

# **Cosimo de' Medici Artistic Patronage - Seminar 2**

## ***Background Notes***

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**WAG**

## Aide Memoire L02

### 15<sup>th</sup>C FLORENTINE PATRONAGE

Patronage of artistic works in Florence during the 15<sup>th</sup>C took many forms; Patronage of an individual artist differed. Broadly it can be divided into

- **Household system** *Rich man gave the artist board & lodging for a period of years in return for provision of artistic needs of the rich man.*
- **Single commission** *Painter works & lodged from owner's house during the time of the commission being worked*
- **Independent Painters workshop** *Commission is given to the Master of the workshop.*
- **Painter produces work to be sold on the open market** *An emerging system – little used by recognised masters of Art*

Artistic commissions for civic or religious art were frequently channelled through one or more organisations such as Trade Guilds, another was Confraternities.

#### *Florentine Confraternities*

A manifestation of popular civic culture in which citizens of every sort participated was the lay confraternity. The confraternity was the setting in which most Florentines acquired an intimate knowledge of the basic texts and tenets of Christian belief and practice, which naturally

*determined the forms of devotional art.* Florentine confraternities multiplied in the wake of a wave of intense personal piety that swept Europe in the later fourteenth century. By the mid-fifteenth century, there were roughly a hundred such groups meeting in the city

Evidence suggests that most Florentine men and some women belonged to a confraternity. These associations provided a form of social security for their members in the confraternal obligations to assist one another through various charitable activities, including the burial of the dead, but what they offered above all was the opportunity for laymen to participate actively in a corporate religious life. Meeting frequently, once or even several times a week, in small groups in their own chapels or oratories under the supervision of their clerical mentor they had direct and immediate access to the communion of the Mass and to confession.

Whereas at regular church services conducted in Latin, laymen were essentially spectators, at confraternal meetings they said prayers and sang hymns as part of services based on the liturgy, but performed mostly in the vernacular. They delivered sermons to their brethren, presented religious plays, and joined in penitential acts. In the activities spiritual, social, educational, and expressive elements were blended.

Analysis of the membership lists indicate that in social and geographical terms confraternities generally crossed the boundaries that restricted other Florentine associations. Whilst guilds divided men of different occupations, confraternities brought them together.

Confraternities were significant patrons of the arts. Artists worked to decorate confraternity buildings and painted banners which were used when the members took part in processions. What is also important is that they provided an audience that understood the symbolism and nuances of religious paintings

Italian confraternities became identified as one of two types. The first type of confraternity, called *Laudesi*, processed through their towns singing songs in the vernacular in praise of God; the second kind of confraternity, known as *battuti* or *disciplinati*, flagellated themselves during sombre public processions.

### Cosimo's de Medici's Patronage

Cosimo's patronage, apart from architecture and art for his own delectation was directed towards several major religious rebuilds as illustrated in Kent's extract below, His patronage was frequently exercised through third parties such as the *signoria*, guilds and confraternities when his financial contribution was usually the greatest. For ease of reference his patronage can be divided into Religious and Secular. The extract below from Dale Kent *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance pp 161-162* provides a résumé of this religious patronage and assess its motivation.

"I turn now to Cosimo's commissions, beginning with the churches and chapels he built or renovated, and the



devotional images that adorned them. Historians of art have discussed these at length, interpreting them as works of art, and as part of the artist's oeuvre. Building gratefully upon their expertise and insights, I want to set Cosimo's commissions in the context of the patron's interests and concerns, and those of his audience.

