



Virgin and Child

Plate 1

Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees,  
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The Madonna and Child with Angels

Plate 2

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Ars Gratia Historiae:  
The Problem of Art and Society in the Italian Renaissance

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During the course of several visits to London's National Gallery in the years before the Second World War, the historian Frederick Antal pondered the apparent stylistic disjunction between two almost contemporary paintings hanging *en pendant* on the museum walls. How, he mused, could two early fifteenth century Florentine Madonnas, one by Masaccio (Plate 1) and another by Gentile da Fabriano (Plate 2) reflect such obvious — even contradictory — conceptions of reality? Next to the severe, fully articulated and naturalistic Masaccio, the Gentile appeared nervous, nebulous and fanciful. Was there an historical explanation for the differences between the two, or was the discontinuity that between two unique personalities? Antal was aware that for those to whom the history of art was a process of stylistic change, discontinuities might be explained in various ways. They might be regarded as the manifestation of a moment of stylistic transition, or as evidence that a given society possessed a parallel set of aesthetic and technical standards.<sup>1</sup> But the fact that such phenomena were explained primarily in terms of their own self-evident characteristics dissatisfied Antal. Not only were conclusions extremely subjective, but circular as well: how useful, he wondered, are historical statements that explain “the co-existence of various styles merely by the fact that they do co-exist?”<sup>2</sup>

Antal's uneasiness raises a significant historiographical problem: is the historian justified in drawing conclusions about a society from its art? This immediately raises the question of whether art can be used as objective historical evidence. Does the art of the Renaissance — or any culture, for that matter — mirror society, or does society take its inspiration from art? If interpretations of art offer insights into even a single aspect of a culture that cannot be interpreted by any

1. The internal dynamics of art fall into the realm of Art History, a discipline with its own assumptions, conventions and vocabulary. See, for example, the descriptive comparisons between Gentile and Masaccio in Frederick Hartt, *The History of Italian Renaissance Art*, hereafter *HIRA* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), pp. 148-52 and 163-64. For a general discussion of cultural history, its problems and implications, see E.H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History: The Philip Maurice Deneke Lecture 1967* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

2. Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting In Its Social Context* (London: K. Paul, 1948), p. 2.

other standard, such questions are both necessary and valid. If, on the other hand, art is too subjective and partisan a matter for the historian to use, potential dangers are best brought to light, and both art and history left to fulfill their separate destinies.

Immediately two problems arise, one generic and the other evolutionary. The question of what "Art" is — whether a product of individualized perception or stylistic maturation, or a manifestation of social *milieu* — provokes, even on a purely abstract level, differences of interpretation both aesthetic and sociological.<sup>3</sup> The problematical nature of art itself is accentuated by obstacles which the process of history imposes, especially the discontinuity of assumptions, beliefs and associations — and hence reality — between the fifteenth and the twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> Add to this the practical problems of source material, interpretation and documentation and the object of inquiry becomes ever more volatile and elusive. Art, like the paintings of Leonardo, has no sharp outlines; but like the *Gioconda*, its elusiveness more often beguiles than repels.

For the Renaissance especially, a period of creative richness, nascent artistic individuality, great intellectual change, implicit and explicit symbolism, hyperbole and extravagant metaphor, the temptation to measure the culture by its visual arts is seductive indeed. Not surprisingly, such curiosity has prompted historians to undertake the difficult task of characterizing an epoch or a culture. Because Renaissance society was so complex, rich and highly developed, relationships between art and society may be subsumed in the social fabric itself, often disguising explicit interconnections. Therefore a highly developed historical sensibility is necessary to make the often intuitive leap from aesthetic fact to social reality. Within this context, methodological differences soon arise. Some historians are willing to grapple with numerous manifestations of a culture and distill from them a coherent synthesis of the essential and typical. Antal, for example, resolves the apparent contradiction between Gentile and Masaccio by defining each — and hence the Renaissance — in terms of a Marxist class struggle.<sup>5</sup> Less audacious historians are loathe to indulge in hypothetical explanations like Antal's lest the individuality of specific works be lost

3. For the social implications of art see J.M.B. Edwards, "Creativity, Part II: The Social Aspects," *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, hereafter *IESS*, 17 vols. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), III, pp. 442-57.

4. See Paul Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XII, 4 (1951), especially pp. 507-21. For a trenchant and provocative discussion of art as an historical phenomenon and the degree to which twentieth century attitudes are the product of historical development see Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art: The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

5. Antal, *Florentine Painting*, pp. 312-13. This is discussed more fully on p. 18 of this article.

in potentially misleading schema. Of the virtues and weaknesses of various approaches more shall be said shortly; first, let us consider the immediate problems and pitfalls involved in any study of Renaissance art and society.<sup>6</sup>

If the artist "produces" and society "consumes," then the attitudes and practices of patronage might form an explicit link by which the true relationship between art and society — and the significance of art as a historical document — might be established.<sup>7</sup> Such an approach might be especially valuable within a Renaissance context: while artists were taking their first halting steps toward professional and intellectual autonomy, they were still almost exclusively — certainly in all major undertakings — dependent on a patron. Works were commissioned on an *ad hoc* basis and the responsibilities of the two parties were usually explicitly defined by contract. The patron was an active member in the relationship, participating in compositional, symbolic and technical decisions to such an extent that it is not unreasonable to characterize a patron in terms of the preferences he manifests in a specific work of art.<sup>8</sup> A danger arises, however, when definitions pursue too narrow a course. As knowledge of particular situations increases, so do potential variables. Variations in motives, the importance of artists' and patrons' egos and self-images and the vicissitudes of circumstance involve more than one-to-one relationships. The potential for patronage as a vehicle for cultural generalization is further limited by the fact that no general or typical patterns seem to exist;<sup>9</sup> context often makes examples of patronage to a certain extent unique. Such is the case with Isabella d'Este's commission of a heroic fantasy *all 'antica*.

