



Medici family members represented in Benozzo Gozzoli's "Journey of the Magi" in the Medici-Ricardo Palace, Florence, c. 1459.

House of Medici Influence on Artists during the Renaissance

Susan Florek for HUMN530: The Renaissance, 25 January 2026, American Public University. Edited 29 April 2026.

After the fall of Rome Empire, as the surviving population ravaged the remains of a once glorified kingdom for the materials needed to build a new civilization, others turned to the church for answers and direction after bouts of rampant plague decimated half the population in some areas. Ongoing conflicts over territorial leadership, such as the Fourth Crusade (1202-1203), “widened the breach between the Eastern and Western churches bringing knowledge from antiquity to Italy” (Langer). After waiting patiently for the opportunity to obtain power arose, scholars and artists used the newly acquired knowledge to launch the Renaissance, financed by wealthy merchants who accumulated great wealth during the 15th century. One family who contributed the necessary funds to help rebuild Europe was the Medici family from Florence, former wool merchants who develop into bankers. When members of the Medici family, including Giovanni, Cosimo, and Lorenzo Medici (see fig. 1), devised financial credit systems, enabling them to provide loans for the establishment of more hospitals, guilds, workshops, academies, and libraries throughout Florence, they transformed the city into

an illustrious humanist epicenter. According to one scholar, “The ability of the Medici to seize and maintain control of the republic was due not only to their political skills but also to the vast wealth that they could use to buy allegiance” (Brucker 363).

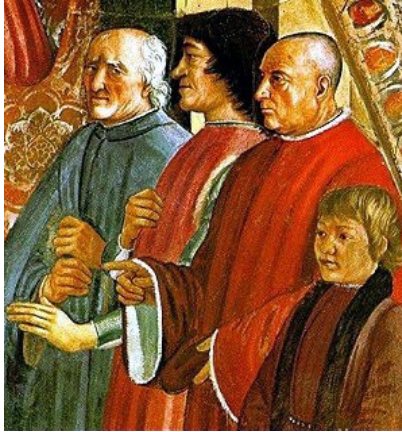


Fig. 1. Domenico Ghirlandaio. Confirmation of the Franciscan Rule, 1448–1494. Painting depicting Medici Family.

Several historians have indicated in their accounts of Cosimo De' Medici's rise to power in the early 15th century, that the “Medici bank awarded Cosimo great wealth and power, creating significant relationships with princes and popes, which made political and artistic patronage feasible on a grand scale” (Jurdjevic 1009). Avoiding extremes, politically active citizens were mostly comprised of “artisans and shopkeepers from the lower guilds and merchants, cloth manufacturers,

bankers, and professionals from the greater guilds” (Brucker 360). For the first time in human history, the artist was now considered significant, that creative individuals were important to the work and that the work was important to civilization. In the Renaissance, the message artists conveyed through their art contributed to the intellectual future of humanity and even changed the direction of man's involvement in how the world is designed. Men were no longer subjugated to the will of God, or the gods, but directed instead by the will of men.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 13th century, Florentine painters had to become a member of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali, a guild which was initially established for physicians but included apothecaries, and spice merchants who supplied pigments. However, by the early 14th century, Florence's painters gained limited independence from the guild by forming the Company of Saint Luke (see fig. 2),

initially founded for painters, but which also accepted tailors, cheese makers, gold beaters, and some women who were devoted to Saint Luke (Asleson). When sculptors were admitted later on, sculptors and painters viewed their interests as united and distinctive from the other trades represented by the guilds. Even though workshop training remained unchanged throughout the Renaissance, artists increasingly saw themselves as specialists of a liberal art, leading to the establishment of academies, which were established to reflect and promote this changing

perspective regarding the arts (Asleson).

Medici Patronage of Academies.

Prior to the establishment of academies in the Renaissance, the Church attempted to prevent the use of cadavers by virtue of the Christian belief that the human body was only a transient vessel for the soul on its way to heaven or hell and it was believed that there was a danger in examining something that was associated with sin (Dowdeswell).

