

Cosimo de' Medici Religious Patronage - Seminar 1

Background Notes

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WAHG

Aide Memoire L01

THE RISE OF FLORENCE and the Medici

Florence became a Roman colony in 59 BC for the Romans wanted to control the only practicable north-south crossing of the Arno River to and from the three passes through the Apennines: one to Faenza and two to Bologna

By the late Middle Ages the cities of Pisa, Siena, Arezzo, Pistoia, Lucca and especially Florence had become wealthy because of textile manufacture, trade, banking and agriculture.

Gradually Florence came to overshadow and conquer all other cities in the region.

The city's water supply made possible the washing, fulling and dyeing of cloth, resulting in the development of a major industry

This city state of moneylenders and cloth-makers without much political or military power rose to a position of enormous influence in Italy, Europe, and beyond. The Florentine vernacular became the Italian language; and the local coin, the *florin*, became a world monetary standard. Florentine artists formulated the laws of perspective; Florentine men of letters, painters, architects, and craftsmen began the period known as the

Renaissance; and a Florentine navigator, Amerigo Vespucci, gave his name to two continents.

In 1425 the city had a population of 60,000 and was a self governed, independent city-state.

Twelve guilds that regulated the trades were the basis of Florence's commercial success. Members of the guilds, who were wealthy and held positions in government, were some of Florence's most influential people in society and politics. Because of its strong economy and a political philosophy that was dedicated to the welfare of the city, Florence thrived.

Florence - political control

A Republican Government was first established in late 13thC. Membership was restricted to members of its guilds, particularly the seven major guilds or *arti* which regulated business such as banking and the cloth, wool, silk, fur and spice trades. They provided the legislature and a rotating magistracy, the *signoria* composed of eight men with a leader the *gonfaloniere di giustizia* who was chosen by lot from amongst members of the guilds and served a two month term of office. These lotteries were increasingly fixed, so that the *Signoria* generally represented whichever leading family, or families, held sway at the time.

The *signoria* re delegated many public responsibilities to the guilds. Thus the care of the Baptistery was in the hands of the cloth merchants, the *Camila*; the wool merchants' guild the *Lana* for the Cathedral; etc

By 15thC Florence was ruled in reality by an oligarchy of wealthy bankers and merchants, among whom the Medici family became dominant.

Florentine Banking

In the 15thC Florence may have been lacking in power and historical greatness compared with such cities as Paris and Milan, but it soon made up for this in the creation of wealth. This was mainly due to the new growth industry - banking, which was to a large extent an Italian invention. (The English term derives from the Italian word *banco*, referring to the original counters on which the bankers conducted their trade.) At this time Italy was the main economic power in Europe, with the Genoese and the Venetians controlling the import of silk and spices from the Orient. Marco Polo even records that in the last decade of the thirteenth century Genoese merchant ships were trading on the Caspian Sea; and as early as 1291 two Genoese galleys disappeared searching for a route to the Orient by way of West Africa. International trade was on the increase, despite hazardous rutted turnpikes and shipping routes raided by pirates. The overland journey from Florence across the Alps to the northern trading city of Bruges in Flanders, a distance of some 700 miles, usually took between two and three weeks. The less dangerous sea journey, via the port of Pisa and the Bay of Biscay, could take twice as long.

Goods such as cloth, wool and grain were supplemented by luxury goods from the Orient, which were mainly destined for the courts of powerful

noblemen and royalty. The setting up of banks in the main trading centres greatly facilitated this burgeoning international trade, and in the process merchant bankers accumulated large assets at these centres, which they soon began loaning out at interest, despite the Church's ban on usury. Many banks managed to circumvent the Church's ban by maintaining that there was always a possibility of loss in their business; any extra charge was merely a payment against *risk*, so this was not really usury at all. Others claimed that they were not actually charging interest on their loans - any increase in the size of the repayments was due entirely to fluctuations in the exchange rate. Despite the spuriousness of its justifications, banking soon became an accepted practice.

Art and Literature

Under the patronage of its wealthy families the arts and literature flourished as nowhere else in Europe.

Florence was the city of such writers as Dante, Petrarch, and Macchiavelli, and artists and engineers such as Giotto, Donatello, Fra Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Brunelleschi, Alberti, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Michelangelo

Because of its dominance in literature, the Florentine language became the literary language of the Italian region and is the *Italian* of today

THE MEDICI

The Medici, the *de facto* rulers of Florence for most of the period 1434-1737 were renowned for their patronage of learning, literature, the arts and science.

