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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

## Patronage

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### Mots-clés

Aristocracy

Art

Commerce

Exhibitions

Literature

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Subscription

## Résumé

In the absence of fully developed markets, patronage (the relation between someone able to dispense something with social or economic value, such as money, connections, public acknowledgment, positions and someone who was able to return the favour with artistic or scientific productions) had for centuries been the main way in which the creation of art – from painting to music and architecture as well as literature – could be realized. Generally speaking, the eighteenth century sees the gradual replacement of traditional patronage (a rich aristocrat or churchman being a patron to an artist) with more market-oriented models that distributed both financial and cultural investments and rewards more broadly. This entry will concentrate mainly on literary patronage as the type in which these changes manifested most strongly, and where they were most directly reflected upon by contemporaries.

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In its original meaning, patronage meant the right to confer offices within an institutional hierarchy, such as originally the church, and later secular governments. In this sense, patronage was a constitutive element in the ongoing distribution of power in Europe. Additionally, it also came to describe the relation between someone able to dispense something with social or economic value (such as money, connections, public acknowledgment, positions) and someone who was able to return the favour with artistic or scientific productions. In the absence of fully developed markets and the commodification of art, patronage was indeed for centuries the main way in which the creation of art – from painting to music and architecture as well as literature – could be realized. Generally speaking, the eighteenth century saw the gradual replacement of traditional patronage (a rich aristocrat being a patron to an artist) with more market-oriented models that distributed both financial and cultural investments and rewards more broadly. This entry will concentrate mainly on literary patronage as the type in which these changes manifested most strongly, and where they were most directly reflected upon by contemporaries.

Patronage could take on many different forms, some of them more, some less visible or tangible, from a real friendship between patron and artist to a small financial gift given for a flattering preface, a lucrative government post, a position in the church, or payment for an article in a political journal. It could mean an invitation to a dinner or the introduction to an even more influential person, food and lodging in a country house or protection from the libel of rival poets.

In its ideal form, patronage was a system based on critical evaluation, whereas in its corrupted form it was based on utility (not that these two forms were necessarily mutually exclusive). The ‘good’ patron rewarded the merit of an artist, whether it had already manifested itself in superior artworks or was still nascent, a potential that the patron as critic and talent-scout had to recognize. The ‘bad’ patron instead selected artists for their own support, strictly according to their usefulness for him or her. These models of patronage are, of course, stereotypes that correspond, if at all, only partially to historical cases, but they do figure in contemporary discussions of patronage.<sup>1</sup> The corrupted form is usually associated throughout the eighteenth century with paid support for political reasons, what Korshin called ‘job-oriented literary patronage’,<sup>2</sup> epitomized in Robert Walpole’s vast number of hired government propagandists. Griffin, though, has convincingly shown that a clear differentiation between this practice and an earlier, purer form of patronage is merely a fiction and that ‘[t]he system of patronage was always political.’ Walpole, usually branded as the villain who politicized literature and patronage, was simply making effective use of well-established principles, and his practice does not significantly differ from that of the ministries that preceded or followed him: ‘[t]he system of patronage was never simply a form of noblesse oblige or disinterested generosity. It was in effect an ‘economic’ arrangement that provided benefits to both parties’.<sup>3</sup> Both gain cultural recognition in this exchange. The values exchanged in this ‘economy’ of patronage are ‘reward’ and ‘merit’, the poetic or artistic capability of the person receiving patronage.

Oliver Goldsmith and Charles Churchill are among the authors in the second half of the century who deplored the marketized corruption of the prevailing system, and idealized the ‘good’ patronage of the past. Goldsmith in his *Enquiry* was convinced that the system of patronage, when executed with ‘learning,’ was workable and desirable: ‘When the link between patronage and learning was entire, then all who deserved fame were in a capacity of attaining it.’<sup>4</sup> The decline of the system of patronage throughout the first half of the eighteenth century was closely connected to the development of the literary market and the concept of authorship. This period saw, with the usual anachronisms and exceptions, the end of aristocratic and the failing of political patronage as the most decisive economic factor in the production of literary texts.

Paul Korshin describes the system of patronage in the eighteenth century as being in a ‘limbo between old fashioned Renaissance munificence and the age of modern foundation and government grants, [...] a unique blending of free enterprise, commercial venture, private beneficence, and public or audience support’ (Korshin 473). The first two decades of the eighteenth century are usually seen as the last era of substantial patronage outside of party interest, with prominent figures like Somers and Montagu, Harley and St. John acting as patrons.<sup>5</sup> With the Hanoverian king, who was above the partisan interest of party politics, but who was also largely uninterested in matters of art, the aristocratic system of patronage lost official royal support to such a degree that ‘the outstanding effect of the Hanoverian succession on authors was the disappearance of political patronage of them’ (Collins 121). Graham therefore calls the reign of the Georges the ‘Age of Neglect’.<sup>6</sup> But to say that patronage declined during the eighteenth century is not to claim that it immediately ceased to exist. In his seminal analysis of the history of literary patronage in the eighteenth century, Dustin Griffin has questioned the narratives of earlier scholarship from Forster to Collins as biased and incomplete:

The ‘golden age’ of literary patronage, in which all the best English poets enjoyed handsome pensions from the court or from aristocrats with literary tastes, is a myth fostered by disappointed writers in later years who assumed that things must have been better in the past, and that England must have once been as enlightened in this respect as Louis XIV’s France. (Griffin 10)

While Griffin does not deny the general tendency of the period to move away from patronage and towards the market, he emphasizes that such shifts were neither ‘rapid’ nor ‘complete’ Also, there is a considerable disproportion in the development of literary patronage and patronage of other arts like architecture, landscape gardening, or the opera, since all of these depended much more heavily on large-scale donors.