In 1501 Isabella d'Este wanted Giovanni Bellini to paint a pagan fantasy for her *camerino* in Mantua. Andrea Mantegna, an indefatigable antiquarian, had already painted a pair of mock-heroic fantasies for the room, and Isabella wanted works to complement and continue this theme. Pirede Ceresara, a

6. For a useful bibliography of the basic issues involved in Renaissance cultural studies see John Larner, *Culture and Society in Italy 1290-1420* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), pp. 357-84. Other works cited contain bibliographies as well, but this is the single most complete listing for discussions of Renaissance art and society.

7. The problems of patronage are outlined by Francis Haskell in an article, "Patronage," *The Encyclopedia of World Art*, hereafter *EWA*, 15 vols. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1961), XII, pp. 118-32, and in his case study of the Baroque period, *Painters and Patrons* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

8. David Chambers, *Patrons and Artists of the Italian Renaissance* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970), pp. 135-38. Case studies of several contracts can be found in Hannelore Glasser, *Artists' Contracts of the Early Renaissance* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1977), and a general impression of contracts and payments can be gained from Larner, *Culture and Society*, pp. 335-48.

9. For example, see Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, pp. 53, 83 and 127, and Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy 1420-1540* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1972), p. 80.

humanist also patronized by Isabella, was responsible for devising suitable *invenzioni*, or compositional instructions. As he had done for Mantegna at Isabella's request, Pirede drew up a programme for Bellini to execute. Bellini, however, was uncooperative. As much as he coveted this princely commission, he was loathe to undertake a subject so unfamiliar to him, and, perhaps, reluctant to have his work shown up by his more classically-minded brother-in-law, Mantegna. Having proved his excellence as a painter of religious subjects, Bellini sought to retain the commission but substitute a Nativity scene. The subsequent intervention of Pietro Bembo who, like Bellini, was Venetian and who may have more readily understood his countryman's sensibilities, resulted in a new *invenzione* more pleasing to the painter. But when the picture — "The Feast of the Gods" — was finished, it was delivered not to Isabella but to her brother Alphonso, duke of Ferrara. Isabella, exasperated with Bellini's delays, commissioned instead a work from the less talented but less temperamental Costa.<sup>10</sup>

Isabella's impatience with temperamental artists and Bellini's realism regarding his own abilities are hardly unique, time-conditioned attitudes. Simple and hardly surprising motives might explain stylistic decisions: Federigo da Montefeltro, anxious to complete his ducal palace at Urbino, chose artists for their availability rather than their skill,<sup>11</sup> and the duke of Milan, judging a competition for the city cathedral, made his selection as much on price as excellence.<sup>12</sup> This was not always the case, for expense was not a major consideration in the 1401 competition for the Baptistry doors commission in Florence. Then, as today, however, corporate patrons were often free to be more liberal in their expenditures than single individuals.<sup>13</sup> Whatever culturally conditioned decisions exist can only be adequately determined by the specific context surrounding a particular artistic statement. As a means of cultural generalization, patronage appears at best fragmentary and vague.

10. See Edgar Wind, *Bellini's "Feast of the Gods": A Study in Venetian Humanism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1948) and Chambers, *Patrons and Painters*, pp. 125-33. On *invenzioni* see E.H. Gombrich, "The Aims and Limits of Iconology," *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance II* (London: Phaidon, 1972), pp. 6-7.

11. C.H. Clough, "Federigo da Montefeltro's Patronage of the Arts, 1468-1482," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, 36 (1973), pp. 141-42.

12. Burke, *Culture and Society*, p. 86. Many artists too tended to be "more commercial than aesthetic" in their outlooks. Glasser, *Contracts*, p. 277.

13. The Baptistry doors may represent something more than corporate largesse. Hans Baron discusses the famous competition (in which Ghiberti and Brunelleschi participated) and communal involvement in it as part of a larger process: the maturation of "civic humanism." See Hans Baron, "The Historical Background of the Florentine Renaissance," *History*, XXII, 88 (1938), pp. 315-17. See also Lerner, *Culture and Society*, pp. 62-118 and 353-55, and a letter concerning the final set of doors in 1426 from Leonardo Bruni to Niccolò da Uzzano, quoted in Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, p. 48.

Only studies of various *aspects* of patronage seem to offer continuity and coherence; these sorts of studies are the most common. They range from geographical,<sup>14</sup> personal,<sup>15</sup> and corporate or class studies<sup>16</sup> of patronage to even more wide-ranging studies of the demographic,<sup>17</sup> ideological<sup>18</sup> and anthropological<sup>19</sup> aspects of the nature and role of Renaissance art. But even in specific studies difficulties remain. Given Bellini's resistance to the idea of a mythological painting – no less for personal than professional reasons – to what extent is his painting to be read as a social document? If we are aware as well that Isabella's intentions (through Pirede) were unacceptable to the artist, is Bembo's later *invenzione* a clear indication of Alphonso d'Este's wishes?

One fact that cannot be over-emphasized is the shortage of source material. David Chambers' recent annotated source book, *Patrons and Artists of the Italian Renaissance*, illustrates the problem strikingly. A slender volume of 127 documents, it contains much of what is directly relevant to the practices of patronage. A sampling of other discussions relating to patronage reflects very little more than the evidence found in *Patrons and Artists*.<sup>20</sup> The scarcity of direct evidence makes alternative

14. Oliver Logan, *Culture and Society in Venice 1470-1790* (New York: B.T. Batsford, 1972). Examples cited in notes 14-19 do not pretend to be comprehensive, though much of what is both relevant and available is included, but rather show that there is no real lack of this specific – and in most cases recent – genre of historical literature.

15. A. de Gaigeron, "Isabella d'Este, une princesse qui pratique le mécénat avec puissance," *Connaissance des Arts*, 281 (1975), pp. 24-33; Deborah Howard, *Jacopo Sansovino: Architecture and Patronage in Renaissance Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); C.H. Clough, "Federigo da Montefeltro," pp. 129-44; R. Rubenstein, *Pius II as a Patron of Art* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of London, 1957); L. Reti, "Leonardo da Vinci and Cesare Borgia," *Viator*, IV (1973), pp. 335-68; E.H. Gombrich, "The Early Medici as Patrons of Art," *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance I* (London: Phaidon, 1966), pp. 37-57.

