

SAINT BENEDICT STARING AT US. CLIENTS AS THE THIRD PARTY
IN MODERN ART. A THEORETICAL MODEL AND A CASE STUDY IN
RENAISSANCE VENICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at studying the role of clients as third party of the art system in Modern Times. To detect a possible third-party-relationship in art, the epistemological approach draws from art sociology and focusses on the economics of art production, though relying on the case-study-tradition of iconology in order to verify the suitability of the proposed theoretical model. The specific case study refers to the Venetian Renaissance studying the Frari triptych by Giovanni Bellini, painted at the end of the 15th Century and dealing with the religious dispute on the Immaculate Conception of the Madonna.

Key words: client, patron, art commission, Venice, Renaissance, Giovanni Bellini, Frari triptych

SAN BENEDETTO CI GUARDA. IL COMMITTENTE QUALE TERZA PARTE
NELL'ARTE MODERNA. UN MODELLO TEORICO E UN CASO DI STUDIO
NEL RINASCIMENTO VENEZIANO

SINTESI

Il presente saggio intende approfondire il ruolo della committenza quale terza parte nel sistema dell'arte in Età Moderna. Al fine di identificare un possibile rapporto di terziarietà nell'arte, l'approccio di ricerca si fonda sulla sociologia dell'arte e si concentra sul funzionamento economico della produzione artistica, pur sfruttando infine la tradizione dei casi di studio di matrice iconologica per verificare la correttezza del modello proposto. L'esempio sotto osservazione fa riferimento al Rinascimento Veneziano trattandosi del Trittico dei Frari di Giovanni Bellini, realizzato alla fine del XV secolo e concernente la disputa sull'Immacolata Concezione della Madonna.

Parole chiave: committente, mecenate, committenza artistica, Venezia, Rinascimento, Giovanni Bellini, Trittico dei Frari

MADONNA WITH SAINTS, ONE IN PARTICULAR

In the small sacristy of the Frari Basilica, the mother church of Franciscan friars since the foundation of their main monastery in Venice, a beautiful 15th Century triptych is still placed on its original spot above the high altar. The painting is a unique piece by Renaissance painter Giovanni Bellini and depicts an enthroned Madonna with child on the central panel, plus one pair of Saints on each of the side panels. At the time he painted this altarpiece, Bellini was Venice's most admired artist and together with his brother Gentile run a very successful workshop in town (Pächt, 2003). Giovanni can be said to have specialized in paintings of the Mother Mary with infant Jesus, with regard to large altarpieces for chapels and to minor panels for private use in aristocratic homes. His ability in portraiture, the skilled use of seemingly artificial light and his tendency towards a complete *chiaro-scuro* effect were great artistic innovations that fathered later developments in Venetian painting, such as those fostered by Giorgione and Titian. Bellini's style can be deemed to be mature already in the Frari Triptych, thus making it one of his absolute masterpieces (Gentili, 1998). The Madonna is sitting on a throne inside a precious chapel with satin walls and golden vault, the light gently penetrating from each side and illuminating her blue mantelpiece, while she is sadly looking downwards. The four Saints who accompany the Mother of Christ depicted on the side panels are standing and appear to be looking in the same unspecified direction. Except for one of them: towering in his black mantelpiece on the right panel, Saint Benedict is actually staring at the viewer with a bold and self-conscious gaze. Besides, his appearance is extremely polished when compared to the three other saints, his face being painted with particular attention to details, as well as his hair and beard. Traditionally clients who commissioned an altarpiece in Medieval times wanted their saint-patrons to be represented together with the Madonna. The four saints in the Frari triptych are most likely linked to the client's family, but Saint Benedict looks much too characterized in his appearance to be only the abstract depiction of an imaginary Patron Saint (Goffen, 1986). It must rather be the actual client's portrait or at least of one of them, in case more were responsible for the commission. So why is he staring at us? Furthermore, Saint Benedict is holding an open book in his left arm that looks like a liturgical volume, for it is hand written and illuminated. Is he showing it to us? And if he is the client dressed as Saint Benedict, what is the message he means to convey? Is he mediating between the holy vision of the Madonna and the believers? Or is he interposing between the artist who crafted the painting and the viewers looking at it?

APPROACHING THE THIRD-PARTY-RELATIONSHIP IN ART

Most social relations take place within binary relationships, meaning that at least two actors are needed to constitute a social relation and that these two parties are usually steered by their own interests, expectations or values. Each of the two actors may be an individual, but even a broader group, such as social classes, families, kinship etc. Despite the two actors being individuals or groups, the essential feature of a binary relationship is characterized by diverging interests, which give birth to complex dynamics on several

levels: political, social, economic, anthropological, legal and – more broadly – cultural. Sometimes a mediator is necessary, in order to constrain possible conflicts and find an agreement between the two competing parties. The judicial system is a typical example of how an external actor is expected to settle a debate between two differing subjects. Understanding the cultural, social and political background of the third party in a given situation is essential to determine the fundamental features of social relations. Hence, whenever an external actor is necessary to enable a binary relationship, we speak of a third-party-relationship (Povolo, 2011).

