

Medici Patronage & Italian Renaissance Art

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Artist as Genius

The powerful Medici family ruled the Republic of Florence on and off for three centuries, and the patronage of the arts is perhaps their greatest and lasting contribution to Western society. When we hear the word *Renaissance*, we often first think of a work of art or one of the great artists of the period. The Renaissance was the rebirth of classical civilization and it is in the arts that great progress and visual achievements were made, beginning in Florence and spreading throughout Italy and eventually Northern Europe. Renaissance art was radical and new; it was impacted by and would impact literature, philosophy, religion and culture. When examining six selected Medici commissioned works of art, the six different Italian Renaissance artists can clearly be given the label of genius. They were geniuses because what they created was new, completely different from past works of art. These works were considered so beautiful and exceptional, that even by today's artistic standards, they maintain their well-deserved accolades. The artists were revered during their lifetimes and patronized to create art with a purpose. In fifteenth and sixteenth century Florence, art was mostly commissioned to display civic pride or devotion to the Christian faith. The Medici were able to rule for so long with many supporters due to their unique patronage and desire to use the visual arts to gain and retain support for their control over the city that was the birthplace of the Renaissance.

While most of Europe was still caught in the throes of the Middle Ages, Florence was prospering due to its strong merchant class and geographic location. The Italian Peninsula did not experience as much hardship and was engaged in trade with the East well before the rest of Western Europe woke up from the dark ages. "Florence's richest merchants were entrepreneurs operating throughout Europe and the Middle East. The Florentine gold florin, first minted in 1252, was internationally recognized."¹ The city was also famous for its fine cloths, velvets and

¹ Mary Hollingsworth, *Patronage in Renaissance Italy: From 1400 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1994), 12.

gold thread, which led to it being a thriving center of trade.² Florence had an exceptionally high literacy rate, which was important as it became a center of humanist learning.³ As trade expanded and banks flourished, mercantile wealth replaced inheritance as the basis of power.⁴ Wealthy merchant families such as the Medici would come into power and rule Florence. The republican form of government was also unique in a time when most states were ruled by hereditary princes or kings. Merchants were valued because of their wealth and knowledge, and thus became the dominant social class in Florence where there was no tradition of hereditary rule. These merchants often used their wealth to build churches, palaces and decorate the city-state. Florence was one of a few cities in Italy to survive the fourteenth century disasters with an economy and government largely intact.⁵ This was a key to its success in becoming a center of learning and art, as well as the locus for the movement of humanism which was to sweep through Europe in the coming decades.

Humanism became a central component of the Renaissance. Its emphasis on learning, with a return to classical sources and concepts, would influence scholars, schools and the arts. Two leading humanist figures were Dante and Petrarch, both of whom spent time in Florence. Humanism would forever change Western civilization with its focus on the here and now and not just the afterlife. It would change people's thoughts and how they lived their lives on earth. It also directly impacted visual art, with a gradual shift away from painting only religious figures and Biblical scenes. Humanism could also be seen in religious paintings with landscapes in the background and portraying saints and the holy family as realistic looking human beings. "Humanists and artists played key roles in the creation of images for their patrons, producing impressive propaganda designed to boost their patrons' prestige."⁶ Through art, patrons like the

² Hollingsworth, 12.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

Medici were able to express their own views and interpretations based on reading humanist works. Art was used to convey ideas to the public and gain admiration from the citizens of Florence. “In the Christian culture of Renaissance Europe, art was commissioned overwhelmingly in the context of religious duty. The Bible was clear that the acquisition of wealth for its own sake was bad and mercantile profits were particularly reviled.”⁷ So at least during the early Renaissance, art was almost exclusively religious in its depictions. This was also a time when making a profit was viewed as a sin, so wealthy merchants used their money to commission works of art to be displayed in churches and public buildings. This was seen as a way to use money to benefit others and glorify God. However art could, and also sometimes did, create controversy. The depiction of nude figures or gods from classical literature that became common in the later part of the Renaissance was seen by many people as too much of a shift away from what should be the focus: Christian faith and living.

Patronage was one of the dominant social processes of Europe before the Industrial Revolution occurred.⁸ It was the continuation of the old feudal relationship between the lord and his dependent and can even be traced back to Mediterranean cities well before feudalism.⁹ It is important to note that patronage was not unique to Florence and had definitely existed in Italy for centuries before the Renaissance. Patronage was a relationship that bonded neighbors, friends and family and during the middle of the Quattrocento, and included an intimate society of citizens who collectively patronized the arts.¹⁰ They did so for a variety of reasons. It can be argued that patronage was mainly done for political purposes—to gain support, prevent revolt and show devotion to a place and its citizens. It can also be argued that patronage was done

⁷ Hollingsworth, 4.

⁸ F.W. Kent and Patricia Simons, ed. *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 1.

⁹ Ronald Weissman, “Taking Patronage Seriously: Mediterranean Values and Renaissance Society,” in *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F.W. Kent and Patricia Simons (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 28-33.

¹⁰ Kent and Simons, 6.

mainly for religious reasons—to show devotion and give thanks and glory to God. Patronage, at least during the early Renaissance, was not used by patrons to create aesthetic works of art.

