

# The City as Cultural Capital

LATE RENAISSANCE FLORENCE

by Gail Leggio

The Italian Renaissance flowered, appropriately, in Florence, but during the period spotlighted by this sumptuous exhibition and catalogue, 1537–1631, the center of gravity had shifted to Rome. Yet Florentine culture remained vibrant under the Medici Grand Dukes. As the title *The Medici, Michelangelo and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence* suggests, this ambitious project focuses on a complex web of relationships between artists and patrons and on how those relationships shaped the physical form, intellectual life and artistic heritage of the city. A dozen authors contributed to the catalogue.<sup>1</sup>

The Medici first came to power in 1434, and Cosimo de' Medici's (1389–1464) patronage of Donatello, Luca della Robbia and Brunelleschi helped shape the idea of Florence as a progressive cultural center. The Medici were bankers, and there may have been some lingering anxiety about the Church's condemnation of usury in the first major project Cosimo funded, Benozzo Gozzoli's (c. 1421–97) *Adoration of the Magi* in the Convent of San Marco. Cosimo's son Lorenzo il Magnifico (1449–92) studied with Alberti and became the patron of Botticelli, Leonardo, Fra Filippo Lippi, and the young Michelangelo. Lorenzo's son Piero was expelled in 1494, with the establishment of the Florentine Republic. After a few decades of strategic maneuvering, including achieving the papacy and some astute dynastic alliances, the Medici regained power. Cosimo I (1519–74) was elected first Grand Duke by the Florentine senate, with the support of Emperor Charles V, in 1537. With the blessing of Cosimo and Michelangelo, the Accademia del Disegno, the first artists' academy in Europe, was founded in 1563. Subsequent Grand Dukes—Francesco I (1541–87), Ferdinando II (1549–1609) and Cosimo II (1590–1621)—continued to support the fine arts, as well as the sciences and what can only be described as the luxury craft trade. Cosimo II appointed Galileo Professor of Philosophy and Math at the University of Pisa, and Galileo reciprocated by naming the four moons of Jupiter he discovered “Medici stars.”

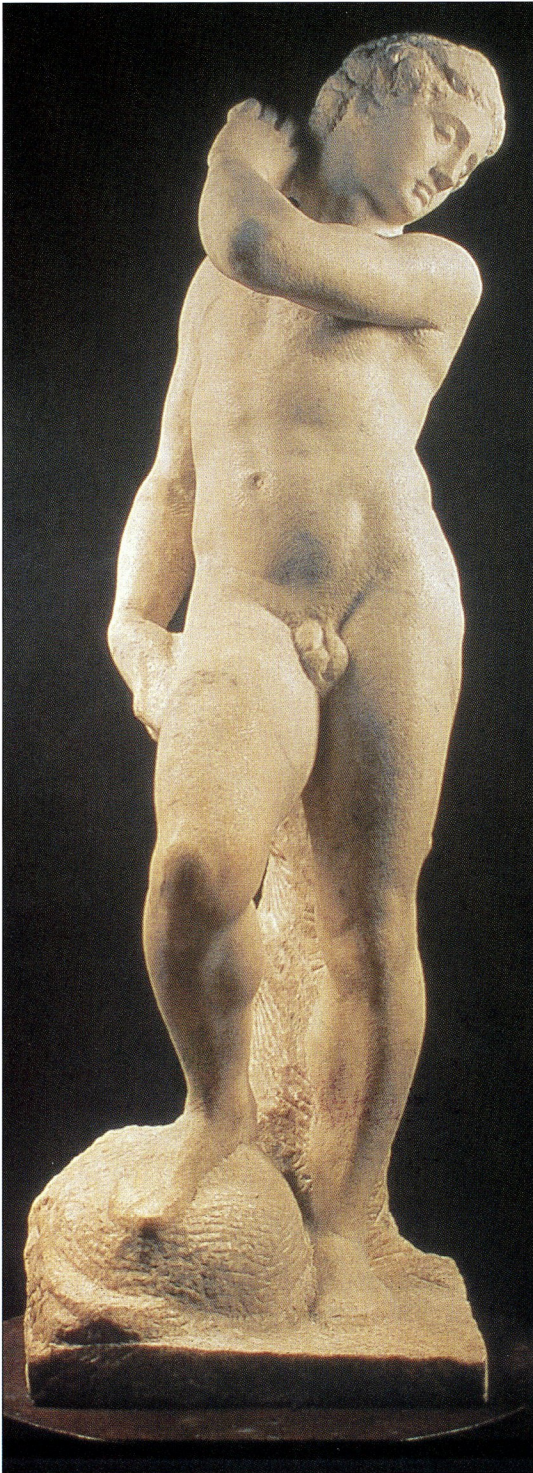
Michelangelo (1475–1564) remained an overwhelming presence, even though he left Florence in 1534 and did not return in his lifetime. His works—notably the colossal marble *David* (1503)—were sources of civic pride, but they also proved a daunting legacy to the artists who came after him. Giorgio Vasari's (1511–74) *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Architects, Painters and Sculptors from Cimabue to Our Times* (1550 and 1568 editions) positioned Michelangelo as the “culminating figure”<sup>2</sup> of the Renaissance. Vasari's use of the term *maniera*

