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# Cosimo de' Medici: Patron, Banker, and Pater Patriae

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# Cosimo de' Medici: Patron, Banker, and Pater Patriae

## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the connection between art, money, and power in the life of Cosimo de' Medici. It discusses several important art works commissioned by Cosimo, including the Medici Palace and Donatello's bronze David. It also examines Cosimo's life as a businessman and a political figure.

## **Keywords**

Cosimo, Medici, Florence, Renaissance Art

## **Disciplines**

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology

## **Comments**

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Cosimo de' Medici: Patron, Banker, and *Pater Patriae*

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Professor Else

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Cosimo de' Medici was one of the most famous personalities of Renaissance Florence and a great patron of the arts, especially architecture. He was also one of the most powerful bankers in Florence, and eventually in all of Europe, thanks in part to his management of the Papacy's finances. Cosimo's influence in the art and the economic world made him very politically powerful, and he was posthumously given the title *pater patriae*, Latin for "father of his country."<sup>1</sup> His success was the beginning of the reign of the Medici family in Florence that lasted until well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

This paper will discuss some of Cosimo de' Medici's most well-known commissions and how they were created to display the wealth and power of Cosimo and the Medici family. The artworks also reveal Cosimo's personality, which he carefully crafted in order to appeal to the people. The paper will also investigate how Cosimo's connections and businesses contributed to his rise to power. Cosimo's personality helped him gain popularity with the citizens of Florence. He portrayed himself as a patriot, and emphasized qualities that Florentine citizens valued, such as strength, honor, and humility. Though he spent an enormous amount of money on the art he commissioned, he represented himself as a humble and generous Christian. A lot of his commissions involved renovating churches, further emphasizing his piety and generosity.

Cosimo de' Medici was born in 1389, into a wealthy banking family. His father, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, was already a successful businessman. In 1420 Giovanni di Bicci retired and handed over his various business and art ventures, including the bank, to Cosimo and his younger brother, Lorenzo.<sup>2</sup> Cosimo and Lorenzo worked closely together, both in business

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 10.

and in commissioning artwork, until Lorenzo's death in 1440. From 1440 until his death in 1464, Cosimo mainly worked with his eldest son, Piero.<sup>3</sup>

Cosimo de' Medici was a very successful businessman. Though he inherited a great deal from his father, Giovanni di Bicci, he expanded on his work and more than doubled the fortune that he inherited. In fact, at the time of his death he was the wealthiest man in Europe.<sup>4</sup> Cosimo gave a large part of his wealth to churches and other charitable institutions, and what he did not give away he used as a weapon to gain power, especially outside of Florence. For instance, Cosimo gave extensive loans to the Venetian Republic to help them fight off the French and the Duke of Milan.<sup>5</sup> Cosimo's financial assistance allowed the Venetians to successfully ward off the attack, which kept Florence safe from invasion. Conversely, when Venice and Naples united against Florence, Cosimo crippled their attacks by demanding that they pay their debts to the Medici bank, leaving them without any resources to continue the war.<sup>6</sup>

Cosimo had many personal connections that gave him influence in the political world. He attended meetings of humanists and had learned conversation with such men as Bruni, Poggio, and Marsuppini, leading humanists in Florence. All of these men later became chancellors of the Republic, giving Cosimo considerable political influence through his friends.<sup>7</sup> Cosimo used this and his wealth to influence policy, especially foreign policy. For example, he used his connections and economic power to arrange the Council of Florence in 1439, a meeting between the authorities of the Eastern and Western church. Cosimo housed all of the members

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<sup>3</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> G.F. Young, *The Medici: Volume I* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1913), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Young, *The Medici*, 106.

<sup>6</sup> Young, *The Medici*, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 24.

of the council with his own resources, giving him ample opportunity to gain from the council.<sup>8</sup> This merging of Eastern and Western culture gave Cosimo and other humanists special opportunities to expand their learning.

Cosimo de Medici's rise to power in Florence was not always smooth. His carefully crafted persona as a pious patriot made him very popular, even though he held no official political title.<sup>9</sup> He revealed his persona through his charitable donations and art commissions to the church. As Cosimo began to gain power among the people, the Albizzi family held sway over the government. The Albizzi family were not unpopular, as they ruled in a time of prosperity for Florence.<sup>10</sup> However, the rival family saw the threat that Cosimo posed due to his wealth and influence over the citizens of Florence. They were not convinced by Cosimo's pious persona. They managed to arrest him on the charges of attempting to raise himself above the average citizen, a serious offense in Florence, where modesty and humility were highly valued. Cosimo's adversaries planned to have him killed in prison, but Cosimo detected their plan and refused to eat anything, lest it had been poisoned.<sup>11</sup> Seeing that they would not be able to kill him without raising suspicion, on September 7, 1433, Cosimo and his family were exiled.<sup>12</sup>

However, the government soon shifted in the favor of the Medici, and Cosimo made a triumphant return just over a year later. Cosimo became the head of a group of families,

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<sup>8</sup> Young, *The Medici*, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Hibbert, *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975), 32.

