

Introduction: Distinction

MOST ITALIAN Renaissance patrons felt the need not merely to establish an elevated status but also to advertise it to contemporary and future audiences. More than a mere desire, this "advertising" often constituted a social obligation. As members of the elite, patrons had to distinguish themselves from those of lower status as well as act in a manner considered appropriate for their class. For both reasons, art patronage flourished. Any conspicuous commission was expensive, and thus out of the reach of but a sliver of the citizens. Still, some artworks had financial costs that were low relative to some other expenditures: most paintings cost far less than a fine horse or an elegant dress.¹ Nevertheless, the social costs, discussed in the previous chapter, usually limited conspicuous commissions to the wealthy and powerful. Distinction thus constituted a major benefit for players in the commissioning game; to achieve it, they employed a strategy that others would find prohibitively costly.

The drive for distinction encouraged the practice of "self-fashioning." In a celebrated study, literary theorist Stephen Greenblatt argued that individuals in Renaissance England—and his observations are valid for all Europe—devoted extraordinary efforts "to fashion a gentleman or noble person," as Edmund Spenser described his intention in *The Faerie Queen*.² The Renaissance period saw the publication of numerous handbooks designed to help readers "thread successfully through the labyrinth of social distinctions, to win at the game of rank."³ Winning often entailed distinguishing oneself from actions and beliefs associated with individuals of lower status. In recent decades, many scholars have explored how patrons used commissions to fashion a persona and effectively communicate it to others.⁴ The elite also found ways, in both art and society, to indicate—and thereby set off—those who had lower status.⁵ In this chapter, we concentrate on how commissioned art served to distinguish patrons by elevating their status. In the next, we explore how art conveyed highly selective or exaggerated information about the patron, thereby incurring some risk to further enhance distinction.

In his study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu revealed how individuals express their status by exhibiting their discernment or "taste."⁶ Bourdieu's analysis of contemporary French society—

published originally in 1979 and recently named one of the ten most important sociology books of the twentieth century—argues that the ability to differentiate between culturally laden symbols increases one's "cultural" or "symbolic capital." This serves to distinguish the "distinguished" from the "vulgar." Bourdieu considered a range of "techniques designed to create and accumulate symbolic capital," from museum visits and furniture purchases to home entertaining.⁷ Of all these activities, he found the purchase of works of art, which offer objectified evidence of "personal taste," to be the one that is closest to the most irreproachable and inimitable form of accumulation, that is, the internalization of distinctive signs and symbols of power in the form of natural "distinction," personal "authority," or "culture."⁸

Only some of Bourdieu's "techniques" apply to Renaissance Italy. Though we can consider the body of works commissioned by a great patron as his *oeuvre*, we have no evidence that his contemporaries considered this the expression of "personal taste." Nevertheless, as Patricia Rubin has recently observed, the possession of certain objects undoubtedly conveyed the owner's knowledge and sophistication to fifteenth-century viewers. "Discriminating was at once a model of knowledge . . . and, as now, a mechanism of class distinction."⁹ Already in the early fifteenth century, the renowned scholar Poggio Bracciolini understood that his contemporaries saw antiquities as a means for collectors to "accumulate symbolic capital." In the essay *On Nobility*, one character notes: "Our host, having read that illustrious men of old used to ornament their homes . . . with statues, paintings, and busts of their ancestors, to glorify their own names and their lineage, wanted to render his own place noble, and himself too, but having no images of his own ancestors, he acquired these meager and broken pieces of sculpture, and hoped that the novelty of his collection would perpetuate his fame among his descendants."¹⁰ Poggio took for granted the goal of self-glorification, and showed how even those lacking blue blood—what Bourdieu would call "natural distinction"—employed art to bolster their status. If viewers appreciate the criteria used to acquire or commission works of art, the owner's reputation for recognizing quality is enhanced. Giovanni Rucellai, Bracciolini's younger contemporary, boasted that he owned several works "by the hands of the best masters there have been, for some time past and up to now."¹¹ He had picked winners, was rightly proud, and received a reputational boost, at least from modern audiences. Surviving evidence documents that some patrons and collectors, such as Lorenzo de' Medici "the Magnificent," achieved this boost in the eyes of contemporaries as well.

To help explain how players in the commissioning game successfully obtained the desired benefits of social distinction, this chapter explores the theories of magnificence and signaling. Both attempt to explain why certain expenditures were made, and how those who made them were seen by the intended audience. The theories of magnificence and signaling, as first presented in the early 1970s, have become extraordinarily influential, respectively, in the study

of early modern Europe and in economics. Scholars have not, however, noted the fundamental similarities between these complementary theories of how information gets conveyed. In his treatise on magnificence, written in 1552, Siense nobleman Alessandro Piccolomini explained that "only someone who makes great things while spending could be properly called 'magnificent'."¹² He focused on public displays, such as the "building of temples, porticoes, and theaters," and the presentation of "public festivals and comedies." Nevertheless, Piccolomini observed that magnificence "could show itself on private occasions, which happen seldom, such as weddings, parties, banquets, receptions of distinguished guests, expenditures on town and country residences, domestic ornaments and furnishings, and other similar things where one can see sumptuousness and grandness."¹³ By this criterion, a wide range of expensive and conspicuous commissions qualify as magnificent, but here we will focus on one genre—architecture—often discussed in both ancient and Renaissance texts on magnificence.

