

E. H. Gombrich, (debate with participants) Cities, Courts and Artists The Third 'Past and Present' Conference, Past and Present, Vol. 19, 1961, pp.19-25 [Trapp no.1961B.1]

CITIES, COURTS AND ARTISTS

THE THIRD PAST AND PRESENT CONFERENCE WAS HELD IN BIRKBECK

College, London on 7 July 1960, with LAWRENCE STONE (Oxford) in the chair. The morning session was opened by PROFESSOR E. H. GOMBRICH (University College, London); the afternoon session by FRANCIS HASKELL (King's College, Cambridge).*

PROFESSOR GOMBRICH began by suggesting a modification of the terms of reference of the Conference: it was not only the social situation of the patron that influenced art but also the artistic situation that stimulated a demand among patrons. Artistic changes may reflect a whole spectrum extending from changes in fashions to novel inventions which secure their success by dint of their demonstrable superiority. In early fifteenth-century Florence the emphasis on Ciceronian Latin and on decorations in the classical style characterised a fashion among a self-appointed élite. It spread as a status symbol. Perspective, by contrast, is a scientific invention that was adopted by all who wanted to keep step with progress. The fame of these inventions, in their turn, created a market.

Patronage in the fifteenth century was not confined to cities. The continued importance of the Church must not be underrated. Pope Nicholas V explicitly stressed the propagandist effect of the imposing buildings he had planned for Rome.

Among the motives of civic patronage there is pride in the city, pride in the family and pride in the age. The first is exemplified as early as the late thirteenth century in the commission to Arnolfo di Cambio to build a Cathedral in Florence, larger and finer than any in Tuscany. Soon the civic pride of Florence rested on the fame of such great Florentines as Giotto, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. Hans Baron [1] has recently emphasised this Florentine pride in her intellectual superiority over the tyrants of the North. A similar attitude also colours the rivalry among the leading families of Florence, the Strozzi, the Medici, the Tornabuoni and others, all of whom competed for the best artists. Giovanni Rucellai's *Zibaldone*, recently published by the Warburg Institute,[2] lists the artists working for him as the foremost in Italy.

Florentine pride in the achievements of Florentine masters merges with a new kind of pride, the feeling of superiority over past ages. Alberti's dedication of the *Della Pittura* to Brunelleschi (c. 1435) is an early example of this attitude. Rucellai thought that if Cimabue or Giotto were working in his time they would be derided as bunglers. These claims of superiority were acknowledged by the rest of Italy. Federigo da Montefeltre of Urbino called Florence "the fountainhead of architects".

The prestige conferred by artists on patrons resulted in the emancipation of the artist from artisan status to the position of a "divine genius". Federigo Gonzaga humbly entreated Michelangelo to let him have at least "a few traces of charcoal". Without Michelangelo's artistic mastery this reversal of social rôles could not have come about. The traffic between social and artistic developments is not all one way.

The ensuing discussion focussed on a limited number of themes : the structure and sources of civic tradition, shifts in the basis of patronage, changes in the rôle of the artist and relationships — real or asserted — between styles and social groups. R. H. HILTON (Birmingham) urged that the cities were in decline and the courts rising in the fifteenth century; how then, could a civic efflorescence explain

the artistic developments of the period? It was argued (G. A. HOLMES, Oxford) that the general economic decline of the fifteenth century was mainly agrarian and that the cities, therefore, increased their wealth relatively. Some participants (GOMBRICH and PROFESSOR D. HAY, Edinburgh) argued that the Italians of the period certainly thought of themselves as flourishing.

The question of the precise nature of civic tradition — and the identification of its exponents — arose. Was articulate civic pride a characteristic of the intellectuals only? (PROFESSOR H. G. KOENIGSBERGER, Nottingham). An instance was cited of a populace, in Mantua, protesting at the sale of their Duke's pictures (PROF. H. R. TREVOR-ROPER, Oxford); Ghiberti's doors and Leonardo's cartoon were popular in Florence, and merchant cities had, in general, literate populations (GOMBRICH).

PROF. M. CURTIS (University of California, L.A.) asked if there were not a historical tendency visible, a shift of patronage from cities to families to courts. GOMBRICH declared that the public-private distinction was difficult to apply to the fifteenth century; the public was admitted to private chapels. PROF. R. WITTROWER (Columbia) did acknowledge a decline in civic patronage and an increase in family patronage in the fifteenth century, when Florence's visual unity was broken into by private monuments. CURTIS suggested that Huizinga's thesis of a conservative reaction developing bogus feudal forms after feudalism's decay had a parallel in the cities in this period, when patronage was a cover for waning civic enthusiasm.

