

## Section 1. History

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### RENAISSANCE PATRONAGE IN FLORENCE: LORENZO DE MEDICI

**Abstract.** This article is devoted to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici, also known as Lorenzo il Magnifico, one of the most prominent figures of the Renaissance. He contributed to Italian and world culture, and his patronage of science and the arts.

**Keywords:** Lorenzo de Medici, Lorenzo the Magnificent, activities, patronage of science and the arts.

The tradition of charity – primarily as assistance to the needy and other vulnerable categories of population – has existed since the emergence of organized human society, and is enshrined in all world religions as a God-pleasing endeavour [2, 106]. One of its forms, patronage of the arts by the wealthy, or patronage of the arts, has also been known since antiquity. Everyone had heard, for instance, about Gaius Maecenas, the Roman rich man, statesman, friend and associate of Octavian Augustus. He generously supported the greatest poets of his time, including Virgil and Horace, which gave his name to this whole charity.

Patronage of the arts was also widespread in the Middle Ages, especially during the Renaissance, which was largely due to the awakening interest in the ancient artistic heritage, both aesthetically and as a model for emulation. In particular, patronage of the sciences and arts flourished in the Italian city-states. This was partly due to the fragmentation of the country itself. As contemporary researcher N. I. Ba-

sovskaya notes, “in the fifteenth century most of the city-states of Italy were to some extent playing on antiquity, in some ways really returning to it” [1]. Attention to the ancient tradition was combined with fierce rivalry between the ‘free cities’ with each other and with papal Rome, as well as a strong local patriotism. As a result, the wealthiest and most influential cities – Milan, Venice, Genoa, Florence and others – vied for the right to be called the main cultural centre of their time, and their rulers and powerful clans generously invested in building, painting, sculpture and creating universities. In Florence, which rightly ranked, if not first, among these cultural centres, this activity was largely due to the Medici banking house.

This family of moneylenders gradually built up a powerful financial empire, their bank had branches in many European countries, and amassed fabulous wealth. However, the Medici ambitions did not stop there: from the end of the fourteenth century the dynasty entered a power struggle in its native Florence, using its capital to acquire allies. By granting

huge loans to European sovereigns, the pope and influential Florentine families, the Medici were able to convert their accumulated wealth into political influence, and in the early fifteenth century a member of the dynasty, Cosimo became de facto ruler of the Florentine republic. This skillful politician and diplomat created a scheme of power followed by his Medici descendants: he maintained external republican institutions, while he preferred to rule from behind the scenes, not holding official government posts. It was Cosimo who became the first prominent patron of the Medici family: in addition to distributing bread to the poor and other populist measures at the state level, for which Cosimo was honoured with the title “Father of the Fatherland”, he strengthened the influence and prestige of his clan through large-scale construction projects and patronage of artists and philosophers. Under him the city was enriched by many splendid buildings: finally completed was the long-built Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, at the time the second largest in Europe. Cosimo was entrusted to the great architect Filippo Brunelleschi to create the cathedral’s gigantic dome. This same Brunelleschi also commissioned Cosimo to rebuild the Basilica of San Lorenzo, while another famous architect, Michelozzo, created another architectural masterpiece for him: the family headquarters and its bank Palazzo Medici. The courtyard was dominated by a statue of David by Donatello (the first nude sculpture created since antiquity) and the family chapel was adorned by a fresco by B. Gozzoli, *The Procession of the Magi*, an allegorical depiction of members of the Medici dynasty, including Cosimo’s young grandson, Lorenzo, who was to become known as “the Magnificent”.

Lorenzo was born in 1449 to Cosimo’s son Piero. Since Piero was seriously ill with gout and could not fully perform the functions of a ruler, his grandfather began to prepare his grandson for political activities from an early age: he involved him in official receptions and celebrations and diplomatic visits and gave him an excellent education. As a result, the boy grew

up to be a true “Renaissance man”, physically developed (often winning jousting tournaments, although arranged by the Medici themselves), with a remarkable gift for literature and a deep knowledge of philosophy (his grandfather mentored the famous Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino, who inculcated Lorenzo with ideas of humanism).

After Cosimo’s death in 1464, Piero became head of the clan and Lorenzo was his right hand and, in particular, secured the Medici a very profitable deal for the extraction of alum (a valuable mineral), secured the accession of Galeazzo Maria Sforza to Milan, strengthening the alliance with that duchy and establishing friendly relations with the Kingdom of Naples. Lorenzo’s diplomatic skills, demonstrated at a young age, would not be out of danger later on – Florence’s influence on the Apennine peninsula far exceeded its potential, as the Republic had neither a strong army nor a navy. After Piero’s death in 1469 a deputation of the “city fathers” asked him to take over. The twenty-year-old Lorenzo soberly assessed the situation and its consequences, but the interests of the family came first: “I agreed reluctantly. It seemed to me that this position was not befitting my years, burdensome and dangerous. I took it only in order to ensure the safety of my friends and the safety of our condition, because in Florence it is not easy to live a rich man, if he has no power in the state” [6].