Today many consider these treatises on magnificence as little more than a justification for conspicuous consumption, but A. D. Fraser Jenkins, in his fundamental article of 1970, drew attention to the "distinctive" quality of magnificence. Starting with Aristotle, most sources emphasized that magnificence spending was an exclusive virtue of the rich and wellborn. A recent study by an economic historian, Guido Guerzoni, demonstrated how the theory of magnificence bestows distinction through the principles laid bare centuries later by the highly influential theory of signaling. In the classic book on the topic, *Market Signaling* (1974), which helped earn Michael Spence the Nobel Prize for Economics, the chapter "Status, Income and Consumption" begins with this observation: "Veblen many years ago suggested that highly visible consumption is used by people as a signal of wealth and, by inference, power and status."¹⁴ If Spence had looked back to authors writing many years before Veblen and across to those addressing the visual arts, he could have said that "magnificent" commissions signaled the same qualities. Economists have not, however, extended the theory of signaling to a historic period, nor considered art commissions. Even for Renaissance writers on magnificence, expenditures on grand public occasions held the greatest interest. In the last section of this chapter, we apply the theory of signaling to conspicuous commissions made by "distinctive" individuals.

Magnificence

Across medieval and Renaissance Italy, in areas with vastly different governments, the wealthy and powerful understood and exploited the theory of mag-

nificence. The term derived from Aristotle, who defined it as "a virtue concerned with wealth . . . [which] consists in suitable expenditure on a great scale."¹⁵ In a key passage interpreted by many authors, most notably Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle recommended that a magnificent man construct two types of structures: public buildings dedicated to the gods, and a grand house commensurate with his wealth.¹⁶ He also indicated the flip side of the coin: since magnificence represents a virtuous way to spend money and leads to public good, "all these things bring with them greatness and prestige" for the patron.

In 1498 these themes were developed into a short treatise on magnificence by Giovanni Pontano, a prominent scholar and statesman, who was active in Naples. His views are consonant with those expressed by many other fifteenth-century authors, including the Florentines Leon Battista Alberti and Matteo Palmieri, the Bolognese Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, and the Venetian Giovanni Caldiera. In one of his rare examples taken from contemporary Italy, Pontano noted that, in Florence, Cosimo de' Medici showed magnificence "in building temples and villas, then in making libraries . . . he was the first to take up the custom of devoting private riches to public good and to the beauty of the fatherland."¹⁷ This passage echoes the sentiments expressed a half century earlier by Timoteo Maffei, who defended Cosimo's magnificence from attacks made against his vast architectural expenditures.¹⁸ After listing the many buildings commissioned by Cosimo, his supporter declared that "all these things deserve extraordinary praise and should be recommended to posterity with the utmost enthusiasm, since from Cosimo's Magnificence in building monasteries and temples it will have had divine excellence before its eyes, and it will consider with how much piety and with how much thankfulness we are indebted to God." Maffei also noted that Cosimo used his magnificent commissions to fulfill the need to distinguish himself: "It was necessary that he should appear more fully equipped and more distinguished than the other people in town, in the same proportion as he received benefits from it greater than theirs." Unlike other Renaissance authors discussed in the previous chapter, Maffei did not mention the crucial role these magnificent buildings played in supporting Cosimo's political survival in Florence.

Not surprisingly, private citizens of elite status, not merely heads of state, adapted the practice of using magnificent commissions to distinguish themselves. In a biography of Filippo Strozzi, probably the most important architectural patron in late fifteenth-century Florence, his son Lorenzo wrote: "If magnificence is recognized and demonstrated by honorable and glorious projects, and especially in the construction of public and private buildings, one can say that Filippo not only acted in a magnificent way, but surpassed the magnificence of every other Florentine."¹⁹ Lorenzo supported this claim with a long list of Filippo's commissions. Most notably, Filippo decided to build a magnificent palazzo that would "bring renown to himself and all his [kinsmen] in Italy and abroad."²⁰ We can determine that the patron achieved his

goal from several letters by various relatives of Filippo. Most importantly, Giovanni Strozzi in Ferrara quoted the opinion of the "Lord," presumably Duke Ercole d'Este. This authority compared the building under construction with that of the Medici leader in Florence, declaring that Filippo's palace "will be more splendid than Lorenzo's."²¹