The enduring fascination of the Medici emanates from their ability as individuals and as a family to control the government of Florence - first, within a quasi-democratic system, and finally through dynastic inheritance. During the 15thC the Medici were not rulers but *prima inter pares* and had to be seen to conform to Florentine conventions. They rarely held any political office. They applied their influence and wealth through a network of clients and family relations who when elected or appointed to important positions could be relied upon to further their interests. The Medici were not the only family of power & influence. The *Strozzi and Albertizi* were only two of several other influential family clans

Less well known is their patronage of music. Musical chapels were maintained at the city's cathedral and baptistery from 1438; especially influential were Lorenzo the Magnificent (ruled 1449-92) and his son Giovanni, who ruled as Pope Leo X from 1513 and patronized many famous musicians. Duke Cosimo I (ruled 1537-74) reorganized and enlarged the chapels and began the practice of retaining musicians and dancers at court. He was also the first to commission musical festivities for family and state occasions. *Intermedi* were staged between the acts of plays, and in 1600 the first

operas were given: Caccini's *Il rapimento di Cefalo* and Peri's *Euridice* (the earliest complete extant opera). A later Medici heir apparent, Prince Ferdinando (1663-1713), patronized Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti, Handel and others.

Cosimo the Elder

Born 1389, died 1 August, 1464, the founder of their power and so-called "*Padre della Patria*", was the son of Giovanni di Averardo de' Medici, the richest banker in Italy. He obtained the virtual lordship of Florence in 1434 by the overthrow and expulsion of the leaders of the oligarchic faction of the Albizzi. While maintaining republican forms and institutions, he held the government by banishing his opponents and concentrating the chief magistracies in the hands of his own adherents. His foreign policy, which became traditional with the Medici throughout the fifteenth century until the French invasion of 1494, aimed at establishing a balance of power between the five chief states of the Italian peninsula, by allying Florence with Milan and maintaining friendly relations with Naples, to counterpoise the similar understanding existing between Rome and Venice.

Sincerely devoted to religion in his latter days, he was closely associated with the Archbishop of Florence who had acted as the papal theologian at the Council of Florence and who was later canonised as St. Antoninus

and with the Dominican friars of San Marco, his favourite foundation.

Cosimo spent a considerably part of his huge wealth on charitable acts, lived simply, and cultivated literature and the arts. He was a munificent and discerning patron of art and letters, a thorough humanist. He amassed the largest library in Europe, brought in many Greek sources, including the works of Plato, from Constantinople, founded the Platonic Academy and patronized Marsilio Ficino, who later issued the first Latin edition of the collected works of Plato. The artists supported by Cosimo included Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Donatello, Alberti, Fra Angelico, and Ucello.

With a far-sighted vision of greatness for his city, in 1439 Cosimo arranged for Florence to host the Ecumenical council that had been working vainly for years to reconcile the Roman and Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Pope, the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Emperor of Constantinople, John VIII Palaeologus, were guests of Florence and of the Medici.

His son and successor, Piero il Gottoso, (1416-1469 the husband of Lucrezia Tornabuoni, was a man of magnanimous character but whose activities were crippled by illness, contented himself with following in his footsteps. His Grandson was Lorenzo known as *Lorenzo il Magnifico*. During his rule and that of his son and grandson, Florence became the cultural centre of Europe and the cradle of the new Humanism.



Cosimo Lecture Notes N°1

The CONTEXT

The philosophical and spiritual foundations of the art in the fifteenth century were derived from two interconnecting factors: the Renaissance philosophy of man and the re-evaluation of classical antiquity, or *humanism*.

Individual achievement and prosperity within the structure of Italian urban society gave further impetus to the desire for personal recognition and the confirmation of one's unique identity. It was in Italy that one looked to the heritage of republican Rome, whose consuls and senators devoted themselves to public service and the good life described by Cicero. His picture of an ideal society whose leaders followed a life dignified by practical activity and rendered delightful by beauty and learning appealed strongly to the upper classes of the Italian city-state. The often glorious prospect of imperial Rome also offered a rich heritage from which to draw.

In the early fourteenth century one man in particular gave impetus to this development - Francesco Petrarch. It was he who embodied within himself and expressed with such clarity and vigour the individualist temper and the cult of fame. Petrarch assumed that human talent, if properly used, was certain of recognition.

Therefore glory, or *fama*, was inevitably the result of excellence, or *virtus*, and this *virtus* was a function of a man's entire personality. In its outward manifestation, *virtus* was most clearly seen in eloquence and purity of style no matter what the mode of expression. It was this excellence that raised a man above his fellows regardless of his material or social status. Increased consciousness of

one's excellence resulted in an examination of one's own personality with the need to comment openly about such observations and do so in a way that would survive the erosion of time and fragility of men's memories. It was, in other words, important to establish a durable means of attaining earthly immortality. The vulnerability of these means became a point of debate in the Renaissance, one camp supporting the written word, another relying upon forms such as painted portraits and sculpture.

