

Cosimo de' Medici Artistic Patronage - Seminar 3

Background Notes

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WAG

Cosimo de' Medici Religious Patronage



The Basilica di San Lorenzo

The Magi

(There are many interpretations as to who were the Magi. I came across this entry on the Web, which I found interesting. I cannot vouch for the author or for several of his sources)

The Magi were a priestly caste of ancient Persian Zoroastrianism and were revered by classic authors as wise men. It was their alleged power over demons that gave rise to the word "magic". Magi comes from Middle English *magi*, from Latin *magi*, pl. of *magus* (meaning sorcerer), from Greek *magos*, from Old Persian *maguš*.

In Christian culture, the Magi were men who came, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, to adore the newborn Jesus. They were guided by the Star of Bethlehem. Their number was not identified in the Gospel of Matthew,ⁱ but Christian tradition has set their number as three, called them kings, and named them **Caspar** or **Gaspar**, **Melchior**, and **Balthazar**. The Feast of Epiphany, January 6th, commemorates their visit.

Their coming was foretold in the old Testament "*The kings of Tarshish and the Isles shall offer gifts, the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute. All kings shall pay Him homage, all nations shall serve Him*" Isaiah also prophesied the gifts: "*Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the Lord*"ⁱⁱ

The Western tradition of the names of the Magi derive from an early 6th Century Greek manuscript, translated into the Latin

ⁱ Matthew 2: 1-12

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 60:6.

Excerpta Latina Barbari The description seems to be of a mosaic of the magi, possibly those at Ravenna. A pseudo-Bedan text, *Collectanea* or *Excerpta et Collectanea* apparently continues the tradition of three kings. The text is said to be from the 8th or 9th century, of Irish origin, and first found in a printed edition of works ascribed (*probably incorrectly*) to St. Bede the Venerable at Basel in 1563.

One source states that the pseudo-Bedan text gives us the following clues about these men. The oldest of the Magi was **Melchoir**, King of Arabia. He had a long grey beard and gave gold as a gift, symbolizing the acceptance of Christ as King. **Balthazar**, King of Ethiopia, was middle-aged, swarthy, bearded, and bore the gift of frankincense, symbolizing Christ as High Priest. Finally, **Caspar** was King of Tarsus, in his twenties. His gift was myrrh, which was used in making medicines. This symbolized Christ as the healer and great physician.

It is said that after discovering and honouring the Saviour, the Magi returned home and surrendered their high positions, gave their property to the poor, and went to spread the Gospel. The apostle St. Thomas is said to have baptized them forty years later in India, ordaining them as priests. An excerpt from a Medieval saints' calendar printed in Cologne reads: "*Having undergone many trials and fatigues for the Gospel, the three wise men met at Sewa (Sebaste in Armenia) in 54 (AD) to celebrate the feast of Christmas. Thereupon, after the celebration of Mass, they died: St. Melchior on 1st of January, aged 116; St. Balthasar on 6th of January, aged 112; and St. Gaspar on 11th of January, aged 109.*" They became martyrs and were buried in the walls of Jerusalem.

The Empress St. Helena (circa 248-330, mother of Constantine I) supposedly discovered their bodies in Persia in 325

AD during her pilgrimage to the Holy Land and brought them to Constantinople, where their remains rested in the Mosque of St. Sophia. It was she who established their identity within the early church although the Magi were not referred to as saints until the twelfth century. St. Helena died in 330.

Shortly thereafter, Eustorgio I, ninth bishop of Milan, received the remains of the Magi inside a huge Roman marble sarcophagus from the Emperor Constantine I (circa 288-337), and brought them to Milan on a wooden cart pulled by a team of oxen. The cart entered the city through Porta Ticinese, and then sank into the mud. Eustorgio decided that this was a sign from God, and built the first basilica on that site.

In 1163 or 1164, the Holy Roman Emperor Friedrich I (called "Barbarossa" meaning "Redbeard," 1122-1190) presented Cologne (Koln), Germany with a gift which he had taken from Milan after he had captured the city in March, 1162 -- the bones of the Three Wise Men. It is said that the remains were transported in three ships.

Within a few years, a shrine to house the relics was begun. The workshop of the goldsmith Nikolaus von Verdun was occupied for 50 years in the crafting of a golden shrine to house the relics (1180-1230). The shrine containing the relics can be seen today directly behind the high altar in the Cathedral. Fervent pilgrims began to flock to Cologne, which quickly became one of the primary religious sites in Germany.