Cynical readers should not conclude that Renaissance patrons commissioned grand public works merely to glorify themselves and their families. In a related context, it is misleading to view texts on magnificence as exalted justifications of greed and vanity, written by insincere humanists only to serve the interests of their wealthy patrons. Recent studies have demonstrated that in Florence—and the argument extends readily to other cities—the desire to spend virtuously for the common good neatly complemented a highly developed and broad-based appreciation for the beauty of the city.²² In his discussion of magnificence in the book significantly titled *On Civil Life*, Palmieri explained how private commissions and actions contribute to beauty that benefited all citizens. Even luxury objects owned by private individuals, such as "magnificent dwellings" and "precious chattels," should be considered together with public goods because they are "highly suited to the general embellishment of the city and create civic beauty, from which there results civic grandeur, honor, and good."²³ In the preface of his monumental treatise *On the Art of Building*, Alberti stressed the universal value of fine architecture: "When you erect a wall or portico of great elegance and adorn it with a door, columns, or roof, good citizens approve and express joy . . . because they realize that you have used your wealth to increase greatly not only your own honor and glory, but also that of your family, your descendants, and the whole city."²⁴ Low-income and affluent residents alike, intensely proud of their city, shared a collective desire to burnish its reputation, to make it appear ever more stunning and prosperous. Such pride only enhanced patrons' abilities to signal their virtue.

Naturally, not all shared this collective vision. In Naples, Pontano's views contrasted with those of Tristano Caracciolo. Inspired partially by a concern about patrimonial stability, as well as ethical and religious motivations, he proposed strictness, parsimony, and austerity in behavior.²⁵ Similarly, as we shall see in chapter 5, many churchmen rallied against the private citizens who were aggrandizing themselves through public magnificence.

Conveniently for Renaissance patrons and modern scholars, Pontano specified the qualities that lend a building magnificence. He felt that "those who strive for magnificence must consider the appearance above all."²⁶ Buildings must exhibit "above all sumptuousness, but with worthiness. For worthiness itself is principally comprised of these things: ornament, size, excellence of materials, and the perpetual duration of the work." Writing in the same years as Pontano, Arienti advocated virtually identical qualities for a magnificent building; he omitted durability but added the value of what we might call

“creature comforts.”²⁷ A half century earlier, Caldiera explained that in Venice the value of the family is expressed in the size of the palazzo, in its materials and artistic quality, and in particulars such as a well-lit courtyard and the size and form of the entrance portals.²⁸ In accord with many writers prior and since, he found that magnificence called for both grand scale and noteworthy beauty.

There was an additional prime requirement: the building must “fit,” and what fit one owner would not often be appropriate for another. All Renaissance authors agreed that for a magnificent house to communicate a favorable message about its patron, it must, as Alberti wrote, “be adapted to the dignity of the owner.”²⁹ Similarly, for Arienti, the building must correspond to “to the condition and state of the man.”³⁰ Magnificence could be overdone, especially in the wrong hands. Some authors presented the problem in ethical terms. In Florence, Palmieri observed that “he who would want . . . to build a house resembling the magnificent ones of noble citizens would deserve blame if first he has not reached or excelled their virtue.”³¹ In other words, the returns to mishandled magnificence could be small or even negative. Those who did not follow fundamental rules of decorum, as we saw in the previous chapter, faced negative reception costs. Pontano warned that the patron would appear ridiculous if the commissioned work did not “correspond precisely” to his social and economic status.³² Here, once again, Pontano drew on the authority of Aristotle: “Great expenditure is becoming to those who have suitable means to start with acquired by their own efforts or from ancestors or connections, and to people of high birth or reputation, and so on: for all these things bring with them greatness and prestige” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1122b). Authors writing in cities ruled by nobles often used blue blood and wealth to evaluate the appropriateness of magnificence. Caldiera offered a fascinating insight into how commissions should be calibrated to status in Renaissance Venice: aristocrats who had inherited their wealth should show more magnificence than people who had accumulated their wealth by themselves.³³ (This dictum has persisted to hamper the nouveaux riches in subsequent eras.) On the other hand, both Francesco Patrizi, writing in Siena in the mid-1400s, and Domenico Morosini, in Venice shortly before 1500, “explicitly proposed that houses of patrician families in a republican state should resemble each other to convey the impression of a homogeneous ruling class.”³⁴ Though they believed that such families should exhibit magnificence, it should be limited to members of this elite group.

The observations by Patrizi, Morosini, and other authors recognized the fierce competition inherent in status seeking. In a Renaissance rat race of “keeping up with the Strozzi,” patrons had to spend vast, sometimes ruinous amounts to maintain social status. If other patrons were contracting for magnificence at the 100,000-florin level, it would do a prosperous merchant little good to reach 90,000 florins. To reach the top of the heap, he might decide to spend