Between the late 1430's and his death in 1464 Cosimo was responsible for rebuilding or redecorating three major religious foundations - the convent and church of the Dominican monastery of San Marco, his parish church of San Lorenzo, one of the city's oldest and largest centres of worship, and the Augustinian church and convent of die Badia at Fiesole. He built also a chapel for the novices at the chief Franciscan foundation in Florence of Santa Croce, and renovated the Franciscan convent of Bosco ai Frati, adjacent to the Medici estates in the countryside north of the city. He had a magnificent chapel made for the Medici palace in Florence, and there were chapels in all the family's country villas. He contributed to the refurbishing of a host of smaller churches and chapels in Florence, Tuscany, and places as far away as Friuli. He commissioned a reliquary from Ghiberti for the Camal olensian convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli, and altarpieces for the churches of San Marco, Santa Croce, and Bosco ai Frati, as well as for the Medici domestic chapels in Florence and at the villas of Cafaggiolo and Careggi.

These commissions made him the major Florentine patron of the Church in his time. Most of the ecclesiastical foundations to which Cosimo gave his

patronage were established well before the beginning of the fifteenth century; they were built, maintained, and frequently refurbished with a mixture of funds from parishes, religious orders, individuals, and the state. Cosimo's gifts to churches followed a long tradition of lay patronage. Florentines and their families had for centuries ensured the commemoration of their souls and asserted a presence in their neighbourhoods by renovating or embellishing their local churches, where their generosity was recorded in inscriptions or in the display of family arms.

The ecclesiastical establishment was keen to regulate the nature and degree of lay involvement in churches. At the very beginning of the fifteenth century Giovanni Dominici, general of the Dominican order and an influential spiritual advisor to the Florentine people, addressed a number of works to the laity on moral issues relevant to their lives. Dominici took a conservative line on lay patronage designed to contribute to the donor's salvation. He recommended the rebuilding of churches to charitable laymen, but in accordance with the biblical injunction that true charity should be anonymous, he stipulated that nobody should know whose money was used, and suggested that it was much better to repair old churches than found new ones: Medici patronage of churches conformed largely to the letter of this last prescription. The architect Filarete observed that the Medici "*are all and have been willing and eager to build, and especially in those structures dedicated to religion*" In his praise of this activity he took pains to distinguish

in each Medici project between money spent "*in riparare*" (repair) and "*di nuovo fare*" (new buildings). However, the scale of Medici renovations at San Marco and San Lorenzo effectively transformed the original structures, and the fame of these building projects was firmly attached to the Medici name from their inception. They were clearly labelled with Medici arms and images, which served as reminders to contemporaries of the family's largesse, and for the information of posterity. By the last decades of the fifteenth century many other patrician families had participated in increasingly self-advertising patronage of churches, but on the map of Florence the measure of Medici ecclesiastical patronage was unmatched

Modern historians speculating on the motives for Cosimo's extensive patronage of churches have tended to be sceptical about the role of religious feeling, and concerned to distinguish and quantify pious and political impulses, civic and dynastic interests. To Renaissance patrons, as observed, these were not alternatives. Their patronage simultaneously served "*the honour of God, and the honour of the city, and the commemoration of me.*" Cosimo's patronage of churches expressed a complex amalgam of inherited family obligations, increasing civic prominence, profound involvement with the institutional church, especially the papacy, with which the Medici enjoyed extremely close relations, and personal devotion.

Many scholars have stressed how effectively Medici donations to churches commemorated them and



enhanced the honour of the city, and these aspects of Cosimo's patronages are prominent features of his oeuvre. But the importance to the patron of honouring God needs to be grasped more fully. Until very recently indeed the role of ecclesiastical patronage in expiating the sinful acts of the patron and securing his salvation has not been taken sufficiently seriously, particularly in relation to the Medici, whose undeniably powerful political instincts are generally presumed to have been always paramount. The dictum sometimes attributed to Cosimo that "*a state is not governed by paternosters*" is misinterpreted almost as often as it is cited, by being read out of the context of his having spent a lifetime saying them. In dismissing Cosimo's piety as "*conventional in the extreme*" historians have failed until lately to realize how far the conventions of late medieval piety and the realities they represented permeated the everyday life of the men whose secular fame and political power have attracted their attention. Salvation was the ultimate concern of even the most worldly of Renaissance Christians....."

