
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Nelson, Jonathan K. and Richard J. Zeckhauser. The Patron's Payoff: Conspicuous Commissions in Italian Renaissance Art

Sally Hickson

Volume 33, Number 4, Fall 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106443ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v33i4.15982>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hickson, S. (2010). Review of [Nelson, Jonathan K. and Richard J. Zeckhauser. The Patron's Payoff: Conspicuous Commissions in Italian Renaissance Art]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 33(4), 136–138.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v33i4.15982>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2011

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

from a vast array of perspectives and disciplines makes of *The Cambridge Companion to Machiavelli* an invaluable addition to the field.

MAURICIO SUCHOWLANSKY, *University of Toronto*

Nelson, Jonathan K. and Richard J. Zeckhauser. *The Patron's Payoff: Conspicuous Commissions in Italian Renaissance Art*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008. Pp. xviii, 234. ISBN: 978-0-691-12541-1 (hardcover) \$45.

As partially quoted in *The Patron's Payoff* (185), Scott Fitzgerald once famously wrote (in the short story "Rich Boy"): "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early . . .". In his pioneering studies of Renaissance economics in Italy Richard Goldthwaite demonstrated why and how the rich were different. In the introductory chapters to the *Patron's Payoff* art historian Jonathan Nelson and economist Richard Zeckhauser join forces to apply Michael Spence's theories of information economics to assert that, by signalling, signposting, and stretching, the very rich could translate this aura of privilege into forms of social currency that were appreciated by broad publics attuned to reading displays of magnificence in terms of their social relevance and political value to church and city. In this analysis, commissioning was a game that involved a variety of stake-holders and Zeckhauser and Nelson apply game theory to identify the players and payoffs, the social benefits and costs, between patrons and publics. Their approach helps to nuance the social relationships underlying cultural production and successfully disrupts the binary approach between patrons and artists which has informed some earlier patronage studies. One hopes that information economists will gain as much as art historians can from this book.

The chapters that follow are written by expert art historians who apply these theories of signalling, signposting, and stretching to specific commissions. For example, Nelson and Zeckhauser themselves discuss the building and decoration of private family chapels in Florentine churches by wealthy Florentine patricians as a virtual "paradise for signalers." Chapels and paintings were used by patrons to convey general messages about their wealth and status

and drew public attention to themselves as individuals. Because this kind of signalling was understood by the Florentine public to convey that highly particularized blend of humility, piety and civic-mindedness that was the hallmark of contemporary ‘magnificence’, the wealthy individuals who spent money on such conspicuous monuments were perceived to be serving the greater good of Florence itself. This understanding deflected negative perceptions of such patronage as flagrant self-promotion. One wonders, though, if individual patrons who indulged in such signalling thought of themselves in the terms Fitzgerald used to describe Jay Gatsby, as “a Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God ... and he must be about His Father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” (*The Great Gatsby*).

In the context of signalling, the only approach imported directly from Spence’s analysis, Thomas Loughman explores the costs, benefits and constraints that governed the patronage of fourteenth-century members of the Alberti family of Florence when commissioning tombs for the church of Santa Croce in Florence in order “to enhance fellow citizens’ perceptions of their status and wealth” (133). Kelley Helmstutler Di Dio demonstrates that the sixteenth-century sculptor Leone Leoni used signalling in the design and decoration of his urban palace in Milan. Choosing not to emphasize his profession as an artist (as Vasari had in Arezzo and Florence), Leoni instead chose an iconographic program centred on Marcus Aurelius, to signal his classical erudition and expertise, to demonstrate (by inference) his allegiance to the Imperial Habsburgs, and to signpost his desire to elevate himself socially through self-identification with the imperial court. Leoni’s gamble paid off; he not only secured imperial commissions, but before his death was granted the right to be buried in an imperial chapel in Milan’s Santa Maria della Scala.

Other essays explore in greater detail two new models proposed by the editors as useful to the study of information economics; signposting and stretching. Signposting is the communication of specific messages while deliberately withholding other information, usually accentuating the positive and glossing over the negative. Stretching is what it sounds like — taking risks in articulating information that might be perceived negatively, gambling for desired outcomes. Molly Bourne’s chapter on Francesco II Gonzaga’s commission to Mantegna for the Madonna della Vittoria altarpiece brilliantly elucidates the use of images to transform information by considerably stretching the truth. Gonzaga commissioned the altarpiece to celebrate his self-proclaimed 1495

victory over the French at the Battle of Fornovo, a shameless bit of self-promotion (it was by no means clear that the Italians had even won) upon which he built his later military career. Furthermore, as is well known, he took advantage of anti-Semitic feeling in Mantua by extorting the money for the commission from a wealthy Jewish citizen, Daniele Norsa, as punishment for his removal of a fresco depicting the *Virgin and Child* from a house he had purchased. Later, he ordered that Norsa demolish the house entirely and erect a shrine to the Virgin which, together with the altarpiece and the public procession held when it was transported to the high altar of the Church of the Madonna of Victory, became part of the campaign to disambiguate the might and right of Francesco Gonzaga as a military hero and protector of the Mantuan state.

Larry Silver asserts in his chapter on stretching that “image is everything.” In a far-ranging analysis that itself stretches from Rubens’ implausible histories made to deify Marie de’ Medici to John Singer Sargent’s immortalization of Isabella Stewart Gardner as a neo-Renaissance princess and modern queen of culture (194–195), Silver also analyzes some well-known self-portraits of artists—Velazquez, Rembrandt, Poussin, Rubens, Gentileschi—to highlight that the convergence of patron/client into a single entity did not alter the nature, complexities or pay-offs in the game of exchange.

In virtually all of the cases studied here, the benefit and cost analysis demonstrate that nearly everyone always won, in tangible or intangible ways. One wonders if studying the failures, such as the commissions abandoned, works rejected (as happened frequently to Caravaggio), the missed signals, messages gone awry or lost in translation, would provide any further insights into the game.

SALLY HICKSON, *University of Guelph*