110,000, which in turn would encourage others to push harder to 120,000.³⁵ Here the competition was about who could do more to beautify the city, glorify God, and enhance their own and their families' reputations. The importance of such striving in Italy, and the fruits it produced, was discussed in a 1588 by Giovanni Botero in *Three Books on the Causes of the Greatness of Cities*. "A gentleman spends more generously because of the competition, and in order to emulate others, in the city, where he can see and be seen by honorable people, than in the country, where he lives among the animals and talks with bumpkins. . . . In this way, the buildings necessarily increase and the arts multiply."³⁶ Whereas this would seem to be a purely positive development, some of Botero's contemporaries noted a great danger: Annibale Romei observed in 1591 that some less affluent nobles were "unable to bear the pomp and the arrogance of the richest in their lifestyle, clothing, and other external matters."³⁷ Though buildings increased and arts multiplied, they contributed to an excess degree of social climbing. As Silvio Antoniano lamented in 1584, "The artisan now wishes to be the equal of the citizen, the citizen the equal of the gentleman, the gentleman the equal of the noble, and the noble the equal of the prince, and these are intolerable things beyond reason and measure which displease God and lead to a thousand sins."³⁸

One solution was to distinguish among different types of expenditures, making some more virtuous or appropriate than others. Piccolomini described the financial transactions of "everyday life, such as gifts and payments, alms and household expenses," as examples of "liberality." Magnificent actions, on the other hand, conveyed "sumptuousness and grandness," and for these "three aspects should be considered: who spends, how much is spent, and the matter of spending."³⁹ These expenditures thus served as signals that distinguished elite patrons from the rest. Magnificence, as Aristotle had said, was limited to people of high birth or reputation.

Signaling

To create magnificence players must exercise both skill and subtlety. The Renaissance patrons and artists who were responsible for magnificent works had to carefully select expenditure levels and tailor commissions to convey the appropriate message. They also had to be sensitive to the ability of their audience to interpret any commission. Fortunately, elites—a patron's most important audience—were highly skilled in assessing the quality of works, the costs to create them, and their appropriateness for the patron who provided them. In this section we examine how signals are created and interpreted.

In a sermon given in Siena in 1427, Bernardino discussed how public signs contributed to effective signals. "By what do we know the shops, eh? By their signs . . . thus we know the shop of the wool merchant by his sign." And so too

with the moneylender, wine seller, hotelier, and tavern keeper.⁴⁰ Such signs were needed: at this time Florence had 1,540 shops.⁴¹ But it was not sufficient merely to know what a merchant did. As Bernardino explained, many merchants tried to cheat with false weights and fraudulent goods.⁴² During the same period, Leon Battista Alberti warned that “the world is filled with fraudulent, false, perfidious, bold, audacious, and rapacious men. Everything in the world is profoundly unsure. One has to be far-seeing, alert, and careful in the face of frauds, traps, and betrayals.” As Rubin commented, “Appearances were deceptive. They were also instrumental.”⁴³ What indicators existed to help shoppers, and how did they convey information that was essential but highly difficult to communicate, such as the purveyor’s honesty and the quality of his goods? How, for example, did sellers of high-quality goods distinguish themselves from those whose products were inferior when some aspect of quality, such as durability, was not obvious on inspection?

The economic theory of signaling addresses the question of how to convey difficult information in modern markets where information is held asymmetrically. Traditional economics assumes that decision makers are well informed—that they have adequate information about anything they buy, be it a product for sale, a person offering a service, or an individual proclaiming her capabilities. Sometimes it is easy to gather the requisite information, for example when a product is purchased frequently, or when a professor’s class is regularly offered and well attended. But even in developed economies, much valuable information is not transmitted to all interested parties. The need to instill trust leads merchants to conspicuous expenditures that do not improve the quality of their goods. In Renaissance Italy, for example, pharmacists invested relatively large amounts in the infrastructure of their shops. In Florence, Luca Landucci had been earning three hundred gold florins a year when working for another pharmacist, but when he opened his own establishment he lamented that “the cupboard alone cost fifty gold florins.” Welch argued that such expenditures, and those for majolica jars to hold ingredients, proved “to both customers and the supervisory authorities . . . that these pharmacies had the appropriate effective ingredients.”⁴⁴ This constitutes a perfect example of signaling: although fancy containers do not necessarily contain or properly preserve the required products any better, they convey a reassuring message about the pharmacist. Thus, the fancy packaging was essential; in the Renaissance, as today, clients needed to see signs of quality before making purchases. By the same logic, a magnificent, classically inspired palace probably functioned for merchants as a sleek corporate headquarters does today. It trumpeted abundance, and attracted clients lured to strong indicators of success. An unusually modest building, on the other hand, might create a social disaster for the Renaissance patron, and a business one for the modern company.

Sellers usually know more about their products than buyers, and this cre-

ates an informational imbalance. As a result, sellers need to produce signs or signals that convey some essential qualities about their products, such as durability, or themselves, such as honesty. At the most abstract level, assume that an individual has (or possesses a product with) a desirable characteristic we can call X. Assume that those lacking X will find it much more expensive than those having X to produce a particular signal, Y. This will discourage them from using Y. Hence, observing an individual with Y will tend to indicate that the individual possesses X.

