PRINCELY CULTURE
FRIENDSHIP OR PATRONAGE?

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Although sixteenth-century cultural production confronts us with the first steps towards what nowadays we should call an ‘open market-situation’, where the artist hopes to sell his creations, there is no question yet of the artist’s being really independent: patronage remains the dominant factor.¹ The relationship between patron and artist, however, is a complex one and is not easily described: reality shows a myriad of possibilities, exhibiting in one way or another the tension between, on the one hand, the patron who likes to see his wishes respected and his exclusive status confirmed and celebrated, and, on the other, the individual creative artist who seems to accept the inevitability of his dependence but who nevertheless resents being treated as a subordinate and who tries to cast off the yoke.² Even if in earlier centuries artists – I take this qualifi-

¹ In the following I ignore the patronage of ecclesiastical authorities exercised within the scope of their official status. I shall also disregard the widespread tradition of the commissioning of religious artefacts by lay people. The ideas of the medieval Church with regard to the visual arts are widely known and need no comment. The religious controversies of the sixteenth century, however, reanimate the discussions concerning the relation between the visual arts and the faith. A striking example of this problem is the decree concerning the images of saints promulgated in 1563 by the Council of Trent. One example: the Church was quite willing to promote the cult of Mary Magdalen, but it did not appreciate at all the sensual way in which painters tended to represent that repenting sinner. The attitude that Protestant theologians adopted towards the arts in connection with Holy Writ bears witness to the same tensions: Luther, for instance, accepted the use of non-allegorical art, but Calvin’s vision of God’s inscrutability remained purely scriptural. According to the latter, pictorial products only concealed God’s intentions. Cf. Delenda, ‘Sainte Marie Madeleine’; Michalski, The Reformation and the Visual Arts, pp. 39, 65; Trevor-Roper, Renaissance Essays, p. 228.

² I use here the designation ‘artist’, although in the period discussed there is no real distinction between ‘artist’ and ‘artisan’. The same applies to the confusion between terms such as ‘author’, ‘translator’ and ‘editor’. See Welch, Art and Society, p. 39; Hauser, The Social History of Art, vol. 1, pp. 31-340; Burkolter, The Patronage System. Remarks pertinent to this issue can be found in Burke, The Italian Renaissance, pp. 105-110 as well as in Salet, ‘Mécénat royal et princier au Moyen Age’. For the relation between sciences and princely power, see Eamon, ‘Court, Academy, and Printing House’, pp. 27-31. For the role played by cultural production in propaganda,
cation in a broad sense: painters, sculptors and authors are all inhabitants of the realm of creativity – existed practically in a state of total dependence (art was merely the *ancilla theologiae*), they seem to have been able to live with the restraints imposed by those in power. In the pages that follow I start with some general remarks. After that, I concentrate on the situation in late fifteenth and sixteenth-century France. From time to time I shall adduce occasional examples related to the situation in Italy and Spain; after all, cultural production in this period functions as it were as an international affair.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages the relation between patrons and artists changes: some artists show signs of unhappiness and even of unwillingness when confronted with patrons who try to condition their creativity or impose unfavourable working conditions. Artists, as a rule, want to have their merits recognised. This consciousness may bring some of them to decline invitations to establish themselves at a specific court, to change patron, and even to refuse to finish objects which had been commissioned. In 1469 Mantegna, desiring to have his professional excellence duly recognised, goes to the Emperor to receive the title of Palatine Count. The historiographer Philippe de Comynes exchanges the patronage of Charles the Bold for that of Louis IX. The sculptor Pietro Tacca, well aware of the fact that his capacities are in great demand, declines James I’s offer to come to London, where the king wishes to have an equestrian statue celebrating his own personal glory. Instead, Tacca heads for Madrid, where he creates the statue of Philip III in the Plaza Mayor (where it still stands). At the request of Francis I, Giovanni Battista Rosso and Primaticcio come to France and transform Fontainebleau into a real royal palace. Sometimes the extant documentation confronts us with protests against the constraints of authority (Michelangelo’s reluctance to obey the very authoritarian Julius II is a perfect example), or else with messages conveying the patron’s prescriptions or reformulating his explicit wishes. From time to time the artist wants his patron to recognise his genius and to pay him better.4

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4 For Michelangelo’s bitter fights with the pope, see Noufflard, transl., *Vi de Michelange*, pp. 29-30; Salvini, *Michel-Ange*, pp. 59-93. Francesco del Cossa’s problems are of a different nature: in 1470 he writes a letter to the duke of Ferrara in which he complains about the non-recognition of his exceptional genius, and he demands more money. The duke, however, plays deaf. Cf. Barker, Webb and Woods, eds, ‘Historical introduction’ in their *The Changing Status of the Artist*, p. 12. See also Campbell, *Cosmè Tura of Ferrara*, p. 1; Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. 