

Workshops and Guilds

In medieval cities, workers practicing the same trade or using the same skills—such as carpenters, stonemasons, painters, sculptors, and metalworkers—formed associations known as guilds. Guilds protected their members from competitors and ensured that trade secrets weren't revealed to outsiders. Many guilds prevented poor workmanship by establishing quality standards. They maintained harmony among their members by setting prices, pay rates, and the maximum number of masters that local demand could support.

Membership in a guild was an honor and brought with it a degree of financial and professional security. Typically, parents sent their teenaged boys to apprentice with a known master, whom they paid for housing and teaching their sons. Similar master-led workshops operated in the Islamic world. Apprenticeships might last for years, after which a young man would work as a journeyman, or day worker, in order to earn a salary. At the same time, he would refine his skill, make the tools of his trade, purchase raw materials, and try to create a masterpiece. If his efforts proved successful, the guild might vote to accept him as a member. Only then could he set up a workshop and accept apprentices of his own.