This fundamental principle of drawing inferences from differential costs underlies a highly influential article, "The Market for Lemons,"⁴⁵ which garnered George Akerlof the Nobel Prize.⁴⁶ The owner of a used car knows whether or not the vehicle starts on cold mornings, something that cannot be determined by a potential purchaser. Owners of nonstarters would like to dispose of them; thus people who are shopping for a secondhand car should expect its quality to be below average for its vintage—that is, a lemon. This handicaps the owner of a perfectly fine car, since that information cannot be readily conveyed to nonexperts, but signaling comes to the rescue. A used-car dealer who can assess reliability can offer a generous warranty—one that is economically feasible only if the car is good—to signal the high quality of his product.

In Renaissance Italy, cities needed to address the shoppers' fear of deception, as voiced by Bernardino and many others. One popular solution was to provide certificates that authenticated goods.⁴⁶ The Silk Guild in Milan, for example, stipulated that all silk cloth be stamped in the guildhall, and buyers had to present their purchases within three days to be checked. If material was faulty or fraudulent, customers would receive their money back plus a 25 percent premium. The certificate or stamp thus signaled difficult-to-communicate information, mainly quality. It was costly to sell fraudulent goods, as it is costly to offer a generous warranty with a car that works poorly.

The concept of "differential costs" extends easily to nonmonetary matters. For example, today it is easy and inexpensive to make a text available on the Internet. When a generic search engine turns up an art historical study on an unknown website, potential readers know nothing about its quality. Specialists, suspicious that the author could not publish the article in a more established setting, view such a piece with extreme caution. In contrast, it is extremely difficult to publish a paper in an established academic journal unless one is a capable scholar. Hence, readers expect studies that get major publication to present new conclusions based on solid research. The difficulty that weak scholars face in placing articles in a respected journal constitutes a significant differential cost. Prominent publication thus signals quality. Scholars win respect for having published many major journal articles or having published books with prestigious presses, even from those who have not read the works.

The concept of signaling can help to resolve a number of real-world puzzles.

Consider three examples. Why did Renaissance apothecaries use majolica vessels and furniture to signal the quality of their products, and their professional seriousness, when a dishonest pharmacist could obtain the same vases and cupboards? Over time, as the poor quality of his product became known, the dishonest pharmacist's sales would slump, and the high investment would have been squandered. A much-studied contemporary puzzle is why companies with spare cash pay dividends rather than repurchase shares, especially when dividends are taxed much more heavily than capital gains.⁴⁷ Economists say that the costly action of paying a dividend signals a firm's rosy prospects, since cutting dividends would be very embarrassing. Hence, only firms with bright prospects will commit to dividends today. The most famous example of signaling was mentioned in the introduction to this book: Students, even those with limited intellectual interests, work hard to obtain a diploma from a prestigious liberal arts college. That is because securing the degree signals a range of positive qualities, including motivation and determination.

Spence showed rigorously, in mathematical terms, why conspicuous consumption expenditures work—namely, their costs are substantially lower to those who have more money. To use an example familiar to most readers, if a speaker at an academic conference appears in a designer dress, the audience will conclude that she is wealthy. Even an assistant professor of moderate means could scrape together five thousand dollars for such an outfit, but her sacrifice of everyday living standards would be much greater than that of her colleague with inherited wealth. Purchasing the signal of the expensive outfit is much cheaper for the rich person.

Economists refer to communications with very low differential costs as “cheap talk.” More generally, words, actions, or instruments cheaply available to all tell nothing favorable about those who use them.⁴⁸ To quote a long passage from Homer in the original Greek is impressive. To toss an occasional Latin term into one's speech might merely convey an attempt to impress. Knowledgeable people, seeking to impress, are good at conveying that their talk is not cheap. Signaling elite status in Renaissance Italy involved high stakes; such “talk” was not cheap.

Signaling in Renaissance Art

A modern-day visitor to Italy who sees a grand altarpiece, statue, or palace from the Renaissance era will conclude that the patron had ample resources. But at the time it was made, something more was almost certainly conveyed, namely that the patron fit the criteria of magnificence. The high social costs to these commissions, if chosen in deviance from one's station, guaranteed that the works signaled status, not merely wealth.

The key to signaling was differential costs, which ensured that a work of art

or the specific attributes of it were not cheap talk. We saw in chapter 1 that Paolo Vitelli asked a painter *not* to depict an order of knighthood given to a family member, since by that date such titles had become abundant, and thus offered little distinction among the elite.⁴⁹ In a similar vein, the poet Aretino refused the offer of a nonstipendiary title (but accepted a beautiful gold chain) because "a knight without an income is like a wall without a cross, which is pissed on by everyone"⁵⁰ (fig. 3.1). In economic terms, these commentators recognized that cost differentials for certain knighthoods had fallen so low that membership in such orders no longer signaled status. They feared that viewers might interpret a reference to the order as cheap talk or, even worse, an attempt to claim status from a signal that revealed little. Such a claim, if recognized, would lower the claimant's status. Vitelli, our shrewd patron, requested that other noble titles be included; presumably, the intended audience would understand that those were more difficult to obtain. Similarly, a respected academic today might have a résumé that lists a lecture delivered at Princeton University but omits one given at an insignificant institution. Beyond wealth, culture and taste were often required for conspicuous commissions; thus, the art signaled the patron's culture and taste.