For Lorenzo the welfare of his family and his hometown were inextricably linked. In power he would look after Florence’s interests, as he understood them, to enhance its economic potential, political influence and prestige. Naturally, he was a son of his time and used the methods already tried by the Medici clan, which he perfected: he consolidated his personal power, but did not take up any public office, but acted as a kind of “grey cardinal”, leaving the trappings of the republican system intact. His instrument was a ramified network of supporters and mere dependants, with whom he flooded the existing and newly created for him power structures, something, as some historians say, like a mafia clan. Therefore,

alongside the laudatory nickname “The Magnificent”, Lorenzo earned the more prosaic “maestro della bottega” (literally: master of the workshop, now would say “godfather”), not only “distributor of work for apprentices”, but also “supreme arbiter” of all conflicts in the city [7, 2].

He defended his family’s power with an iron hand and his commitment to humanistic ideas did not prevent Lorenzo from ruthlessly dealing with political opponents when necessary. Thus, after the failure of the Pope’s “Pazzi plot” against the Medici, which resulted in the murder of Lorenzo’s beloved younger brother Giuliano, the dictator’s revenge was cruel – dozens of members of the patrician Pazzi clan and others involved in the plot were executed, including Archbishop Salviati of Pisa.

Lorenzo also demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice himself for his native city: when, after the failed plot, Pope Sixtus IV formed a coalition for war against Florence, he personally went to one of its main participants – King Ferdinand I of Naples, renowned for his rigidity – actually offering himself to him as a hostage. With his diplomatic skills, Lorenzo was able to turn the situation around, convincing the pragmatic king that it was more profitable for him to make peace, and he returned to Florence victorious, having destroyed the hostile coalition and saved the state from ruin.

Political manipulation and the suppression of opposition was only one of the pillars of Lorenzo de Medici’s power. He enjoyed genuine popularity among the people, which he skillfully maintained by reducing tax oppression (in particular, he encouraged the building of Florence through tax exemptions), distributing food to the poor, organizing various festivals, carnivals, jousting tournaments, theatrical performances, as N. I. Basovskaya notes, “it was an endless succession of festivals for the people” [1]. And, of course, a great place in his life was occupied by patronage of the sciences and the arts. For Lorenzo this activity was not only a political tool – like all the Medici, Lorenzo did not simply “play at antiquity”. For him, the ancient heritage was a model, which can

and should be embodied in order to create a Platonic “ideal state” headed by “philosopher on the throne”, as Lorenzo considered friends and supporters, and he himself. It was not without reason that he chose as his motto the phrase “The Age Returns”, referring specifically to the traditions of antiquity. He was also deeply interested in philosophy and a follower of Neo-Platonism. As contemporary biographer I. Klulas notes, “philosophers fascinated him” [6]. He continued his grandfather’s activities in support of the Academy of Philosophy, Marsilio Ficino, and took part himself in the debates held at Villa Caredgi, which his grandfather had given Ficino, and the postulates of the philosopher became a kind of “official ideology” of the Medici. Ficino paid him deep gratitude, devoted to him all his works, and according to one version, it was he who became the author of the nickname “magnificent” under which Lorenzo entered history. It was also he who sheltered in Florence another great philosopher of the period, Pico della Mirandola, who had fallen out of favour with the Pope.

Poetry had a special place in Lorenzo the Magnificent’s life. He himself was a gifted poet, and the example of Gaius Maecenas was on his radar. Therefore, representatives of this literary genre enjoyed his special attention and patronage. Especially close to Lorenzo was Angelo Poliziano, who became his personal secretary and close friend. Lorenzo even gave him a villa so he could pursue his art in peace, stating in the donation: “For seclusion and leisure” [1].

Lorenzo also devoted a great deal of attention to educational activities. The Academy of Florence (Studio), which Lorenzo transformed into a university, was at that time the only place in Europe where the ancient Greek language was taught. Lorenzo strongly supported printing [6], and extraordinarily expanded the library that his grandfather Cosimo had begun to collect, buying up valuable antique manuscripts and other books in various countries with the help of branches of the Medici Bank. This book collection of about 10,000 volumes was turned by Lorenzo into a public library: it still exists today

and is named Laurenziana in his honour. He also increased his art collection, which had been collected by many generations of Medici – it was not publicly available in his time, of course, but it later formed the basis of the Uffizi Gallery's holdings.

While Lorenzo's support for philosophers, writers and enlightenment structures is recognised by all scholars, historians have divergent views on his attitude to the visual arts. Thus, speaking of architectural projects, Lorenzo's younger contemporary, F. Guicciardini, in his *History of Florence*, notes that compared to Cosimo he "built nothing at all", "noting" only a few commissions to build villas [5, 82]. Other scholars, in particular his contemporary biographer I. Clulas, state that contrary to the "myth about Lorenzo created by the humanists from the Magnificat's entourage and the Medici dynasty, his commissions for painters "were rather modest" [6]. At the same time, the contemporary American scholar F. W. Kent points out that since the 1960s historians have been so keen on debunking the "myth of Lorenzo" as the greatest patron of all time, that they have created their own "counter-myth" which belittles his real achievements. In this regard he gives a characteristic example: Guicciardini, speaking of the insignificance of his contribution to architecture, forgets that Lorenzo, unlike Cosimo, lived a very short life, and only had time to launch several innovative architectural projects [7, 5]. He also notes Lorenzo's great attention to the more "mundane" aspects of improving the city – laying out new streets, constructing housing, public buildings, etc. These projects may not have left behind architectural masterpieces, but they certainly made life more comfortable for citizens.