<sup>11</sup> Niccoló Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 178.

<sup>12</sup> Tim Parks, *Medici Money: Banking, Metaphysics, and Art in Fifteenth-century Florence* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005).

typically younger families determined to oppose the older families led by the Albizzi.<sup>13</sup> The Albizzi family eventually made their way to Arezzo, which caused tension between the Medici and Arezzo for many years to come.<sup>14</sup> Cosimo took great care to ensure that his return to power was reflected in every aspect of his life, especially in the art he commissioned.

Cosimo commissioned a great variety of works from the most talented artists in Florence at the time. His patronage spanned personal, religious, and civic subjects. Each work he commissioned contained a specific message for a specific audience, depending on the context of the work. These works aimed to promote the strength and honor of the Medici family. While Cosimo commissioned many famous works, this paper will discuss the Medici Palace, designed by Michelozzo, Donatello's bronze *David*, and the complex of San Marco, also designed by Michelozzo. These works were innovative in terms of style, and they were meant to be viewed by many citizens of Florence, making them the ideal vessels for Cosimo to display his wealth and power after his return to Florence.

After the death of Giovanni de Bicci, Cosimo saw to the creation of a grand new family residence located right in the heart of the city. This allowed Cosimo to easily become involved with governmental affairs from the comfort of his home. The palace is also located near the church of San Lorenzo, the Medici family church, where Giovanni di Bicci is buried in the sacristy.<sup>15</sup> Cosimo selected an up-and-coming architect Michelozzo to complete the task of designing the palace. The palace was three stories tall, and each floor had its own unique exterior design. The ground floor was designed in the "Rustica" style, which involves building

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<sup>13</sup> Ferdinand Schevill, *Medieval and Renaissance Florence Volume II: The Age of the Medici and the Coming of Humanism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 354.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Black, *Studies in Renaissance Humanism and Politics: Florence and Arezzo* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 43.

<sup>15</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 10.

with large, rough stones. This style, also known as rustication, has roots in both antiquity and medieval styles. This combination of traditional and classical styles is a trademark of Cosimo de' Medici, as he attempted to connect with both the traditional and progressive citizens of Florence. Michelozzo chose the design because it contrasted a formidable appearance of strength with delicate reflections of light from the sun.<sup>16</sup> The roughness of the stones meant that sunlight hit the palace wall from many different angles, creating a varied look on the exterior of the palace, as the upper floors had more smooth walls. The palaces of powerful families were required to function as fortresses as much as residences, which is why the ground floor uses rustication to appear solid and foreboding and does not contain much ornamentation. This also increases the palace's resemblance to the Palazzo Vecchio, which also has a rusticated exterior.

The exterior of the top two floors were designed with "Doric" and "Corinthian" details.<sup>17</sup> Michelozzo was likely influenced by ancient works, like the Colosseum in Rome, when designing the upper two floors. The round arches framing the windows are similar to the arches along the outside of the Colosseum. Additionally, the cornice of the palace, or the area under the roof of the palace, contained many classical details, including dentils, coffers, and egg-and-dart molding.<sup>18</sup> These classical elements demonstrate Cosimo's knowledge and interest in humanist ideas relating to classical traditions.

Michelozzo was also likely inspired by the Palazzo Vecchio, a late medieval structure that was the center of government in Florence. The windows of the upper two floors of the Medici Palace are biforal, meaning they have two divided panes, a design based on those of the

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<sup>16</sup> Young, *The Medici*, 140.

<sup>17</sup> Young, *The Medici*, 140.

<sup>18</sup> Loren Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Florence: 1400-1600* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 74.

Palazzo Vecchio.<sup>19</sup> This combination of design elements reflects Cosimo's civic pride for the city of Florence. Having his palace reflect a famous government building demonstrates his cooperation with the government and his connection to political power in Florence. Additionally, the outside of the palace is covered in the symbols of the Medici family, lest anyone forget who the building belonged to. The designs included the well-known Medici balls, as well as Cosimo's personal symbols, a diamond ring with three feathers.<sup>20</sup>

The Medici Palace was the first Renaissance palace to be built in Florence, and it inspired other prominent families to follow suit. One famous palace that was likely inspired by the Medici Palace was the Rucellai Palace, designed by Leon Battista Alberti.<sup>21</sup> The Rucellai Palace has similar patterns of rustication on the exterior, and the ornamentation on the palace even contains the ostrich, a Medici family symbol. In fact, the Medici palace was more architecturally advanced than most existing residences in Europe, including royal palaces in France, Germany, and England.<sup>22</sup> While the Medici Palace was the personal home of Cosimo, his sons, and their families, it became an important civic building as Cosimo gained power. Many important figures, both religious and political, visited Cosimo here, and thus the connection to the Palazzo Vecchio is even greater.

