

In our Time Programme 97
The Artist

Melvyn Bragg: Hello. The sculptors who created the statues of ancient Greece were treated with disdain by their contemporaries, who saw the menial task of chipping images out of stone as a low form of drudgery. Writing in the 1st century AD the Roman writer Seneca looked at their work and said: "One venerates the divine images, one may pray and sacrifice to them, yet one despises the sculptors who made them". Since antiquity artists have attempted to throw off the slur of manual labour and present themselves as gifted intellectuals on a higher level than mere artisans or craftsmen. By the Romantic period Wordsworth claimed that poets were 'endowed with a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul than are supposed to be common in mankind'. How did the artist become a special kind of human being? What role did aristocratic patronage of the arts play in changing the status of the artist? And how have we constructed the image of the artist?

With me to discuss the status of the artist is: Emma Barker, Lecturer in Art History at The Open University, Thomas Healy, Professor of Renaissance Studies at Birkbeck University of London, Tim Blanning, Professor of Modern European History at the University of Cambridge and author of *The Culture of Power and The Power of Culture*.

Tim Blanning, Plato famously wanted to throw artists out of the republic, is this because he saw them as subversive to the state?

Tim Blanning: Well, he certainly did see them as subversive to the state but I think Plato's problem was that like many intellectuals he greatly exaggerated the influence that intellectuals have on their fellow citizens - that's one of the reasons why he wanted to get rid of the 'competition', as it were. The second reason is that he believed that the human soul or psyche was infinitely malleable, and so those who had an input into moulding it had to be very strictly controlled. The ideal republic of Plato is a highly collectivist and a highly censored place. But I suppose most fundamentally Plato believed in ideal forms that exist out of time and out of space, and all we can approach is a dim reflection on the cave wall, an imperfect representation of the forms. So if you allowed an artist to create an image of a perfect form then they're one removed, so what they're making is a representation of a representation. They could be, subversive people. There may also be a psychological problem here, Plato famously said that poetry and philosophy are hostile to each other -but he was a bit of a poet himself, so perhaps the root of this was that there was a poet inside himself that needed to be driven out.

Melvyn Bragg: but there seemed at the time to be a parallel body of opinion which we can't pin on one person because artists, especially playwrights did have a role in society - as facilitators of public events in these great festivals in which they appeared, so how did that run alongside Plato's condemnation and expulsion?

Tim Blanning: I don't think they're mutually exclusive, because there was a hierarchy of genre, the Greeks esteemed theatre and music very highly, but representational visual arts much less so, and at the great dramatic festivals, where all the arts were involved, the name of dramatists who enjoyed high status like Sophocles, who had high birthright and high status were foremost

Melvyn Bragg: It's interesting that you say high birthright, because you get another complicating factor which entered then and lasted for 2,000 years, as Aristotle said: 'we call professional musicians vulgar, no freeman would sing unless here were intoxicated or in jest', so when you say Sophocles you had to mention that he was of high birth - is that notion around in Greek times then too?

Tim Blanning: Yes, it is. Music is a special case, it highlights a specific problem which is around at any time until the romantic revolution: When you're in a culture that is worked centred rather than art centred, there is a particular problem for the creative artist. So it is possible - as you quoted Seneca in your opening remarks - it is possible to admire the genre, to admire music, drama or whatever, but have a lower estimation of the creator. If it's yoked to a higher concern, a higher agenda, then the person who creates is merely in the service of that higher ideal, and consequently as Seneca said, and as Plutarch said rather more pithily: 'we admire the work of art, but despise the maker of it. This is quite a common attitude in the ancient world

Melvyn Bragg: Why 'despise', 'condemn', why these strong words?

Tim Blanning: Because they're regarded as manual labourers

Melvyn Bragg: I see...back to that...

Tim Blanning: Its very clear in the case of sculptors chipping away at stone. Manual labour was done by slaves, so they are somewhere between a freeman and a slave.

Melvyn Bragg: We'll stick to the artists, Thomas Healy: artists such as Pygmalion begin to appear in Greek myth, how much does Greek mythology tell us about Greek attitudes to artists?

Thomas Healy: Oh, an enormous amount I think. One of the things Greek mythology shows us is that there isn't one single view, and I think we can pick up three myths that would really give a good exemplary range of the way Greeks thought about art. The first would be Orpheus, the great original poet, and I think coming back to the point that the artist wasn't supposed to dirty his hands, Orpheus played this music that lifts stones into place - he's not actually having to do it at all, and so he's seen as a civilising force. The artist as a civilising force is one thing we can pick up on very strongly. Of course there's also then the fact that Orpheus is ultimately destroyed by counter-art, torn apart by Dionysian women, who hate the fact that he turned his back on women. And so there's a counterpart, a clanging uproarious art that destroys this high, ordered apollonian art - this distinction that Nietzsche made between the Dionysian and the apollonian art.