16. R. Piattoli, "Un mercante del trecento e gli artisti del suo tempo," *Rivista di Arte*, X (1929), pp. 221-53, 396-437, 536-79, *Ibid.*, XII (1930), pp. 97-150; H. Wescher, "Cloth Merchants of the Renaissance as Patrons of Art," *Ciba Review*, XLVII (1943), pp. 1694-1722; Denys Hay, "The Renaissance Cardinals: Church, State and Culture," *Synthesis*, III (1976), pp. 36-46; C.M. Rosenberg, "Art in Ferrara during the Reign of Borso d'Este (1450-1471): A Study in Court Patronage," see *Dissertation Abstracts*, XXXV, 5 (1974-75), p. 2865.

17. Sarah B. Blanshei, "Population, Wealth and Patronage in Medieval and Renaissance Perugia," forthcoming, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* (1979).

18. Helene Wieruszowski, "Art and the Commune in the Time of Dante," *Speculum*, XIX (1944), pp. 14-33; E.H. Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the neo-Platonism of His Circle," *Symbolic Images*, pp. 31-81; C.H. Clough, "Federigo da Montefeltro's Private Study at the Ducal Palace at Gubbio," *Apollo*, LXXXVI, 68 (1967); Nicolai Rubenstein, "Political Ideas in Siennese Art: The Frescoes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Taddeo di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, XXI (1958), pp. 179-208.

19. W.L. Gundesheimer, "The Patronage of Ercole I d'Este," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, VI (1976), pp. 1-18.

20. This appears most obviously, though not exclusively, in a comparison between Chambers's documents and a chapter entitled "Patrons and Clients" in Burke, *Culture and Society*, pp. 75-111. See also Haskell, "Patronage," *EWA*, XV, pp.

approaches and more subtle inquiries inevitable. Possible points of departure might be various issues relating to historiography, society and art: the role of the Renaissance artwork as a social document, the social status of the artist, and possible motivations for patronage within the value structure of Renaissance society. These issues naturally involve many constants which transcend the Renaissance specifically, yet the discontinuities that exist between the Renaissance and the twentieth century may define Renaissance Italy as a culturally distinct and historically unique phenomenon.

What a painting says outside its strictly narrative content (e.g., a Nativity) might give it validity as a social document. The interpretation of secondary images was formalized into a discipline called iconology by Erwin Panofsky in 1939.<sup>21</sup> Panofsky proposed three levels of artistic interpretation: a primary or stylistic level; a conventional or allegorical level; and what he calls a level of "intrinsic content." The last, according to Panofsky, is an indirect and probably unintentional reflection of social *milieu* in visual terms. Because it consists of images of a less explicit and even unconscious kind, interpretation of this third level of pictorial content demands experience and subtle observation.<sup>22</sup>

A recent iconographical interpretation of Renaissance art by Michael Baxandall characterizes aspects of Renaissance culture through obvious and latent images in secular and religious painting. The leap from a Medicean dance form to Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," however, is one that calls for

118-32. It is also worthwhile to note that written *invenzioni* of Pirede's type are more than rare: his instructions to Bellini are the *only* extant example of that genre of literature. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, p. 36.

21. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939). For a general discussion of iconology see Jan Bialostocki, "Iconology and Iconography," *EWA*, VII, pp. 770-85.

22. These three levels of interpretation can be illustrated by way of example in Masaccio's "Virgin and Child" (Plate 1). On a primary level the painting represents a significant departure from traditional stylistic conventions through its naturalistic treatment of form, depth of characterization and use of perspective. On a secondary, or allegorical, level there is an explicit reference to the Eucharist and the Passion, evident in the grapes Christ eats so intently. On the highest level of interpretation, which refers back to the first two and elaborates them, a number of hypotheses are possible: that classical allusions — in the tiered Corinthian throne, strigil ornaments imitated from Roman sarcophagi, and classical rosettes — indicate a more serious understanding of classical culture; that the active role played by the Virgin in offering the grapes to Christ might mean a corresponding activism in Mary's theological role, even a changing attitude toward women in society as a whole; that Masaccio's naturalistic treatment of form and light might echo a growing social and cultural rationalism, and so forth. Antal, *Florentine Painting*, p. 325, discusses this last point. Other discussions — on various levels — in Luciano Berti, *Masaccio* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), pp. 42-43 and 89; Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 118-28; *HIRA*, pp. 164-65. See also Gombrich, "Limits of Iconology," *Symbolic Images*, pp. 1-26.



sensitivity and a keen sense of art and culture.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, E.H. Gombrich's study of the "allegories" of Botticelli (whose ambiguous works make him a favorite for interpretation) rests on a subjective, tenuous, yet not easily contradicted sense of Renaissance culture, and of the relationship between Botticelli and his patron, Lorenzo Pierfrancesco de' Medici.<sup>24</sup> Such methods have been criticized for their unrealistic expectations and have produced counterclaims that iconological interpretations have a tendency to "over-read." "Pictures with the same iconography," writes Creighton Gilbert, "may have different iconologies"; he maintains that the one-to-one correspondence between social and visual reality may be too conscious or too neat to have true historical validity.<sup>25</sup>

Part of Panofsky's claim for the primacy of iconology was based on the sublimation of "obvious symbolism" that occurred in the Renaissance in order to "reconcile the new naturalism with over a thousand years of Christian tradition."<sup>26</sup> This contention is partially reinforced by the fact that the artist often did not draw allusions on his own. The relationship between educated humanists, patrons, and the visual arts might have resulted in involved pictorial representations that exceeded the intellectual range of the *bottega*-trained artist.<sup>27</sup> *Artista* had more the connotation of "craftsman" in the early Renaissance, and as such the artist was often regarded as only the executor of the patron's *invenzione*. (The artist was sometimes compared to the mother; the patron, the father.)<sup>28</sup> The artist was therefore very much dependent on the intellectual leaders of his day, not only as an intermediary between himself and patron, but as the measure of appropriateness for visual representations of a complex artifice of icons, symbols and assumptions.