Since money alone was not sufficient to commission various works, and certain works would be inappropriate for some patrons, many commissions also signaled status. As we have seen, one patron might be able to signal high status through a message whereas others trying to do the same would face the high reception cost of social disapproval. Triumphal entries into cities—consisting of ephemeral street decorations and permanent written records—provide a salient case. Very wealthy but common citizens might be able to afford such extravaganzas—much as a CEO today could hire a band to play "Hail to the Chief" at the beginning of board meetings—but if the audience felt that the protagonist did not deserve the honor, it would bring only ridicule.

Given these types of costs, even uninformed members of the throng witnessing a Renaissance triumphal entry could draw accurate conclusions about the importance of a celebrated leader. One probably typical example, unusual though for the abundant documentation that has survived, was the 1585 triumphal procession of Duke Carlo Emanuele I of Savoy and his bride Catherine of Austria.⁵¹ Volumes of letters, between ducal representatives and the government officials responsible for realizing the project, detail the preparations for a series of entries into nine different cities. This correspondence indicates the high importance given to the identity, status, roles, and clothing of participants. The Savoy, not yet a major power at this date, wanted to show that they could carry off a triumphal entry comparable to those produced by major European dynasties. The procession was made at the very time the Savoy were mounting an extensive campaign to obtain a royal title. They demonstrated the capacity to express themselves in the visual language expected of royal houses: allegories, ancient-inspired decorations, and classical gods.



CHAPTER THREE

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FIG. 3.1. Titian, *Portrait of Pietro Aretino*, Frick Collection, New York (Frick Collection, New York). © The Frick Collection, New York

The extensive literature on Renaissance processions focuses primarily on the learned iconographic programs conveyed by the costumes, statues, and painted arches. Scholars explain how the events promoted specific messages useful to the rulers, supplying examples of selective revelation of information, what we call signposting, a subject discussed in the next chapter. The analyses often fail to assess what the actual intended audiences perceived. Erwin Panofsky would be disappointed in accounts written by learned eyewitnesses to the Savoy procession, including ambassadors in attendance; they showed a surprising lack of interest in the iconography. The same is true of the patrons themselves, and most members of the audience probably felt the same way. But all grasped the grand pageantry and recognized that great wealth, skill, and power were required to produce it.

The triumphal entry signaled the general quality and high status of the Savoy family. The origins and marriage alliances of the Savoy permitted them to stage this parody of events, and they had the sophistication to produce them in the proper style. Though skilled planners were necessary, to avoid the embarrassment of gaffes in symbolism or protocol, these details were not arranged by the Savoy themselves.

Most probably, we can interpret the vast majority of complex painted and sculpted iconographic programs in a similar fashion. Patrons wanted to show that they could "talk the talk" and impress viewers with an overall appearance, but expected few to appreciate the fine details of the message. The rarity of triumphal entries indicates that they were difficult for all but the most exalted to mount, and helped ensure their effectiveness as signs of elite status. With more familiar processions, such as those associated with funerals, patrons had to spend ever-increasing amounts to distinguish their families as exceptional. As a result, wealthy Florentine patrons regularly spent far more on funerals than on the altarpieces and frescoes for which they are now famous. In the 1400s, the cost of prominent funerals ranged from three hundred to seven hundred florins (about eight to twenty man-years), excluding the price of tombs or masses. A few exceptional funerals cost far more, with those for the Medici, Alberti, and Strozzi families reaching the cost of over sixty man-years each.⁵²

Many elements of funerary rituals, such as canopies, candles, and the public display of the deceased, were incorporated into the designs for the most exclusive tombs. As with triumphal entries, however, money alone could not allow patrons to obtain such personal monuments. As a result, the type and placement of tomb markers provided a socially acceptable and widely used mechanism to allow individuals to differentiate themselves. Not surprisingly, the churches in Florence, as in other cities, developed a series of codes for tombs.⁵³ The simplest and most common type was the small floor marker, although larger, rectangular marble slabs also appeared frequently in the pavement of chapels. Freestanding monuments were almost unheard of, and wall

tombs were exceptional; the presence of a stone canopy or arch enriched the signal, providing additional evidence of high status.

Many casual viewers in the fifteenth century presumably understood what art historians have realized only recently: even very rich and powerful private patrons were rarely honored by wall monuments adorned with effigies. The frequent appearance of this tomb type, such as Bruni's, in modern art books obfuscates how exclusive such effigies were in the Renaissance. In Florence, as we now recognize, nearly all fifteenth-century monumental tombs with sculpted effigies commemorate high officials in the Church or local government. If we turn to nonmonumental tombs, nearly all portraits represent members of one of four elite groups: lawyers and physicians, higher ecclesiastics (and other important religious figures), "civil servants" buried at public expense, and knights and aristocrats. In short, if one can see the face of the departed, and especially if one can look up or out (but not down) at him, his status, like his burial place, was high.