The question of court patronage and of the contrasts on different sides of the Alps was raised, but the issue of republicanism in the Italian cities had to be discussed first. HAY held that the Italian princes were urban and not aristocratic in the Northern sense; C. A. M. HENNESSY (Exeter) pointed out that they were indeed urban but also military. Florence's republicanism was held to be a source of its peculiar tradition (M. KITSON, Courtauld). The differences amongst the Italian cities were emphasised and there was some agreement that R. S. Lopez's thesis,^[3] that money was put into art when economic outlets were few, might have applied to Venice (STONE and PROF. SIR ANTHONY BLUNT, Courtauld). Genoa was as rich as Florence, and hardly as much patronage issued thence (STONE). The discussion, then, seemed to suggest that civic patronage in Italy was exercised frequently by bankers, merchants, princes (although one or two insisted that the guilds could not be overlooked), but that the general structure of the city gave this either a private or a civic emphasis.

Much was made of the contrast between the Italian cities and the Kingdoms of the North — and indeed between Italy and the Flemish cities, in the matter of patronage. DR. JOAN EVANS held that in France, possibly because of a strong dynasty, civic pride was minimal — although GOMBRICH thought that the patronage of Cosimo de Medici and Chancellor Rolin had, perhaps, similar motives. It was objected that the guilds did patronise art in Flanders and the Netherlands (E. H. KOSSMANN, University College, London). In general, the courts of the north were thought to have engaged in a different sort of patronage.

Changes in the rôle of the artist were stressed by WITTKOWER, who said that, in the fifteenth century, artists (at least the more successful ones) were gradually freed of guild restrictions; this had an effect on quality as it predisposed men to more innovation. Ghiberti even altered the Baptistery door, by himself, and wrote an autobiography by way of self-advertisement. WITTKOWER also raised the question of a connection between the social identity of the patron and the choice of style. GOMBRICH held that while Alberti's canons for building specified different styles for different sorts of patron, no unconscious class preferences in art can be found in this period. F. Antal ^[4] had not sustained his thesis; the social classes of the time were not articulate groups using taste to maintain

their identity. MISS K. SIMON (Warburg) maintained that different styles in different objects were, indeed, commissioned by the same patrons.

HASKELL, who proposed to confine himself mainly to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, asked if it were possible to talk about a definite "court art". It was surely more than a coincidence that Urban VIII, Philip IV, Charles I, Richelieu, Mazarin, Louis XIV were among the greatest patrons and collectors of the seventeenth century. Colbert put the matter in words by saying that it was the function of a great prince, even if he did not like beautiful things, to provide evidence that he did, and that posterity would judge a prince by the splendid palaces built in his lifetime. Simultaneously, the late seventeenth-century Papacy was commissioning Bernini's colonnade in front of St. Peter's. "I give these two examples from France and Italy built at almost exactly the same moment because it shows that art patronage could be used to signify an ascendant power or to bolster up a declining one". Royal (or Papal) efforts, frequently successful, to obtain exclusive rights to a specific artist's output were new; a proof of the prestige attached to art.

HASKELL exemplified the opposition to court art by quoting Shaftesbury on the corrupting effect of courts on taste, but commented: "The visual arts will suffer from tyranny, if the tyrant has no taste. That is all we can see". But the real question was whether the courts did attempt to impose a particular style; Mannerism, Classicism, Baroque have each been advanced as the court art par excellence. A case can indeed be made out for each, but the variety is instructive. The case of Poussin is equally so: a painter, who had worked entirely for a "progressive bourgeoisie" of bankers, was most esteemed in the absolutist France of Louis XIV, but ignored in Rome.

Yet HASKELL held that the end of the wave of naturalistic painting that swept Europe in the early seventeenth century (the followers of Caravaggio, Le Nain, the early Velasquez) must "in some way" be connected with the growth of absolutism, or perhaps an "aristocratic reaction" in the second half of the century. He recalled Louis XIV's alleged remarks when shown peasant scenes by Teniers: "Enlevez-moi ces magots", and opposed to it Diderot's: "I would prefer one Teniers to ten Watteaus". He also cited Louis XIV's comment on the proposed decoration of the Duchess of Burgundy's apartments: it was too serious, "il faut de l'enfance répandue partout". He did not accept A. Hauser's views that the rococo developed in aristocratic or progressive bourgeois circles; it sprang up in the very citadel of absolutism, and in later years Watteau was admired by that absolutist enthusiast for the rococo, Frederick the Great.