But the relationship between humanist and artist ran deeper than this. Both drew on a similar heritage for their inspiration and faced their society with common interests both material and intellectual. Since both the artist and the humanist were dependent on the patron for material support, each had an interest in furthering the spiritual supremacy of creativity. It hardly need be said that classical examples were a source of great inspiration to the men of the Italian Renaissance, and much of the glorification of the arts was derived from sup-

23. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, pp. 77-78.

24. See Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies," *Symbolic Images*, pp. 31-81.

25. Creighton Gilbert, "On Subject and non-Subject in Renaissance Pictures," *The Art Bulletin* (1952), p. 202. This is nowhere more apparent than in comparisons of various interpretations of a single painting.

26. Quoted in Bialostocki, "Iconography and Iconology," *EWA*, VII, p. 781.

27. Burke, *Culture and Society*, pp. 43-53.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 87. According to the architect Filarete, the verb "fecit" referred as much to the patron as the artist.

posedly classical values uncovered by humanist researchers: allusions in Pliny, the fame of Appelles (whose work Botticelli went so far as to "recreate"), and the writings of Vitruvius.<sup>29</sup> Such scholarship was not always completely objective, but the profusion of art work *all 'antica* was indicative of a love — if not for antiquity itself — then for a uniquely Renaissance vision of antiquity.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, when Leonardo called poetry "speaking painting" and painting "silent poetry," he was exhibiting sentiments of mutual dependence based on a "common heritage."<sup>31</sup>

Here again, however, generalization should be tempered with reservation. The subjective — even erroneous — Renaissance conception of antiquity, coupled with centuries of Christian tradition, precludes direct correlations between the Renaissance and Classical civilizations. The exact nature of "humanist advisors" and their overall importance too is a matter of debate.<sup>32</sup> Even in documented cases, the extent to which they were able to make compositional and iconographical decisions in a painting — as the example of Pirede, Bembo and Bellini shows — can be ambiguous.

There can be no doubt, however, that the use of classical sources to elevate the artist and the humanist, who as the publicists of their day were the chief beneficiaries of their self-created identities, began the process by which both became more than just a brush or pen for hire. Dante's acclamation of Giotto and Cimabue, couched in the sort of rhetoric hitherto reserved for princes, is a manifestation of the spiritual importance of the artist.<sup>33</sup> Vasari too, who according to one author published his *Lives* as a means of educating potential patrons,

29. Logan, *Culture and Society in Venice*, p. 165.

30. See F. Saxl, "Jacopo Bellini and Mantegna as Antiquarians," *Lectures*, 2 vols. (London: Warburg Institute, 1957), I, pp. 151-61. He notes that artists and men of letters did not follow classical examples to the letter; they were instead prone to "invent great sentimental scenes *all 'antica* which cannot be related to texts or marbles, but which interpret classical subjects in a new and highly subjective language." (pp. 155-56) See also Kristeller, "Modern System," pp. 514-15. On the style generally and its Renaissance context see E.H. Gombrich, "The Style *all 'antica*: Imitation and Assimilation," *Norm and Form*, pp. 122-28, and Wind, *Bellini's "Feast"*, pp. 6-8.

31. Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, 2 vols. (New York: Knopf, 1951), I, p. 322. On the intellectualizing of art and the mutual support between humanists and artists see Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition (1330-1450)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). Mutual support did not, however, preclude, mutual jealousy: see, by the same author, "Guarino, Pisanello and Manuel Chrysoloras," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, XXVIII (1965), pp. 164-85.

32. Burke, *Culture and Society*, pp. 95-98.

33. "Cimabue was once believed to hold  
The field in painting; now it's Giotto's cry  
That makes once famous names obscure."

(*Divine Comedy*, "Purgatorio," XI, 11. 94-96.) For the changing role of the artist see John Lerner, "The Artist and the Intellectual in the 14th Century," *History*, LIV, 180 (1969), pp. 13-30.

had no small effect on the social importance of the artist.<sup>34</sup> It is also important to note that while the three visual arts never attained a position equal to the "seven liberal arts," they nonetheless rose gradually in the popular mind.<sup>35</sup> But the artist as fertile genius is — with some notable exceptions — a nineteenth century creation. In many respects the artist remained, and still remains, on the fringes of society.

The artist's less than exalted position in society was due both to the nature of the craft and to the social and economic realities of the Italian Renaissance. Rarely in the fourteenth century did patrons speak of "art"; rather they spoke of "adornment." Painters were *sottoposti*, or not fully privileged members, of the *Medici e Speciali* guild as late as the early *quattrocento*. Although the mobility of the painter (though not the sculptor or architect) was in part responsible for the breaking down of guild attachments, the painter still lived marginally from commission to commission, responsible for training assistants, purchasing pigments, and arranging for framing and installation.<sup>36</sup> Very often too his wages were delayed, paid in installments, or (often in the case of religious orders) delivered in kind.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, material hardship — and this may explain the nature of the artist's spiritual ascendancy — was not indicative of a declining interest in the arts. Paradoxically, the withering of late Medieval economies stimulated rather than diminished artistic activity, a fact that is emphasized especially in demographic and Marxist studies. According to a 1953 article by Robert Lopez, economic considerations, namely that investment prospects were limited, partly

34. B.I. Mitchell, "The Patron of Art in Vasari's *Lives*," see *Dissertation Abstracts*, XXXVI, 8 (1975-76), p. 4819A. Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) is the outstanding example of artist and propagandist. Because his *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti architetti, pittori e scultori italiani* (1550) was the first — and remains the only — source of information on Renaissance artists, he has been rightly hailed as the father of art history. See Jakob Rosenberg, *On Quality in Art, Criteria of Excellence Past and Present: The A.W. Mellon Lectures on the Fine Arts 1964* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 3-29.

35. On the *campanile* of Sta. Maria Dei Fiori in Florence the three visual arts were placed below the seven liberal arts, but markedly separate from the mechanical arts. Larner, "Artist and Intellectuals," p. 22.

36. Some painters chose the security of being on a permanent retainer to an individual or commune. Mantegna faced this decision and chose to enter the circle of the Gonzaga rather than to work as a free agent. See E. Tietze-Cronat, *Mantegna* (London: Phaidon Press, 1955), p. 11. A Siense contract by which Francesco di Giorgio Martini was retained by the commune and *contado* (December 26, 1485) is cited in Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, pp. 75ff.