Cosimo's major secular patronage was mainly directed towards his Palace in Florence and his various estates outside the City. Cosimo directly employed two major artists Donatello and Michelozzo Michelozzi. The latter designed *Palazzo Medici* which is considered as one of the noblest specimens of Italian fifteenth-century architecture, in which the great taste and skill of the architect has combined the delicate lightness of the



earlier Italian Gothic with the massive stateliness of the classical style. In addition for Cosimo he designed numerous other buildings, mostly of them of noteworthy importance. Among these were a guest-house at Jerusalem for the use of Florentine pilgrims, Cosimo's summer villa at Careggi, and the fortified castello that he rebuilt from 1452 as the Villa Medicea di Cafaggiolo in Mugello.

Donatello's commissions for the *Palazzo Medici* included the bronze figures *David*. He thereby created the first free-standing statues of the Renaissance, independent of architecture or decoration. *David* conceived fully in the round was read at the time by the Florentines as an allegory of the civic virtues triumphing over brutality and irrationality. Donatello produced several other sculptures under the patronage of Cosimo.

Cosimo's patronage working through *Arte della Lana* (the wool guild) enabled the eccentric and bankrupt architect Brunelleschi to complete the dome of the Cathedral *Santa Maria del Fiore*. The dome was a fitting crowning achievement as an artistic patron. Yet perhaps Cosimo's greatest achievement was in the realm of philosophy especially his accumulation of an outstanding library and his establishment of a modern Platonic Academy in Florence. He appointed Marsilio Ficino as head of the Academy and commissioned Ficino's Latin translation of the complete works of Plato (the first ever complete translation). Through Ficino and others associated with the Academy, Cosimo had an inestimable effect on Renaissance intellectual life.

## Cosimo Lecture Notes N°2

### Cosimo de' Medici Religious Patronage

***"BUILDING FOR THE HONOUR OF GOD, AND THE  
HONOUR OF THE CITY, AND THE MEMORY OF ME"***

***Giovanni Rucellai***

Religious Art patronage in the early Renaissance took two main forms. Firstly the commissioning of individual artists to produce religious images to be placed in churches and in particular in chapels devoted to the spiritual salvation of an individual or family or to be used in the family's residences as devotional images. Secondly, the building and redevelopment of existing religious buildings and the construction of family chapels within existing buildings. In Florence the majority of these were commissioned by the rich patrician families, such as the: Bardi, Peruzzi, Strozzi, Pazzi and the Medici.

A prodigious proliferation of private altars and chapels were built. The earliest chapels appeared around the transepts (and therefore near the high altar) of the great mendicant churches. The patronage of the high altar itself was popular as the space surrounding it could be extended into the nave to incorporate the entire choir area.

The beginnings of Medici artistic patronage in fifteenth-century Florence were hardly modest. Giovanni di Bicci, along with other families in his neighbourhood, undertook the reconstruction of the church of San Lorenzo. Cosimo acted as one of four *operai* for the commission of Ghiberti's *St. Matthew* for the Arte del Cambio at

Or San Michele; a forced assessment of guild members in 1420 indicates that Medici contributions to this commission were significantly more generous than those of the Strozzi, the then wealthiest family of the oligarchic faction. Although spiritual considerations were probably uppermost commissions contracted by guilds or confraternities were not immune from family and personal rivalries.

Between the late 1430's and his death in 1464 Cosimo was responsible for rebuilding or redecorating three major religious foundations. These were: the convent and church of the Dominican monastery of **San Marco**; his parish church of **San Lorenzo** and the Augustinian church and convent of the **Badia** at Fiesole. He was also responsible for the building of numerous chapels and altarpieces in various churches such as the chapel for Franciscan novices in Santa Croce; the renovation of the Franciscan convent at Bosco adjacent to the Medici country estates; the chapel in his new Florentine Palace and a host of smaller churches and chapels in Florence and Tuscany.