The careful choice of materials for tomb monuments also helped Renaissance patrons across Italy signal status. Writing in 1539, Lilio Gregorio Giraldi from Ferrara opined that burials in the ground were vulgar and plebeian. He judged marble sepulchres more "civil," and porphyry and bronze coffins apt for "princes and potentates."⁵⁴ Following a similar line of thought, the Venetian Giovanni Priuli complained in 1575 about the planned tomb for two doges from his family. He argued that "nowadays the most illustrious men are no longer entombed in Istrian stone."⁵⁵ The use of this material for the tomb of a mere physician, Tommaso Rangone, made it no longer appropriate for those of higher class.

The greater the differential costs of signals, whether because of monetary cost, status constraints, or requirements of taste or erudition, the more a particular commission separated one from the others. Time could often be the partner of true elites, making their endeavors more costly to imitate. Bourdieu observed that "the objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest . . . the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacity which, requiring a long investment of time, like pictorial or musical culture, cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy."⁵⁶ In the competition to commission objects with such "distinctive power," families who retained money and influence over long periods had unique opportunities. As Loughman demonstrates in chapter 6, members of a long-prominent family can set themselves apart from others by obtaining a number of tombs in one location. This *oeuvre* gained value as time passed, because even if a nouveau riche merchant could obtain a tomb of the most exalted material and type, he could not place it near comparable monuments of his ancestors. In chapter 7, Helmstutler Di Dio demonstrates how Leone Leoni obtained an "object" with extraordinarily high distinctive power: the right to burial in the imperial church in Milan, Santa Maria della Scala. This

honor was reserved to the most illustrious men of the court of Charles V. In both cases, patrons obtained what money alone could not buy; one needed to have high status, and thus these two commissions signaled this difficult-to-convey quality. The most effective signals are those that are beyond the reach of others.

Notes

1. For a discussion of costs, prices, and markets, with references to further literature and databases, see Michelle O'Malley, *The Business of Art: Contracts and the Commissioning Process in Renaissance Italy*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); Evelyn Welch, *Shopping in the Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy, 1400-1600* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); and Guido Guerzoni, *Apollo e Vulcano. I mercanti artisti in Italia 1400-1700* (Venice: Marsilio, 2006).
2. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 169.
3. *Ibid.*, 163.
4. See, for example, Mary Rogers, ed., *Fashioning Identities in Renaissance Art* (Aldershot, UK, and Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 2000), and Wim Blockmans and Antennu jansse, eds., *Showing Status: Representation of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999).
5. Diane Owens Hughes, "Earrings for Circumcision: Distinction and Purification in the Italian Renaissance City?" in *Persons in Groups: Social Behavior as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. Richard C. Trexler (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1985), 155-177 and Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
7. For the "ten most important sociology books" honor, conferred by the International Sociological Association, see <http://www.uconn.edu/info/isa/books/books10.htm>.
8. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 282.
9. Patricia Lee Rubin, *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 17. For examples of how works of art, especially ancient pieces, signaled the knowledge of their owners, also see *ibid.*, 165-168, and Paula Findlen, "Possessing the Past: The Material World of the Italian Renaissance," *American Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (1998): 83-114.
10. Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Ouvre* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 240. Poggio himself argued that nobility is found not in objects but in wisdom and virtue.
11. Creighton E. Gilbert, "What Did the Renaissance Patron Buy?" *Renaissance Quarterly* 51 (1998): 411.

12. Guido Guerzoni, "Liberalitas, Magnificentia, Splendor: The Classic Origins of Italian Renaissance Lifestyles," in *Economic Engagements and the Arts*, ed. Neil De Marchi and Craufurd D. W. Goodwin (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 337, and Guerzoni, *Apollo e Vulcano*, 109–110.
13. Guerzoni, "Liberalitas," 337, and Guerzoni, *Apollo e Vulcano*, 109–110.
14. A. Michael Spence, *Market Signaling: Informational Transfer in Hiring and Related Screening Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 62.
15. A. D. Fraser Jenkins, "Cosimo de' Medici's Patronage and the Theory of Magnificence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33 (1970): 162–170.
16. Paula Spilner, "Giovanni di Lapo Ghini and a Magnificent New Addition to the Palazzo Vecchio," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 52 (1993): 453–465, esp. 458.
17. Giovanni Pontano, *I libri delle virtù sociali*, trans. and ed. Francesco Tateo (Rome: Bulzoni, 1999), 188.
18. For this and the next two quotes, see the translation and discussion in Fraser Jenkins, "Cosimo de' Medici's Patronage," 165–66.
19. Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi, *Le Vite degli uomini illustri della Casa Strozzi*, ed. Pietro Stromboli (Florence: Landi, 1892), 72.
20. F. W. Kent, "'Più superba de quella de Lorenzo': Courtly and Family Interest in the Building of Filippo Strozzi's Palace," *Renaissance Quarterly* 30 (1977): 311.
21. *Ibid.*, 315.
22. Jill Burke, *Changing Patrons: Social Identity and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Florence* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), esp. 35–37, and Rubin, *Images and Identity*, esp. 19–42.
23. Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 40.
24. Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 4.
25. Giuliana Vitale, "Modelli culturali nobiliari a Napoli fra Quattro e Cinquecento," *Archivio storico per le province napoletane* 105 (1987): 27–103.
26. Pontano, *I libri*, 178. Similarly, see Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, 291: "it is preferable to make the parts that are particularly public or are intended principally to welcome guests . . . as handsome as possible."
27. Rupert Shepherd, "Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti and a Practical Definition of Magnificence in the Context of Renaissance Architecture," in *Concepts of Beauty in Renaissance Art*, ed. Francis Ames-Lewis and Mary Rogers (Aldershot, UK, and Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), 52–65.
28. Kornelia Imesch, *Magnificenza als architektonische Kategorie: individuelle Selbstdarstellung versus ästhetische Verwirklichung von Gemeinschaft in den venezianischen Villen Palladios und Scamozzis* (Oberhausen: Athena, 2003), 176.
29. Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, 291.
30. Shepherd, "Giovanni Sabadino," 53.
31. Richard A. Goldthwaite, "The Florentine Palace as Domestic Architecture," *American Historical Review* 77, no. 4 (October, 1972): 990.
32. Pontano, *I libri*, 182.
33. Imesch, *Magnificenza*, 176.