Although self employment might have been more lucrative, its demands could be strict: Jacopo della Quercia was responsible for obtaining his marble for the doors of San Petronio in Bologna, which involved trips to Verona and Venice at his own expense; Piero della Francesca had to put a "warranty" on a painting commissioned by the Confraternità della Misericordia in San Sepulchro for a period of 10 years. See Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, pp. 6-7, 52-53.

37. Antal, *Florentine Painting*, pp. 277-82.

account for the primacy of art in Renaissance Italy.<sup>38</sup> Others maintain that the retrenchment that followed the economic contraction of the *trecento* stimulated patronage while at the same time diminished the independence of the artist: the stagnation that followed the withering of the economic strength of the communes meant that patronage passed from the hands of the communes to the leaders of an economically "re-feudalized" social structure.<sup>39</sup> In the face of this rigid stratification, the social ascent of the artist was arrested.

The transition from predominantly communal to private patronage is illustrated in the progression of attitudes manifested by members of the Medici family. Cosimo de' Medici was one of the first great patrons since antiquity. His patronage nevertheless had strong corporate overtones and a sense of civic obligation. It also manifested a sense of atonement and an aversion to appearing too "magnificent."<sup>40</sup> The patronage of his son, Piero, and his grandson, Lorenzo "the Magnificent" (whose agnomen is an outright contradiction of his grandfather's inhibitions), became progressively more egocentric and precious. Private collecting became more important; public endowments, increasingly more rare. Similar tendencies existed in Venice, where there arose a mania for collecting movable (and re-salable) works or art.<sup>41</sup> A corollary to this change might be that art became more the province of a refined elite than an evangelical or moralizing church or commune, even — as Arnold Hauser maintains — a reorientation from an active to a passive life. Using stylistic evidence to corroborate his thesis, he points out that art itself becomes less straight-forward and "like life," and increasingly more idealized, "classical" and mannered. The Gregorian tenets that the visual arts were to

38. Robert Lopez, "Hard Times and Investment in Culture," *The Renaissance: Six Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), pp. 29-54. The idea of economic stagnation as a catalyst to patronage is also discussed in its larger context by Enrico Fiumi, "Fioratura e decadenza nell'economia fiorentina," *Archivio storico italiano*, CXVI (1958), pp. 443-510.

39. Hauser, *Social History*, I, pp. 325ff., Blanshei, "Population, Wealth and Patronage," pp. 15-18. Even an artist as late and as great as Titian had to resort to the kind of patron-as-maker flattery more characteristic of an earlier period. Haskell, "Patronage," *EWA*, p. 124. Lopez, among others, continues this theme on the premise that Renaissance society, stagnant and promiscuous, built for itself a social hierarchy based on dilettantism rather than wealth or blood. See Lopez, "Hard Times," pp. 47-48; Gundesheimer, "Patronage of Ercole I," p. 2; Clough, "Federgio da Montefeltro's Patronage," p. 142.

Indicative of the plight of the artist in a period of social stagnation is a letter from Domenico Veneziano to Piero de' Medici, April 1, 1438, quoted in Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, pp. 91-92.

40. See Gombrich, "The Early Medici," especially pp. 39-40, and A.D. Fraser Jenkins, "Cosimo de' Medici's Patronage of architecture and the theory of Magnificence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute*, XXXIII (1970), pp. 162-70.

41. Logan, *Culture and Society in Venice*, pp. 154ff. See also Simona Sarin-Branca, *Il collezionismo veneziano nel '600* (Padua, 1964) and Michael Levey, *The Early Renaissance* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 79-107.

be a "book" for the unlettered are not evident in the later Renaissance.<sup>42</sup>

In the early Renaissance art had indeed fulfilled an important didactic function, both on a political and religious level. Political statements were generally commissioned by the state or commune, and a work of art was often a matter of civic concern.<sup>43</sup> In Siena, elaborate allegories painted in the Palazzo Pubblico both warned and inspired the deliberating priors. During the short-lived Florentine republic Michelangelo and Leonardo were commissioned to celebrate communal victories. (The fact they were destroyed when the Medici returned to Florence might indicate their potency.) Venice was lavish in its official commissions which glorified the city and its institutions. The coveted appointment of painter to the *Serenissima* carried with it a membership — a *Sansaria* — on the board of the Salt Monopoly and obligations to decorate the ducal palace.<sup>44</sup> Many religious paintings were also commissioned with set objectives and explicit content. Michael Baxandall<sup>45</sup> explains the conventions that were understood and expected in *quattrocento* religious art: the actual and symbolic significance of the pigment ultramarine, gestures, levels of adoration and so forth. This level of iconography (Panofsky's second) was one which the majority of Renaissance Italians were able to "read."<sup>46</sup>

No set conventions governed the practical motives of the patron of the early Renaissance. The commission of a religious work carried with it a variety of ulterior motives and expectations. For some it meant eventual salvation, not only for themselves, but their families (deceased members included) as well.<sup>47</sup> For others it was an offering of thanks, for still other simple familial glorification.<sup>48</sup> Even more subtle motives may have

42. Hauser, *Social History*, I, p. 331. Gregory the Great is quoted by Larner, "Artist and Intellectual," p. 14. According to the Statutes of the Painters of Siena (1355), the artist fulfilled an almost evangelical function: "By God's grace we are called to display to the uneducated who cannot read the wonderful things which have been achieved through and in the power of the Holy Faith." Quoted in Antal, *Florentine Painting*, p. 277.

43. Baron, "Historical Background," pp. 315-17.

44. See contracts for Gentile (1474) and Giovanni Bellini (1478). Each is promised a fee until a *sansaria* comes open at the Fondaco dei Tedeschi. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, pp. 78-80.

45. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, pp. 29-108.

46. One must not over-generalize this point, however. Although Gregorian ideals still held, the growth of the concept of individual creativity undermined the importance of the didactic function. Petrarch may have been speaking for himself as well as visual artists when, in 1370, he referred to a painting of the Virgin (hardly the subject matter of a dilettante) as one whose "beauty amazes the masters of art, although the *ignoranti* cannot understand it." Although it might be advisable to remember that the critic may be as much the recipient of praise as the artist, Boccaccio later spoke in a similar vein. Larner, "Artist and Intellectual," p. 25.

