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Art History 204 Reading Response 3

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**Artists and Patrons Response**

When reading the contract with Pietro, one intriguing aspect that I noticed is how it rigidly limits Perugino's artistic freedom. The contract specifies, "The predella below is to be painted and adorned with stories according to the desire of the present Abbot" (Perugino, *The Contract Of Pietro Perugino With The Benedictine Monks Of S. Pietro At Perugia*, 269), highlighting the patron’s control over the content. This illustrates how artists, despite their skills and reputations, were often required to adapt their visions to fit the desires of those who commissioned their work. Meanwhile, it states "other ornaments, as may seem suitable to the painter," suggesting a level of trust in Perugino's artistic judgment and expertise. This duality caught my attention because it made me think of popular historical paintings, and whether they were truly based on the artists’ free expression, or molded by the repressive society they lived in. Is art authentic, or is it fabricated? Further, the contract's stipulation for the artwork to be "embellished with fine gold and other fine colors, as will be most fitting" proves that the merit of this highly esteemed artist - as suggested in the quote “it befits a good, experienced, honorable, and accomplished master" (Perugino, *The Contract Of Pietro Perugino With The Benedictine Monks Of S. Pietro At Perugia*, 269) – is not enough to make the art sufficiently valuable. Instead, luxurious materials and exquisite craftsmanship are required to underscore the value of his masterpieces. This indicates a society that is built on prestige and status, rather than respect for artistic creativity and craftsmanship. This is significant because it remains true today. A piece of clothing is only deemed desirable if it has a high-end brand label, or an unrealistically high price tag. Society fails to appreciate the intrinsic value of unique creations, focusing instead on the superficial to meet the status quo of capitalism and dominant ideology.

Competition is also seen in the resolution of the Wool Guild to commission the statue of St. Stephen, where art is used as a status symbol and a tool for civic pride. They intended for the statue to outshine others, aiming to enhance their guild’s prestige, "the figure or image of St Stephen, protomartyr and protector and defender of the said famous Wool Guild, to the honour and reverence of God" " (Ghiberti, *Resolution of the Wool Guild (‘Arte della Lana’) to commission the statue of St Stephen from Ghiberti*, 43). Once again, this paints an image of the pressure and anxiety imposed by artists to outdo other artists, which undoubtedly suppresses the joy and passion they are supposed to associate with their work, leading to reduced motivation and productivity – which is very counterintuitive to the generation of artistic masterpieces.

Similar restrictions are seen in Lorenzo Ghiberti's contract, where he is given the freedom to decide the size of the statue of St. Matthew, but within a specific framework: it must be "at least as large as the present figure of St John the Baptist of the Guild of Cloth Merchants, or larger if it seems better, at Lorenzo’s discretion" (Ghiberti, *Contract of Lorenzo Ghiberti with the Money-changers Guild (‘Arte del Cambio’) to make the Statue of St Matthew*, 42). Again, this reflects a broader societal hierarchy where even renowned artists like Ghiberti operated under the influence and authority of their patrons. Moreover, the fact that his freedom was bounded by the need to meet or surpass an established standard, set by a previous work, in terms of the size of the statue, was particularly revealing. It underscored the competitive nature of the art world during the Renaissance, where guilds not only fostered but also constrained creativity, ensuring that their commissioned works both honored their civic pride and maintained or elevated their status in the community.

In sharp contrast, Abbot Wibald talks to Godefroi in his letters in great respect and importance to Godefroi as a goldsmith, and it opens up a lot about their professional relationship and how highly Godefroi is regarded. Wibald uses phrases full of respect and acknowledgment of Godefroi's professional standing and expertise. He praises Godefroi's craftsmanship, calling out "your noble talent and your willing and celebrated hand," which doesn't just compliment his skills but also highlights his reputation and reliability in his craft (Wibald, *An exchange of Letters*, 170). This praise not only flatters Godefroi but also reminds him of his esteemed reputation, which – unlike what we saw with the previous contracts – definitely would have fueled his artistic motivation and made him feel trusted with his unrestrained artistic choices rather than paralyzing him with rigid constraints and pressures.