Then there is pygmalion, the artist who is very gifted but ultimately becomes self-indulgent. He also becomes very hypocritical, he creates this woman and falls in love with her and rapes her, he rapes her - so the artist is creating art which is slightly self indulgent, and he goes out of control.

The third, and my favourite example of the artist in antiquity is arachny. Arachne is a figure who denies that she has been gifted by the gods (the artist as inspired by the gods is one of the pinnacles of Greek thought) and Arachne says that her artistry, and she's very much a technical artist: a weaver. Arachny claims that her art is her own, and Athena challenges her to a contest and then turns her into a spider. Which suggests that the reason Athena turns her into a spider is not because the god demonstrates her authority, but because arachny wins the contest. And she wins on two counts. One is that Athena's skill does not match arachny but Athena shows a series of tapestries of Gods bringing justice to the people, but arachny shows them as unruly adolescents who are out of control, involved in rape. So there's a clash of cultures going on there we can see a variety of views. The artist is in tune with nature, improving nature, going beyond nature with Orpheus, the artist is self-indulgent with Pygmalion, and the artist as a critic, a figure who changes the status quo.

Melvyn Bragg: That's a terrific roundup there, we know exactly where we are, so lets move on to the Romans. Virgil has an interesting position with regard to artists because he was conscripted in effect to be their national Poet Laureate.

Tim Blanning: He was, there's no doubt that his relations with Augustus...

Melvyn Bragg: The state is using the artist...

Tim Blanning: This is where there's an interesting argument that comes about in Roman times. Virgil presents a vision which is very much in sympathy with Augustus' vision of imperial rule, he creates a Roman identity which needs imperial rule. The hero is not one who seeks self-glory, but gives up glory for the glory of the state. that is how he gets self glory. This is a process of learning, coming to civic-education as it were, and this fits in with Augustus' view of himself as a saviour of the people, he famously said to Virgil: 'Do you think I will be seen as a tyrant?', and Virgil says: 'No, No I think you will be seen as a Good Man because you are working for the good of the people', so one can see how as it were, the art was very important to this. But the interesting thing here is that Art was seen, Virgil was seen as not really a propagandist, the artistic vision was leading partly because of the skill in the performance and execution of a poem that Virgil brings. But I think very importantly the state has something that it can present as distinct from itself.

Melvyn Bragg: ab: when we talk about Pliny's natural history, it contains a lot of articles on Greek artist, praising their talents. What is Pliny doing there? Is that a text we can rely on? He did that in the 1st century AD...

Emma Barker: Well, it is very anomalous in a way, because Pliny is celebrating these artists who are famous to this day, though none of their works survive. Pliny has given us these names, but it's quite hard to square with the fact that artists are despised at the time because they are manual labourers. And this is a problem right up to the romantic era, that visual artists are producing objects for use, they are only craftsmen, and this is particular to the visual arts. The other thing that causes a bit of a problem with the visual arts particularly is that there is a challenge to God, because you are producing images of the human form and I'd add to Thomas' list of myths that of Prometheus, who creates man out of clay which he then steals fire to bring to life. And Prometheus transgresses, defies the authority of the Gods, and in the romantic figures he becomes an icon for creative artists. There's a sense of danger and transgression. But Pliny is celebrating these artists. But the important thing to remember with Pliny, as you say, writing in the 1st century AD about Greek artists. So there's a distinction between the disdainful attitudes of his time, and those which he is looking back to, several centuries earlier. There is a sense that he's giving a false impression of the artists of his own time, so we have to question his agenda.

Melvyn Bragg: What agenda do you think he had?

Emma Barker: He's promoting people to collect art at his own time, it's not really clear. Certainly he's trying to raise the status of art. He puts forward one particular story of an artist called Apollonius, who he said was learned in arithmetic and geometry, and gave painting the status of a liberal art, rather than a mechanical art (that is art that uses the hand), and he would give young gentlemen tutoring in drawing, and it therefore became the foundation of the liberal arts. Presumably he's writing to the elite of his own day, encouraging people to take up art. He's not trying to raise the status of the artist, who is considered as a craftsman.