A fabulous shrine was seen to need a stupendous church to house it, and the city of Cologne set about rebuilding its cathedral on a grand scale. Construction was begun in 1248 by the Archbishop Konrad von Hochstaden, in order to provide a more fitting cathedral to house the relics of the Three Magi. By 1265, the first of the chapels along the back of the cathedral were completed and in 1322,

the Inner Choir with the High Altar was consecrated (even though this section had been completed around 1300). After 1322, the pace of construction slowed considerably, eventually grinding to a halt in 1560 due to a lack of funds. It was not until 1842 that construction was resumed by the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm IV. It took another 32 years of work to finish the Cathedral, with the last stonework being placed upon the South Tower in 1880.

After taking 632 years to complete (1248-1880), the Cathedral Church of SS. Peter and Mary in Cologne is the largest Gothic structure in northern Europe. It is currently the most visited building in Germany -- with 15,000,000 people a year come to view its beauty and its treasures. The shrine of the *Three Wise Men* is so famous that the church itself has become popularly known as the Dreikoenigenkirche (the Church of the Three Kings).

In 1906, some of the bones were returned to Milan and are now kept in an urn just above the altar of the Magi.

The cathedral was severely damaged by Allied bombing during WWII. The restoration was finished in 1956. However, the golden shrine which contained the relics was not damaged.

The author's Sources:

Alan E Mack from postings to Christmas International at Yahoo.com on January 5 and January 11, 2003

Catholic Encyclopedia,

Magi, St. Helena, and Frederick I History of Frederick 1, Barbarossa History of the Christian Church, Chapter 4

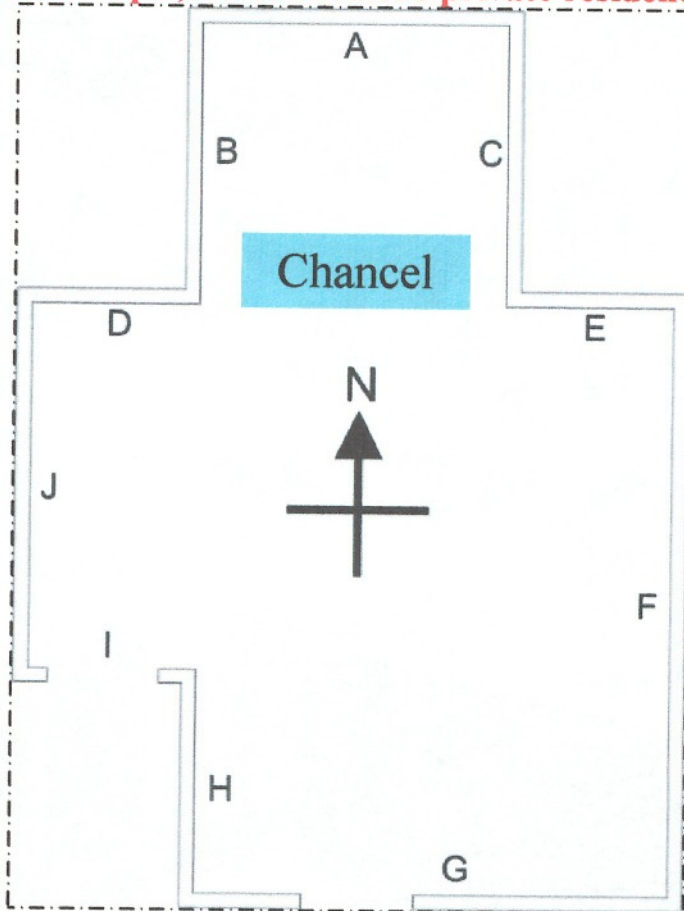
Marsha Galbiati, The Procession of the Magi [in Milan]