In Florence there were many guilds that rivaled one another and many of these guilds became leading city patrons and were responsible for city monuments.¹¹ Florence became Europe's fifth largest city and was a place filled with civic pride and a view that it was a "new Rome." "The guilds lavished funds on Florence's major buildings and launched a campaign of patronage that marked the beginning of what we call the Renaissance."¹² Most male citizens belonged to a guild and felt a sense of loyalty toward Florence. This sense of pride and devotion was clearly displayed through building commissions and the creation of new works of art. Guilds were expected to devote funds to charity and there was no better way to do so then through sponsoring new public buildings and churches. Civic duties and religious obligations led to wealthy Florentines contributing to the city's appearance.¹³

During the early fifteenth century, there was a dramatic increase in the demand for family chapels.¹⁴ All important families had one in their local church and its main function was religious, not aesthetic.¹⁵ While today we may look at these chapels as great works of art, during the time they were built for strictly religious reasons. In addition, the patron, not the artist, was seen as creator of his family chapel.¹⁶ This illustrates that artists were not given much credit for their creation. Patrons perhaps gave them ideas and details of what they wanted included in their chapel and its design. This makes sense when understanding the mindset of the time and the fact that chapels were not seen as being works of art, but as places for worship. The family chapel celebrated the financial, political and social prestige of its patron.¹⁷

¹¹ Hollingsworth, 17.

¹² Ibid., 19.

¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 37.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The Medici were a non-noble family that originally owned two Florentine wool workshops and eventually opened a bank. The Medici bank would expand and flourish along with the florin, which became a standard coin used throughout Europe, beginning in the early 1400s. They became well established as the pope's bankers, beginning with Pope John XXIII.¹⁸ The Medici bank would quickly expand with branches located in large cities such as Venice, Milan and London. "Within a few years, indeed, the Medici bank became not only the most successful commercial enterprise in Italy, but the most profitable family business in the whole of Europe."¹⁹

Cosimo de' Medici was born on September 27, 1389. He became a humanist and began collecting classical manuscripts at a young age.²⁰ Due to a rivalry with another powerful Florentine family, the Albizzi, the Medici were banished from the city by the Signoria in 1433 and went into exile in Venice. Cosimo's many supporters in Florence sought to overthrow the Albizzi who became more unpopular as time went on.²¹ In October 1434, Cosimo returned and took control of Florence and office holders were soon dominated by Medici supporters.²² This seizing of power by Cosimo began the reign of the Medici dynasty and saw the decline of guilds in Florence. The Albizzi were banned from the city and Medici opponents were excluded from election to the Signoria.²³ Cosimo ruled mostly behind the scenes, appearing as a prosperous and generous banker.²⁴ "Within a few years the Medici party was so strongly rooted—if always loosely knit—and so firmly identified with the interests of Florence as a whole that Cosimo had no need to suppress the voices of opposition."²⁵ Cosimo de' Medici had quickly gained

¹⁸ Christopher Hibbert, *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 34-35.

¹⁹ Ibid., 37.

²⁰ Ibid., 37-38.

²¹ Ibid., 54-55.

²² Hollingsworth, 48.

²³ Hibbert, 58-60.

²⁴ Ibid., 60.

²⁵ Ibid., 61.

supporters, eliminated factions and opponents, and began focusing on ways to solidify his family's control over the thriving Renaissance city.

One of Cosimo de' Medici's greatest projects was the establishment of Florence's Platonic Academy. As a humanist, Cosimo was interested in reading the works of Plato and returning to classical antiquity for knowledge and ideas. Many Greek scholars came to Florence and Cosimo decided to create an academy for Platonic studies.²⁶ Platonism's flattering view of human nature led to a revival in reading all manner of ancient works. The Platonic Academy would greatly influence the development of European thought.²⁷ As literacy increased, people began to think and reason for themselves. Humanism would spread throughout Europe, leading to the questioning of Catholic Church beliefs, practices and abuses, which eventually led to the Protestant Reformation. Humanism would also influence science and views of the universe, leading to the Scientific Revolution. In addition to founding the Florentine Platonic Academy, Cosimo also spent a lot of money on his personal library and on the adornment of the city, following his father's example.²⁸

The artistic patronage by Cosimo de' Medici was done for both personal and political reasons. He obviously had an interest in art but his commissions were mainly to be seen and admired by others.²⁹ "Cosimo de' Medici was the leading citizen and the major private patron of the visual arts in Florence in the first half of the fifteenth century. He commissioned objects from most of the distinguished painters, sculptors, architects, and craftsmen of his day, a large and innovative body of work that changed the face of the city and made it then, as now, a magnet for lovers of art."³⁰ Medici patronage was calculated to flaunt their superiority.³¹ They used

²⁶ Hibbert, 68.

