

Earlier cultural traditions—of tribes, religions, guilds, royal courts, and states—largely controlled the craft, form, imagery, and subject matter of painting and determined its function, whether ritualistic, devotional, decorative, entertaining, or educational. Painters were employed more as skilled artisans than as creative [artists](#). Later the notion of the “fine artist” developed in Asia and Renaissance Europe. Prominent painters were afforded the [social status](#) of scholars and courtiers; they signed their work, decided its design and often its subject and imagery, and established a more personal—if not always amicable—relationship with their patrons.

During the 19th century painters in Western societies began to lose their social position and secure patronage. Some artists countered the decline in patronage support by holding their own exhibitions and charging an entrance fee. Others earned an income through touring exhibitions of their work. The need to appeal to a marketplace had replaced the similar (if less impersonal) demands of patronage, and its effect on the art itself was probably similar as well. Generally, artists can now reach an audience only through commercial galleries and public museums, although their work may be occasionally reproduced in art periodicals. They may also be assisted by financial awards or commissions from industry and the state. They have, however, gained the freedom to invent their own visual language and to experiment with new forms and unconventional materials and techniques. For example, some painters have combined other media, such as [sculpture](#), with painting to produce three-dimensional abstract designs.