The Penny Magazine, Cologne

Filming of the Magi

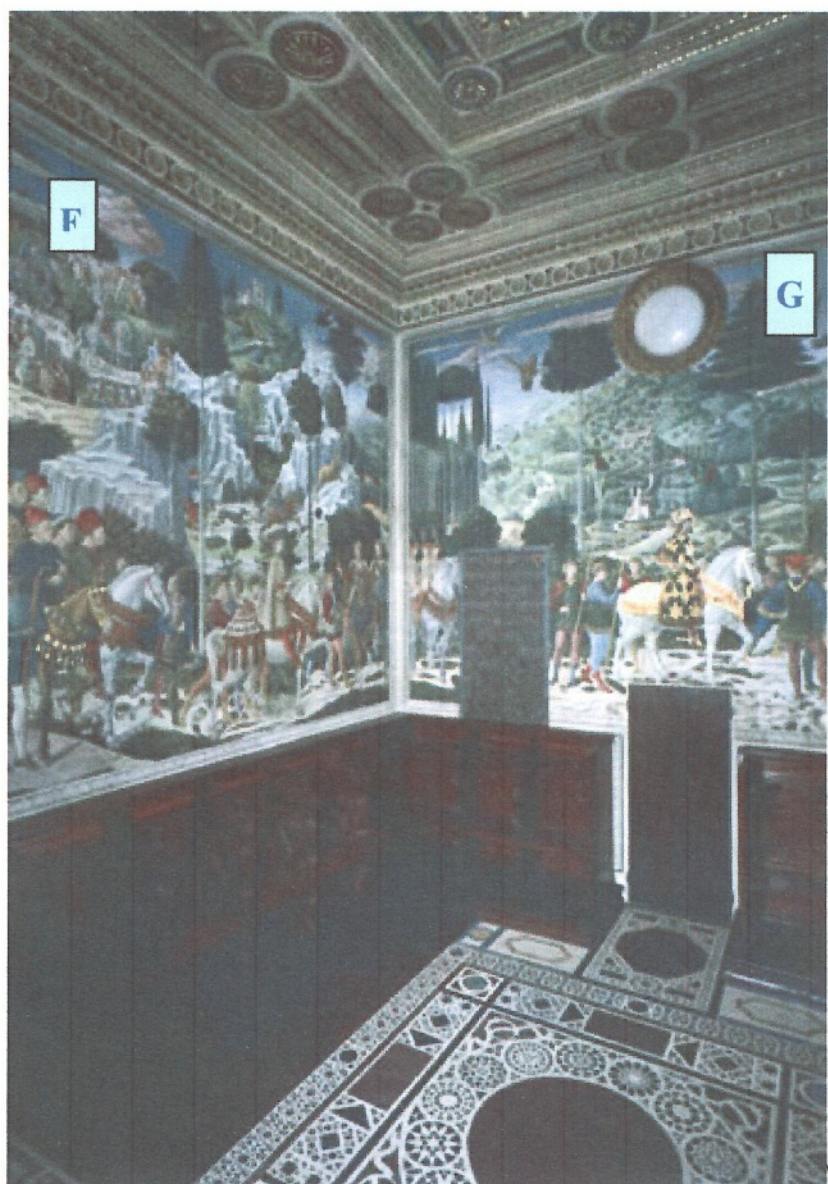
Legend of the Three Kings

The chapel, in the Medici's private residence



Built by

Michelozzo (1396-1472) between 1446 and 1449
Originally designed as two almost square rooms





Wall **F** = Procession of the Magnus **CASPAR**

Wall **G** = Procession of the Magnus **BALTHAZAR**

Walls **H** + **J** = Procession of Magnus **MELCHIOR**

Wall **I** = A later 1699 addition

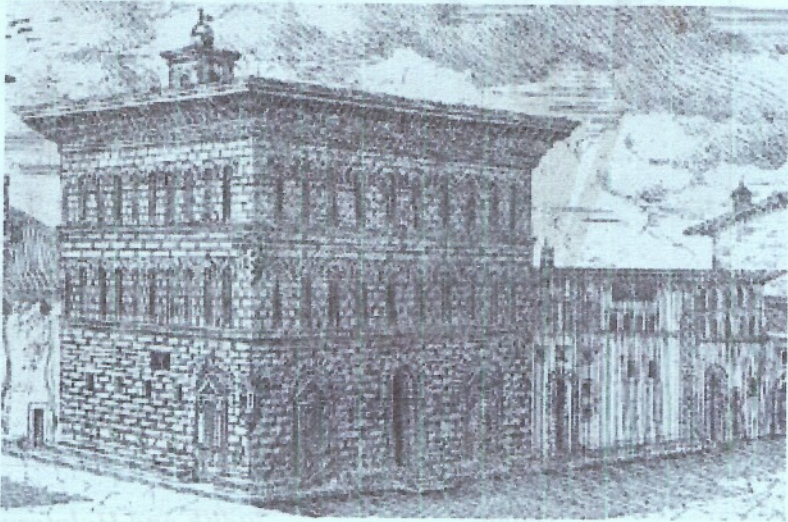
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Walls **A,B,C** **The Chancel** flanked by walls **D & E** *Vigil of the Shepherds*