Cosimo's religious patronage took various forms. Firstly, directly financing the architects, builders and painters in consultation with the appropriate church authorities responsible for the building concerned. This applied to the buildings mentioned above. Secondly acting through the media of a confraternity or guild where he would be the, or one of largest benefactor. In the case of the construction of the dome of the Cathedral he was the driving force in supporting the architect Filippo Brunelleschi.

### ***Church of San Lorenzo***

Sometime around 1418 a group of citizens living in the neighbourhood of the church of San Lorenzo decided to act together to rebuild their parish church. Led by Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici,



then the banker to the papacy and head of a family attempting to establish its prominence in the city, each member of the group agreed to contribute funds for the construction of his family's chapel around the transept of the proposed new structure. Giovanni agreed to build the sacristy of the new building as a family burial site and also to build an adjacent double chapel at the end of the transept. This gave the Medici patronage rights over a traditionally important part of the building --the sacristy-- and also more than twice as much space as any other family participating in the project.

The building already at the site was an eleventh-century Romanesque church, itself a replacement for an Early Christian basilica dedicated in 393 by no less a person than St. Ambrose, who had also consecrated Florence's first bishop. San Lorenzo, then, represented the entire history of Florence --more so, even, than the Duomo, which had a later foundation....

Although the Old Sacristy was substantially complete at the time of Giovanni's death in 1429, it owes most if its subsequent decoration to Cosimo and his brother Lorenzo<sup>i</sup>. The classically inspired sarcophagus of Giovanni de' Medici and his wife Piccarda, lies directly below the lantern, emphasizing the patrons' hopes for eternal life. The inscription on it names both Cosimo and his brother Lorenzo as its commissioners emphasises that they jointly discharged their filial responsibilities. In a social system in which the oldest son became the head of the family upon the death of the father, this manifestation of equality speaks quietly but eloquently about the unity of the Medici family and deflects attention from Cosimo's leadership role just at the time when he was beginning his consolidation of political power in the city.

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<sup>i</sup> Not to be confused with Lorenzo the Magnificent, Cosimo's grandson



The brothers' presence in the sacristy is also marked by other visual signs. Large stucco reliefs by Donatello over small doors on either side of the altar wall present dramatically posed standing figures of saints Lawrence and Stephen on the left and saints Cosmas and Damian on the right. These figures could simply be titular saints --Lawrence (Lorenzo), for the church in which they appear and Cosmas and Damian, the doctors (medici), for the family that had built the Old Sacristy. These saints, however, are also the patron saints of Lorenzo and Cosimo, who probably commissioned these reliefs after their father's death, the sons appearing in the guise of their patron saints just as Giovanni does in the roundel of St. John the Evangelist above the altar arch

Work that had begun so earnestly on the transept of San Lorenzo had all but ceased by the time of Giovanni di Bicci's death in 1429. It was not until 1442 that Cosimo declared that he would himself pay for the construction of the new building. In doing so he assumed property rights over the main altar area and he stipulated that no family crest other than that of the Medici appear in the church. Cosimo's assumption: of the building costs effectively transformed San Lorenzo into a Medici structure, despite the presence of families who maintained control of the chapels along the transept. Insofar as the building marks the site of the first Christian church in Florence, dedicated in 393, Cosimo also symbolically appropriated the entire religious history of the city for his family; the princely overtones of this act recall royal foundations such as St. Denis, outside Paris, or the Visconti patronage of the Certosa of Pavia. In a city that called itself a republic, this form of patronage must have seemed extraordinary.