34. See discussion in Michael Lingohr, "Palace and Villa: Spaces of Patrician Self-Definition," in *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, ed. Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 267.
35. Robert H. Frank and Phillip J. Cook discuss, in *The Winner-Take-All Society: Why the Few at the Top Get So Much More Than the Rest of Us* (New York: Free Press, 1995), a more extreme version of this phenomenon. There are very high returns to the professional golfer or the topflight litigator who is just a little bit better than his or her competitors.
36. Quote taken from the 1598 edition of Giovanni Botero, *Della ragion di stato e delle cause della grandezza delle città*, ed. Luigi Firpo (Bologna: Forni, 1980), 350 (II.x).
37. Guerzoni, "Liberalitas," 363; Guerzoni, *Apollo e Vulcano*, 128.
38. Guerzoni, "Liberalitas," 339; Guerzoni, *Apollo e Vulcano*, 127.
39. Guerzoni, "Liberalitas," 337; Guerzoni, *Apollo e Vulcano*, 110.
40. Welch, *Shopping*, 137.
41. *Ibid.*, 140. By 1561, the number of shops had increased to 2,172.
42. *Ibid.*, 71-72.
43. For this comment and the Alberti citation, see Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 4.
44. *Ibid.*, 158.
45. George Akerlof, "The Market for Lemons: Quality, Uncertainty and the Market Mechanism," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 84, no. 3 (1970): 488-500.
46. Welch, *Shopping*, 73.
47. A higher tax rate on dividends generally applied in the United States until 2003. Once the two tax rates were equalized, many companies, such as Microsoft, began paying dividends.
48. Vincent P. Crawford and Joel Sobel, "Strategic Information Transmission," *Econometrica* 50, no. 6 (1982): 1431-51.
49. Julian Klummann, *Gesta dipinte. La grande decorazione nelle dimore italiane dal Quattrocento al Seicento* (Milan: Silvana, 1993), 85.
50. Pietro Aretno, *Il primo libro delle lettere*, ed. Fausto Nicolini (Bari: Laterza, 1913), 25 (letter of 17 September 1530); with this line the poet quotes himself from *Il Marescalco* (act V, scene II); Pietro Aretno, *Teatro*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milan: Mondadori Editore, 1971), 71.
51. Marta Alvarez Gonzalez, "Pageantry and the Projection of Status: The Triumphal Entries of Catherine of Austria (1585) and Christine of France (1620) in Turin," *Melange de l'Ecole française de Rome: Italie et Méditerranée* 115, no. 1 (2003): 29-50.
52. Sharon T. Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 59, 77, 122, 292 note 55, provides details on several exceptional funerals: for the Acciaiuoli in 1353 (5,000 florins or 131 man-years); the Alberti in 1377 (3,000 florins or 84 man-years); the Medici in 1429 (3,000 florins or 96 man-years); the Tornabuoni in 1432 (1,056 florins or 32 man-years); and two ceremonies for the Strozzi in 1491 (1,222 florins or 61 man-years). We estimate a "man-year" of unskilled labor at about 130 lire; see discussion in the introduction.
53. Andrew Butterfield, "Monument and Memory in Early Renaissance Florence,"

in *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 135-62.

54. Kathryn B. Hiesinger, "The Fregoso Monument: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Tomb Monuments and Catholic Reform," *Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 878 (1976): 284 note 9; and Martin Gaier, *Facciate sacre a scopo profano: Venezia e la politica dei monumenti dal Quattrocento al Settecento*, trans. Benedetta Heinemann Campana (Venice: Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti, 2002), 212.

55. Gaier, *Facciate*, 211-12.

56. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 281.