²⁷ Ibid., 69.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

their power and alliances with other families to show that they were in charge and that they were there to stay. Renaissance networks of patronage and friendship operated much like the Mafia.³² In a government that had in name been a republic, they transformed it into a dynastic principality, with their allies serving in the Signoria and other government positions. This would not have been possible without having many friends and developing personal relationships within the Florentine community. To prevent others from challenging their authority, the Medici commissioned works of art and recommended artists to their friends. Through its bank and patronage network, the Medici triumphed.³³

One of the great Italian Renaissance sculptors patronized by Cosimo was Donatello. “Donatello was the artist for the two earliest important commissions with which Cosimo was involved; the tomb of Pope John XXIII in the Florentine baptistery, and the decoration of the old sacristy at San Lorenzo.”³⁴ He was a native of Florence and when his bronze *David* statue that Cosimo commissioned was completed around the year 1430, Donatello was then considered to be a genius.³⁵ The *David* (Fig. 1) “was not only an astonishingly beautiful and emotive work of art, it was also a remarkable innovation, the first free-standing figure cast in bronze since classical times.”³⁶ Donatello, like many other Renaissance artists and architects, returned to antiquity for ideas, subject matter and materials. Of course a lot of the influence and inspiration came from humanism and humanist educated rulers like Cosimo de’ Medici. “Artists and humanists were neither mere acquaintance, nor simply professional consultants to patrons, meeting them only at the point of a commission. They were Renaissance men, with an

³¹ Dale Kent, “The Dynamic Power in Cosimo de’ Medici’s Florence,” in *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F.W. Kent and Patricia Simons (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 69.

³² Dale Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, 7.

³³ Dale Kent, “The Dynamic Power in Cosimo de’ Medici’s Florence,” 64-65.

³⁴ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, 344.

³⁵ Hibbert, 90-91.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

impressively wide variety of interests, and their paths crossed and recrossed...’’³⁷ The *David* was an appropriate choice for a new sculpture because the ancient king had already been a well established and popular civic image of Florentine republicanism.³⁸ David’s victory over Goliath carried a clear message of freedom from oppression.³⁹ This was a time when Florence had to deal with rival city-states and the pope, so the sculpture revealed a sense of pride that Florence remained an independent and powerful city, continually fighting powerful states that sought to ruin her.

The *David*, portrayed as a young adolescent boy, was a controversial sculpture. It was situated in the Medici courtyard, which many citizens would have walked past.⁴⁰ Many people who saw it found it shocking because it portrayed a young male form so lovingly, realistically and sensually.⁴¹ Donatello was a homosexual and the sculpture showed a nude young man with a perfect adolescent body, pointing a sword downward while standing on the severed head of Goliath. Past images of David portrayed an older and fully clothed leader. Donatello’s sculpture was created at a time when homosexuality was not openly discussed or accepted, in a culture that was very religious and had not produced any nude works of art since antiquity. While the sculpture was controversial and not liked by all Florentine citizens, it was an important artistic achievement and is a great example of a humanist sculpture. It is a fairly realistic looking Florentine young man who appears pleased with his victory over Goliath. Cosimo grew attached to Donatello, assuming a kind of paternal responsibility and giving him more commissions for which he was always satisfied with the final product.⁴² According to Giorgio Vasari, Donatello rendered illustrious the art of sculpture and he awakened in Cosimo de’ Medici the desire to

³⁷ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, 22.

³⁸ Hollingsworth, 69.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, 52.

⁴¹ Hibbert, 91.

⁴² Ibid.

bring antiquities to Florence.⁴³ This is a good example of mutual patronage and devotion by both the patron and the artist. The Medici patronized many of the greatest artistic geniuses of the Italian Renaissance, not just through commissions, but also through spending time with each other and often inviting artists like Donatello and later Michelangelo to live at the Medici palace.

Another Florentine artist patronized by Cosimo de' Medici was a Dominican priest named Fra Angelico. "The friar was loved and admired by Cosimo de' Medici because of his special merits, and after Cosimo had built the church and monastery of San Marco, he had Fra Angelico paint the entire Passion of Jesus Christ upon one wall of the chapter house..."⁴⁴ Cosimo had patronized the Dominicans at San Marco, rebuilt their convent, and in 1438 he purchased the rights to the main chapel.⁴⁵ This was Cosimo's first major personal building commission.⁴⁶ In 1443 the church was consecrated to St. Mark along with Cosmas and Damian, the Medici family patron saints.⁴⁷ Fra Angelico was a good choice to do the frescoes in the church, because not only had he proven himself as a qualified artist, but as a priest he was able to express the particular style of devotion with which the Medici identified themselves in their patronage of San Marco.⁴⁸

Fra Angelico is also a good example of an artist who was very much influenced by Leon Battista Alberti's perspective theory. This perspective theory would influence many Renaissance painters and modern artists. An example of Alberti's influence can be seen in the San Marco Altarpiece (Fig. 2) that Angelico worked on from 1438-1440.⁴⁹ The altarpiece was made of tempera and gold on panel and it was commissioned to commemorate the rededication of the

⁴³ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 159.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁵ Hollingsworth, 51-52.

⁴⁶ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre*, 141.

⁴⁷ Hollingsworth, 52.

⁴⁸ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre*, 150.