In its ideal – or rather idealized – form, patronage was equal to an enlightened form of sociability. John Dryden in many of his prefaces dedicated to his aristocratic patrons emphasized (certainly somewhat disingenuously) that the real benefit a poet derived from a patron was not money or protection, but ‘conversation’, that is, the participation in a social

and discursive space – the court – that synthesized political and aesthetic power. For Dryden, the patron provided ‘conversation’, the ideal form of criticism.

As the eighteenth century progressed, there were just too many authors to all find patrons, ‘and, as the number of aspiring authors grew, they besieged the doors of the rich with epistles and dedications, until patronage became a scandal’ (Collins 122). An intermediate method, that became especially popular while patronage was on the decline and the market not yet fully established, was publication by subscription, a practice that had been in existence since the early seventeenth century. Though, in total numbers, the percentage of subscriptions for book publication was always relatively low, the model helped further change the conceptions of authorship and the literary market. This was because the author described the subject matter, the length and the format of the book he wanted to undertake – often large-scale enterprises like a multi-volume history or a collection of engravings that had high production costs – and then tried to find as many buyers willing to subscribe to his projected book as possible, thus reducing the financial risk of publication. Subscribers usually paid half the price at the time of subscribing, and the rest when the book was actually delivered. Their ‘reward’, besides obtaining the book, was the inclusion of their names in a list of subscribers printed at the front of the volume. Due to the public nature of the list and the mutually supportive role of social association (both subscribers and authors could gain cultural capital), one might even call this a form of print sociability. In any case, it was hardly possible to become a patron at a cheaper rate. The practice of publishing by subscription can therefore be seen as an intermediate stage between the system of (aristocratic) patronage and the economic system based on the literary market. It takes elements from both of these systems, thereby reducing the impact on patrons as well as the risks of committing to the market. The practice of subscription is described as ‘an intensely nostalgic replication of personal patronage within a publishing system long since operating on market motives – a commercialization of patronage, or even a democratization of it’.<sup>7</sup>

The changes in the system of patronage were not just experienced by the writers of the time, but also hotly debated. Korshin claims that the intellectual community in eighteenth-century England was ‘tantalized’ by the subject (453). One of the writers and critics who, for many of his contemporaries, came to exemplify the antagonism against patronage was Samuel Johnson. The most famous illustration of the decline of the system of patronage was surely Johnson’s interchange with Philip Stanhope, Fourth Earl of Chesterfield, over the patronage of his Dictionary. In 1746, Johnson was asked by a consortium of booksellers to create an authoritative dictionary of the English language. Though they agreed to pay him the substantial sum of 1,500 guineas for this, he still attempted to enlist aristocratic patronage, as was customary. Famously, Lord Chesterfield, to whom he addressed his ‘Proposal’ for the dictionary, kept him waiting for an audience and gave him 10 guineas. When the work was done and published some nine years later, Chesterfield published two ‘puff’ pieces, implying that he was indeed an important patron for the project. To this Johnson reacted with his letter, a strongly worded repudiation of Chesterfield’s suggestion, and an assertion of the author’s independence, in what was, as Alvin Kernan describes it, ‘the Magna Carta of the modern author’.<sup>8</sup> Johnson writes:

Is not a patron my lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it: till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it.<sup>9</sup>

For Johnson, the booksellers had become the enablers of a project like the dictionary, and the author was paid as a consequence of a contract, not as an act of mercy or charity.

Indeed, the attempts to assign to booksellers the function of the patron became more frequent in the second half of the eighteenth century. As the number of authors increased and the likelihood of patronage dwindled, the booksellers were becoming the only source of money for a writer. Collins characterizes the middle of the century as a period of transition, with a book market on the rise, but completely controlled by the booksellers. To address booksellers as potentially fulfilling the function of the patron was to express the hope that they would make their decisions according to critical standards rather than economic considerations and continue the (idealized) tradition of the patron as rewarding merit.

Patronage of the other arts and the sciences had its own specific differences, but the general trend that has here been sketched – away from individual patrons and their direct relationship to the artist and towards either more market-driven structures or at least more impersonally institutionalized forms of financing – can be found there as well. Perhaps the first area in which direct patronage stopped being the dominant factor were the sciences – indeed, this is not even an area that is readily associated with individual patronage, although Renaissance scientists were routinely dependent on patrons. The major factor here is a shift in the way that societies organized science, the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge, a development that favoured institutions over individuals. Already the second half of the seventeenth century saw the establishment of royal societies (England 1660, France 1682), which meant a shift away from a focus on individual scientists and patrons. While the king still remained as patron for the society as a whole, the evaluative assessment of the individual research and researcher became de-individualized.