However, by the mid-14th century other



Fig. 2. Giorgio Vasari. St Luke Painting the Virgin, 1511–1571. Workshop Guild depicted in painting.

European countries began to recognize the importance of dissecting bodies in order to learn anatomy for medical reasons. After the first legal public dissection was conducted by Mondino de Liuzzi in Bologna in the 14th century, the Florentine Academy of Art made anatomy courses mandatory for its art students (Dowdeswell). The patronage of the Medici family helped to connect anatomists, who wanted to gain scientific knowledge, together with artists, who wanted to accurately depict the human form (Sellmer). In return for providing artists with demonstrations of anatomy using cadavers, artists would produce accurate detailed drawings of the human body for use in anatomist's scientific books and pamphlets. Artists Leonardo da Vinci

and Michelangelo even carried out their own studies of cadavers (Dowdeswell), greatly improving the quality of their paintings and sculpture.

MEDICI PATRONAGE INFLUENCE ON ARTISTS

The Medici Family's humble beginnings as wool merchants may have instilled in them the belief that even those of "low birth" could achieve greatness, a belief they turned into a reality by establishing a vast banking empire in spite of not being born to noble or royal bloodlines. Some of the greatest artists in human history were given the chance to study art in the academies that the Medici established, including Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo Buonarroti, who launched their artistic professions from the rooms and gardens of the Medici workshops.

Examples from the Artist Sandro Botticelli. When Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) painted the *Adoration of the Magi* (see fig. 3) around 1475, he was still protected by the Medici family, who figured prominently throughout his painting career. In the painting *Adoration of the Magi*, many



Fig. 3. Sandro Botticelli. *Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1475. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Depicting the Medici Family.

members of the Medici family are represented in the painting including Cosimo the Elder and his sons Pietro and Giovanni, the sons of Piero, Lorenzo the Magnificent, and Giuliano. Botticelli also incorporated the banker Gaspere di Zanobi del Lama, who commissioned the work, and Botticelli himself (Gebhart 181), appearing in the

lower right corner looking directly at the viewer. While most of the art created during Early Renaissance was focused on Christian images of biblical stories and saints, the art during the High Renaissance started focusing more on “appreciating beauty, recounting mythological stories, and displaying dynamic movement” (Puckett). During his time in Florence under the Medici when “Paganism conquered Florence with ancient philosophy” (Gebhart, 106), Botticelli was free to paint subjects exploring paganism and nudity, like *The Birth of Venus* (see fig. 4), a painting depicting a full nude pagan mythological “goddess of love whose affair with

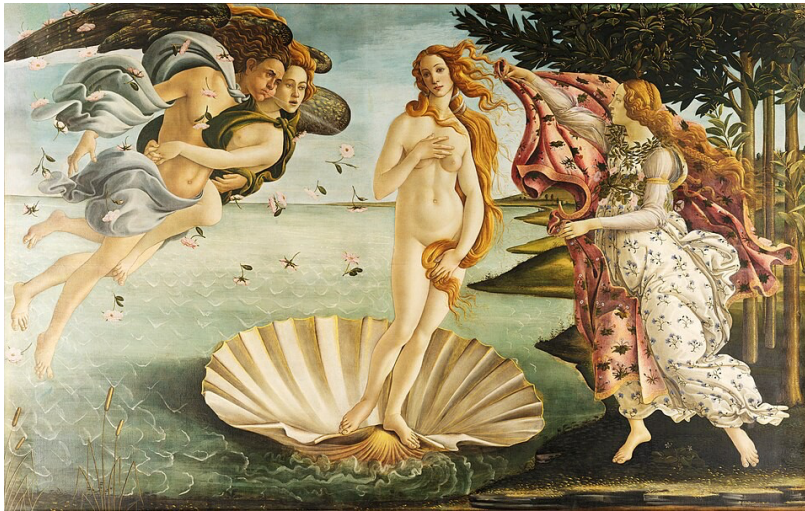


Fig. 4. Sandro Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus*, c. 1484–1486. Painted before Savonarola’s reign from 1494 to 1498.