Melvyn Bragg: Pliny's descriptions on gaining status by learning about the art became part of the Renaissance idea of the artist, didn't it?

Emma Barker: Absolutely crucially, these stories become famous. Particularly the story about Apelles as how he was admired by Alexander the Great, so much that he would only have his portrait painted by him, how Apelles fell for Alexander's mistress Campaspe, and Alexander gave him Campaspe. These are wonderful stories for artists, and there are many paintings of them. The stories get repeated and clearly artists in the Renaissance seize on these stories by Pliny, and erroneously assume that it was standard practice in antiquity for artists to have this high status - this idea is hugely influential. The other aspect is this idea of the artist as a liberal artist.

Tim Blanning: But these artists are famous suddenly because they're associated with great men. Apelles is celebrated because he's associated with Alexander the Great. Phidias is celebrated because he's associated with Pericles. They're not famous in their own right, but because they're attached to certain individuals. But what Pliny is doing is creating a classical canon, so there are great men in the past who can be used as references. And that's one stage in the creation of the higher status of the artist. The artist is not seen as someone here and now, but as someone who can be positioned in a long line stretching back to the classical canon.

Melvyn Bragg: There's been a long period in art of art being done in the service of someone else, for example Egyptian art where we'll never know the name of the artist. Even in the Middle Ages, we only know the names of a few people who built the cathedrals, and we look at the high level of craft/art that we now think of as entirely ours. Was that, Tim Blanning, was the idea that you were pulled by a divine hand prevalent throughout the Christian era?

Tim Blanning: I think it does, what we call art may not have been regarded as art by the creators, so the monks who sat down to write the Book of Kells and we've no idea who they were or where they were, very little is known about it. When the monks sat down to create what we regard as one of the great landmarks of Western art, were they engaged in an act of worship, or self-conscious artistic creation? I think it's the former, they were worshipping God through the best means at their disposal.

Melvyn Bragg: So what do we extrapolate from that? Is it that artists can transform themselves, taking on religious duty, or does it mean that we look at things in a different way? Because I agree with you, the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels, the early cathedrals and churches were built for the Glory of God. We go and look in churches and say 'What wonderful works!', but that's just us, isn't it?

Tim Blanning: yes, but I think that's true of every work of art a work of art is not static, it changes. It's not an object, it's an organism even if it looks like a bit of dead stone, it changes with every generation as our perception changes. In the case of the book of Kells, that's an extraordinary example of the difference between a 20th century observer, and a 9th century observer. I think that it applies even to music today - it has a polycentric response.

Melvyn Bragg: you were going to say...

Thomas Healy: I was going to say that during the renaissance the role of the artist changes, and ironically part of the reason that the artist can claim divine inspiration is that they bring back Plato. The artist is not making the representation of the representation but is able to have intimation of the lost, unfallen world. Sydney has the phrase that the wit of the artist allows us to discover what our infected will no longer allows us to see. And this is really about the platonic idea that the ideal is out there, and now the inspired artist has a means of getting at it and bringing us into the realm of the divine.

Melvyn Bragg: but nevertheless the artist is trying to firm himself up in the renaissance in many different ways - Durer goes to Venice and says 'In Venice I am a parasite, at home I am a gentleman', Leonardo says sculptors are not like dusty bakers. They all sought to build up their status as learned people...can you give us some fix on that?

Emma Barker: well clearly humanism is very important its a revival of interest in classical literature, and the moral and political ideas that go with it, and the sense that the artist can make a contribution to society. Certainly as far as the visual arts are concerned, there is this notion of a particular kind of painting which is moral and improving, famously defined by Alberti in his de Pictura, the kind of paintings that are called 'historia'. Its connection with literature is with rhetoric - language which has an effect, the painting has a literary subject, is very dramatic, emotive, it seeks to have an effect on the viewer and that effect is a moral and uplifting one. It is through this type of art, and the skills needed to create this type of art (centralised perspective, for which you need to know mathematics; classical literature, so you know your subjects) that you have the artist serving society, but at the same time being a gentleman because he's learned and cultured.

Tim Blanning: I agree with that, but I think there's another dimension too, and that has to do with the artists view of himself. One effect of humanism was to enhance individualism, to allow the artists to have a higher self-regard...

Melvyn Bragg: Could you give us an example or two?