This third-party-relationship represents a possible scheme in social relations that is easily found in various aspects of political, legal or economic life throughout history. If we think of ambassadors, judges or banks, for instance, we immediately understand what function might be proper of such a third party. Shifting attention to the art system, one might wonder, whether a third-party-relationship is likely to be found there too. If we



Fig. 1: Frari Triptych (1488) by Giovanni Bellini, Sacristy of the Basilica of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice.

Fig. 1: Trittico dei Frari (1488) di Giovanni Bellini, sacrestia della basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari a Venezia.

Sl. 1: Frari triptih (1488), Giovanni Bellini, zakristija bazilike Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari v Benetkah.

consider the fact, that art is a social product, since it holds meaning within a specific society, there could well be a third party. To detect a possible third-party-relationship in art, the epistemological approach to art history must be aware of social issues and sensible to its importance for art production, rather than pointing to aesthetic or formalist concerns. For this particular reason, the theory this article is based on draws from art sociology after Arnold Hauser and art economics in the wake of David Galenson, while the method relays on the case-study-tradition in iconology commenced by Aby Warburg.

After exposing the theoretical guidelines of this research, it is necessary to choose a specific period in art history and a geographical location, in order to study the social relations and structures the art system was based on. This will allow us to understand, whether the third-party-relationship may be defined as a typical feature of the art system. Consequently, this theoretical frame must be verified by means of a concrete example that refer to the chosen time and place. The period selected is early High Renaissance at the end of the 15th Century, since it has been thoroughly studied by scholars, so that we can rely on the social structures of the art system they have sketched. Most artworks in Modern Times, at least until the late 18th century, are the result of explicit commissions from a client to an artist, such as those stemming from the patronage system. Hence, art commission deriving from an artist-client-relationship is to be taken as the basic relation which should be analysed in order to approach the issue of the third party in art. Furthermore, this research focuses on art works that were expressly commissioned for public venues, such as churches or political buildings, streets or squares. The area taken into account is the Venetian Republic and its domain in the Mediterranean Sea, considering the scope of the publication this paper is part of.

To sum up what has been said so far, the paper aims at studying the role of clients as the third party of the art system in Modern Times both on a theoretical basis, by following the above exposed approach, and on a historical basis, by examining specific circumstances in modern art stressed by various art historians. Finally, a specific example related to Venetian Renaissance will be discussed, in order to verify the suitability of the theoretical model designed for the third-party in the art system. The case study is the already mentioned Frari triptych by Giovanni Bellini, painted in the late 15th Century and dealing with the religious dispute about the Immaculate Conception of the Madonna.

IDENTIFYING THE THREE ACTORS OF THE ART SYSTEM

In his book *Patterns of Intention* (Baxandall, 1986) art historian Michael Baxandall, while exposing the methodology he applies, argues that “the maker of a picture or other historical artefact is a man addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution” (Baxandall, 1986, 14). Baxandall stands for an epistemological approach to art history that favours a plain historical explanation of pictures, thus paying attention to the specific context – both social and political – in which an art object was made¹. Since in his view the painting represents the solution to a problem, to understand

1 Baxandall worked for the Warburg Institute in London and was an assistant to Ernst Gombrich.

its meaning we must “reconstruct both the specific problem it was designed to solve and the specific circumstances out of which he was addressing it” (Baxandall, 1986, 15). If we were to translate the above definition of a picture into the judicial field, we could find some unpredicted similarities with the verdict worked out by a judge in civil law tradition. In fact, the judge is a man who is confronted with a problem (the debate) to which his product (the verdict) is a concrete and (supposedly) definitive solution. In the judges’s case, however, the solution would be the settlement of an argument between two opposing parties. Therefore, such a comparison between the art system and the judicial one would only be correct, if the problem the artist is confronted with arises from the conflict between two parties. Different parties could be seen as the various actors that are necessarily involved in the art system, at any given time or place, so that artworks can exist. We must seek then for the various parties of the art system.

Two actors are easily found: first we have the artist, secondly the audience – for otherwise the artwork wouldn’t exist, if no one had produced it and/or no one ever con-



Fig. 2: The Patron Saints of the Pesaro family belonging to the San Beneto branch: St. Nicholas from Bari, St. Peter, St. Mark and St. Benedict from Nursia.