In contrast, architecture retained its dependency on patronage the longest, since its ‘products’ were arguably the most difficult to commodify, because they were by necessity of a high cost and could not easily be copied for commercial gain. Still, even here changes can be noted throughout the period, not only through the emergence of a wealthy bourgeoisie in need of representative housing like the French *hôtels particuliers*, but also through a move towards more institutionalized forms of organizing large-scale architectural projects. In Great Britain, the Office of Works during the eighteenth century shifted towards a more bureaucratic organization and therefore away from a grace-and-favour system, and that went hand in hand with the increasing professionalization of the architectural institutions themselves.<sup>10</sup>



Painting continued to rely to a large extent and for a long time on the traditional relationship between artist and a commissioning patron, but change was introduced in different ways throughout the period. For one thing, the eighteenth century saw the introduction of art exhibitions as a means to connect art with an audience that was wider than before, and these exhibitions themselves constituted a new form of patronage. The Paris Salon opened to the public in 1737, and in 1768, the Royal Academy of Arts was created under the patronage of the king and with the express purpose of organizing an annual exhibition. In addition, there was the extraordinary success of William Hogarth's prints, starting from 'A Harlot's Progress' in 1731. Hogarth had originally created a series of six paintings, but while these quite ironically have been lost, what they depicted became immortalized through reproduction once they were engraved and printed. The two original print runs were exclusive and limited, published through a subscription model, and Hogarth thereby established his art in a middle ground between the high-art original and the mass-produced commodity of the ever-expanding print culture.

Lastly, the creation of music underwent comparable changes, particularly towards the end of the century. While Georg Friedrich Handel produced some of his most important works either as direct commissions from George I (such as 'Water Music', 1717) and George II (Music for the Royal Fireworks, 1749) or as a means to curry royal favour, his opera works are indicative of a more complex structure of financing. In 1719, a group of aristocrats founded the Royal Academy of Music as a means to facilitate the creation and staging of opera in Britain, with Handel being appointed Master of the Orchestra. The Academy took the legal form of a joint-stock corporation under letters patent issued by George I, thus showing a similar shift away from individuals to institutions. In addition, once staged, operas were public affairs as well as business ventures that at least partly depended on an audience. Performing music had of course always been connected to sociability, but where in a courtly setting it was part of a hierarchical power structure (with a clear distinction between the patron as enabler and a subordinate audience receptive to both the music and the social power that came from making it happen), the opera audience could regard itself as a more equal social group. Besides opera, other forms of music also gradually moved out of the churches and courts into new, and more public, venues, such as outdoor gardens or dedicated concert halls. This meant on the one hand that performances were much more accessible to a larger part of the population, but also that composers could increasingly rely on the popularity of their works in such performances for their own success, freeing them from the necessity of relying on a single patron. This was further helped by a growing interest within the middle class in musical accomplishments (itself driven by fashions of sociability), which led to a steadily rising demand for private music tutors.

As a look at these different disciplines shows, the major shift in terms of the patronage of the arts was one from a highly privileged and intimate personal relationship between artist and patron towards more socially distributed forms that employed bureaucratic structures or market mechanisms. As the consumption of the arts becomes a more sociable affair (enjoying music in an opera house or a concert, reading a successful novel that everyone was talking about, discussing the worth of a painting at an exhibition), the modes of patronage shifted to give the public and the state a much higher profile.

1. For example Charles Churchill, *The Author. A Poem* (London: W. Flexney, 1763), p. 3-4; James Ralph, *The Case of Authors by Profession or Trade, Stated. With Regard to Booksellers, the Stage, and the Public. No Matter by Whom* (London: R. Griffiths, 1758).
  2. Paul J. Korshin, 'Types of Eighteenth-Century Literary Patronage', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (vol. 7, n° 4, 1974), p. 461.
  3. Dustin Griffin, *Literary Patronage in England, 1650–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 10.
  4. Oliver Goldsmith, *Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Dodsley, 1774), p. 93.
  5. Arthur Simons Collins, *Authorship in the Days of Johnson* (London: Routledge, 1927), p. 118.
  6. Walter Graham, *English Literary Periodicals* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1930), p. 14.
  7. Thomas Lockwood, 'Subscription-Hunters and their Prey', *Studies in the Literary Imagination* (vol. 34, n° 1, 2001), p. 121–136, here 132.
  8. Alvin Kernan, *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 105.
  9. Quoted in Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 77.
  10. Harry Francis Mallgrave (ed.), *The Companions to the History of Architecture. Vol II: Eighteenth-Century Architecture*, ed. Caroline van Eck and Sigrid de Joong (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2017), p. 10.
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## Citer cet article

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[The Author, 1763](#)