the Renaissance CONNECTION Lesson Plans

Finding Value in the Renaissance

Class: *Math*
Theme(s): *Arts and Architecture*

BACKGROUND

Artists earned a living during the Renaissance by receiving commissions for works of art. Whether working as sculptors, painters, architects or weavers, most artists did not make art in the Renaissance unless a patron ordered a work of art made and was willing to pay for it. This is very different from artists involved in the current art world. Today, many artists make art without knowing if anyone will be interested in buying it, place it in galleries and wait for a buyer to come along.

The amount of money a Renaissance artist received for making a work of art varied widely. An artist of great reputation could expect to receive more money for a commission than a young artist just starting out. The materials that a patron ordered also determined the price of a work of art. For example, a payment for a stone statue might see the artist through a year of living expenses, while the same statue in bronze would cost ten times that amount. Casting a bronze statue took considerably more technology than carving stone, and the ability to create bronze sculpture was considered a modern triumph during the Renaissance. While a statue of a saint carved from stone would look very similar to a statue of the same saint by the same artist cast in bronze, bronze was the more impressive medium, and many patrons were willing to pay for it.

Lorenzo Lotto, who painted this picture in 1515, signed a contract in 1513 to create an altarpiece for the largest amount paid to an artist in Venice, 500 ducats (Venetian dollars)

Lorenzo Lotto
Saint Jerome Penitent
1515
Oil on panel

ZOOM IN

Artists didn't always receive payment in coins. Records left behind by both artists and patrons show that some Renaissance artists received payments of wheat, wine and cloth. If travel was required, a patron might provide an artist with a place to live while he or she worked on a commission.

An artist was often required to pay other crafts people from the payments collected for a work of art. For example, an altarpiece had to be constructed by a carpenter and a wood carver might decorate the framing. If gold leaf was to be applied, it was common for a gilder to do that work. An artist also might be expected to purchase certain kinds of colors for a painting. Ultramarine blue was very rare and expensive but many patrons insisted on it since it was the only blue considered appropriate for the robes of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Of course the value of an item cannot always be summed up by how much the item costs. If your family has a pet -- a dog or cat or goldfish -- it probably didn't cost as much as other items your family owns, like a car or television. But in an emergency, like a fire, your family would almost certainly try to save the family pet before they thought of the car or television. A car or television may cost more but they are easier to replace than a family pet.

Works of art created during the Renaissance are expensive because of their rarity and their great contribution to the history of art. We also highly value the art of the Renaissance today because it represents a period in European history that contributed so much to the modern world we live in.