Fig. 2: I santi patroni della famiglia Pesaro appartenenti al ramo di San Beneto: San Nicola da Bari, San Pietro, San Marco e San Benedetto da Norcia.

Fig. 2: Svetniki – zavetniki družine Pesaro, ki spadajo v okvir podružnice San Beneto: Sv. Nikolaj iz Barija, Sv. Peter, Sv. Marko in Sv. Benedikt iz kraja Norcia.

sidered it a work of art. Even though it might seem obvious today to hold both the artist and the audience as founding actors of the art system, this was not always the case. Artists had to struggle hard for their role to be socially appreciated, since in Medieval Times their work was regarded as any normal craftsman's. On the other hand, it is mainly thanks to German scholars² that we now consider art audience as a broad and autonomous category containing society's expectations or values – and not just those of art experts. Artists and the audience are definitely part of the game, but a third subject is needed, in order for the art system to fit the third-party-problem we are confronted with.

Another actor of the art world may be represented by those who have promoted the creation of art, though this is to be considered again a broad category that sums up all subjects having in some way fostered artists' production throughout the centuries. In fact, patrons and collectors, as well as galleries and museums, may all be regarded as promoters of the arts at different stages in history. The fundamental role of this actor is allowing artists to produce their works, since he himself is expecting an aesthetic, moral, social, financial or political gain from art. The promoter may be seen as mere consumer of an art work, but in reality he shouldn't be associated to the general audience, as he shares such interests with the artist as the audience does not. Economically speaking, this third actor is to be seen as a stakeholder: he may be directly involved in the production of the work, but even if he is not, his outcome is still determined by it. So far, we have pledged in favour of the promoter as the third actor in the art system, but this actor could probably be more appropriately defined as *client*, since this word holds a particular meaning in art history. The term client is used for those subjects who commission a specific work to an artist without necessarily holding a strong or unique link to the artist, such as in the case of patrons. In doing so, the client can assume an array of different attitudes towards the artwork, which range from mere consumption (no interference in the production of the piece) to explicit commission (contents as well as specific aesthetic and/or iconographic desires are laid out beforehand).

Having identified clients as a subject of the art system, besides artists and general audience, what is the structural relationship between those three actors? Furthermore, if we intend to interpret this relationship from the third party perspective, who mediates between which two competing parties? Is it really the artist, as suggested by Baxandall? And is it of any use at all to raise the third-party-problem in the field of art history? What advantages may it purport as far as art historians are concerned? The above questions must be answered by means of the identification of each actor's role in the art system.

ART PRODUCTION AND PRODUCERS IN EARLY MODERN TIMES

To begin with, we must focus on the role played by artists in Modern Times. One must seek a convincing explanation for their function in the art system and – more generally

2 Reference is made here to the *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of Hans Belting, which stresses the fundamental role played by the audience for the development of the arts, hence pointing to a kind of art history focussed on how art is perceived.

– in society. Peter Burke has written a fundamental paper on the subject that is still unparalleled (Burke, 1979). Claiming the importance of structural continuity in the long run of art history, he describes five different types of artists who have characterized several Centuries in Western civilization. For each type there are specific political, social and economic premises that made its appearance possible and favoured it rather than others. Nevertheless, all five types coexisted at some point in Modern Times and must be therefore regarded as typical for European Art in the period spanning from late Mediaeval Age to the early 19th Century. Burke determines the following categories: craftsman, courtesan, entrepreneur, bureaucrat and rebel. Besides these five types Burke mentions two more, but underlining they were far less frequent: the religious artist and the woman artist.

Speaking of the main categories, each one had different ways of producing and marketing their works, as well as a peculiar role in society. The artist as a craftsman dates back to Medieval tradition, when labour was organized in small workshops and constrained by the guild's ruling. Craftsmen usually worked on a local basis for small commissions, possibly moving from place to place in order to engage in bigger commissions. A typical example of craftsman-artist was Giotto da Bondone, who had a touring workshop. In the period of the Renaissance some artists were allowed into the homes and palaces of rich noblemen and became part of their private courts. Even though courtesan-artists were paid higher wages than craftsmen, not many reached a stable position and moved around



Fig. 3: The inscription on the golden vault above the Madonna in the central panel: it is the Officium approved by Pope Sixtus IV to be read on Immaculate Conception day.

Fig. 3: L'iscrizione sulla volta d'oro sopra la Madonna nel pannello centrale: si tratta dell'Officium approvato dal papa Sisto IV per essere letto il giorno dell'Immacolata Concezione.