⁴⁹ Laurie Schneider Adams, *Italian Renaissance Art* (London: Westview Press, 2001), 106.

church, which occurred on January 6, 1443.⁵⁰ The Virgin Mary is seated on a large and elegant gold throne with Roman style arches behind it. She is holding the baby Jesus in her lap. They are surrounded by various saints with gold halos on their heads, with two kneeling on a Turkish carpet. The background includes a forest landscape. This painting appears in many ways to be more medieval than Renaissance in style, with only a few colors used (red, blue, gold and green) and the people's facial expressions are all similar. However it is an example of an early Renaissance painting because it includes depth, perspective and many details, especially in the background. The squares of the Turkish carpet provide orthogonals leading to the central vanishing point at the Virgin Mary's torso.⁵¹ Three friars on the right side are balanced by three saints on the left.⁵² In addition, Cosimo de' Medici is portrayed as St. Cosmas, serving as a visual intercessor between the viewer, the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ.⁵³ During the Renaissance, it was common for artists to portray the patron in a work. Whether Fra Angelico did this because he was asked to is unknown. It is likely that St. Cosmas was included since he was a Medici family patron saint. "Fra Angelico follows Alberti by creating different kinds of variety: texture, pose and gesture, character type, and setting."⁵⁴ Through many details and figures represented, Angelico is showing an understanding of this new artistic style that Alberti wrote about. "The drama of intercession is focused on the figures along the strong vertical axis of the picture. The Virgin and Child represent at once the triumph of Christ and his mother in heaven, and the Incarnation by which God the Father sent and sacrificed his only Son to redeem the sins of mankind."⁵⁵

The San Marco Altarpiece is a magnificent work of art because the viewer is drawn into the beauty of a youthful looking Mary and the baby Jesus, along with the many saints who are

⁵⁰ Adams, 106.

⁵¹ Ibid., 107.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 108.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 107-08.

⁵⁵ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre*, 156.

worshipping them. While it looks like they are on earth, they could very well be situated in heaven, or perhaps a “heaven on earth.” Fra Angelico causes the viewer to think about salvation and shows the power of God, and what might be in store for those who worship him and choose to do good on earth. The worshipping saints exemplify devotion and make the viewer think about how one can achieve what they did on earth and become a saint in heaven. According to Vasari, he got many commissions for the homes of Florentine citizens and his fame spread throughout Italy, leading to patronage by Pope Nicholas V.⁵⁶ “He never painted a crucifix without the tears streaming down his cheeks, and the goodness of his sincere and noble nature inspired by the Christian religion can be recognized in the faces and poses of his figures.”⁵⁷ Fra Angelico painted other well known devotional works during his lifetime besides the San Marco Altarpiece, including his own version of the *Adoration of the Magi*, which was a popular artistic subject matter, especially for the Medici.

One of the most famous and beautiful depictions of the *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig. 3) was completed by Benozzo Gozzoli, a native Florentine artist. It was commissioned by Piero de’ Medici, Cosimo’s son, who would briefly rule Florence upon his father’s death in 1464. Gozzoli was an assistant to Angelico and in 1459, he began the project, using frescoes on the walls of the Medici Chapel to create the *Adoration of the Magi* (or sometimes called the *Procession of the Magi*).⁵⁸ The cult of the Magi was adopted by the Medici and had become popular in Europe beginning in the late Middle Ages.⁵⁹ “A metaphor for the spiritual progression of the wealthy and powerful toward submission to Christ, it exemplified the compatibility in Renaissance Catholicism of devotion with display, the play of imagination, fantasy, and pleasure in religious ceremonies and images.”⁶⁰ The Magi were also among the few wealthy and powerful figures in

⁵⁶ Vasari, 172-73.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 177.

⁵⁸ Malcolm Oxley, “The Medici and Gozzoli’s Magi,” *History Today* 44 (December 1994): 16.

⁵⁹ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, 12.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

the Bible that did not have difficulty getting to heaven.⁶¹ The Medici worried about their wealth and salvation, since the church still believed that usury was a sin. This large painting depicts the Medici family on their way to pay homage to the new born baby Jesus. Not only is it a beautiful work of art, with lots of vibrant colors and details, it is also a work of political propaganda. The Medici were essentially saying that they are like the wise men, royal princes, completely devoted to the Christian faith. You could even argue that the Medici may have been stating that they were chosen by God to rule, due to their devotion to Florence and to Christianity. Since it was located in the family's chapel, it's not likely that most Florentine citizens would have seen it. So it could have been more a creation of devotion for the family, allowing them to see themselves as divinely chosen and a constant reminder that they had to do good deeds, in order to maintain power and perhaps reach heaven. "It is a grand piece of family showing off."⁶²

In analyzing the *Adoration of the Magi* there is a lot to view. It is important to note that Piero de' Medici took a great interest in the painting's day-to-day progress and insisted that Gozzoli use the finest materials available.⁶³ "This supervision—even micromanagement—of an artist's work was not unusual. Renaissance patrons were often intimately involved in the smallest details of the works they commissioned."⁶⁴ The *Adoration of the Magi* extends across three walls and the family are richly dressed, looking as if they are about to enter a large welcoming city and not a small, poor Palestinian village.⁶⁵ "Theirs is a huge procession rather than a pilgrimage or tough spiritual search."⁶⁶ Included in the painting are a Tuscan landscape and castle in the background, angels, Cosimo, his children, grandchildren and allies, and Gozzoli himself. During the Italian Renaissance, it became popular for artists to depict themselves or

⁶¹ Miles J. Unger, *Magnifico: The Brilliant Life and Violent Times of Lorenzo de' Medici* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 23.

⁶² Oxley, 17.

