

Art and the Medici: A Political and Tactical Tool for Advancement in Renaissance Florence

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Introduction

The Medici are an impeccable example of how careful and calculated spending can further promote identity and family power. Their rise to power in the 15th century was largely assisted by the numerous works of art that they commissioned from local painters, sculptors and architects. This tradition of highly public spending was led by Cosimo de' Medici. Cosimo's family's prestige was greatly enhanced by their spending and he knew this ¹. Cosimo de' Medici knew that the greater the impact he made on the city, the longer their impact would remain and the longer the Medici name would live on. Thus, the rest of the family followed suit. Although the ways the Medici family used art as a political tool evolved over the generations, it remained a vital part of their approach to gaining prestige and influence.

Cosimo de' Medici

Cosimo focused a lot of his spending on building a massive palace that was a focal point in Renaissance Florence ². The Medici patronage aimed to create "princely" identity for the family by associating it with the *Compagnia de' Magi* ³. This group associated with the three kings from the birth of Jesus and focused efforts on acts of charity and social benefit. Understandably, the magi were a long term focus of the Medici due to their combined sainthood and expensive gifting, which the Medici viewed as a biblical mirror to their family way. One example of this association comes from a painting completed in the 1440s. It was begun by Fra Angelico and completed by Fra Filippo Lippi, the *Adoration of the Magi* (figure 1). It shows the

¹ Mark Jurdjevic. "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici". *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (1999): 999.

² Dale Kent. *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000). 161.

³ Allie Terry-Fritsch. "Florentine Convent as Practiced Place" *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 18 (2012): 260.

newborn Jesus being honored by the three magi in a magnificent procession ⁴. It was meant to be reminiscent to viewers of the processions of the *Compagnia de' Magi* through Florence that were



Figure 1
Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi
The Adoration of the Magi, c. 1440/60
Tempera on panel, diameter 137.3 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

held every 5 years and funded by the Medici. The painting mirrors the extravagance of the Medici, but in context that also reflects intentions that are pious and dedicated to Christ. The image features a peacock, representing immortality, and a goshawk⁵, representing victory ⁶. The essential message here is that the Medici family is here to stay with great power. The Medici are very good at creating symbolic references of themselves in their works and this is a key early example.

Cosimo also commissioned numerous

religious works that were featured in churches in Florence. The entirety of San Marco was commissioned by the Medici and most of it painted under or by Fra Angelico ⁷. The funding of a convent such as this one showed that despite their great wealth, the Medici were still a pious and humble family, who prioritized God and their faith. In many of the works commissioned by Cosimo that were completed by both Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi, you see the saints that correspond to various Medici family members featured in prominent places in the paintings. A

⁴ Allie Terry-Fritsch. "Florentine Convent as Practiced Place" *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 18 (2012): 258.

⁵ A goshawk is a medium large bird of prey.

⁶ Allie Terry-Fritsch. "Florentine Convent as Practiced Place" *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 18 (2012): 261.

⁷ Allie Terry-Fritsch. "Florentine Convent as Practiced Place" *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue* 18 (2012): 231.

significant example of this is the *San Marco Altarpiece* (fig.2). The main focus of the works was an enthroned Virgin and Child that are surrounded by various Saints and Angels. The focal point of the painting is two saints, Saint Cosmas and Damian, who are kneeling in the most immediate of the foreground. Saint Cosmas happens to be the patron Saint of Cosimo, and this portrayal since been identified as a portrait of Cosimo himself⁸. He looks out to the viewer, inviting them to join him in the holy presence of the Virgin and Child⁹. Also pictured, at the Virgin's right hand, is Saint Lawrence, representing Cosimo's brother Lorenzo and Saint John the Evangelist, standing for Cosimo's



Figure 2
 Fra Angelico
San Marco Altarpiece, c. 1438/43
 Tempera on wood, diameter 220 cm.
 San Marco Museum, Florence, Italy

father. Lawrence, like Cosmas, looks out at the viewer.¹⁰ Saint John is next to him. Usage these saintly personifications was intended to show the importance and the power of the family, and show how close to God they were. It also served as a constant reminder to the friars of the monastery the importance of the Medici family wealth in the convent's establishment.

