

## To what extent did trade create an ideal environment for art to flourish in the early Renaissance?

In the Early Renaissance trade greatly affected the wealth of city-states as its merchant and banking classes rose with power. This allowed a new focus on art as artists began to explore new materials and techniques, hence the development from gothic to renaissance art. Trade also affected the ideas of art, as new ideas of classicism and humanism were introduced, and the Church's influence on art decreased.

Geographically positioned by the Mediterranean Sea, the area which now forms Italy, was in the perfect location for trading as it had many port cities during the Renaissance. They became huge trading hubs, connecting several main trading routes, which allowed travel to other parts of Europe, the Middle East and Africa<sup>1</sup>. Inland city-states, such as Florence and Siena were all along main trade routes where merchants would pass through, bringing business and wealth. Self-governed Florence was built in a valley, by the Arno River, one of the most important rivers in modern Italy. This provided Florence with not only fresh water and fish, but also a form of transportation for goods<sup>2</sup>.

Florence's economy flourished, as it made most of its wealth off textile guilds that were the centre of the European wool industry. High quality wool was often imported from England or further inland, then treated, dyed and spun into fine cloth that was then sold. This was how many merchant families became wealthy, as they accumulated huge profits from their growing business<sup>3</sup>, which created an environment where there was a new demand for art. The resources for this trade guild highly depended on trade and travel, as wool was provided from different areas, and new dyes were created from exotic materials collected in the Middle East and Africa.



Not only were materials collected for dyes, but pigments for painting also relied on the collection of minerals through trade. Countries such as Afghanistan, Egypt, India and the Middle East each had minerals and stones that were used to create paint pigments<sup>4</sup>. Lapis lazuli is a precious stone collected from Afghanistan. Once processed it created a brilliant colour called Ultramarine. The colour it created was much stronger and brilliant than the previous pigment used for blue and its use became controlled by the Church. Due to the trouble it took to get and its lengthy process to be created into a fine blue powder, blue became the most expensive material to buy, even more than gold leaf. Because of its expense, only wealthy patrons could afford to use it in their commissioned works, and was then only used on the Virgin Mary.

In Giotto's tempera on wood, the Ognissanti Madonna, the use of blue is restricted to the Madonna's robes. The blue, combined with her central positioning and large size, portrays

<sup>1</sup> History, Trade and Art (n.d.): *Renaissance and Trade*. Retrieved April 5, 2014, from <http://historytradeart.blogspot.co.nz/2010/05/renaissance-and-trade.html>

<sup>2</sup> Paoletti, JT & Radke GM (2011) *Art in renaissance Italy* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) London, L.King pp78

<sup>3</sup> The rise of the merchant classes – the Medici family (n.d.), *Renaissance in Europe, Renaissance and reformation*, SOSE: History Year 7, WA. Retrieved April 5, 2014 from [http://www.skwirk.com/p-c\\_s56](http://www.skwirk.com/p-c_s56)

<sup>4</sup> Chesterman S. *Economic contexts for Renaissance areas of study*. [Class handout] At History, Mount Albert Grammar School, Auckland

her importance and hierarchy over the other figures, as the mother of Jesus. Through using blue, we know the Madonna is much more important than the saints and angels looking at her

Merchants who continued to gain more wealth began to put money into creating artwork for their community, financing churches and paintings to decorate their city, as they wanted to present a beautiful and impressive city-state to other cities. Patrons provided artists with finances to spend their time producing magnificent works of art to display. Generally the wealthier the patron, the more money could be put into the work. As more and more patrons gave back to the community, increase in competition fuelled greater artworks to be commissioned<sup>5</sup>. As much as patrons gave back to their community, commissioning work was also a way of displaying their wealth and power. The Medici Family were great patrons of the arts and commissioned many of the greatest works from the Renaissance.



Masaccio, *The Tribute Money*, 1425, fresco

Felice Brancacci was a wealthy merchant who gained connections with the banking families. Also a strong rival to the Medici, he commissioned works for his private family chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.<sup>6</sup> **The Brancacci**

**Chapel was decorated with brilliant frescoes**

**of the life of St Peter and was a way to show off his wealth, and to compete with other families such as the Medici. This rivalry created the right environment for art to truly flourish, as families tried to out-do each other in decorating their family chapels and building architecture around their city.** Without this money they gained from trade, the great art of the Renaissance would never have been produced at such a large scale.

In conclusion, the extent that trade allowed art to flourish in the Early Renaissance was great. Geographic positioning in the Mediterranean Sea connected many trade routes to city-states, such as Florence and large port cities. Trade allowed the merchant class to rise in wealth and power, creating the ideal environment for art to flourish, as they became patrons of art. Florence was an inland city-state that made its wealth off textile guilds and soon became the heart of the renaissance due to its strong economy and success.

Wealthy trading families often entered banking, investing their profits to earn more money. Some of this they used to finance art, commissioning paintings for churches or building architecture to make their city more impressive and beautiful place. Not only was this a way of giving back to the community, but also a way of showing off their wealth and power. This led to competition between the wealthy families, such as the Medici and Brancacci, of who had the best artworks made. Without trade, the need for art would never have been as significant for art to flourish. So it is fair to say that trade created an ideal environment where art could flourish on a big scale. It provided new materials to create magnificent art works and fuelled a new influence by the merchant class, which generated some of the best pieces of renaissance art we know today.

<sup>5</sup> The rise of the merchant classes – the Medici family (n.d.), *Renaissance in Europe, Renaissance and reformation*, SOSE: History Year 7, WA. Retrieved April 5, 2014 from [http://www.skwirk.com/p-c\\_s56](http://www.skwirk.com/p-c_s56)

<sup>6</sup> Baldwin R. (n.d.) *Social History of Art, Humanism in Masaccio's Brancacci Chapel*. Retrieved April 7, 2014, from <http://www.socialhistoryofart.com/Baldwin%20Civic%20in%20Masaccio%20Brancacci%20Chapel.doc.MasaccioTributeMoneyBrancaccifamily>