⁶³ Unger, 39.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Oxley, 16.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

other artists in their work. Several master artists did this including Botticelli and Raphael. Lorenzo de' Medici who was just ten years old at the time of the painting's completion appears as a confident adolescent, destined to be a great and powerful future ruler.⁶⁷ "The fresco was not just a glorification of the Medici family as a whole but a tribute to Cosimo's role in creating their prestige and power."⁶⁸ Cosimo was nearing the end of his life and had truly created a golden age in Florence. He had managed to stay in power, had created powerful alliances, and used his wealth to create great buildings and works of art. "Gozzoli's painting is both a sacred narrative and, perhaps more important, a portrait of the Medici regime at the height of its power."⁶⁹

The theme of the Magi procession was not only popular to depict in art, but was practiced in real life. The Medici were members of the 'Company of the Magi' a spiritual club of Florentine families which promoted good works and a good time for its members.⁷⁰ During the Epiphany, there were processions and festivities in the city, and the Medici obviously played a key role in them.⁷¹ In 1477, Guaspare del Lama, a Medici client, commissioned Botticelli to create an *Adoration of the Magi* altarpiece for his chapel and the Epiphany was depicted, with the Medici family worshipping the Christ child.⁷² "In short there was a family tradition established for associating the Medici with the Magi and hence, by implication, with a form of kingship."⁷³ This shows that it was not just the Medici who viewed themselves as royal rulers. Clients and many citizens certainly viewed them as a great dynasty that had done much for Florence, deserving praise and thanksgiving. "The story of the Magi is thus also a neo-Platonic revelation uniting pagan thought and religion with Christian truth."⁷⁴ Gozzoli's *Adoration of the Magi* is certainly a complex work of art, mixing politics and religion in a beautiful landscape

⁶⁷ Oxley, 17.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁹ Unger, 41.

⁷⁰ Oxley, 19.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 21.

setting. It is a great example of Renaissance art, because it combines humanism and religion through symbolism and the people and objects that are vividly depicted.

In August 1464, Cosimo de' Medici died at the age of 76. The Renaissance man had put Florence on the map and patronized some of the greatest artists ever seen in Western society. For him, patronage served the "honor of God" and Vespasiano, his biographer, wrote that Cosimo rebuilt churches in the hopes of making restitution for his sins, especially usury.⁷⁵ Cosimo de' Medici understood sculpture and painting, showing favor to worthy craftsmen.⁷⁶ He was no saint, often ruining families or businesses that threatened the Medici.⁷⁷ "He was learned well enough in classical and Christian culture to be willing and able to express himself with sophistication in these terms, and to appeal to a Florentine audience educated to appreciate this expression."⁷⁸ Cosimo de' Medici's legacy is one of great devotion to his native city and the church. The tradition of Medici patronage would continue under his successors, especially inspiring his grandson Lorenzo.

Piero de' Medici became head of the family upon his father's death, but due to perpetual poor health, he did not take an active role in either the Medici bank or the affairs of the city.⁷⁹ He continued the Medici tradition of collecting artifacts and patronizing artists. After just five years in power, Piero died of gout in 1469, succeeded by his 20 year old son, who would become known as "Lorenzo the Magnificent." Lorenzo had been raised as a humanist and successor to the leadership of the city of Florence. "From the moment of Lorenzo's birth the Medici were engaged in a continual and delicate process of seduction in which the young boy was presented to the people as both the paragon of the virtuous citizen, a Florentine born and bred of a respectable merchant family, and as a charismatic leader, destined to hold the fate of a nation in

⁷⁵ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre*, 132.

⁷⁶ Hibbert, 98.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁸ Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre*, 370.

⁷⁹ Hibbert, 101.

his hands.”⁸⁰ He was essentially a prince without the title, knowing from an early age that someday he would rule. The Medici under Cosimo’s leadership were determined to continue the dynasty and did everything they could to make the citizens of Florence feel that Lorenzo would be a just and worthy future ruler. He was educated in the classics of ancient literature and the “modern” masters like Dante and Petrarch.⁸¹ As a young man, Lorenzo participated in multiple religious brotherhoods, making his presence felt in these secret political clubs.⁸² “By the age of eleven Lorenzo was hounded by office-seekers who viewed him as a likely source of patronage. Those who wished to get ahead in Florence knew he had the ear of the most influential men in the city.”⁸³

Lorenzo de’ Medici grew up in a household that valued fine art. With his father he shared a passion for mosaics and manuscripts.⁸⁴ “It is particularly easy to believe what one cannot prove, that the young Lorenzo frequented Andrea del Verrocchio’s workshop, so fertile of talent and much favored by his family.”⁸⁵ We know that Lorenzo was appointed to several works committees for the building of churches and convents, and that he served on the committee responsible for commissioning the *Christ and St. Thomas* by Verrocchio.⁸⁶ In September 1471, Lorenzo went to Rome to inspect the city’s ancient monuments with Alberti as his tour guide.⁸⁷ Lorenzo was committed to Neoplatonism, wrote poetry and also patronized music.⁸⁸ All of this reveals that the young ruler was raised with an appreciation for humanism and art and was clearly interested in it, through his service on works committees, his travels, and

⁸⁰ Unger, 52.

⁸¹ Ibid., 55.

⁸² Ibid., 61.

⁸³ Ibid., 53.

⁸⁴ F.W. Kent, *Lorenzo de’ Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2004), 18.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 21-22.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 41.

his own personal collection. This would lead to a continuance of Medici patronage, especially in the visual arts.