Piero de' Medici

Piero de' Medici, Cosimo's son, took a different approach to patronage that was more focused on antiquity. He focused much of his efforts in curating a collection of ancient coins. He had a medal honoring his father Cosimo cast when he died that proclaimed Cosimo the "Father of the Country," in line with an antique formula (fig. 3)¹¹. The coin also features Cosimo's

⁸ Dale Kent. *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000). 156.

⁹ Dale Kent. *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000). 156.

¹⁰ Dale Kent. *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000). 156.

¹¹ Carl Strehlke and Elizabeth Cropper. *Pontorno, Bronzino, and the Medici: The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence*. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2004). 134.



Figure 3
 Florentine, 15th century
 Posthumous medal of Cosimo de' Medici; Florence Holding an
 Orb and Triple Olive Branch, Approximately 1465/69
 Bronze
 National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

profile and name. The reverse
 side shows a female
 personification of the city of
 Florence. The implication is
 that Cosimo is also a
 personification of the city.

Florentia, the personification of
 the city, sits on a chair that rests
 on a yoke, which becomes a

Medici symbol of their service and dedication ¹². A later version of the coin notes that Cosimo was actually given the title of “Father of the Country” by public decree ¹³. The future Pope Leo X, Piero’s grandson, took the emblem as his personal device, showing the longevity of the symbols and works the Medici commissioned. Lorenzo de’Medici, the son of Piero, continued the tradition initiated by Piero of creating emblems of the family members as they died. He prepared one of himself towards the end of his life, that emulates the earlier medal of Cosimo quite strongly. His determined expression is intended to speak of his responsibility as a vital citizen of the city and as the head of the Medici family, leading its way into fortune and success. As with Cosimo’s medal, it shows Florence as a woman on the reverse and features numerous Medici emblems.

Lorenzo de’Medici

¹² Carl Strehlke and Elizabeth Cropper. Pontormo, Bronzino, and the Medici: The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2004). 116.

¹³ Carl Strehlke and Elizabeth Cropper. Pontormo, Bronzino, and the Medici: The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2004). 118.



Figure 4
Giovanni di ser Giovanni Guidi
Childbirth tray of Lorenzo de' Medici with The Triumph of Fame, c. 1448
Tempera, silver, and gold on wood, diameter 92.7 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

It was with the birth of Lorenzo de' Medici, the son of Piero, that Medici patronage truly became an extravagant and dynastic display. For the birth, Piero commissioned a childbirth tray that depicted the *Triumph of Fame* (fig 4)¹⁴. Most childbirth trays are intended to carry food and gifts to the mother in the birth chamber, but the massive size and delicate painting of this one implies that it was intended more as a showpiece to celebrate the continuation of the Medici line. It also celebrated the joining of two powerful families, the Medici and the Tornabuoni. The use of the image of Fame, standing high and proud with a sword in one hand and a statuette of Cupid in the other as she is respected by a collection of warriors of nobles, implies that Lorenzo is destined to be a leader of the city of Florence. The reverse of the tray has many references to the Medici. These include three emblems of the Medici that were introduced by Piero and became fundamentals of Medici decoration thereafter. They are the diamond ring, three colored ostrich

¹⁴ Dale Kent. *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000). 245.

feathers symbolizing three theological values of hope (green), faith (white) and charity (red), and a scroll inscribed *semper* (always). All of these elements emphasize the goals of the Medici family and also their longevity.

Lorenzo was known for actively promoting the reputations of Florentine writers and artists. He wanted to promote Florence as a cultural capital, and elevated the likes of Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio and Petrarch. They ultimately became known as writers and poets that were emblems of Florence and its culture. Lorenzo also worked to put the portraits of important Florentine men of the arts in Florence Cathedrals and churches. An example of this is the bust of 14th century artist Giotto, which was placed in the church of Santa Maria del Fiore.¹⁵ Not only did the Medici promote themselves through their works commissioned, but they knew that to promote those who aided their rise to power which kept people happy and placed the Medici in a position of favor and respect in the city.

Portraits were an important part of the Medici having power and visibility in the highly competitive Florence social scene¹⁶. Portraits allowed the Medici to gain visibility in the highly competitive and vast Florentine socio-political scene. They present themselves as handsome, confident and at times

arrogant. For example, a portrait bust done of Lorenzo's younger brother Giuliano that is attributed to Verrocchio (*fig. 5*)¹⁷. He holds his head high and angled upward, with the air of



Figure 5
Andrea del Verrocchio
Bust of Giuliano de' Medici, c. 1475/78
terracotta, diameter 61 cm
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

¹⁵ Christopher Hibbert. *The House of the Medici* (New York: Morrow, 1975). 122

¹⁶ Andrew Butterfield. *The Sculptures of Andrea Del Verrocchio*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997). 90.

