

## **Patrons of Religious Renaissance Art and their Influence**

**Sarah Moore**

### **Introduction:**

Religion was an incredibly powerful element in Renaissance society. From the early Byzantine period through the Counter-Reformation Christianity heavily influenced the arts, music, and society as a whole. In the art world specifically, the influence of the church was strong, and that influence only grew with the development of humanism and later the Counter-Reformation. The church itself commissioned countless works to portray Christ and his life, to teach biblical stories to the illiterate, and to inspire piety in its members. Wealthy patrons were another vital source commissioning religious art pieces, but often this was their way of buying piety, having saintly representations of themselves included in the works as well as donating large sums to the church. Because of this, patrons greatly influenced the brevity of religious art in the Renaissance as well as the mainstream ideas in society as a whole. By including themselves within the works, patrons were essentially paying to depict themselves as ‘forever pious.’ This is, in similarity to purchasing indulgences, a way that the wealthy used their money, power, and influence to shape society.

### **Argument:**

Within religious art, there are many colors, animals, hand signs, etc., that symbolize the stories and represent the ideals of the church. It is important to know and understand these in order to recognize how wealthy patrons included them within their commissioned pieces to signify their knowledge, power, and piety. Common representations and symbols include: kneeling before a holy figure, hands clasped or pressed together in prayer, a cross, and a church or religious setting. Symbolic elements more related to the craft of a work include: Mary always depicted in blue with some form of head covering, halos above a significant religious figure, and

depictions of naturalized forms to make Christ appear more life-like. All of these different elements symbolize the ideals of piety and the hierarchy of Jesus and religious figures in the church, which patrons made use of to show their own piety and devotion.

For example, a few notable patrons to discuss are Enrico Scrovegni, Federico de Montefeltro, and the Medici family. These patrons are notable because they have commissioned works that have survived time and are clear representations of how wealth can give opportunity for portraying everlasting piety. These patrons each influenced the way society viewed those with wealth and power, with art created to manipulate the way they were perceived by their publics. The notable works that include their patrons are the *Scrovegni Arena Chapel* (fig. 1) with frescoes painted by Giotto, Piero della Francesca's *Enthroned Madonna and Saints Adored by Federico de Montefeltro* (fig. 3), and the *Basilica of San Lorenzo* (fig. 4) in Florence.

### **Enrico Scrovegni:**

Giotto painted the *Scrovegni Arena Chapel* frescoes to completion, in 1305. In the Last Judgment scene, on the left side, we see Enrico Scrovegni presenting a model of the chapel to the Virgin Mary (fig. 2). The depiction of Scrovegni shows him kneeling with one hand raised towards the heavens, and the other offering the chapel to the Virgin. A cleric is holding the main weight of the chapel on his shoulders and three holy figures are looking down at Scrovegni and accepting his offer. This image shows Scrovegni as perpetually pious, because of his devout posture and hands in prayer, as well as showing his devotion to the church because he and his family commissioned and funded the building's restoration project. It also shows that Scrovegni is the wealthy patron, because the cleric is holding most of the weight of the chapel on his shoulders showing that Scrovegni is offering it but not bearing its full weight. Another reason



**Figure 2: Detail from the Scrovegni Chapel, Giotto, Fresco, 1305**

for this pious representation of Scrovegni may have been because his father was known as an evil man, who is supposedly depicted by Dante in his seventh circle of Hell<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, this addition to the chapel fresco, in addition to the building of the chapel itself, lends yet another example of how Scrovegni was attempting to redeem himself, his family, and show his perpetual piety. The longevity of this work allows Scrovegni to appear in a positive light for as long as the work may continue to survive, as well as to forever redeem him.

**Federico de Montefeltro:**

In Piero della Francesca's *Enthroned Madonna and Saints Adored by Federico de Montefeltro* (fig. 3), we see a similar depiction of the patron in the

work as perpetually pious. What is different about this piece in comparison to the *Scrovegni Chapel* fresco is that it utilizes much deeper religious symbolism and is also a singular altarpiece commission rather than a detail of a larger chapel dedication. In this work, Federico de Montefeltro is depicted kneeling with hands in prayer before the Virgin Mary holding the Christ child. Again,



Figure 3: Enthroned Madonna, Montefeltro, oil on panel, 1472-74

depicted in perpetual piety, Montefeltro can permanently be viewed as a devoted member of the church. Montefeltro was a mercenary,

and later the Duke of Urbino who, because of battle wounds, did not want his right side shown in his later commissions<sup>2</sup>. In the piece, the deeper personal symbolism stems from the belief that

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<sup>1</sup> Moschetti, Andrea., *The Scrovegni Chapel and the Frescoes Painted Therein*, 1907, 1-12

<sup>2</sup> Mediateca Di Palazzo Medici Riccardi, *Federico de Montefeltro*, Window on the Renaissance, 2007

the Christ child represents his son and the Madonna represents his deceased wife. This shows a great deal of privilege, wealth, and power because it is asserting that Montefeltro sees himself and his family on an equal level with heavenly figures since he is using them to symbolize members of his family.