During the reign of Lorenzo de' Medici he not only patronized many artists but also opened a school for the training of young boys in the arts. It was located between the Palazzo Medici and San Marco.⁸⁹ It was at this school that a young sculptor caught Lorenzo's eye. His name was Michelangelo Buonarroti and he would go down in history as one of the greatest artists of all time. Lorenzo so admired the sculpture of a faun that he noticed Michelangelo working on, that he asked his father's permission to essentially adopt the boy and gave him his own room at the Palazzo Medici.⁹⁰ Michelangelo became a member of the Medici family, eating meals with them and growing up in a household that appreciated art and those who created great works. It is also possible, but not provable, that Leonardo da Vinci lived at Lorenzo's house.⁹¹ We know that Leonardo worked in Verrocchio's Florence workshop and that Lorenzo took an interest in da Vinci's work.⁹²

"Far less rich than his father or grandfather, Lorenzo did not commission nearly as many sculptures or paintings; and many of those for which he was responsible have been destroyed, like the frescoes at Spedaletto, or lost."⁹³ One painting that is now believed to have been painted for Lorenzo's cousin, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, is another example of an Italian Renaissance masterpiece. The painting is *Primavera* by Sandro Botticelli. For awhile it was believed that it had been originally commissioned by Lorenzo himself because it was displayed in Florence's city palace, but in 1975 it was discovered that the painting was the property of his cousin.⁹⁴ Botticelli was an artist who reflected Lorenzo's influence but it is unknown whether he

⁸⁹ Hibbert, 165.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁹¹ Ibid., 168.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ *Primavera*, Web Gallery of Art, <http://www.wga.hu/html/b/botticel/5allegor/10primav.html> (accessed July 13, 2008).

was ever commissioned a painting by the Florentine ruler.⁹⁵ According to Vasari, Botticelli worked on a number of projects in the Medici home and did works throughout homes in the city, specializing in portraying females nude.⁹⁶ This was a time when it was still not common to depict nude figures in art. As the Renaissance progressed, it became more common and accepted, and perhaps Botticelli was one of the artists able to make it more accepted. He also painted panels in several churches and became so well known in Florence that he was summoned to Rome by Pope Sixtus IV for a commission.⁹⁷

Primavera (Fig. 4) is a painting that depicts classical influences and themes. It depicts the beginning of spring with the goddess Venus at the center. She is surrounded by seven other gods and goddesses with Cupid shooting his arrow just above her. They are all set in the woods with flower petals and what appear to be orange trees in the background. “The young man at the left has been identified as Mercury because of his attributes—winged boots, a helmet, and the caduceus in his right hand.”⁹⁸ On Venus’ right is Flora, the personification of Spring and she is wreathed in flowers and wearing a floral dress.⁹⁹ “Whatever texts inspired the painting, its themes are apparently love and fertility in the context of a luxurious, imaginary setting.”¹⁰⁰ It is also significant as one of the first surviving paintings from the post-classical period which depicts ancient gods almost naked and life-size.¹⁰¹

There have been many different interpretations of *Primavera* and the figures depicted in the painting. One source for the scene is Ovid’s *Fasti*, a poetic calendar describing Roman festivals.¹⁰² “Botticelli is depicting two separate moments in Ovid’s narrative, the erotic pursuit

⁹⁵ Unger, 231.

⁹⁶ Vasari, 225.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 226-27.

⁹⁸ Adams, 232.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ *Primavera*, Web Gallery of Art, <http://www.wga.hu/html/b/botticel/5allegor/10primav.html> (accessed July 13, 2008).

¹⁰² Ibid.

of Chloris by Zephyr and her subsequent transformation into Flora.”¹⁰³ It is also believed that Giuliano de’ Medici’s mistress is the goddess Venus and that Botticelli drew his inspiration from the circle of poets and philosophers who gathered at Lorenzo’s villas.¹⁰⁴ *Primavera* is a beautiful and detailed painting that seems to draw on both classical and Renaissance themes. The painting also depicts the goddesses as beautiful women who should be admired for their abilities and individualism. Spring is always a new beginning and a time of rebirth, and perhaps these women are meant to encourage young male viewers to fall in love. *Primavera* was likely inspired by an ancient Greek tale, but may also have been inspired by what the artist saw going on inside Lorenzo’s household. Lorenzo de’ Medici and members of his family brought scholars to their court and were intellectuals themselves. If Botticelli was in fact inspired by *Fasti* and by what he witnessed at Medici sponsored intellectual discussions, then it is a great example of a painting that was influenced not just by antiquity and the humanist movement, but also by what was occurring at the moment, during the height of the Italian Renaissance.

“At one time or another Lorenzo employed most of the finest painters in the city to decorate his villas. Botticelli, Filippino Lippi, Perugino, and Domenico Ghirlandaio were engaged in painting frescoes at his villa at Spedaletto, unfortunately now destroyed. But unlike a royal court, which, through its monopoly on prestige, tends to suck all the oxygen out of the cultural atmosphere, Lorenzo’s “court” encouraged imitation and competition.”¹⁰⁵ This is an interesting point that Lorenzo not only appreciated artists but also wanted them to work with one another and engage in competitions. Lorenzo wanted each artist to strive to do their best in their work. “To be the first citizen of the land, rather than its king, meant that he had to exemplify those civic virtues of patronage without depriving others of their opportunities.”¹⁰⁶ We know

¹⁰³ *Primavera*, Web Gallery of Art.