HASKELL hoped in many ways that he would be refuted, but he saw no necessary connection between one style of art and one type of society. If a court happened to adopt a classical style, then a freer, colourful style would be associated with the opposition, and if the court was identified with rococo, then classicism might well become the banner of its opponents. There were, of course, some subjects which were associated with the ruling class, allegories of royal behaviour of which Apollo and Alexander the Great were typical. "Correspondingly, other subjects — often derived from identical sources (usually Plutarch) — often capable of identical interpretations became, almost fortuitously, associated with the opposition to courtly circles". In 1790 a writer said that David's Brutus and Oath of the Horatii "had inflamed more souls for liberty than the best books".[6] HASKELL concluded that court art is not a constant, that by studying the relativity of styles, we may be able to reach certain conclusions binding for a specific country and period, but not capable of generalisation into a universally acceptable theory.

The discussion was rather more diffuse than in the first session, but five themes were discernible: variations in the structure of the courts, the question of a courtly style, the propagandistic function of court art, the relationship of court to artists, and the general question of the market for art in the seventeenth century.

BLUNT held that changes in court art followed, often, changes in the courts themselves. It was agreed that large courts were best able to patronise the arts, especially architecture and STONE depicted England in this period as a small, rather poor court. Court monopolies in building, it was pointed out, depended upon the nature of the Court's power. Some attention was given to the migration from Italy of the best painting, as the seventeenth century progressed; KOENIGSBERGER attributed this to the decline of the smaller Italian courts and HASKELL said that the tendency was even more pronounced when the Papacy declined at the century's end. Quality in art followed power in politics during the period.

The question of a courtly style provided, perhaps, the unifying thread in the session. WITTKOWER held that artistic theory in the seventeenth, and to some extent in the eighteenth century, dictated court style: a "low" subject could not be offered to a "high" patron. Others adduced instances where courts adopted styles of a non-courtly origin. BLUNT said that Watteau, so far from being the epitome of a court painter, was virtually owned by a set of bankers. Further, BLUNT declared that the rococo was in fact associated with Louis XV; Louis XIV stuck to the baroque. E. MERCER (Roy. Com. on Hist. Monuments) mentioned the split in England between court taste and taste in the country as invalidating the view that the opposition deliberately patronised what the court did not; the split in English taste, he said, was the mainly unconscious reflection of the general split between court and country which began early in the seventeenth century. The Puritans were mentioned as exemplifying religious opposition to court art, although BLUNT could not find any specifically Calvinist French art in the seventeenth century. HASKELL referred to the view that there were two sorts of baroque, classical-baroque and baroque-baroque, the latter being thought "heretical".

WITTKOWER introduced the theme of court propaganda, describing Menestrier as a court propaganda minister responsible for organising festivals, printing medals, and the like. In the seventeenth century, the relationship of word to image differed from our conception, and so did propaganda. A number of participants described medals, busts and similar objects as mobile propaganda; MISS MONTAGU (Warburg) characterised Gobelins as a ministry of propaganda, and STONE pointed to the propaganda value of monumental construction. Propaganda motives, BLUNT surmised, were connected with the move from the Louvre to Versailles. MRS. E. FRANKFORT (Warburg) held that the Spanish court, by contrast, was not very good at getting the artists it wanted — for propaganda purposes — and equally, it did not know what to do with those it got.

The relationship of court to the artist was also discussed. Many participants held that bad taste in a patron would usually produce bad art and STONE said that lesser artists, at least, were ordered about. It was agreed that great ones were often able to impose a style on a court. The sixteenth century notion that courts and art were mutually exclusive, GOMBRICH said, derived from the antique association of literature and liberty: no one at the conference, at least, was prepared to defend it. Finally, there was some discussion of the market for art in the seventeenth century. Some participants argued that something like a free market had existed, in rudimentary form at least, from the sixteenth century. HASKELL claimed that painters were not found working for dealers until the seventeenth century.

NOTES

*The Editorial Board of Past and Present is very grateful to Mr. Michael Baxandall and Miss Jennifer Montagu of the Warburg Institute, for putting at their disposal the notes they took of the morning and afternoon sessions, respectively.

[1] Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, (Princeton, 1955).

[2] Perosa (ed.), *Giovanni Rucellai ed il Suo Zibaldone. Part I: Il Zibaldone Quaresimale*, (London, 1960).

[3] See his papers in K. H. Dannenfeldt (ed.), *The Renaissance: Medieval or Modern*, (Boston, 1959); and *Annales (Econ., Soc., Civ.)*, vii (1952).

[4] F. Antal, *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*, (London, 1948).

[5] A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, (London, 1951).

[6] Père Duchêne: referred to in D. C. Dowd, *Pageant-Master of the Republic, Jacques-Louis David and the French Revolution*, (Lincoln, 1948).