Mars gave birth to the god of sexual lust” (Näthler). When the Italian Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola tried to banish the sins of desire—lust, gluttony, greed—from society, it ultimately led to the “Bonfire of the Vanities,” which took place in Florence on February 7th,

1497. Thousands of objects including art, books, playing cards, mirrors, musical instruments, painting and anything which could be considered as a luxury, were burned frequently throughout Florence during Savonarola’s short, but terrifying reign. Botticelli was later described as cooperative when it was described that he “threw himself into the arms of Savonarola” (Näthler), who was the de facto ruler of Florence from 1494 to 1498, when he was executed for heresy. An

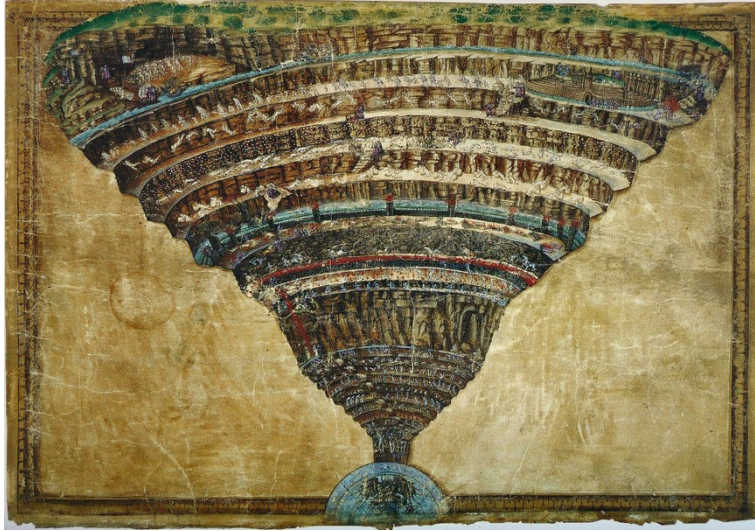


Fig. 5. Sandro Botticelli. *Map of Hell*, c. 1490. Painting during Savonarola's reign from 1494 to 1498.

example of how Botticelli's work was impacted after the execution of Savonarola can be seen in his *Map of Hell* (see fig. 5) from a series of illustrations he completed for the illustrated manuscript of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. One can note the stark difference between the colorful "light and breezy" depiction of the

female nude in his *Birth of Venus* created before the "Bonfire of the Vanities" to the dark "gloomy and depressing" depiction of hell for Dante's Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, originally written during the Medieval period when death and oppression was the daily reality.

Examples from the Artist Leonardo da Vinci. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), born in a small village near Vinci, received his early education directly from nature in the Tuscan countryside before he began his apprenticeship in the esteemed workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio in Florence (Mussari 5). At the age of eighteen, in 1472, he was enrolled in the Compagnia di San Luca, the guild of Florentine painters for ten years before he moved to Milan where he took numerous notable positions, including "painter, sculptor, architect, town planner, civil and military engineer and director of official ceremonies" (Mussari, 5). Leonardo's extensive examination of facial muscles made accessible through anatomy lessons backed by the Medici, led to an evolution in the way he painted faces of women in his portraits which can be found in the comparison between an earlier *Portrait of Ginevra Benci* (c. 1474-1480) and later portraits including *Lady of the Ermine*, painted between 1489 and 1491 and the *Mona*



Fig. 6. Leonardo da Vinci. *Portrait of Ginevra Benci*, c. 1474-1480. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Lisa, which was painted between 1503 and 1506. The grey-skinned woman depicted in the older painting *Portrait of Ginevra Benci* (see fig.6) is emotionless compared to later portrait, *Lady of the Ermine* (see fig. 7) which is much more realistic and lively as the woman in the painting appears to move slightly with the animal she is holding, expressing a slight smile that seduces the viewer. While the anatomy lessons helped to enhance the painting styles of the Renaissance, some artists found the lessons disturbing. According to some sources, after

Leonardo carried out some twenty dissections at the University of Pavia in Milan, he “recognized the unsettling nature of this kind of hands-on work” (Dowdeswell) and warned of “the fear of living through the night hours in the company of quartered and flayed corpses fearful to behold”



Fig. 7. Leonardo da Vinci. *Lady with the Ermine*, c. 1489-1491. Czartoryski Museum, Kraków, Poland.