¹⁰⁴ Unger, 231.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

that many of the artists that Lorenzo patronized did other commissions and that he even sent Botticelli and Lippi to do work in Rome.¹⁰⁷ This shows that he did not hoard these artists for himself and wanted others to see their work and use them as well. “Whether or not Lorenzo commissioned a particular work, it is clear that he strived to foster a climate in which architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, scholarship, and music all flourished.”¹⁰⁸

In terms of politics, the Medici were growing less popular during Lorenzo’s reign. The Pazzi were a much older Florentine family than the Medici.¹⁰⁹ As time went on, they grew to dislike the Medici and some of the decisions that they made. They also were a banking family and so had been business rivals for decades. The Pazzi believed they had a right to rule and viewed the Medici as a family that had too much power and influence, and had ruled Florence for too long. After all, Florence had originally been a republic, but under the Medici it had essentially become a principality. They found a supporter in Pope Sixtus IV when Lorenzo refused to grant a loan to him.¹¹⁰ The pope became even angrier with Lorenzo when he proposed a mutual alliance between Florence, Milan and Venice in his attempt to achieve peace in northern Italy.¹¹¹ The pope did not want any one city-state or alliance of them to rival his power and land holdings around Rome. In early 1478, the Pazzi began planning to assassinate both Lorenzo and his brother, Giuliano, with papal support. On Sunday, April 26, 1478, the bloodshed began in Florence’s Cathedral during morning mass. The cathedral, officially named Santa Maria del Fiore, had been completed in 1436 with the famous dome created by Brunelleschi. It was another project the Medici had helped fund as a gift to the republic. Lorenzo was attacked by two priests but managed to escape, while Giuliano was killed.¹¹² It was a daring act that seems so sacrilegious. Yet this was a time when politics often overshadowed

¹⁰⁷ Hibbert, 167.

¹⁰⁸ Unger, 229-30.

¹⁰⁹ Hibbert, 131.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 130.

¹¹² Ibid., 138.

religious acts and devotion. Justice came swiftly as Lorenzo had five conspirators hung in the piazza.¹¹³ People began rioting in Florence and rallied behind Lorenzo, who dramatically appeared in the Medici palace window in bandages to show that he was alright and was still in control.¹¹⁴ “Few of those involved in the attempted *coup* escaped punishment.”¹¹⁵ Members of the Pazzi were executed, their property was confiscated and their palace was renamed.¹¹⁶

We know so much about the conspiracy to eliminate the Medici because of several works of art that were created commemorating the event. Botticelli did a painting of Giuliano de’ Medici. Verrocchio sculpted two great facial busts: one of Giuliano and one of Lorenzo. A native Florentine, Andrea del Verrocchio was a goldsmith, sculptor, woodcarver, painter and musician.¹¹⁷ He created many works in Florence, Venice and Rome. According to Vasari, he never rested and was always working on something and sometimes worked on several projects simultaneously.¹¹⁸ “The death of Giuliano de’ Medici and the danger which befell his brother Lorenzo, who was wounded in Santa Maria del Fiore, provided the opportunity for Lorenzo’s friends and relatives to order that his image be placed in numerous places in order to give thanks to God for his escape.”¹¹⁹ With the assistance of Orsino Benintendi, Verrocchio executed three life-size images in wax, with an inner framework made of wood.¹²⁰ According to Vasari, one of the sculptures shows Lorenzo exactly as he appeared at the window after the assassination attempt.¹²¹

The *Lorenzo de’ Medici* sculpture (Fig. 5) is a terracotta bust that is well preserved. It is unknown whether the Medici family had it commissioned. It shows Lorenzo in a contemplative

¹¹³ Hibbert, 140.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 142.

¹¹⁷ Vasari, 232.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 236.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 240.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

yet powerful pose. “Lorenzo’s overhanging brows and grimly set mouth suggest a man who has survived the worst attack his enemies could mount and warns them not to try again.”¹²² He is richly dressed and his face shows someone who appears to be a bit sad over the loss of his brother and maybe in a state of shock. Yet Lorenzo’s clothes and gaze seem to be sending a message. The message would likely be that the Medici would survive and continue to rule. It is a great work of political propaganda that fed into the mood that swept Florence on that spring day in 1478. The coup revealed that the Medici had many supporters and that a majority of Florentines did not want a regime change. Of course it is also possible that the swift justice against the conspirators may have shown citizens that the Medici were to be feared, and that any opposition would be quickly crushed.

Lorenzo de’ Medici continued to rule the Republic of Florence until his death at the young age of 43 in April 1492. His successors would struggle to maintain control over Florence and the Renaissance was declining in Italy at the time of his death, due to many wars within the peninsula. Lorenzo, who was called “the magnificent” by Florentines during his lifetime, did a lot to continue the patronage traditions of his grandfather and father. While many works he may have had commissioned were destroyed, and we don’t know for sure whether he had certain works commissioned, we know that Lorenzo brought many artists to his court. Lorenzo was a humanist who wrote his own poetry and had an artistic eye. He was determined to see his family continue to rule and used art to show power and devotion. During his lifetime, art shifted away from just religious themes and artists experimented with new techniques and materials. With his death, Florence began a period of decline and would not remain a powerful European city-state.