Sl. 3: Napis na zlatem oboku nad Materjo božjo v osrednji plošči: bil je to Officium, ki ga je papež Sikst IV. odobril, da so ga brali na dan Marijinega brezmadežnega spočetja.

from court to court, being constantly subdued to their patrons' desires – sometimes even aesthetically. The painter Sandro Botticelli is a well known artist who flourished at the Medicis' court in Florence. At the beginning of the 16th Century the art market became more and more international with painters travelling all over Europe and some superstar-artists earning big money. The art boom allowed a few famous artists to open huge workshops, some becoming true enterprises that fed the richest courts of the Continent with pieces of art. The Venetian painter Titian and the German Lucas Cranach the Elder used their talent and broad appreciation to found true financial empires based on workshops that worked around the hour. With the predominance of large nation-states such as Spain, France and Britain in the 17th Century many artists entered institutions becoming part of the bureaucracy, such as for instance the newly born academies. Artists were then drawn into a bourgeois lifestyle and sometimes held important posts in government, as in the case of the sculptor Antonio Canova. Finally, there were some artists who didn't want to play by the rules and were already considered rebels in their epoch, as, for instance, Caravaggio or the Neapolitan painter Salvator Rosa. Nevertheless, one should not interpret the term rebel as anti-bourgeois, meaning the Bohémien attitude of some late 19th Century artists. In fact, even rebel-artists needed powerful clients' or patrons' protection in order to survive, as Alessandro Conti pointed out in his research on the evolution of the artist's role in times (Conti, 1979, 132).

Francis Haskell, who studied the relationship between artists and patrons during the Baroque period, agrees with Burke and Conti in stressing the importance of appraisal and protection by at least one influential client for any artist's success – whether courtesan, bureaucrat or rebel (Haskell, 1989, 3–23). Considering the five categories exposed above, one can see there has never been a time when artists were not influenced by social ties and duties. To be successful an artist has always had to accept society's pressure, either willingly or reluctantly. Following this perspective, art sociologist Arnold Hauser regards the artist as an expression of his or her own personality strictly within the frame of allowances society is ready to make (Marcone, 1998).

Moving beyond general sociological aspects, Michel Hochmann (Hochmann, 1992) and Albert Boime (Boime, 1990) give a closer look at the artist-client-relationship as the basic structure that determines how the art system proceeds. The former studied how artists in 16th Century Venice were supervised by their clients, following strict instructions for the subject of a painting and sometimes even for its style. However, Hochmann argues that Venetian painters never behaved as clients' servants, since most of them had their own workshop. On the contrary, while the client simply solicited the artist, the latter could decide more or less freely how to react to the client's desires (Hochmann, 1992, 11). Boime instead suggests that art-commissions by clients are the main cause of art's evolution during the Renaissance and Baroque periods (Boime, 1990, 11). Hence, art is seen as a social practice that is only partly due to a single individual's creation, since there are many different characters who cooperate behind the scenes: Boime calls this the "patronage system" (Boime, 1990, 12). Although he gives clients a central role in this system, the art historian doesn't think of clients as individuals or single institutions. In his view, clients represent an entire social class and act as the broadband of the ruling

elite's cultural predominance within society (Boime, 1990, 13). The client's role is vital for the art system, as it is the client who acknowledges artworks as such and consequently guarantees the artist's survival. In doing so, the client even determines art evolution – at least indirectly – by choosing the style, techniques and contents that respect or represent ruling class culture and taste (Boime, 1990, 15).

Countering Boime, Arnold Hauser argues that the advent of art collectors and amateurs (meaning art lovers) around the second half of the 16th Century subverted the traditional roles in the art system. Unlike clients, collectors didn't commission artworks and therefore couldn't determine art market equilibrium anymore. In fact, Hauser regards artists of the time as true rulers of the art system's, since collectors simply bought their pieces. In his words, "the artist was transformed into a producer of goods for the marketplace" (Hauser, 1971, 328–329). However, in our opinion the change that Hauser emphasizes didn't affect the structure of Boime's "patronage system". In fact, the client shifted from a direct control over artworks to an indirect one: it is still him who determines what an artist may or may not do, since it is always the client/collector who buys the pictures and sculptures. With the emergence of collectors, artists have probably gained more freedom in their daily practice, but as far as themes and aesthetics are concerned they are bound to society's values and powers again. This happens for several reasons: firstly, because they wouldn't be considered artists, if they didn't fulfil society's expectations; secondly, because they have grown up under specific social, political, cultural and economic circumstances that have been forged by the ideological background of the ruling class (Boime, 1990, 17). If we consider the client as a dynamic force that influences cultural practices of a given society, we are then allowed to assume there has never been a time in art history without clients. This may lead us further to the conclusion, that the art system needs the client to act. For this particular reason, so far the client seems a very good candidate for the role of third party.