### **The Medici:**

A final example of patron privilege is the *Basilica of San Lorenzo* (fig. 4) erected by the most powerful and culturally significant family of the Renaissance, the Medici. While this is much more of a literal example of the patron in their commission, it still holds the relevance to wealth equaling privilege and power. San Lorenzo was a project that the Medici took over due to their financial ability to ensure the project's

completion. It is now the resting place of multiple members of the Medici family as well<sup>3</sup>.

This Basilica is one of a plethora of examples of how the Medici's religious commissions shaped ideas about devotion and piety towards the



**Figure 4: Basilica of San Lorenzo, Michelangelo, 1422-1470, Florence, Italy**

church. Their financial privilege allowed them to control and influence aspects of society to the point that they were looked to as an example of how to behave. By commissioning religious pieces, buildings, and always donating in large sums to the church, the Medici was the top tier of religious influence outside of the church itself. They included themselves within many of their commissions and the *Basilica of San Lorenzo* is

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<sup>3</sup> The Museums of Florence, *Medici Chapels and Church of San Lorenzo*, 2015

just one grand example. This family ties together all of the ideals that patrons held when striving to appear unerringly devoted to God.

**Conclusion:**

Overall, the ideas of the church first shaped the ideals of proper behavior in society, and the wealthy, privileged class reinforced those ideals by commissioning works of art that both benefited the church as well as depicted them in glory towards the heavens. The religious symbolism within their commissions allowed their piety and power to be recognizable to their public. This served the dual purpose of showing their elevation in society and promoting their religious convictions. Therefore the wealthy members of society were held in high esteem in terms of promoting the religious ideals of the Renaissance.

Appendix of Images



Figure 1: Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel Frescoes, 1305

[http://www.artble.com/artists/giotto\\_di\\_bondone/paintings/scrovegni\\_chapel\\_frescoes](http://www.artble.com/artists/giotto_di_bondone/paintings/scrovegni_chapel_frescoes)



Figure 2: Giotto, Scrovegni detail from the Last Judgment Scene, Fresco, 1305

<http://www2.idehist.uu.se/distans/ilmh/Ren/giotto-honour.htm>



Figure 3: Piero della Francesca, Enthroned Madonna and Saints Adored by Federico de Montefeltro, Montefeltro Altarpiece, 1472-1474, oil on panel, Milan

<http://www.poderesantapia.com/art/pierodellafrancesca/montefeltrotarpiece.htm>

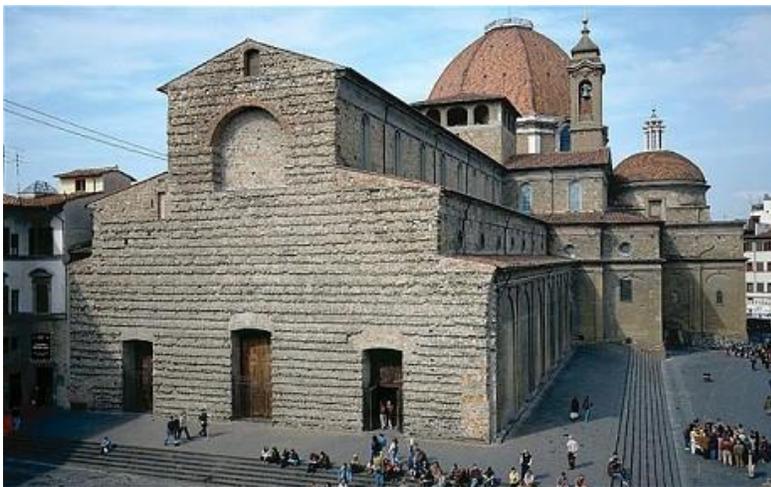


Figure 4: Basilica of San Lorenzo, The Medici Chapels, Florence, Italy

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/8687266/Michelangelos-San-Lorenzo-Basilica-exterior-could-be-revived.html>

## Works Cited

Artble, *Scrovegni Chapel Frescoes*, 2015

This source was helpful because it described the frescoes, including their stories, inspirations, the timeline, and more.

Kren, Emil., Marx, Daniel., *Piero della Francesca*, Web Gallery of Art, 2015

This source was helpful because it was a simple biography of Piero della Francesca, and more specifically discussed the *Madonna and Saints* piece which was key to my argument.

Mediateca Di Palazzo Medici Riccardi, *Federico de Montefeltro*, Window on the Renaissance, 2007

This source was helpful because it discussed Federico de Montefeltro's life and his various accomplishments. This helped me reinforce the points about his importance in society and as a patron of religious art.

Moschetti, Andrea., *The Scrovegni Chapel and the Frescoes Painted Therein*, 1907, 1-12

This source is helpful because it is a full excerpt about Giotto's work on the Scrovegni Chapel frescoes. This helped me to understand more about the chapel itself as well as more background about Scrovegni's family. This source is a peer-reviewed article from the library search engine.

The Museums of Florence, *Medici Chapels and Church of San Lorenzo*, 2015

This source is helpful because it discusses the various elements to the church and surrounding religious areas that the Medici helped install. It talked about the different sacristys, what the building(s) is/are used for, etc.