For Guarino's views, see Baxandall, "Guarino, Pisanello," p. 196.

47. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists*, p. 10.

48. The evolution of the "donor" in religious pictures from a position of relative unimportance to a full fledged participant in Biblical history is indicative of the

moved Cosimo de'Medici to commission the "Judith and Holofernes" from Donatello: it may have been a disclaimer to his contemporaries to the Renaissance sin of *Luxuria*.<sup>49</sup> Ostentation was hardly a vice in Venice. There, the various confraternities exercised an important role in commissioning decorative works of art, providing a market for large projects which individual patrons were unable to afford.<sup>50</sup>

The importance of the individual and his motives is evident especially in the later Renaissance and in the despotisms. With individualism came priorities of aesthetics and connoisseurship, even, one author suggests, a *noblesse de culture*. Isabella d'Este's commissions were primarily for her own enjoyment; those of Lorenzo de'Medici were generally of the decorative type, ill-suited to any but the private collector. Machiavelli and Petrarch both advised a certain amount of princely patronage as an affirmation of centralized power and good public relations.<sup>51</sup> In anticipation of a livelihood, many literati praised prospective patrons with the characteristic Renaissance *laudatio*. Lorenzo the Magnificent's reputation rests largely on such paeans, as does that of Federigo da Montefeltro, duke of Urbino. Although the latter kept very few men of letters at his court, he was nevertheless the recipient of a great deal of diverse, free publicity. One recent author notes dryly that

Federigo was one better, yet again, than Petrarch's ideal prince, for such was the potential of his patronage that he achieved fame from eulogies without having to pay, and without suffering from their [the humanists'] boring society — a viewpoint Petrarch understandably overlooked.<sup>52</sup>

If nothing else, the contrast between Federigo's reputation and historical reality illustrates the danger of trusting existing

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relationship between religious patronage and purely secular immortality. See Barbara K. Debs, "From eternity to here: uses of the Renaissance portrait," *Art in America*, LXIII (1975), pp. 48-55, and note 57 below. One author has gone on to suggest that increased emphasis on the individual might reflect the breakdown of the extended family and the emergence of the limited household that occurred during the Renaissance. See Larner, *Culture and Society*, pp. 350-51.

49. Gombrich, "The Early Medici," p. 40.

50. Titian and Tintoretto were too expensive for most private patrons. State patronage, while to a certain degree dependent on commercial and political fortunes, was a characteristic feature of Venetian culture. See Logan, *Culture and Society in Venice*, pp. 181-93. That Venice was the seat of civic patronage throughout the Renaissance might be explained by the pseudo-totalitarian nature of Venetian social and political ideology. See Margeret Leah King, "Caldiera and the Barbaros on Marriage and the Family: Humanist Reflections on Renaissance Realities," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, VI, 1 (1976), pp. 19-51.

51. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XXI, "How to acquire a reputation," and Petrarch, *Rerum senilium liber xiii.*, quoted in Larner, *Culture and Society*, pp. 137-38.

52. Clough, "Federigo da Montefeltro's Patronage," p. 142. For realistic appraisals of Lorenzo's patronage see Gombrich, "The Early Medici," pp. 52-53, and Lopez, "Hard Times," pp. 50-51.

documents too readily. Few though they be, they might reflect a Renaissance self-image that falls short of the truth. Jacob Burckhardt, the great admirer of Renaissance culture, has been criticized for taking much of this fiction too literally, yet he also wrote that

the connection between art and the general culture is only understood loosely and lightly. Art has its own life and history.<sup>53</sup>

Evidence seems to support this admonition. Certainly Cosimo's reluctance to appear too "magnificent," Isabella's conception of the proper relation between artist and patron and Leonardo's description of the visual arts deepen the historian's understanding of the Renaissance. But whether these many separate strands of incident and anecdote can be synthesized is another matter altogether. For the historian this question presents certain risks. Provocative as art may appear as a means of interpreting past societies, Burckhardt's warning focuses on a central issue: do studies of the relationship between art and society only *confirm* conceptions of society? Can they generate new discoveries about societies as a whole? Or does what the historian sees in art change to fit his predetermined social and historical reality? Admittedly, answers to such questions do not evolve in a vacuum, they emerge from a confrontation with the facts. But because the nature of the confrontation often determines the nature of the outcome in historical studies, methodology is of central importance.

The most recent attempt to synthesize the various strands of Renaissance culture into a cohesive statement is Peter Burke's *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy 1420-1540*. The author, aware of the perils of cultural history, nevertheless regrets that it exists in only two equally unsatisfactory forms: one (macro-sociological) which "jumps to conclusions" and another (micro-sociological) "whose only risk is that it comes to no conclusions at all."<sup>54</sup> He attempts in alternating chapters to steer a course between the two, thereby reconciling the two historical modes. Burke is by no means the last word on the subject; he is the most recent, however, and his work serves as a model against which the methodological problems of art and society can be effectively delineated.

53. Quoted in Burke, *Culture and Society*, p. 8. I have been unable to find this quotation in any edition of *The Culture of the Renaissance in Italy*. Possibly it may come from the first edition of *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* of 1860 (Basle). It is not, at least as Burke cites it, in the Leipzig edition of 1869. His unusual citation of the quotation ("from chapter 5 . . . the first sentence" — edition unspecified) leads me to believe that he too might have come by it second hand. Where Burckhardt actually committed these words to paper — indeed, whether he even did so at all — is probably not as important as the fact that drawing them from Burckhardt's lips is too great a temptation to resist, verified or not.