### ***San Marco:***

. When the Dominican order took charge of the dilapidated monastery of San Marco in 1436, Cosimo hired Michelozzo di Bartolommeo (1396-1472) to rebuild it. Cosimo also added a library (which he then helped to fill with books), a cloister, a chapter room, a bronze bell, and church furnishings, including an imposing altarpiece by Fra Angelico (c. 1395-1455), for the main altar. He had his own double monk cell suitable adorned with meditative frescos by Benozzo Gozzoli

### ***The Chapel of the Magi***

Originally Cosimo de' Medici's private devotional chapel in the Palazzo Medici was perfectly symmetrical divided into two juxtaposed squares: a large hall and a raised rectangular apse with an altar and two small lateral sacristies. The entrance was through the central door.<sup>ii</sup> Begun around 1449-50, the Chapel was probably terminated in 1459 with the precious ceiling of inlaid wood, painted and generously gilded attributed to Pagno di Lapo Portigiano, according to Michelozzo's design. The latter also designed the flooring of marble mosaic work divided by elaborate geometric design, which due to the extraordinary value of the materials (porphyries, granites, etc.), affirmed the Medicis' desire to emulate the magnificence of the Roman basilicas and the Florentine Baptistry.

The destination of the procession is the altar panel bearing Filippo Lippi's *The Adoration, with the Infant Baptist and St.*

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<sup>ii</sup> The "cutting-out" of a corner in 1699 to accommodate a staircase was instigated by the subsequent owners of the Palace, the Marchesi Riccardi,

**Bernard** <sup>iii</sup> The Chapel is famous for the series of wall paintings by Benozzo Gozzoli, "*Journey of the Magi*" in the large hall and the hosts of angels singing and adoring against a background of a typical Florentine countryside in the smaller hall. They represent the masterpiece of this painter, dedicated to a sacred subject but rich in traces of pomp and secular elegance with all the care that Cosimo and his son Piero de' Medici - as exigent buyers and connoisseurs of art - expected of him

The magnificent processions of the Three Kings are accompanied by their respective entourages. Among the followers of the Magi there are numerous portraits of personalities associated with the Medici. Their sumptuous and varied costumes make this pictorial series one of the most fascinating testimonies of art and dress of all time. The paintings as whole also provide a wealth of references to contemporary events and customs.

The restoration of the paintings (1987-1992) revealed a refined and complex operational technique and made it possible to fully appreciate Benozzo's compositional capacity. He was a skilled constructor of animated landscape backdrops in perspective, besides being an analytical witness of the knightly pomp of the Court, in which are incorporated the memories of magnificent parades which, during the Feast of Magi and on other important celebrative occasions, wended their way along the Via Larga under the palace windows. Cosimo was a member of the Confraternity of the Magi.

The chapel's fresco images reflect a cohesive, if many faceted devotional visions articulated by the artist **Benozzo Gozzoli** who, in

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<sup>iii</sup> Sold during the last century and is now in Staatliche Gemaldegalerie, Berlin. In its place is a copy attributed to the Pseudo Pier Francesco Fiorentino, a follower of Lippi,



close consultation with his Medici patrons included the imagery and symbolism that embraced the sacred and secular aspects of the Medici experience.

Though the chapel was dedicated to the Holy Trinity the main theme of the Chapel's decoration is *the procession of the magi*. Cosimo de Medici belonged to the lay confraternity, the *Compagnia de'Magi*. A confraternity, devoted entirely to the Magi that was responsible for organizing the *Festa de' Magi*, a public festival dedicated to the kings. Celebrated on the Feast of the Epiphany, the festivities were particularly important, since it was believed to be the day on which St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence, baptized Christ. During the celebrations, the *Compagnia* would organize a parade and a re-enactment of the Magi's journey to Bethlehem to worship Christ. There was much pomp and ostentation involved in the fiesta.

. **The culmination of the procession of the Magi**



Adoration of the Child by Fra Filippo Lippi,





*Procession of the Magus CASPAR*

The Medici's family of Cosimo supported by many of their supporters feature proximately in the depictions. Included in the crowd are several who represent members of the Orthodox church; an allusion to the ***Council of Ferrara/Florence*** in 1439 and the brilliant part Cosimo had played in financially supporting it by bringing the Council to Florence. The Middle Eastern aspect of some of the characters may also refer to Cosimo's support of the Armenian community in Florence.