Art Appreciation Lecture Series 2016
Collectors & Collections: classical to contemporary

First among equals: the Medici and Renaissance Florence

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It seems fitting to launch a series on collectors and patrons of art with a lecture on some of the most celebrated art patrons of all time, the Medici family of Florence. This lecture looks at the patronage of the early Medici, beginning with canny political operator and political kingpin Cosimo de’ Medici (1389-1464), who after 1434 established Medici control over the nominally Florentine government and became the city’s unofficial ruler, a role continued by son Piero (1416-69) and his grandson, Lorenzo the Magnificent, groomed to power from a young age, who was to become one of the most famous and influential statesmen of his age. This lecture looks at the multifaceted role of Medici patronage and its calculated use to advance the family’s honour, status and political prestige. As we shall see, in the highly contested civic world of Renaissance Florence, art and architecture were never neutral, but always carried highly charged religious, social and political meanings well understood by contemporaries.

**Dominican church and convent of San Marco, Michelozzo & Fra Angelico, 1437-44**
Existing convent and church given to the Dominicans in 1435. Rebuilding and decoration funded by Cosimo de’ Medici, who lived nearby, c. 1437-43. New choir of church and new conventual buildings, including a magnificent library, by Michelozzo di Bartolomeo. New altarpiece for high altar (San Marco altarpiece, 1438-40, Museum of San Marco; predella panels in various museums) and frescoes throughout the convent (cloister, chapter house, refectory, corridors, individual cells) painted by fra Angelico, who was himself a Dominican friar, 1439-44.

**Donatello, bronze David, c. 1435-40** (Florence, Bargello)
Most likely for old Medici residence; later moved to the courtyard of the new palace. Displayed on a pedestal, with a [now lost] inscription: “The victor is whoever defends the fatherland. All powerful God crushes the angry enemy. Behold, a boy overcame the great tyrant. Conquer, O citizens!”

**Medici palace, Michelozzo, c. 1445-60**
New palace erected next door to old Medici residence. First use of rustication (roughly worked protruding blocks, in emulation of classical antiquity; also projects an image of toughness and strength) in Florentine palaces, graduated from very rough to smooth over 3 stories. **Loggia** originally open to street on corner (open arches bricked up in the early 16thc, windows later added by Michelangelo); central **courtyard** decorated (probably in 1460s) with graffito festoons & sculpted medallions w Medici coat of arms and mythological subjects inspired by antique gems in Medici collection. Garden beyond. Ground floor rooms devoted to business, including headquarters of Medici bank; living quarters and chapel on first floor, **piano nobile**.

**Mino da Fiesole, Piero de’ Medici** (Florence, Bargello), 1453-54
First surviving Renaissance portrait bust, a new type of object inspired by Roman precedent; inscribed on base with name and age of sitter & name of the artist. Displayed above the door to Piero’s appartments on first floor of the palace.

**Mino da Fiesole, Giovanni di Cosimo de’ Medici** (Florence, Bargello), c. 1455
Displayed above the door to Giovanni’s apartments.
Luca della Robbia, *Allegories of the months* (London, Victoria & Albert Museum), c. 1450-56. 12 enamelled terracotta roundels, from the ceiling of the *studiolo* (little study) of Piero de’ Medici on first floor of Palazzo Medici.

Benozzo Gozzoli, *Journey of the Magi*, frescoes on 4 walls of the *chapel* on first floor (architecture by Michelozzo), 1459-61

Filippo Lippi, *Adoration of the Christ child* (Berlin, Gemaldegalerie), c. 1458-59, altarpiece of Medici chapel

Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*, 1457-1464 (Florence, Palazzo Vecchio, Sala dei Gigli), for garden of Medici palace (though not a fountain, as long thought; holes in cushion probably for inserting tassels, now lost). 3 reliefs on triangular pedestal depict classically-inspired putti harvesting grapes, pressing grapes to make wine, and enjoying the fruits of their labours; these all relate to drunkeness of Holofernes. Not a fountain, as long

Inscriptions on pedestal: “In the cause of public good, Piero de’ Medici, son of Cosimo, dedicated this statue of a woman to strength and freedom, so that citizens may take up again the defence of the republic with indomitable and constant hearts.”

Readings

John Paoletti and Gary Radke, *Art in Renaissance Italy*, any edition (4th ed, 2011). Great survey of Italian art, 14th-16th. John Paoletti is one of the most insightful commentators on Medici art and patronage, and his comments here are excellent.


Individual artists & works:

Ludwig Heydenreich, *Architecture in Italy, 1400-1500*, Pelican History of Art, any edition (also published as joint book, Heydenreich and Lotz, 1400-1600), for Michelozzo


Jeffrey Ruda, *Fra Filippo Lippi, life and work, with a complete catalogue*, New York, 1993


*The Renaissance portrait, from Donatello to Bellini*, ed. Keith Christiansen & Stefan Weppelmann, exh. cat., New York, 2011, for Medici portraits; preview on google books


Searchable digital archive of Medici artists, works and sites, esp the Medici palace; individual entries on all works discussed today.

https://www.oneonta.edu/faculty/farberas/arth/arth213/Medici_patronage.html

web page on Medici patronage put together by Dr Allen Farber (State University of New York, Oneonta) for his course on Italian Renaissance art, with extracts from some of main scholarly studies.

For access to all past lecture notes visit: