In his *Venice and Amsterdam* (1974), Peter Burke distinguished the two cities by their art patronage practices and by the relationships between urban elites and culture. In this essay, I will examine the evolution of the patronage of the arts in Naples between the 16th and 18th century by looking at both architecture and art collecting; in particular, I will examine the role of rulers in stimulating local artistic life. In the 16th century, Naples attracted Spanish artists such as Diego Siloé and Pedro Machuca. In the 17th century, painters such as Caravaggio, Ribera, and Domenichino came to the city, attracted by the local art scene and in search of commissions from the viceroys. In the 18th century, Charles of Bourbon succeeded in attracting to Naples artists of the caliber of Vanvitelli and Fuga. To what extent were these patrons responsible for the activities of such artists? I will here review three centuries of patronage in Naples and orient the reader in the historiographical debates on these issues.

Old-fashioned prejudices about foreign domination in Italy and the historiographical topos of the decline of Spanish Naples prevented historians from associating the splendor of Neapolitan art with its rulers and long delayed interest in the study of art patronage in the city. At the start of the 20th century, Benedetto Croce began to break with this tendency, arguing that one should be guided by the sources. The silence about the viceroys was slowly surpassed by a new historiographical attitude: in 1983 Eduardo Nappi published the results of vast archival research on viceregal patronage, which he has since updated.1 Other obstacles to the study of patronage have included the notion of early modern Naples’s isolation, which suggested that Spain had no influence over Neapolitan art, and the idea that the viceroys’ short terms (usually three to six years) rendered them unable to affect the local cultural scene.2

Studies of the 16th century have focused more on poetry and spirituality, from Vittoria Colonna to Juan de Valdés, whereas the 17th century

1 Nappi, “I vicerè”; “I vicerè spagnoli.”
has offered the most to art historians studying the artistic explosion in Baroque Naples. And yet the catalogue of the great exhibition Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli, organized by Raffaello Causa in 1984–85, devoted limited attention to viceregal patronage. There has been more work on 18th-century patronage, with the presence in Naples of Charles of Bourbon.3

Historians have gradually been filling in these gaps. Whereas many once thought that Spanish Naples had become a diminished court, because of the king’s absence, interest in viceregal patronage has increased, as shown by the recent volume edited by José Luis Colomer. The study of the Neapolitan art market and of art collecting, pioneered by Renato Ruotolo in 1973, has also proven fertile.4 Historians no longer see the viceroys as mere emulators of royal patronage practices but as noblemen with personal tastes and collectors able to employ local market networks to enrich their collections and libraries. Viceregal patronage models often derived from the practices of Italian aristocratic families.

Recent work on patronage and collecting in Naples has been influenced by anthropology and the cultural history of power, and it has also built upon Giuseppe Galasso’s analysis of the sociopolitical mechanisms used by the monarchy to create consensus. This connection between the study of visual culture and political history helps us see the patronage system as part of the overall strategy of the Spanish government in Italy: patronage could contribute to political stability and augment loyalty to the ruling dynasty. This focus has led to studies of the political role of artists, especially with regard to reinforcing the monarchy’s prestige. Whether or not patronage was a useful investment was discussed at many meetings of the Council of State in Madrid, for instance regarding the renovation of the royal palace or the widening of the harbor dock. Viceroys, like other contemporary patrons, sought to persuade the monarchy of the usefulness of particular public works.

Historians no longer see patronage in Naples simply in light of the relationship between center—namely, Madrid—and periphery but within a polycentric monarchy which dealt with a large network of courts, each with its autonomous workings. Each court developed its own image of power which did not necessarily follow Madrid’s and was shaped by local cultural traditions.5 Viceroys, ambassadors, agents, soldiers, and artists

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3 Civiltà del Seicento; Civiltà del Settecento; Spinosa, Borboni; Spagnoletti, Storia.
4 Ruotolo, “Collezioni,” and Mercanti.
5 Gil, “Una cultura”; Rivero, La edad; Enciso, “Modelos.”