The interior of the Medici Palace also reveals Cosimo's interest in classical antiquity and his desire to associate his family with civic symbols and virtues of Florence. The main entrance of the palace opened into a courtyard, or *cortile*, which was surrounded by the palace walls.<sup>23</sup> The courtyard contains arches in the classical style, as well as supporting

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<sup>19</sup> Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Florence*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 227.

<sup>21</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Young, *The Medici*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Young, *The Medici*, 141.

columns with classical Corinthian capitals. One of the most famous works Cosimo commissioned for the *cortile* of the palace is Donatello's bronze *David*. David was a popular subject of sculpture in Florence, as he embodied youth, strength, and patriotism, virtues that were highly valued by Florentine citizens.<sup>24</sup> This David is unique in several aspects, however, as it was made from bronze, which was very rare and expensive in that time, usually only commissioned by royalty.<sup>25</sup> The fact that Cosimo was able to afford a bronze statue for his private residence is a testament to the immense wealth of the Medici family. As a work of art the statue was also unique, in that it was the first freestanding nude statue in the round since antiquity.<sup>26</sup> The statue was placed in the center of the courtyard, as it was meant to be viewed from all sides. Nudity was common in classical statues, but was still a fairly new idea during the Renaissance. In fact, Donatello had sculpted a fully clothed marble David for the Palazzo Vecchio just a few years earlier.<sup>27</sup> The bronze *David* may have reminded Florentine citizens of the marble *David*, furthering the connection between the Medici and the government. With the *David*, Cosimo again demonstrated his connection to classical ideals and art as well as Florentine civic ideals. This balance of classical and traditional ideas made him very popular with humanists and the Florentine public.

Another one of Cosimo de' Medici's major commissions is the renovation of the complex of San Marco. In the church, Cosimo commissioned Fra Angelico to design the altarpiece and enlarged the *tribuna* which housed the choir and pulpits.<sup>28</sup> The altarpiece is a portrayal of an enthroned Madonna and child among a group of angels and saints, a style known as *sacra*

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<sup>24</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 283.

<sup>25</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 281.

<sup>26</sup> Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Florence*, 87.

<sup>27</sup> Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Florence*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 177.

*conversazione* or sacred conversation. This Madonna is unique, however, as the patron-saints of the prominent Medici males are shown worshipping the Virgin and Christ Child.<sup>29</sup> The depiction of St. Cosmas, Cosimo's name-saint, lets the audience know who commissioned the work. Most of the work at San Marco involved rebuilding the monastery buildings, including the dormitories for the monks. Each cell in the dormitory contained a painting by Fra Angelico. For example, one cell contained Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, depicting the angel Gabriel giving the Virgin Mary the news of her role in Jesus' birth.<sup>30</sup> The painting employs a fairly naturalistic style and contains good perspective. The work was meant to promote meditation and prayer for the monk living in the cell.

Cosimo also funded a library at San Marco, which was the first public library in all of Europe.<sup>31</sup> Cosimo's friend and fellow civic humanist Niccoló Niccoli donated his collection of books to the library, which was open to all citizens. The library helped Cosimo promote classical and humanist ideas, as many of the books in the library were of classical origin. Humanists believed in the importance of knowledge in a wide variety of subjects, and the library could help Florentine citizens increase their knowledge.

The Medici family spent a great deal of money renovating the church of San Marco, as well as the church of San Lorenzo, their family church. The work at San Lorenzo was originally commissioned by Cosimo's father, Giovanni di Bicci, and Cosimo oversaw the completion of the work after his death. The church again reflects Cosimo's interest in combining traditional and classical style. The sacristy of San Lorenzo has a cupola that has a blend of Gothic and classical

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<sup>29</sup> Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Florence*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Partridge, *Art of Renaissance Florence*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> Young, *The Medici*, 85.

styles, conforming to neither.<sup>32</sup> The cupola is built from pilasters with Corinthian capitals, but the dome was built during the Gothic era.<sup>33</sup> The sacristy itself contains the cupola, lunettes, and other classical architectural designs. Cosimo's dedication to charitable works enamored him to the public, while also displaying the wealth of his family.

Cosimo de' Medici was a powerful, wealthy man who gained power and control by connections, economic influence, and a persona portrayed through the art he commissioned. In each commission and business decision, Cosimo increased the strength and honor of the Medici family, and he was so beloved that when he died in 1464, the ruler of Florence gave the title *pater patriae*, or father of his country. He left a powerful legacy in the buildings he commissioned, including the churches of San Lorenzo and San Marco, as well as his own residence, the Medici Palace. He also left an economic legacy, as his son Piero became the wealthiest man in Europe at Cosimo's death. Finally, Cosimo left a legacy in his family, who controlled Florence, one of the most powerful cities in Europe, until 1537.

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<sup>33</sup> Schevill, *The Medici*, 91.

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