Piero de’ Medici, Lorenzo’s 22 year old son, succeeded him but proved to be a weak leader. In October 1494, the Medici were forced to flee as King Charles VIII of France and his

¹²² *Lorenzo de’ Medici*, National Gallery of Art. http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tinfo_f?object=12189 (accessed July 16, 2008).

army approached Florence.¹²³ The city would be ruled by a Dominican friar named Girolamo Savonarola for four years. Florence became a theocracy under the friar and when the citizens got tired of his strict rule, he was arrested and hanged. In September 1512, Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici returned triumphantly to his native city.¹²⁴ The son of Lorenzo the Magnificent, he might have become Florence's ruler, but was elected pope upon the death of Julius II in 1513. The Medici had managed to gain the most powerful office in the Western world.

Around 1519, Pope Leo X (formerly Giovanni de' Medici) and his cousin Giulio (who later became Pope Clement VII) proposed the construction of a new sacristy for the Medici family church of San Lorenzo.¹²⁵ The original plan called for four tombs to honor Lorenzo the Magnificent, his assassinated brother Giuliano, and two young Medici dukes who died in battle.¹²⁶ The commission was given to a man who proved to be one of the greatest sculptors of all time and someone they knew well, because he had lived in their household as an adolescent. Michelangelo had proven himself as a fine sculptor with the *Pietà* and the *David*. He had also been in Rome working on the great Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes, commissioned by Leo's predecessor, Julius II.

The *Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici* (Fig. 6) is made of marble and shows him in the middle column in a reflective pose. This would be fitting since Lorenzo was a humanist and someone who was always thinking and seeking knowledge. He is pensive and wearing a leonine helmet accentuating the idea that he is weighed down by thought.¹²⁷ Lorenzo's left elbow leans on a money box, a reference to the Medici fortune.¹²⁸ "Its lion's head relief probably alludes to Florence and the continuity of Medici rule."¹²⁹ Below Lorenzo are personifications of *Dusk* and

¹²³ Unger, 440-41.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 446.

¹²⁵ Adams, 380.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 381.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Dawn.¹³⁰ *Dawn* is a woman in the process of waking and *Dusk* is a man in a meditative mood.

“Although the precise meaning of Michelangelo’s iconography has been disputed, it is possible that he merged the Neoplatonic opposition of the *vita attiva* [active life] and the *vita contemplativa* [contemplative life] with the depictions of Giuliano and Lorenzo.”¹³¹ It is an impressive and appropriate monument to his former patron, who treated him like a father.

Lorenzo de’ Medici was revered during his lifetime and in his death was seen as a great man who did so much for his family and the republic. Michelangelo had a special talent with the use of marble. For seven years he worked off and on the project, and was able to create impressive and detailed tombs for the Medici Chapel.

In conclusion, the Medici went down in history especially for their political and religious achievements as rulers of Florence and with two men from the dynasty becoming popes. While the dynasty did not rule for as long as the Habsburgs or Romanovs (they were out of power by the mid eighteenth century) they certainly had an impact on Modern European history, especially in terms of the arts. Without Medici patronage, the Renaissance would likely have started later, centered in Rome or Venice, and would probably not have been as significant a turning point in Western civilization. The Medici, especially under Cosimo and Lorenzo, decided that art could and should be used to gain support and please the citizens of Florence. They had an eye for talent and were not afraid to use their vast wealth and connections to bring some of the greatest artistic geniuses into their network. Without this patronage, artists like Donatello, Botticelli and Michelangelo may never have gone on to create other great works and may not be as well known and revered as they are today. These Italian Renaissance artistic geniuses influenced all future artistic movements and artists. What they created with their hands, brush strokes and other materials was not only new and different, it was masterful to the viewer. It was a break from the

¹³⁰ Adams, 381.

¹³¹ Ibid., 384.

past but also caused people to think and reflect. It led to a greater interest in the arts, literature and history. When we think of the Renaissance, we usually immediately think of Italy and the masters. We should also think of the Medici, for without their persistent and dedicated patronage, we would not today have so many works of art to admire, appreciate and reflect on the meaning and message conveyed to us. A lot has happened and changed since then, but we can still see these works of art as a reflection of the times, and the Renaissance was certainly a time defined by great progress and achievements for mankind.

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Appendix – Referenced Italian Renaissance Works of Art



Fig. 1 – *David* (c. 1430)

by Donatello di Betto Bardi

Located at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy Photo courtesy of Web Gallery of Art:

<http://www.wga.hu>



Fig. 2 – *San Marco Altarpiece* (1438-40)

by Fra Angelico

Located at Museo di San Marco, Florence, Italy

Picture courtesy of Web Gallery of Art: <http://www.wga.hu>



Fig. 3 – *Adoration (or Procession) of the Magi* (1459-60)
by Benozzo Gozzoli
Located at the Chapel, Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence, Italy
Picture courtesy of Web Gallery of Art: <http://www.wga.hu>



Fig. 4 – *Primavera* (1482)
by Sandro Botticelli
Located at the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy
Picture courtesy of Web Gallery of Art: <http://www.wga.hu>



Fig. 5 – *Lorenzo de' Medici* (15th or 16th century)
by Andrea del Verrocchio and Orsino Benintendi
Located at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Photo courtesy of the National Gallery of Art website: <http://www.nga.gov>



Fig. 6 – *Tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici* (1524-31)
by Michelangelo Buonarroti
Located at Sagrestia Nuova, San Lorenzo, Florence
Photo courtesy of Web Gallery of Art: <http://www.wga.hu>