberg am Attersee](#) | Author: Sotheby's New York | License: Public Domain
- [Great stupa of Sanchi](#) | Author: Nagarjun | License: CC
- [Portrait of King Philip IV](#) | Author: Lluís Ribes Mateu | License: CC-SA 4.0
- [Tomb of Giuliano di Lorenzo de'Medici by Michelangelo, Night and Day, Sagrestia Nuova, Cappelle Medicee, Florence, Italy](#) | Author: Elias Roviello | License: CC-SA 4.0



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Art Gallery

A store or showroom where works of art are sold. A gallery could also be a room in a museum.

### Art Market

The economic circulation of works of art.

### Auction

A system of selling works of art in which buyers compete to purchase works of art by offering increasingly higher bids.

### Patron

A person who provides financial support for the arts, by purchasing works of art, by paying the artist as an employee, or by other means, such as establishing a scholarship.

### Patronage

The act of financially supporting the arts.