ART CONSUMERS AND VENUES IN EARLY MODERN TIMES

Having discussed the role of artists and clients in art production of early Modern Times, we must now move on to consider art consumers and the places for art consumption in the same period. Clients, including patrons and collectors, are definitely to be regarded as consumers of the works produced by artists, thus taking part both to the production and the consumption of art. However, depending on the venue, they are not the only consumers. In fact, public spaces housed artworks already in the Middle Ages, so they could be appreciated by a much larger audience than the sole client. By public spaces we mean places that were accessible to the majority of society, both as building interiors (for instance chapels, churches, town halls etc.) and as open air venues (squares, streets, market facilities etc.). Clients who commissioned artworks for public spaces were well aware of the power of the image to convey a specific moral or political message. Therefore, placing a painting in the side-chapel of a cathedral or a sculpture in front of a town hall cannot be seen as a neutral event. At the beginning of the 15th Century, aristocratic families very often turned to art commissions for a political purpose: in Genoa, Venice and Florence,

for instance, noblemen had their portrait onto palace facades or inside frescoes and paintings for churches (Borlandi, 1985). These clients hoped to impress the audience and convince them of their power and nobleness, as if they were using today's mass media advertisements (De Luna, 2004). As regards art consumers, we must therefore take a second category into account besides clients, which is society on its whole as represented by the general audience which had access to public venues.

Speaking of public spaces, one needs to identify then which venues for art consumption were instead regarded as private and what audience they could have. Logically we would think of all those buildings, or parts of them, where the general audience was not allowed, so for instance private homes and palaces or specific areas of churches and monasteries. The truth is, that in Modern Times most places were accessible at least to someone else except the sole client or his family. As an example, we may consider the case of the presbyterium, the area of a church that for a long period was thought to be exclusively accessible to clerics. Machtelt Israëls has recently demonstrated, that the presbyterium was actually interdicted to lay people only during religious functions, thus being open to everyone for all the remaining time (Israëls, 2009). Artworks were visible to a broader audience even in private homes: take for instance the case of the so called *studiolo*, the private office many Renaissance princes had accurately set up in their palace. What seems to be a small fortress for artworks and other kinds of *mirabilia*, was in reality the room where the lord used to meet his guests. The refined objects in the *studiolo* were necessary to impress the viewer and convince him their owner possessed the same beauty, culture and power (Cieri Via, 2001).

Having said this, one may see now that it is difficult to separate public and private places for art consumption in Modern Times. Depending on the venue, the real distinction shall be made between different kind of audiences: artworks in a church were visible to almost everyone, while only a tiny part of high-society had access to the ruler's private rooms. However, the true evidence emerging from the types and modes to consume art is represented by the intents of clients: art was usually produced to fit specific moral or political purposes of those who commissioned it (Shearman, 1988, 44), one more reason to distinguish clients from general audience – hence being two separate actors of the art system.

Considering the fact that society was forged by the values and principles of the ruling class, the viewer was capable of de-codifying the message contained in artworks (Boime, 1990, 16). Anyway, this does not mean the audience was a passive player in art reception: in fact, historical evidence shows that society was extremely conscious of political and moral contents in artworks. Very often the general public autonomously interpreted the meaning of paintings and sculptures according to society's values and principles (Shearman, 1988, 50). Sometimes the audience even misinterpreted the message the client intended to deliver, especially when the artwork contents or form did not meet society's feelings or expectations. John Shearman, who studied the role of the spectator in the Italian Renaissance, argues this was particularly the case for pieces exposed in public venues, because they directly affected the viewer (Shearman, 1988, 58). Furthermore, the art historian demonstrates that the audience responded even to the aesthetic aspects of an art-

work, not just to its hidden contents or intended message. In doing so, society measured at one and the same time the moral, political and aesthetic acceptability of art. If we turn our attention away from moral and political issues onto mere aesthetic and formalist aspects, which are traditionally considered the real domain of the history of styles, we can see that the true counterpart to the artist is the general audience. In fact, the artist proposes a certain solution to formal problems, which is then mediated by the client in order to meet the expectations of society, which is of course influenced by the culture of the ruling class.

Having discussed the role of artists, clients and spectators in art production and consumption during early Modern Times, we may now confirm the presence of three parties in the art system and try to construct a theoretic model for art that fits the third-party-relationship.



Fig. 4: The book on Saint Benedict's left arm is the Ecclesiasticus, accepted in the Biblical canon by Catholics, and it lays open on the page that refers to the Madonna's Immaculate Conception.

Fig. 4: Il libro sul braccio sinistro di San Benedetto è il Siracide, accettato dai cattolici nel canone biblico, aperto sulla pagina che si riferisce alla Immacolata Concezione della Madonna.