The Chancel

Cosimo de' Medici Secular Patronage



Palazzo Medici

Built by Michelozzo (1396-1472) between 1446 and 1449



David
Donatello
1455-60

Bronze, height: 236 cm



Judith and Holofernes
Donatello
c. 1444-46

Bronze 158 cm



View of Florence
From
the Medici Palace
C1560

*Probably the scene
depicts Cosimo's
Study*



*Illustration depicting
Medici Palace
& San Lorenzo church*

Cosimo Lecture Notes N°3

Cosimo de' Medici Secular Patronage

Cosimo's secular patronage of artistic endeavours should be interpreted against the background of his time and place i.e. Florence in the first half of the fifteenth century where only 5 to 15 percent of art dealt with secular subjects. Most of the latter alluded to people and events that were subject of recent Florentine history. Thus overwhelmingly paintings and sculptures had as their subject matter Christian religious subjects. It is in buildings that Cosimo secular patronage is more apparent. Yet, apart from rebuilding religious establishments and providing several of them with libraries, he confined himself to building a magnificent residence the **Palazzo Medici**. Like the majority of his rich contemporaries he did not spend money on public buildings. It was the churches, monasteries and palazzos which gave Florence its magnificence. The palazzos were outward manifestations of the power and influence of the Florentine merchant and banking families. They acted as the focal point for individual families and provided accommodation and entertainment for up to three generations as well to visiting dignitaries. In addition, in the case of the Medici it was the place where the control of banking and governmental affairs was undertaken.

Cosimo filled his new residence with art: frescoes, paintings tapestries and statues. The most spectacular were the *Magi* frescoes on the walls of the residence's chapel. Unfortunately, as far as I am aware no inventory of these was taken during his lifetime or at the time of his death. However an inventory was taken at the time of the death of his grandson Lorenzo that provides an indication but only an

indication of Cosimo's tastes. Furthermore most of the portable art has been distributed to museums and galleries throughout the world though much has been retained in Florence but in different locations. Most of the easel paintings had religious subjects. But irrespective of subject most of the art commissioned by Cosimo, as opposed to what he inherited were by artists who had absorbed elements of Renaissance Humanism in particular the depiction of the human body and in their use of mathematical perspective. However as far as subject matter few, if any had yet to use the symbolism of classical gods and their adventures on earth and in their heavens. It is interesting to note that the ground breaking statutes of David and Holofernes by Donatello their subjects are derived from the Old Testament and not from Classical texts. This was to occur under a new generation of artists during the lifetime of Cosimo grandson, Lorenzo

RETURNING IT ALL TO THE LORD

Verrocchio's Tomb slab for Cosimo de' Medici: Designing with a Mathematical Vocabulary

Cosimo's final commemorative commission, among the most eloquent articulations of his visible image is his tomb in San Lorenzo. Its form and location underlines his position as patron of the church and its parishioners, but expresses above all his aspiration to salvation, to union with God after death. His body was placed in the vault beneath the floor at the very centre of the crossing, his tomb the symbolic focus and support of the church that was the centre of spiritual life of his family and his partisans, who had rebuilt and embellished it in classic Renaissance style over the course of his lifetime. A porphyry plaque marking the site of the tomb below is set

in the pavement directly before the high altar. The translation of the Latin inscription on it reads:

"Here lies Cosimo de' Medici, by public decree Father of his Country. He lived seventy-five years, three months and twenty days".

The tomb slab for Cosimo de' Medici is laid in the pavement in the crossing of the basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence. Its design is credited to Florentine sculptor Andrea del Verrocchio. It is very different from the kind of tomb markers of the early Renaissance: there is no bust or portrait of the deceased, and no explicit Christian symbols appear in the marker. To interpret the tomb slab, it is necessary to study its geometrical forms and proportions. Far from being a terse pagan marker, it is a rich symbol for the cosmos and the Creator

The geometrical forms in the composition refer to Humanist thought and neo-Platonic philosophy. In the centre of the panel is a rectangle of red porphyry with sides which relate as 3:4. It is divisible into two 3:4:5 triangles, which have a long mathematical tradition. The addition of a half-circle to each side of the rectangle forms a *"Solomon's Knot,"* a symbolic reference to eternity. In the larger half-circles are almond shaped *"mandorle,"* the fish-shaped symbol for Christ and the Eucharist. The composition is circumscribed by a circle, in its turn circumscribed by a square. As did the geometrical problem of squaring the circle, the circle in the square relates to the perfecting of the imperfect.

Proportions as well as geometric forms are exploited for expressive purposes. All the proportional relationships are based on the ratios of the five integers which make up the Ptolemaic musical scale. The use of these proportions implies a *"harmonic"* treatment of the elements of the composition, a phenomenon, which occurs quite frequently in Renaissance architecture.

The tomb slab has been compared to three other pavements with which it is coeval: the Sistine Chapel, the Medici Chapel in the Palazzo Medici, and the Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal in S. Miniato al Monte. Verrocchio's tomb slab, however, is a forerunner of the ideas of greatest importance in pavement design of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, because of its emphasis on the concept of "*centre*." By drawing the spectator into the centre of the crossing, the tomb slab introduces the element of living man into the composition. The design of Cosimo's marker makes reference to the order of the cosmos, and its placement in the centre of the crossing is symbolic of man's central position in that cosmos.

Its colours of **green**, **red** and **white** are the armorial colours of Cosimo de Medici