54. See Burke, *Culture and Society*, pp. 13-17.

Burke's Charybdis, the macro-sociological approach, emphasizes unity rather than diversity. Just as Marx saw class consciousness as a manifestation of an overarching economic struggle, so too have art historians like Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser interpreted the art of the Renaissance in terms of a class struggle that was transforming the feudal into the bourgeois world. As mentioned above, Antal sought an explanation for the co-existing stylistic differences between the ethereal Gentile da Fabriano and the more earth-bound Masaccio. Because purely stylistic criteria appeared to him to be too speculative, Antal worked from art back to society and proposed that the tension between the two manifested a tension in the culture at large: the rising bourgeoisie (Masaccio) against a declining feudal aristocracy (Gentile). Gentile, in short, represented a retrograde world view.<sup>55</sup> Similarly for Hauser, Giotto is revolutionary only in that he is a manifestation of bourgeois pragmatism. He perceived the world not in a classical, stylized or fanciful manner, but in a matter of fact, straightforward style.

These arguments — and those like them — exhibit a preconception about the direction and progression of history whereby art is but one manifestation of that progression. Having ascertained the inherent structure of historical process, these historians select and arrange data to fit a particular hypothesis; culture cannot be understood on its own terms and becomes, instead, an uneasy accomplice to a theoretical reality. As commonplace as Giotto's style appears in retrospect, it must have been a novel development in the fourteenth century (unless medieval artists were completely cynical in their "distortion" of reality)<sup>56</sup> and, while two earlier patrons of Gentile's and Masaccio's works, Palla Strozzi and Felice Brancacci, might represent divergent social classes, it is worth noting that additional evidence also indicates they were related by marriage. Can such a close familial bond make distinctions of class valid criteria for evaluating the glaring stylistic differences between their two clients?<sup>57</sup>

55. Antal, *Florentine Painting*, pp. 312-13.

56. For a discussion of "objectivity" and varieties of perception see F. Saxl, "Science and Art in the Italian Renaissance," *Lectures*, I, pp. 111-25.

57. Burke, *Culture and Society*, pp. 15-16. Felice Brancacci (Strozzi's son-in-law) commissioned the chapel in Sta. Maria del Carmine that bears his name in 1423. He was a rising businessman who may — according to Hartt, *HIRA*, pp. 158-59 — have commissioned the St. Peter cycle to commemorate the pro-Guelph policies of Florence or to give the recently established *catasto* Biblical legitimacy. Palla Strozzi, on the other hand, may have harked back to an earlier style in order to create a pendant for an Orcagna altarpiece commissioned for his family chapel in Sta. Maria Novella 70 years earlier (*Ibid.*, p. 150).

It is also interesting to note that of Giuliano di Ser Colino degli Scarsi, who commissioned the Pisa Polyptych (of which Antal's London Madonna is the main panel), almost nothing is known. The notary has nonetheless achieved what was in the Renaissance a sought after ideal: fame. Not only has he been immortalized as Masaccio's patron, but he and his son live on in the predella of the altarpiece, now in



Although Marxists seem to excel at omission and simplification, these are by no means exclusively their characteristics: Burckhardt's famous *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* has likewise been criticized as too unified a conception to be possibly true. In a letter to his friend Karl Fresenius in 1842 Burckhardt insisted that he was an empirical historian, "clinging to the concrete, to visible nature and to history." He adds, however, that

as a result of drawing ceaseless analogies between *facta* (which comes naturally to me) I have succeeded in abstracting much that is universal. . . . You would not believe how, little by little, as a result of this possibly one-sided effort, the *facta* of history, works of art, and the monuments of ages gradually acquire significance as witnesses to a past stage in the development of the spirit.<sup>58</sup>

For Burckhardt the process of history and the evolving spirit manifested themselves through cultural development.<sup>59</sup> His tendency to use the archetype and the paradigm as the definition of culture, however, often on the basis of intuitive judgment, overlooked both accuracy and individuality for the sake of structural cohesiveness.

Burke's Scylla, however, is hardly better. Emanating from within a specific historical context, the micro-sociological method explores culture with an often too narrow perspective. Unlike theoretical interpretations which broadly define the relationship between art and society or use the relationship to document a larger and transcendent process, this less ambitious genre examines and defines relationships without *a priori* truths and eschews any grand expectations. E.H. Gombrich and Karl Wackernagel are proponents of such a method, as is almost anyone who stops short of the broad, synthetic overview. Gombrich favors an "historical approach" whereby relationships between art and society are based on documented and reasonably certain co-existing phenomena. Hesitancy to indulge in speculation, and a tendency to limit studies to the material available do not permit an all-encompassing view.<sup>60</sup>

Berlin's Dahlem Museum. See Debs, "Renaissance portrait," p. 52.

58. Burckhardt to Fresenius, Berlin, June 19, 1842, quoted in *Burckhardt: The Civilization of the Renaissance and Other Selections*, edited and translated by Alexander Dru (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 298.

59. For the implications of Burckhardt's philosophy of history, and especially the brand of Hegelianism that might approach the method of not the essence of Marxism, see Gombrich, *Cultural History*, pp. 19-25.

60. Gombrich's method is a good deal more subtle than this. See his "Aims and Limits of Iconology," *Symbolic Images*, pp. 12-17. A number of his other articles and lectures have already been cited. Martin Wackernagel's *Der Lebensraum des Kunstlers in der florentinischen Renaissance* (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann, 1939) in many respects has yet to be surpassed.

Yet the lack of source material is a major obstacle to thoroughness. In the case of Isabella and Bellini, where a great deal of documentation exists, ambiguities still remain. Even in limited studies the historian must make highly subjective judgments. If a painting survives (and in many cases it does not), how can variations from the perhaps extant contract be explained? Did a patron, as Antal and Hauser seem to suggest, simply choose from an existing pool of artists the one who best characterized his outlook and preceptions, or was circumstance more influential than simple stylistic distinctions might imply? Historians have attempted to answer these and similar questions in spite of the shortage of first hand evidence. The situation is such that one document is enough to overturn years of scholarship.<sup>61</sup>

Peter Burke confronts the inconsistencies and failures of both historical methods. In an innovative approach to cultural studies he seeks to avoid the problems of speculative generalization and scholarly self-restraint by using all available data as a means to a comprehensive whole. In a systematic and thorough way, he gathers all the lights of art, science and the letters into a "creative elite" of 600 persons (three women), and proceeds to analyze it. For his artists, he goes to the most impartial yet well-informed source: the article on Italian art in *Encyclopedia of World Art*. Because such a source reflects a general consensus (through its board of editors) and probably has no theoretical axe to grind, the risks of selectivity and prejudice are minimized. Similar sources are used for philosophers, musicians, writers and scientists.<sup>62</sup>