Sl. 4: Knjiga v levi roki Sv. Benedikta predstavlja Sirah (svetopisemsko knjigo), ki so jo v biblični kanon sprejeli katoličani; odprta je na strani, ki se nanaša na Marijino brezmadežno spočetje.

THE THEORETICAL MODEL

Concerning art, in case we want to detect the structure of a third-party-relationship, we must look for its fundamental features as roughly exposed in the second paragraph of this paper. In opening a recent scientific conference on the third party, Claudio Povolo set out four basic aspects that must be met in order to have a true third-party-situation (Povolo, 2011). First of all, the third party is such, whenever its presence is necessary for a binary relationship to reach a positive outcome, because the two competing parties would not be able to do so autonomously. Second, the more distant the third party is from the contenders – hierarchically speaking – the more easily he will succeed in finding a settlement. Furthermore, the specific position of the third party, which is defined both by wealth and status, affects the decision-making process as well as the possible acceptance by the contenders. Given the predominance of aristocratic elite since Medieval Ages, another typical feature is represented by the circumstance that the third party was a role usually played by members of the ruling class, hence being also designed for the rulers to maintain *status quo*. However, the aristocratic elite could not do completely as they liked, because of the strong resilience of some cultural values deeply rooted in society or single communities. Therefore, the fourth aspect crucial for a third party is the urgency to balance the intentions of the ruling class and society expectations.

Having discussed the fundamental features a third party must possess, we shall look for them in one of the three actors identified for the art system in early Modern Times. The artist seems unlikely to be the third party, considering he struggled for a client's commission or protection and for the appraisal of the audience. No matter which kind of artist we may take into account, referring to the five types identified by Peter Burke, the professional existence and the very survival of an artist depended on the other two actors. The general audience, as argued in the previous paragraphs, stands for society as a whole or for some part of it. As such, the audience measures the acceptability of an artwork in response to social values and expectations, both political and moral. As society is necessarily broader than its ruling class, the audience cannot be the third party. On the contrary, the spectators are to be seen as an antagonist to the artist: in fact, whatever an artist produces, it may not be considered art by the viewers, unless there is a third party who certifies that.

Consequently, it looks plausible that the artist and the audience represent two competing parties of a binary relationship. To make sure this is an actual third-party-relationship, the remaining actor of the art system – the client – must possess all features of the typical third party. A closer look at the client's role in modern art is likely to confirm this view: on the one hand, no artwork would be possible without a client, because someone must have commissioned it or certified it as a genuine piece of art; on the other hand the client usually holds a higher hierarchical position than the artist and generally belongs to society's leading hierarchy. What's more, the client himself acts as a third party between the artist and society, because he is the first one to vouch for the political, moral and social acceptability of an artwork. Even when the client evidently uses the commission to convey a political, moral or social message, he cannot do that against society's deeply rooted

common values. It becomes clear now that the client's role and position have great resemblance to those of a judge working out the verdict of a trial. One might even observe, that clients generally belonged to the same social elite holding exclusive access to judicial functions over many centuries. If it is true, that the ruling class uses the judiciary system to maintain *status quo* – hence its power over society, we may also observe a similar procedure in the art system: the patronage system described by Albert Boime shows how the ruling class used art to protect and confirm the hierarchic structure of society.

Circumstantial evidence must now be found to corroborate the above proposed scheme on the third-party-relationship for art of early Modern Times. In order to verify the likelihood of the client being the third party, a case relating to the Venetian Renaissance will be discussed briefly in the next paragraph.

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION BY GIOVANNI BELLINI

We may now come back to the marvellous triptych enshrined in the sacristy of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, the conventual church of Franciscan friars in Venice. Since the depiction of the Madonna with Saints is no uncommon object for a religious building, we must explore the circumstances of the altarpiece commission, in order to approach the meaning of the painting. Rona Goffen has delivered consistent results on the issue, which convincingly account for the people and events that lay behind the scenes of the Frari triptych (Goffen, 1986).