(Dowdeswell, Leonardo da Vinci, 1510). In 1516, after the death of his protector Giuliano de' Medici, he decided to leave for France, ending his relationship with the Medici (Mussari 5).

Examples from the Artist Michelangelo Buonarroti. Another ground-breaking artist who benefitted from anatomy lessons was Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475-1564), who visited the San Marco Garden in Florence, where he received his early training under the patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici. Michelangelo met and mixed with various

humanists, discovering the treasures of antiquity in the gardens in the Medici Palace that would

continue to inspire him for the rest of his life (Müntz 20). To symbolize the city's rebirth, Michelangelo was commissioned to create his *David* (see fig. 8), first sketched in 1501 and



Fig. 8. Michelangelo Buonarroti. *David*, c. 1504. Galleria dell'Accademia, Florence, Italy.

completed in 1504, which personified the invincibility of the Republic of Florence. The huge 17-foot sculpture was placed in front of the Palazzo Vecchio, the seat of government at the time (102). Michelangelo rejected convention by characterizing the biblical hero in a “state of impending alertness for victory under divine protection, with only an elbow to protect a right flank otherwise entirely exposed to evil” (140). His facial expression and stance perfected as a result of the sculptor’s advanced studies in anatomy. Because the artists at the academies spent so much time examining the human form, many of them became

experts in anatomy, including Michelangelo, who wrote, “who has not been, or is not a good master of the figure, and especially of anatomy, cannot understand it” (Dowdeswell, Michelangelo, 1560). Other commissions by the Medici family which benefitted from the anatomy lessons include painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508-1512) and *The Last Judgment* (1535 to 1541), both the commissioned by Pope Julius II, Lorenzo de Medici’s son (Müntz 212). The Medici’s approval of human dissection contributed to advanced art techniques in depicting human anatomy and facial expressions creating more natural looking figures in the art of the Renaissance artists leading to competition among artists and regions throughout Europe.

Medici’s Indirect Influence on Women in the Arts. During the Renaissance, most girls did not attend school, however, some wealthy families could afford to give their daughters a formal education at home. Because educational options for girls were incredibly limited, girls were

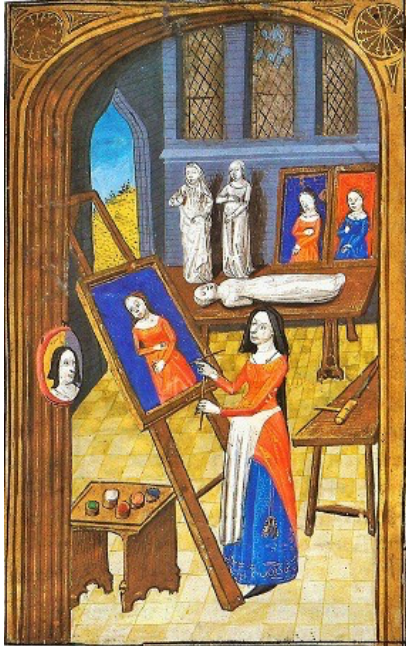


Fig. 9. Unknown Artist. *Marcia Painting Her Self-Portrait*. c. 1470. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Des clères et nobles femmes*, Spencer Collection MS. 33, f. 37v, French.

expected either to marry or to become nuns or servants. Many fathers could not afford to the required dowry resulting in some 12 per cent of the female population of Florence becoming nuns (Hale). Even though the educational prospects were nearly nonexistent throughout the Renaissance, girls who were fortunate to receive some tutelage helped to pave the way for future educational and occupational opportunities for girls and woman.