Tim Blanning: well, Michelangelo is a real mould breaker. He was a genius, and he knew it, and he imposed his will on the pope as Leonardo did. Artists saying 'I am just the greatest, and the world must be bent to my will, and not the other way'

Melvyn Bragg: by bringing in the pope with Michelangelo your bringing in the patron, I mean Michelangelo's payment was to be able to stand in front of the pope, he wanted to be the popes equal, so we're talking about the relationship that begins as a dependent relationship, and ends almost like Wagner welcoming royalty - the artist is doing the pope a favour

Tim Blanning: Yes, that, I think, is a very interesting comparison. and that is what every artist strives for: to seek material reward, high status and high patronage - but on his own terms. So it isn't Wagner who visits the emperor in Berlin, its the emperor who visits Wagner. Similarly with Michelangelo and the pope.

Melvyn Bragg: Michelangelo still thought though, that he was doing the work of God. He thought he was Michelangelo because God was doing this, when people went to the Sistine chapel, they went to see Gods work

Tim Blanning: In that respect Michelangelo and Wagner are different, Wagner is the essence of the romantic artist who 'does it all'.

Thomas Healy: I think we're in danger of using our rather romantically-based categories of artist and pushing them backwards. Michelangelo wants to improve his status because that's how he can improve his economic place in society. And it worked mutually between patron and artist. The patron gets glory for having a Michelangelo, a

unique figure, the highest figure gets hold of the great artist, and the status of both improves.

Melvyn Bragg: Is this where we get the idea of the individual genius? Let me bring that into context with Vasari's lives of the artists, written in the mid-sixteenth century, he's writing about the artists of the day and Michelangelo is his hero

Emma Barker: Thomas is obviously quite right, this relationship between the artist and the patron is important. but Vasari writes his lives of the artists and it culminates in Michelangelo, he is the greatest and Vasari is promoting him, and also trying to raise the status of the artist. Michelangelo, the divine Michelangelo as he calls him, is important. There's this clear emphasis in Vasari, which we inherit, of Michelangelo being a Genius. He says of the creation of Adam in the Sistine chapel that its so beautiful it seems to have been fashioned by the supreme creator rather than a mortal. But also, Vasari does not use the word Genius. If you look in the current, readily available Penguin version of his 'Lives', the word genius is all over the place, but its not in the original. Vasari talks about 'ingenio', which really is inventiveness a skill, talent, something that seems to be innate

Melvyn Bragg: God given?

Emma Barker: Certainly, but not genius. Genius is something quite different. Its unique to a person, like 'genetics' its bound up with the person. In the Renaissance there were these two distinct categories, and its only in the seventeenth, definitely the eighteenth century, that these two terms, 'ingenio' and genius get confused, and out of this confusion comes the idea of the genius as a special kind of person. You don't have the idea, the fully-fledged idea, of genius in the Renaissance. It doesn't refer to a particular kind of person, and also because there is this sense that creation has to be rule bound (bound up with the idea that the perfect creator has to be God), there are limits on the creative power of the artist.

Melvyn Bragg: Tim Blanning: when Reid (?) wanted to make a film about Michelangelo, he said he wanted to see him in torment, and artists start to be associated with mental anguish, when does this come in?

Tim Blanning: Well I agree entirely with Anna with her position on the meaning of Genius. That kind of image, which is then read back into Michelangelo, and lots of others before him can only come with the development of the eighteenth century, when their emphasis on the inner light, on originality, authenticity from a memetic aesthetic to and expressive aesthetic where the emphasis is all inside the creator. I think there's this idea of the artist as a misunderstood, tortured genius, and we look back into the past and find lots of artists like that, like Michelangelo, even if he wasn't really like that. Its the all-important question of self confidence.

Melvyn Bragg: Yeah. Are we really seeing a steady procession from Michelangelo of the artist as detached, saying 'I am a poet'. Is there a steady progression going on there?

Thomas Healy: Since Anna raised the problem of the meanings of words, I want to mention originality. The first conception of originality was looking back to antiquity and struggling with how the Christian tradition can match it, and then we have the conception of originality today, as some distinct, unique vision. It would've been impossible, Michelangelo would not have understood the idea of someone sitting in a room going 'I know I am a Genius, no one thinks so' because he can also demonstrate his ingenuity, his artistry. The relationship between tradition and the individual talent - to use T.S. Eliot's phrase, is very important to the renaissance, and it gradually loses half of that, so that the individual talent becomes the main thing.

Melvyn Bragg: You had to prove it to your peers, the things had to make a certain sense, people around Michelangelo could just see that he was better than them. That was a central part of it, wasn't it?

Tim Blanning: Yes, indeed, but he's demonstrating it to a select group, there simply isn't the means to spread his art across Europe, across the world. I hesitate to use the word public, because its a tight group of connoisseurs that he's seeking to impress.