At least since the 13th Century, all over the Italian peninsula aristocratic families typically owned side-chapels in churches to be used as their private funeral chambers (Puppi, 1996). Furthermore, families were usually tied to a specific religious order, either because of a particular devotion to the order founder or because of some family members who had entered the convent. In fact, clerical life was a frequent option for several reasons: on the one hand aristocrats would know where to place unmarried children, on the other hand they would have relatives praying for their salvation; last, but not least, it was a way to gain control over religious property such as land or tax revenues (Del Torre, 2010). This is why most private chapels are found in convent churches, which acted also as a convenient strategy to foster the family's distinction (Israëls, 2009). The Frari sacristy is no exception, as it was the funeral chapel of the Pesaro family belonging to the San Beneto branch. The Pesaros were one of Venice's most influential families and their ties to the Franciscan basilica date back to the 11th Century (Goffen, 1986, 23). The San Beneto branch was founded by Pietro Pesaro, whose second wife was Franceschina Tron, Nicolò Tron of San Beneto's daughter³. They had three sons together: Marco, Benedetto and Nicolò. The mother died in 1478, so her sons started the decoration of the funeral chapel during the 1480s, which is in fact dedicated to Franceschina⁴. Bellini finished the triptych in 1488

3 The Pesaro originally came from San Zan Degolà, a parish in the Sestiere of Santa Croce, while San Beneto is a parish in the Sestiere of San Marco.

4 It is quite unusual for a chapel to be dedicated to a woman, but this may sound clear, if we think of the fact that she was Pietro's second wife and therefore the true founder of the San Beneto branch (Goffen, 1986, 28).

and it seems obvious now, the reason why the Saints depicted are Peter, Mark, Nicholas and Benedict: the patron-saints of Pesaro father and his sons. We have already noticed, that Saint Benedict is the most outstanding of the four saints because of his fierce look and the open book he carries. This might be explained by the fact that Benedetto Pesaro was an outstanding figure in his family. In fact, he had definitely the most successful career compared to the other mentioned family members: he was appointed chief of the supreme Venetian court – the so called *Consiglio dei Dieci* – and in 1500 became even navy admiral or *Generalissimo da Mar*, losing his life while on duty in the Ottoman wars (Goffen, 1986, 44–45).

Having the father Pietro died before his wife Franceschina, the clients must have been the three sons, with Benedetto probably playing the lead role because of his authority. If it is true then, that Benedetto was Bellini's chief client for the Frari altarpiece and that Saint Benedict is his crypto-portrait, it is much more important to understand what he is showing to the viewer. Goffen correctly identified the painted manuscript as the *Ecclesiasticus*, which is accepted in the biblical canon by Catholics, and it lays open at the page dealing with the Immaculate Conception of the Madonna. This is no casual choice, since another reference is made to the above issue: in fact, on the golden vault above Mother Mary in the central panel a Latin sentence may be read: *Ianua Certa Poli Duc Mentem Dirige Vitam / Quae Peragam Commissa Tuae Sint Omnia Curae*. It is an extract of the *Officium* approved by Franciscan Pope Sixtus IV to be read on the celebration day of the Immaculate Conception (Goffen, 1986, 40). The so called Immaculate Conception of the Madonna, that means her being created without the original sin, fostered one of the biggest theological disputes of Western Christianity from the 13th to the 15th Century. The two parties in this dispute were on the one side the Franciscan friars, who celebrated the Immaculate Conception, and on the other side the Dominican order, who vehemently disagreed on this belief. Depending on how strong the influence of Franciscan culture was, the population would have been allowed to celebrate their belief in the Virgin's purity. In fact, where the Dominican order prevailed, no one would have dared to pay particular devotion to the Mother of Christ. Franciscan culture was widespread in 15th Century Venice due to several reasons: the renown Franciscan reformer San Bernardino from Siena had stayed in Venice for several years in the 1440s; the Doge Cristoforo Moro as well as two of his successors, Nicolò Tron and Agostino Barbarigo, were fervent supporters of the Franciscan order; Pope Sixtus IV, who admitted the cult of the Immaculate Conception, had been a Franciscan friar at the Frari convent in Venice (Hollingworth, 1994, 138–145). Besides the Franciscan influence, Venetians were particularly devoted to the Mother Virgin, since the city was told to have been founded on the 25th March 421, the Annunciation day. Venice saw itself as a virgin city, because it was free from any tyrant, and progressively transformed many Marian festivities into State holidays, so for instance the *Sposalizio col Mare* (Venice's marriage with the Sea) came together with the celebration day of the Virgin's Assumption to Heaven (Goffen, 1986, 105–117).

A reference to Immaculate Conception in a Franciscan church may not be surprising, but it is certainly curious that a lay client stands for it on a painting, since Bellini could not have done so without Benedetto Pesaro's consent. It seems likely, that Benedetto himself

wanted it to be that way, for paying tribute to the Mother Virgin underlined his loyalty to Venice's independence. Finally, concerning the Immaculate Conception, Benedetto with his fierce authority shows the evidence in his hands and addresses the audience to believe it, as if he was a judge waving the paper bearing the verdict.