Running through the lectures is the influence of the *rediscovery* of Greek and Roman philosophical, scientific and artistic legacies that triggered new ways of thought now known collectively as the

RENAISSANCE HUMANISM

The term is used to describe the literary and cultural movement that spread through Western Europe in the 14th, 15th & 17th centuries. It gradually replaced the previous dominant Western philosophy that appertained from mid 11thC and lingered on to early 15thC, known as

SCHOLASTICISM

- A philosophy and theological movement that attempted to use Greek reasoning (*mainly Aristotelian*) to understand Christian Supernatural revelation.
- A basic principle of scholasticism was that God (truth) is the source of both **KNOWLEDGE & REVELATION** but that direct revelation from God had a higher certitude than man's reasoning

- Scholasticism viewed the classical literature as a kind of revealed knowledge that predated Christianity but which needed the interpretation of the early Christian fathers and Saints

One of the most influential exponents of Scholasticism was.



St. Thomas Aquinas 1225-1274

The greatest scholar of the medieval period

Thomas Aquinas unfinished *Summa Theologica* (1266-73) managed to find a way of reconciling **FAITH** in the form of Christian theology, with **REASON**, in the form of Aristotelian philosophy

- **FAITH** and **REASON** had often been considered incompatible. Aquinas argued against this notion.
- For him all human understanding was ultimately based on what had been revealed by God but that it was necessary for humans to have rational thought in order to understand God's revelations.
- Reason could lead us to an understanding of God but he maintained that this was not the only path. Those who lacked

philosophical gifts but were steadfast in their faith could come to understand God's existence through divine revelation.

Under Scholasticism philosophy

FAITH was always the supreme arbiter; theologian's decision overruled that of the philosopher.

- *The theologian used philosophy to understand and explain revelation*
- *Originality and novelty **not** sought. Questions referred to Aristotelian and early fathers' thoughts. Questioning scientific methods **not** encouraged.*

Scholasticism as noted above was a philosophy and theological movement that attempted to use Greek reasoning (*mainly Aristotelian*) to understand Christian Supernatural revelation.

This changed with RENAISSANCE HUMANISM

The rediscovery of the Roman and Greek literary works was not a rediscovery as such. *It was viewing classical writings in a new historical perspective by interpreting them in their contemporary (i.e. Roman or Greek) contexts*

- The Renaissance Humanism's revival of Greek and Roman studies emphasised the value of Classics for their own sake, rather than for their relevance to Christianity.
- A basic principle of humanism is that people are rational beings who possess within themselves the capacity for truth and goodness.

- Not a coherent philosophy or religion
- It did not reject the supernatural or in the belief in God. Yet it noted that Sophist Greeks like Protagoras considered that '*man is the measure of all things*'



PROTAGORAS ca. 490 – 420 BC

Plato credits him with having invented the role of the professional sophist or teacher of virtue.

Early Greeks and Christians believed laws were God-given and therefore unchallengeable, whereas according to Protagoras they were man-made and could be altered

Humanism had several significant features

such as

- It took human nature in all of its various manifestations and achievements as its subject
- In place of the medieval ideal of a life of penance as the highest and noblest form of human activity, the Humanists looked to the struggle of creation and the attempt to exert mastery over nature.
- Humanists assisted in the consolidation of a new spiritual and intellectual outlook and in the development of body of knowledge

- It led to people to seek knowledge through experience acquired through the *senses* as opposed to blindly accepting knowledge as *revelations* interpreted by the teachings of Church elders and saints.
- It emphasised the **DIGNITY OF MAN**. In place of the medieval ideal of a life of penance as the highest and noblest form of human activity, the Humanists looked to the struggle of man to exert mastery over nature.
- Education must train ALL children to be able to argue both sides of a question and see the other point of view as preparation for the political life, where laws are passed and justice dispensed by ordinary people.

It emphasised human & naturalistic viewpoint & need for scientific approach to the understanding of nature rather than religious or transcendental values that appertained during the medieval world

HUMANISTIC VIEWPOINTS

Led educated people to ask **WHY** as opposed to being satisfied with **HOW**

Medieval manuals gave instructions based on practice according to which a man may work, but did not attempt to derive them from general principles or to support them by verifiable facts. They constitute, in short, a code of rules but not a theory, much less a 'science' as envisaged by Leonardo da Vinci.

How did RENAISSANCE HUMANISM come about?

Firstly old Latin manuscripts were found and read

Secondly there was an influx of Greek classical works into Italy and particularly into Florence, due to various factors including the Council of Florence in 1439 and the spread of the Ottoman Empire leading to the fall of Constantinople in 1453



Marsilio Ficino 1433 – 1499

One of the greatest figures of the Italian Renaissance, was a priest, a doctor and musician, but is best known for his work as a translator of Greek works, author and philosopher.