¹⁷ Andrew Butterfield. *The Sculptures of Andrea Del Verrocchio*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997). 91.

confidence and pride expected of him. Upon his grand armor, an emblem of a grimacing mask is placed, intended to show the inner strength and resolve that comes with being a Medici prince.



fig 6
Andrea del Verrocchio
Bust of Lorenzo de Medici, c. 1475
painted terracotta, diameter 65.8 cm
National Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC

Another portrait, also by Verrocchio portrays Lorenzo in a different style (fig. 6)¹⁸. He is dressed instead in the clothes of a normal Florentine citizen, but he has a powerful and monumental face. His features are large and serious, and it gives him an air of strength and importance, especially in light of the attacks on the Medici family around this time period¹⁹. Regardless of the details of how the Medici were portrayed, it was always with an air of importance and power.

Conclusion

The Medici used art as one of their most important tools in their rise to power in Florence. Their heavy artistic influence began with Cosimo. He focused on religious patronage and architecture, works that provided a benefit, not only to the family, but also helped to shape and benefit Florence in a way that was notably due to the Medici influence. The religious patronage also allowed for the Medici to in a way, repent, for their wealth and show their religious commitment despite their great wealth. From that point on, the Medici usage of art continued to evolve. They left behind a mass of influence that was ever growing. Each Medici would continue the tradition of patronage, innovating new ways to represent their family in the culture and social scenes of Florence. They always aimed to pay respect to their family members who came before them and to those who created their works, but they never failed to promote and benefit themselves. For the Medici, art was a vital and tactical

¹⁸ Andrew Butterfield. *The Sculptures of Andrea Del Verrocchio*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997). 94.

¹⁹ Andrew Butterfield. *The Sculptures of Andrea Del Verrocchio*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1997). 95.

tool that was used carefully over hundreds of years to leave behind a lasting and positive reputation for the family name.

Works Cited

Butterfield, Andrew. *The Sculptures of Andrea Del Verrocchio*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1997.

This book is an in depth examination of Verrocchio's sculptures. It uses technical and contextual research to investigate Verrocchio's style, patronage, function and iconography. In addition to being rich with information it includes a plethora of photographs.

Hibbert, Christopher. *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall*. New York: Morrow, 1975.

This book is an overarching summary of the family and their influence in the political, economic and cultural history of Florence. It begins in the early 1430s with Cosimi de Medici and moves forward through the family and their eras of influence, including as patrons of some of the most important artists of the Renaissance.

Jurdjevic, Mark (1999). "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici". *Renaissance Quarterly* 52 (4): 994–1020.

This article discusses the rise of the Medici, particularly Cosimo, and how they fit into the idea of civic humanism, a term used in reference to the moral, social and political philosophies that began to be used in the 14th and 15th centuries in Florence.

Kent, Dale V. *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000.

This book considers how Cosimo's personal experiences influenced his patronage, how the culture of Florence provided a common platform for the patron, artists and audiences, what he intended as a patron, and how the use of art altered his long term perception away from that of a banker and politician. It argues that Cosimo was as much a product of the Florentine Renaissance as a shaper.

Luchinat, Cristina Acidini. *The Medici, Michelangelo, & the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2002.

This book focuses on the Medici grand dukes. Under them, Florence blossomed as a center for the arts, with commissions of the Medici going to artists such as Michelangelo and Vasari. The Medici, this book argues, used resulting buildings and works of art to reflect their political and cultural aspirations.

Strehlke, Carl Brandon., and Elizabeth Cropper. *Pontormo, Bronzino, and the Medici: The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence*. Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2004.

This book accompanied an exhibit of the same name held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In it, Strehlke discusses the history and multifaceted significance and effects of Medici portraits and other paintings, coins and medals.

Terry-Fritsch, Allie (2012). "Florentine Convent as Practiced Place; Cosimo de'Medici, Fra Angelico, and the Public Library of San Marco". *Medieval Encounters: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Culture in Confluence and Dialogue*. 18(2-3).

The article considers the San Marco convent which was largely remodeled and funded by the Medici. It considers the meaning behind the many frescoes and what the convent's patron intended for the the public audience to get from the works inside.