CONCLUSIONS

After exposing a specific case in Renaissance Venice, we may now draw a few conclusions as regards the third-party-relationship in the art system. The chosen example has shown to possess several revealing aspects: i) the client played an important role in society, being even part of the judiciary system; ii) the client was fundamental for the creation of the artwork, since it had been explicitly commissioned; iii) the artwork refers to a relevant dispute of the period and takes a public stand on the subject; iv) the artwork was explicitly created for a space accessible to the general public, even though private; v) the artist was recognized in Venice as one of the most important painters of his time. If compared to the typical features of the third-party, we may now be correct in arguing that Benedetto Pesaro as a client played the role of a third party for the art system. In fact, Benedetto belonged to the Venetian ruling class and was fundamental for the creation of the above discussed triptych. Furthermore, he had the moral stance and hierarchical authority to vouch for the political and social acceptability of the artwork contents, which is the belief in the Immaculate Conception. However, Benedetto wouldn't have done so, unless Franciscan culture had already put deep roots in Venetian society. Last, but not least, Benedetto Pesaro had been a member of the supreme court for several years, finally being appointed chief judge. With all due precaution, we may consider that Benedetto acted as a third party in the art system, especially in the case discussed, for he was a third party due to his social position and professional career.

Critics might argue, that one single example is not enough to sustain the existence of such a third-party-relationship in the art system. Further case studies are definitely needed, but the main features drawn for the theoretical model are consistent anyway. In fact, to disrupt this scheme one should contest the client's role in early Modern Times, otherwise the basic structure of the relationship remains unaffected. What is more, shifting the focus on other art periods might even lead to further evidence, so for instance in contemporary art, if clients are regarded as a broad category, including every subject promoting art production such as museums and galleries. This paper should have positively demonstrated the fundamental role played by clients in the art system, a role resembling that of a third party.

If the client is then to be seen as the third party for the art system, where do we find material evidence? The example discussed shows that the third party sets his verdict into the artwork itself and leaves it there for society to read it. However, his contemporaries – as well as later generations – might interpret a different story according to their own values. In fact, visual sources finally function as a basic text, which everyone may read depending on the context. Hence, the third party in art is embedded in paintings and sculptures of past and present times – and rests there for spectators (and scholars) to be discovered.

SV. BENEDIKT NAS GLEDA. NAROČNIK KOT TRETJA STRANKA V MODERNI UMETNOSTI. TEORETIČNI MODEL IN ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA V RENESANČNIH BENETKAH

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POVZETEK

Razprava na teoretični in zgodovinski podlagi preučuje vlogo, ki so jo naročniki v modernem sistemu umetnosti igrali kot tretje osebe. Odnos, v katerega je vpletena tretja oseba, predstavlja možen vzorec v družbenih odnosih, ki ga skozi zgodovino zlahka najdemo na različnih ravneh političnega, pravnega in ekonomskega življenja. Če upoštevamo dejstvo, da je umetnost družbeni proizvod, ker ima v določeni družbi svoj pomen, bi lahko obstajala tudi tretja oseba. Epistemološki pristop se z namenom, da bi v umetnosti našel morebitni odnos s tretjo osebo, raje ukvarja z družbenimi vprašanji in njihovim pomenom v procesu ustvarjanja umetnosti, kot pa da kaže na estetske ali formalistične skrbi. Teorija, na kateri temelji ta članek, se zaradi tega posebnega razloga naslanja na sociologijo umetnosti po Arnoldu Hauserju in se osredotoča na ekonomijo umetnosti po zgledu Davida Galensona, medtem ko se metoda opira na tradicijo študij primerov v ikonologiji, ki jo je začel Aby Warburg. Razprava se bo nadaljevala z opredelitvijo treh akterjev v umetnostnem sistemu na začetku zgodnjega novega veka, ki jih predstavljajo umetnik, splošno občinstvo in naročnik. Z opisom vloge, ki jo v sistemu umetnosti igra vsak od omenjenih akterjev, bo razprava v umetnosti poskušala najti odnos, v katerem je prisotna tretja oseba. Razpravljali bomo o posebnem primeru beneške renesanse in z njim preverili ustreznost predlaganega teoretičnega modela. Umetniško delo, ki ga bomo vzeli pod drobnogled, je triptih Frari, ki ga je v Benetkah na koncu 15. stoletja naslikal Giovanni Bellini in ki zadeva versko razpravo o brezmadežnem spočetju Matere božje. Študija primera bo pokazala, da je naročnik za sistem umetnosti igral vlogo tretje osebe oz. strani, ki je poleg vsega podala tudi svoje mnenje o samem umetniškem delu. Razprava bo torej prikazala temeljno vlogo naročnikov v sistemu umetnosti – vlogo, ki spominja na tretjo osebo.

Ključne besede: naročnik, mecen, naročila umetniških del, Benetke, renesansa, Giovanni Bellini, triptih Frari

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