As for the "modesty" of his commissions to artists and sculptors, it should be noted that Lorenzo developed many forms of indirect support for them, notably in the spirit of a *maestro della bottega* in the literal sense of the word, "pushing through" commissions for them both in Florence and outside it, for example by arranging with the Pope for Florentine artists to paint the Sistine Chapel in Rome. For him

this was truly a matter of state – the promotion of Florentine art throughout Italy boosted the city's prestige and influence.

The direct support of the best masters of the time was not insignificant. Lorenzo had a special patronage for the Bottega of Verrocchio in whom he valued not only talent but also the ability to train able pupils. Thus it was during this period that the court painter of the Medici clan, headed by Lorenzo, was a descendant of this workshop, Sandro Botticelli. His most famous paintings, *Allegory of Spring* and *The Birth of Venus*, were commissioned by them. It was here that Leonardo da Vinci, another titan of the Quattrocento period, also picked up the basics. His talent, too, has not escaped the attention of discerning Lorenzo. True, it is known only about one of his orders for Leonardo – an image of Madonna and Saints for the St Bernard's Chapel in the Palazzo della Signoria, which was never completed (The painting was later completed by Filippino Lippi (1457–1504) from his drawings) [4, 44–45]. Leonardo was known to work very slowly and this could hardly please an impatient customer. According to one version, when the clouds began to gather over Leonardo because of accusations of sodomy, it was Lorenzo who ordered him an unusually complex musical instrument as a gift for the Duke of Milan and sent it to Milan to spare him from persecution [3, 51].

Lorenzo's undoubted merit, with his flair for talent, was that he gave another Renaissance genius, Michelangelo Buonarroti, a start in life. In the studio of his other favorite – Ghirlandaio – he drew attention to the talented teenager, and took him under his personal tutelage. Lorenzo not only placed him in his own organized art school under the sculptor Bertoldo di Giovanni, but also settled in his house, introduced the family circle. It was in the "gardens of Lorenzo" – a kind of sculpture park, stacked with ancient works – that Michelangelo created his first works and presented them to his exacting but benevolent patron. It is said that this sombre-looking young man with an irrepressible temperament wept

inconsolably when he learned that his patron and de facto “second father” was terminally ill [1].

Lorenzo’s patronage also served as a role model for other wealthy Florentine families. In an effort to keep up with the ruler and “trendsetter”, they too handed out generous commissions to painters and sculptors. As a result, Florence under the Magnificent Medici has become perhaps the largest cultural and artistic centre of Italy. Suffice it to say that the city – certainly not only thanks to his efforts, but undoubtedly with his participation – had 40 Botteghe of painters and sculptors, 55 Botteghe of engravers, and 80 workshops of woodcarvers and inlayers [8].

Lorenzo de Medici’s “enlightened tyranny” was largely based on his political skill and personal charisma, and his ability to maintain the family’s popularity with the people. Public opinion, however, was fickle, and in the last years of his life Florentines were clearly fed up with the Magnificent’s “liberal dictatorship”. He was less of a businessman than a politician and the Medici bank was on the verge of bankruptcy due to his huge expenses. Consequently, Lorenzo began to dip his hand into public coffers to finance his projects and increase the tax burden. As a result, his direct antipode – the monk Girolamo Savonarola, a religious fanatic and supporter of extreme austerity in

all things – became the new “ruler of thoughts” in the state. Lorenzo, in recent years increasingly suffering from a hereditary disease – gout – could not resist his influence, and soon after his untimely death in 1492, the Medici were expelled from the city and Savonarola became its de facto ruler. In the streets blazed up “bonfires of vanity”, where townspeople, succumbed to the preaching of a fanatic, burned their luxury goods, including works of art (on such bonfires burned many of his paintings and Sandro Botticelli, also fallen under the influence of preacher). However, the pendulum soon swung in the other direction: the townsfolk became increasingly discontent with Savonarola’s radicalism, the Pope excommunicated him and the monk was executed. The Medici returned to power and the myth of Lorenzo’s “golden age” became one of the cornerstones of the ideological justification for their long rule of the city.

Whether Lorenzo was history’s number one patron of the arts or simply followed in the footsteps of his great grandfather, his contribution to Italian and world culture is undeniable – including Europe’s first public library, his collection of priceless works of art and, most importantly, the works of philosophers, artists and sculptors he encouraged – Ficino, Botticelli, Michelangelo and many others.

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