Assuming the list is as valid as he can make it, Burke begins to ask various questions: Where was the elite from? How mobile was it? What was the nature of paternal occupations? Was it urban or rural? The results are, even in Burke's estimation, tentative. Not only are many members of the elite dead weight for lack of evidence, but those whose lives are documented are often clustered in certain "creative" areas (particularly Tuscany). Although he asserts that the occupation of the father is important in determining the rate of social mobility, the author is, however, forced to admit that for over half his cases he simply lacks sufficient evidence.<sup>63</sup> Those cases that are docu-

61. Grombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies," *Symbolic Images*, p. 36.

62. Burke, *Culture and Society*, pp. 34-74, 291-302. This is not Burke's only attempt to quantify hitherto unquantified material. He takes the 2,229 dated paintings of the *quattrocento* (1420-1539) and proceeds to break down the subject matter of the 1,796 religious paintings into half century blocks. His results:

|             |      |        |        |
|-------------|------|--------|--------|
|             | Mary | Christ | Saints |
| 1420 - 1479 | 52%  | 18%    | 30%    |
| 1480 - 1539 | 53%  | 26%    | 20%    |

This data is then analyzed from a variety of iconographical, ideological and intellectual perspectives (pp. 147ff.).

63. 57 percent unknown. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

mented carry no guarantee of accuracy: in an age when appearances counted for much, deliberate embellishment of the truth was not unknown.<sup>64</sup> Skepticism is necessary at every stage.

Burke proceeds nonetheless, and achieves interesting results. His elaboration of a thesis of Max Weber is a case in point. Weber claimed that the city was a "creative setting"; that "the city and it alone has brought forth the phenomenon of the history of art."<sup>65</sup> Weber's claim that the complexity of society was analogous to creative potential seems reasonable in the light of Italy's concurrent cultural richness and communal tradition, but his claim is probably more speculative than documented. Burke's analysis of the creative elite reveals that artistic fertility does *tend* to be relative to the size of a Renaissance city's industrial sector. Florence produced many artists and non-industrial cities like Rome or Naples, very few. Although a quantitative ratio among various industrial cities does not conform so nicely to his hypothesis, Burke does find that Venice's art began to "overtake" that of Florence around 1500, at the very time Venice was becoming less maritime and more industrial.<sup>66</sup>

Burke's attempt to bridge the gap between specificity and generality is, however, valiant but inconclusive. The correlations between creativity and industry have as many documented contradictions, late medieval Siena, for example.<sup>67</sup> Lack of evidence is part of the problem, but the scope of the question is another. Rab Hatfield observed that the sheer breadth of Burke's synthesis made his material uncontrollable: "It corresponds to no chronological realities and is hopelessly complex."<sup>68</sup> He continues by observing that chronological and geographical self-restraint might make cultural studies more fruitful. The validity of Hatfield's criticism is borne out by the fact that the peninsula of Italy retains even today perceptual and cultural differences that make accurate, homogeneous generalizations difficult. To assume that a cohesive analysis of art and society in the Renaissance is even possible may be giving "Renaissance" and "society" a cohesiveness they never really had.

64. Despite Renaissance *amplificato*, Burke is able to effectively confront — though perhaps not disprove — a traditional period myth: that of the *uomo universale*. Of the 300 members of the elite, only 18 practice the 3 out of 7 arts that Burke decides are necessary to "universality." See *Culture and Society*, pp. 52-54. For a less original refutation see Hauser, *Social History*, I, p. 331.

65. Quoted in Edwards, "Creativity," *IESS*, p. 447.

66. Burke, *Culture and Society*, p. 43. This is only one of many striking conclusions.

67. See Lopez, "Hard Times," p. 49.

68. Review in *The Art Bulletin*, LV, 4 (1973), p. 633. Hatfield is an art historian, and is more severe in his criticisms than Burke's fellow cultural historians. David Chambers, whose own compendium (*Patrons and Artists*) is also a contradictory collection of material, nevertheless characterized Burke's effort as "too inexact for specialists, too didactic and quirkish for the general reader, and too densely allusive for the sixth-former." *History*, LVIII, 193 (1973), p. 272.

Whether these concepts can be linked to art in any but a general, descriptive way is another question altogether. Art will always be protected from the crude handling of social historians by those that believe that art "has a life and a history of its own." The responses to Burke's study illuminate the dissatisfaction generated by attempts to draw art and society too closely together.

Burke tries to avoid the subjectivity of a Burckhardt or a Hauser. At each stage of his inquiry, he makes assumptions and gathers data in a reasonable and impartial manner. The sources for his "cultural elite" and the questions he asks of it are straightforward and sensible. The final creation, alas, is only the sum of its parts, for it fails to resolve any historical or methodological issues. The tenuousness of his conclusions makes him susceptible to the kind of characterization — "jumping to conclusions" — he had tried to overcome.

The retreat recommended by Hatfield, however, has its own particular problems and pitfalls. Defining the specific connections between artist and patron can also be a matter of speculation. Analysis of patrons' motives, iconographical interpretation and the nature of the arts in the Renaissance likewise do not yield any definitive or final answers. Even when a broad consensus is achieved, it is often qualified or restricted to a narrow, specific context. Most importantly, the retreat into context, which Burke also wants to avoid, funnels events and evidence in such a way that reconciliation with larger issues may be will nigh impossible.

Perhaps the implication of Antal's question cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of cultural, economic and social historians alike, and perhaps there is no less flawed an explanation for co-existing styles than "that they do co-exist." Unanimity and flawlessness, however, are not necessarily virtues. Burckhardt himself has shown that great History, like great Art, also fulfills an aesthetic function that cannot presume to achieve absolute beauty or truth. Aware of the dangers inherent in socio-cultural analysis, aware as well of the many historical and technical problems that plague Renaissance studies, the historian might be well advised to handle synthetic histories with care. Yet it would be foolish to insist that an imperfect creation is worse than no creation at all.