Emma Barker: The crucial difference as far as the visual arts are concerned is the public exhibition, it creates a public for art. And the artists can become a celebrity because of the wide audience. At the same time, as part of this creation of a public for art, is the creation of the idea that there is such a thing as 'the arts' - which isn't just about

individual painting, sculpture, literature, but that they come together as part of something called 'the arts' which is the perception of the public which sees that they have something in common.

Tim Blanning: I agree entirely, of course simultaneously with the emergence of a public sphere there also develops the art critic for the first time, who mediates and tells us what we ought to see, and what we ought to think about art, art associations, periodicals - several layers of mediation between the art and the viewer.

Melvyn Bragg: The individual artists position can be summarised by Haydn...

Tim Blanning: Haydn is the perfect example of this transition where the contract stated that the music he created was the property of the prince: he couldn't publish it. Subsequently he renegotiated this contract and that was a way of escape for Haydn, because he could have it printed and distributed against Europe, becomes hugely popular, 'The Great Haydn', and makes visits to London for huge sums of money. So there's a neat reversal of roles: in the 1760s he's famous because of his connections to royalty, by 1809 when he dies the royals are famous because of their connection with Haydn.

Melvyn Bragg: Can I take up this market idea because an interesting paradox grew up. You had this market growing up, with individuals wanting paintings, which enables artists to become so powerful, but at the same time they're saying that there against this society that's sustaining them.

Thomas Healy: I think one of the things that grows up particularly in the eighteenth century is the idea of 'taste', that you have people seeing themselves not only as materially better off, but better off by developing an sense of 'taste'. This creates an interesting conflict, because your always looking for something new. So the artist, by announcing themselves a revolutionary, is also, in a curious way, is playing into the hands of a public who are looking to distinguish themselves, to give themselves and advantage. That idea of almost 'speculation' in the arts. that becomes extremely important. And the Artist himself does this, a very good example in the eighteenth century is Alexander Pope, who goes out and realises that rather than seeking one patron to commission the work, he can make a small fortune by having many. So this shared taste is exploited by him, for his own advantage.

Melvyn Bragg: The romantic notion of 'what it was like' to be an artist: at the beginning of the programme I talked about what Wordsworth said, the claims they made for themselves as extraordinary human beings with extraordinary inspiration... they were of an uncommon kind, how long did that take to grip the imagination of artists and the way artists wanted to be seen?

Emma Barker: well certainly the sense of the artists as an uncommon person who is not appreciated is fairly well established by the late eighteenth century, the whole kind of 'martyr-ology' of the romantic movement. One example is Paso, there are paintings by Delacroix for example of Paso suffering in the madhouse, Paso the great poet who is imprisoned in the madhouse, and the idea is that he isn't really mad, he's being persecuted is established quite early on

Melvyn Bragg: and we look back at John Clare in much the same way

Emma Barker: its to do with the idea of the market, which does give new opportunities to artists, but also promotes insecurity, there's no obvious use for the arts, they can sell their art but they may not find a seller, there's the fear that you'll get bad reviews, the terror of the bad judgement. So all these things, contribute to the romantic idea, but it also appeals to the people, who actually love the idea of the great romantic artist

Melvyn Bragg: Is there a sense of full circle here Tim, they wanted to get away from being artisans, who produced what everybody knows as the main artists. But one of the main drives in the Romantic movement is that you can make works of art without having craft, they themselves declared themselves as inspired, and could do the art, and so the hold and the grip art had in craft was broken off by that, it that one of the consequences?

Tim Blanning: Yes, I think it was. Among the romantic artists whom we know and admire, there were many who have been forgotten, waiting for generations of PhD students. I think it's a very sound point, that we had, in a sense, come full circle. So if there is to be an inner voice, which is to be heard by all mankind, the it has to be expressed in a way which is not just individual, but which is comprehensible.

Thomas Healy: I think that one of the things the artist does try to redefine is the technical artistry involved, I'm thinking of the famous court case where Ruskin is accused of just putting a few dabs on a canvas, needing no skill at all. He had to come to court about this and prove that his training, his imagination, his vision might appear to be of limited technical ability. And I think we still share some of the arguments and misgivings of the distinction between skill and artistry in the art market today.

Melvyn Bragg: We haven't really got on to what's happening now, so there's another program there. Thank you very much Thomas Healy, thank you Tim Blanning, and Emma Barker. Next week we're discussing extra-terrestrials. Thank you for listening.