Finally, Coulton illuminated the significant contrasts in the societal roles of artists during the medieval period compared to the Renaissance, as depicted in the contracts of Lorenzo Ghiberti and Pietro Perugino. Unlike the Renaissance artists, who negotiated their creative freedoms and contractual obligations with patrons, Coulton describes medieval artists, often monks, as deeply integrated into the communal and religious fabric of their society. For instance, he notes, "The earliest masters of the works recorded, and in many cases the workmen also, were often monks or monastic servants … The Religious (as monks and nuns were called) were indeed theoretically separated from mankind by an impassable gulf. Each had retired from 'the world' to save his own soul; it was his duty to become strange even to his own kinsfolk." highlighting a more collective approach to art tied to spiritual and community welfare (Coulton, *Artist Life in the Middle Ages*, 336). This helped me understand how art during the Middle Ages was not merely a profession but a way of life, serving broader societal and religious roles, reflecting the deeply communal nature of medieval societies compared to the emerging individualistic expressions of the Renaissance. This understanding showcases the evolving relationship between artists and society, revealing the impact of historical context on the perception and function of art in human cultures.

Moving on to the overall atmosphere painted by the contract of Perugino, the formal tone and structured nature of the contract enhance made it clear to me that during the Renaissance, relationships between artists and patrons were formalized, with clear expectations and severe penalties for non-compliance, indicating the business-like nature of art production in this era. For instance, the contract explicitly states that the work must be completed "within the space of the coming two and a half years, all at the cost and expense of the said master Pietro himself" and that the artist "pledges all his goods, real and movable property, present and future" as a guarantee (Perugino, *The Contract Of Pietro Perugino With The Benedictine Monks Of S. Pietro At Perugia*, 269). This level of detail about deadlines and financial obligations shows the pressures and risks faced by artists like Perugino, who operated under the patronage system. Once again, this enables us to view both society, and the life of an artist through a completely new lens, which, in my opinion, makes me respect the efforts of artists more than I did before.

On the other hand, Wibald’s tone of polite firmness when reminding Godefroi to focus on the commissioned work subtly hints at Godefroi’s busy schedule, indicating his high demand: "that you may zealously concentrate on the work we have ordered you to do and not in the meantime accept another commission which might hinder the completion of ours" (Wibald, *An exchange of Letters*, 170). This direction underscores Godefroi's desirability and busy workload and shows Wibald’s concern that other engagements might divert Godefroi’s attention, a typical situation for a craftsman of high reputation who would be in demand for multiple high-profile projects. This gives us insight into another form of pressure that artists face, which is the pressure to give each commissioned work their full attention, which is often impossible and could create tension that limits productivity rather than boosting it.

In the texts by St. John of Damascus, art is deeply intertwined with religious expressions, wherein icons are not merely decorative but are imbued with profound spiritual significance. St. John defends the veneration of icons by articulating their role as conduits for worship and as educational tools for the faithful. This theological justification for images highlights a distinct function of art in Byzantine society, where art serves as an integral part of spiritual life and doctrinal expression.

In contrast, Coulton's discussions and the Renaissance contracts show artists more as professionals dealing with work agreements and what society expects of them. They focus more on the beauty and community aspects of art, not so much on religious reasons. For example, Coulton talks about medieval artists highlighting their roles within their communities and how they contributed to society, which doesn't directly involve the religious reasons that were so important in the Byzantine context.

This helped me understand how the role and significance of artists can vary dramatically based on the societal, religious, and historical contexts they operate within. The stark difference between the theological defense of art by St. John of Damascus and the more secular or community-oriented views in later periods underscores how art adapts to meet the needs and values of its time.

Participating in the classroom activity where we assumed the roles of artists and patrons vividly illustrated the dynamics discussed in the texts about Ghiberti, Perugino, and medieval craftsmen. By negotiating artistic visions against specific patron demands, I experienced the tension between creative freedom and contractual obligations. This role-play helped me understand the delicate balance artists must manage, much like Ghiberti who was granted unusual autonomy in his sculpture's size, a liberty that I found empowering during our simulations. Additionally, the polite yet firm communication style we adopted as patrons mirrored the historical correspondence between Abbot Wibald and Godefroi, emphasizing the role of communication in maintaining professional relationships. This activity not only brought historical contexts to life but also deepened my appreciation of the complexities artists navigate, balancing creative integrity with practical constraints, as detailed in the readings.

This exploration into medieval documents has expanded my understanding of how intertwined art, commerce, and societal status were. The reverence for art as a divine and communal contribution evident in these texts challenges the often simplistic view of the Middle Ages as a less culturally sophisticated time. It’s intriguing to connect these historical practices with current ones and realize the continuities and evolutions in how art is commissioned and valued. When talking about the targeted audience, I think the readings were initially aimed at the people directly making and funding the art, like artists and patrons, as well as other guild members who were probably overseeing these projects. But the whole reason for being so specific and strict about the quality and themes of these artworks wasn’t just for their personal satisfaction. It was also because these pieces were going to be public. They were set up in places like churches and guild halls where lots of people would see them.