

Painting under Pressure: Fame, Reputation and Demand in Renaissance Florence.
Michelle O'Malley.

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Part 1 of the classic *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972) opens with a discussion of the “conditions of trade” in which Michael Baxandall points to the role of contracts in disciplining the “social relationship” (1) between client and artist that is resolved in a work of art. The short chapter moves on to discuss how the artist’s skill might be valued as a monetized asset, and indeed how that asset might be understood and perceived by others so that, as Baxandall puts it, “this expensive skill must manifest itself clearly to the beholder” (23). As is well known, *Painting and Experience* is a brief volume without footnotes, and as such its observations and insights have provided ample opportunity and inspiration for exploration and development by subsequent scholars.

Michelle O'Malley's first book (*The Business of Art* [2005]) specifically explored contracts as a means of understanding the process of patronage; in *Painting under Pressure* the attention is turned to the issue of skill (and concomitant fame and reputation) and how artists were able to cultivate and develop their relationships with given clients, monetizing their qualities by carefully controlling access to their skillsets. The book is structured around a discussion of the work of four strong “brands” operating in Florence in the last quarter of the fifteenth century — Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Filippino Lippi, and Perugino — and with the use of a “control” in the form of a weaker artist, Cosimo Rosselli. O'Malley consciously focuses on economics, seeking to evaluate what specific aspects of an individual's artistic skill constituted and affected the value of their works, and how that value was managed through an artist's career.

The opening chapter introduces the concept of reputation or fame (*fama*) through a discussion of contemporary texts in praise of the chosen artists, thus introducing them briefly to the reader. Chapter 2 asks the interesting question of how artists acquired fame and came to the attention of important patrons, whose support, of course, bolstered their emerging reputation. Networks clearly are important here, and while the text is filled with documented and hypothetical connections assembled from the art historical literature, it is very surprising to find no discussion of the wider concept of *fama* and how it has been interpreted and theorized in recent years by social historians. While art may be a product of a social relationship, it is nevertheless also evident that social relationships function in similar ways, whether or not art results from these interactions (in the same way that patronage does not uniquely define an artist-client relationship).

Chapter 3 proposes that style, or the characteristics that distinguish the work of a given master, was pursued as proprietary (almost a patent) and defined both the artist and the patrons who selected them (a strong brand identity). Once this has been established, O'Malley proceeds to the key chapter that deals with economic value and the management of products (paintings) and prices. Developing the important initial findings of the Material Renaissance Project, which explored prices and value of various commodities, the concept proposed is that prices were not fixed or regulated by markets as classical economic theory contends for current consumption practices. Instead, a sliding scale of value is outlined, in which competing factors, ranging from conspicuous display, sociopolitical posturing, or marketing opportunities, contributed to define what might at first sight seem arbitrary pricing strategies. While the asymmetries of artist-client relationships have previously been commented upon, what is significant about the argument outlined in *Painting under Pressure* is that this is posited as an economic model, tested by systematic comparative analysis. On this basis of this model, the final two chapters turn to artists' practices to show how each developed specific production and design methods, and elaborated workshop protocols to assure a uniform quality would be delivered to clients.

For a book that is largely about the economics of the artistic profession — as opposed to the art market, which has received considerable attention in recent scholarship — the author only addresses economic theory in a limited way. On the whole, O'Malley relies on art historical scholarship and looks surprisingly little outward from the discipline, in spite of asking questions that are often overlooked in monographic studies of artists. Nonetheless, in comparing the working practices and financial value attached to the work of a number of significant artists and their studios — as opposed to dwelling on the more commonly examined distinctions between master or workshop production — *Painting under Pressure* provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of authorship, quality, and value, and how these were regulated through the social relationships between clients and artists in fifteenth-century Italy.

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