During the early Renaissance, evidence of work from women artists and writers was beginning to appear, especially within the religious communities and depictions in various manuscripts. One such example was found in a 1470

illustration from a French manuscript representing the story of a Roman noblewoman and artist named "Marcia," who was known for painting self-portraits using a mirror (Allen). According to Lucy Allen, the image is a medieval manuscript illumination titled "Marcia Painting Her Self-Portrait"



Fig. 10. Sofonisba Anguissola, *The Game of Chess*, 1555. Collection of the National Museum in Poznań, Poland.

(see fig. 9), depicting a female artist in her studio surrounded by her other artwork, including sculptures and painted portraits (Allen). The next century would find more woman throughout Europe, mostly from wealthy families, training to become established artists, like Sofonisba Anguissola, who

was known to have exchanged drawings with Michelangelo. According to Annikka Olsen,

Sofonisba was considered to be one of the most successful women artists of the Renaissance, creating many “self-portraits as well as portraits of her sisters, including *The Game of Chess* in 1555 (see fig. 10), which are noted for their realism and liveliness” (Olsen).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although many artists during the Renaissance did benefit from the Medici family patronage and tolerance and promotion of humanist values, there have been some evidence that for others who interfered with the Medici rise to power locally and eventually the papacy, the family was accused of authoritative and unfair actions throughout their rule. Under the Medici rule, it has been reported that the guilds lost their autonomy, becoming state agencies for the ‘regulation of commerce, industry, the retail trades, and the crafts’ (Brucker 372). Their transformation introduced principles of hierarchy into membership, bringing city-wide guilds under the control of the duke, which emphasized a new ethic of obedience, while replacing older rituals that focused on community and equality with ritual salutes of status and rank. For example, when a group of Florentine intellectuals formed a cultural society in the early 1540, Cosimo first scattered and then reorganized the association as the Academia Fiorentina, forcing its membership and its constitution strictly controlled by the prince” (Brucker 372). The Florentine art creation would be almost completely concentrated around the Medici as capital that was switched from wars and redirected towards the arts, which were devoted to the “dynastic glorification of the Medici and the Tuscan duchy” (Apostolski 193).

However, overall, The Medici applied Renaissance humanism to all aspects of public life, from art and literature to even architecture, and to politics (Marwaha). In the 15th and 16th centuries, Florence became the nucleus of humanistic learning during the peak of Renaissance. The Medici family is still seen today seen as tantamount to Italian Renaissance, dominating the

Florentine culture for nearly three centuries, even though they were not kings nor nobility. Because the power structure and economy depended on the wool trade and banking due to the history and interest of the Medici family, those who dominated these spheres in Florence were also the ruling power in the government of the city-state (Marwaha).

The rise of the Medici family was made possible because of the family's initial involvement in civic affairs as their determined and hardworking ancestors developed a strong foundation for the entire Medici lineage to become great patrons of art. Their interest in spreading humanist ideas and in supporting the arts, instead of reinforcing past conflicts, changed the nature of competition between local regions and ultimately other countries. The financial support from the Medici's family of bankers changed from investing in destruction from ongoing wars to supporting Florence's intellectual and artistic progress. Greater opportunities emerged for anyone who demonstrated talent in painting, sculpture, and architecture, including those from the lower classes and woman. Besides the financial backing by the Medici, their family's acceptance of Humanist ideas allowed for the exploration of nature, including human anatomy and revolutionary scientific views. The rise of such great artists like Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo Buonarroti, who demonstrated evolving artistic talents, helped to open doors for women as well. While opportunities for girls and woman to engage in the humanities got a slow start during the Renaissance, they did exist and gradually improved in the following centuries. The pursuit of knowledge and continuing interest in exploring humanity's deeper purpose flourished during the Renaissance and continues today by both men and woman.

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