- Ficino's precocious talent was recognized by Cosimo de Medici, who selected Ficino as a boy to lead the Florentine Platonic Academy
- Cosimo encouraged Ficino to study Greek and then to provide the first Latin translations of the whole of Plato's works.
- Cosimo's son Piero and grandson Lorenzo continued to encourage and support Ficino.

THE TERM RENAISSANCE

in relation to the period under discussion was first coined in the 19thC by the French Historian **Michelet** and given prominence in 1860 as an era of enlightenment by the German Historian **Jacob Burckhardt** in his book *Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy*

- *Both these historians believed that the cultural achievements of the period heralded a 'rebirth' (the French 'renaissance') of the classical Greek and Roman values of literary purity and aesthetic beauty.*
- *They believed that the Renaissance represented a questioning of religious authority, and a new spirit of artistic experimentation and scientific curiosity, which would ultimately give birth to modern, secular man*

But there were other factors in play not explored by these and many other historians. The two most important in my view were

- The influence of other cultures
- The application of movable type *printing*

INFLUENCE OF OTHER CULTURES

Trade, finance, science and exchange with other cultures in particular the Arabic and Persian cultures including the ability to calculate profit and loss using Hindu-Arabic numerals, (*instead of calculating with Roman numerals*); the appreciation of commercial usefulness of algebra; commercial practices such as uses of “*cheques*”ⁱ these and other stimulated *new outlooks*

ⁱ Derived from the Arabic 'sakk'.

PRINTING

- Johann Gutenberg (c. 1400-1468) of Mainz, Germany, is commonly given credit for developing modern printing through his invention of the modern printing press with *movable* type, though virtually the same process was in use in Korea in the early 14thC
- The first known book produced by the new method, the *Gutenberg Bible*, was begun in 1450 and completed in 1455
- Within about 40 years, there were printing presses in virtually every country in Europe.
- In c.1455 estimated total of 100,000 books by 1500 some 10 million

ALL THESE FACTORS

- Humanism
- Trade with Other Cultures
- Printing
- Better understanding of the human form
led to a change in artistic perceptions

CHANGE IN ARTISTIC PERCEPTIONS

Representations during the late Medieval period:

- Personages of the remote past or the distant future could share the stage of time with characters of the present
- Objects that were plainly recognized as symbols could mingle with real buildings, plants or implements on the same level of *non-reality*

*This medieval blend of present, past and future, of things symbolic, proved to be less and less compatible with a style, which with the introduction of perspective sought **NATURALISM** in its depictions.*

The influences of the Renaissance humanism led to:

- The introduction of mathematical perspective. Perspective implies that the painting surface is understood as a window through which the onlooker looks out into a section of space
- Thus pictorial space should be subject to the rules that govern empirical space.

There must be no obvious contradictions between what we see in the picture and what we might see in reality excepting the symbolic representations of spiritual events

FEATURES COMMONLY ATTRIBUTED TO RENAISSANCE ART

REALISM - SECULARISM - INDIVIDUALISM

REALISM = IMITATE NATURE?

Never comprehensive – all painters select items

Domestic realism

Refers mainly to **subject matter** – to the depiction of everyday, the ordinary, the low status rather than the privilege

Deceptive realism

Refers to **style**, which produces or attempts to produce the illusion that the painting is not a painting but the actuality

Expressive realism

The manipulation of outward reality the better to express what is within e.g. in portraiture where the shape of the face is modified to reveal the sitter's character or a natural gesture is replaced by one that is more eloquent

SECULARISM

A sample suggests that the proportion of Italian Paintings that were secular in subject matter rose from about 5% in the 1420's to about 20% in the 1520's.

Renaissance Patrons did not make sharp distinctions between the sacred and the secular until it became obligatory after the Council of Trent 1545-63

INDIVIDUALISM

Artists of the Italian Renaissance did **NOT** produce works as an individual exercise in self expression

- Artists in their subject matter responded to the wishes of religious and secular patrons, many of whom were ***Humanists***
- However individual artists were identified as the Master of a workshop that produced specific works of art and their individual styles were recognised.

This identification was relatively new. It was an element that distinguishes Renaissance Art from Gothic and Byzantine Art.

THE RENAISSANCE A TIME FOR INNOVATIONS IN THE ARTS

For example

New Techniques

- ⇒ Oil Painting
- ⇒ Woodcut
- ⇒ Copper Plate
- ⇒ Printed Books
- ⇒ Rules of Linear Perspective

New genres

- ⇒ Free standing Statues - equestrian & portrait busts
- ⇒ Landscapes and still life

Why did the Renaissance take root in Florence?

For the visual arts, which includes architecture to flourish a concentration of artisans and consumers (*patrons & audience*) are necessary in other words an urban environment.

- In the 15thC & 16thC the most highly urbanised regions in Europe were northern Italy & the Netherlands
- The most favourable environment for artists to flourish were cities like Florence that were craft orientated, had wealthy clients and citizens that participated in the city's life