to describe a late phase of Michelangelo's sculpture—epitomized by the anatomically exaggerated, psychologically fraught figures of *Day, Night, Dawn* and *Dusk* for the tombs of Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici in the Medici Chapel, S. Lorenzo, Florence—spawned the notion of a Mannerist style. Attesting to Michelangelo's status is Agostino Ciampelli's painting *Funeral of Michelangelo* (c. 1613–35), now in the Museo di Casa Buonarroti, Florence, which documents the magnificent ceremony held on July 14, 1564, in San Lorenzo. The event centered around a huge, ziggurat-shaped catafalque decorated with episodes from the artist's life, ending with Michelangelo's arrival in the Elysian Fields, surmounted by a figure of Fame blowing a trumpet. The Medici play prominent roles in the scenes depicted.

Michelangelo died in Rome, but, at least according to Vasari, his body was smuggled back to Florence, disguised as a bundle of merchandise, by a nephew, thus outflanking the Pope's expected claim. Adding to the drama, the body—when finally unpacked in Florence—was found to be uncorrupted.<sup>3</sup> This conventional sign of sanctity added to the aura of the miraculous. Indeed, the competition for Michelangelo's remains smacks of medieval wrangles over the bones of saints. Just as the body of the Evangelist St. Mark was stolen from Alexandria and transferred to Venice (there is a wonderful painting by Tintoretto on the subject), so the body of Michelangelo was spirited away to Florence. St. Mark became the pre-eminent sacred relic in Venice's great basilica, and Mark's attribute, the winged lion, was adopted as a civic emblem. So, too, Michelangelo's tomb in Santa Croce secured Florence's place in the history of the Renaissance, and became a *de rigueur* destination for art pilgrims. Vasari continued to burnish the city's—and the Medici family's—image. He began his career at the ducal court in 1555, decorating rooms with scenes of Medici history. The Medici appropriated Florence's town hall, the Palazzo Vecchio, in 1540, and had it frescoed by Vasari and Bronzino. They acquired the Pitti Palace in 1550. The building of the Uffizi began in 1560, under Vasari's supervision; it was completed in 1580.

Michelangelo still draws art pilgrims to Italy, but the showing of his works in this exhibition is limited to three sculptures and five drawings. By the late phase of his career, he had largely abandoned sculpture for painting, and his greatest paintings are on Roman walls. The exhibition does, however, include one major marble figure, the *Apollo/David* of 1525–30 (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence), left unfinished when the artist departed for Rome in 1534. The nearly life-size work offers insight into Michelangelo's method, his use of chisels, rakes and scalpels. Iconographically, the twisted figure (*figura serpentina*) could be another take on the Old Testament hero associated with the Florentine Republic. At the same time, the reaching gesture could allude to Apollo choosing an arrow from his quiver. As the classical deity most identified with the arts and a favorite of Cosimo I de' Medici, Apollo is an equally viable candidate. In either case, the closed eyes of the beautiful young man





give him an introspective quality, as well as suggesting Michelangelo's dictum about awakening the figure from the stone. Also included in the exhibition are a terracotta male torso (1530–40) and a very rough but moving wooden crucifix (c. 1562), both now in Casa Buonarroti, Florence.

The Florentine sculptors who followed and were, inevitably, intimidated by Michelangelo adopted a decorative Mannerist mode. An elongated bronze figure of a woman, sometimes identified as *Fiorenza*, by Giambologna (1529–1608) from the Villa Medici at Petraia, Florence, is typical. Originally intended to top a fountain, the nude figure (c. 1571–72) balances with one foot on a vase and wrings out her long hair, suggesting the goddess rising from the sea and justifying the sculpture's alternate title, *Venus*. Francesco de' Medici included Giambologna's *Venus*, along with Michelangelo's *Four Slaves*, in a sculptural ensemble surrounded by natural rocks and foliage in the Boboli Gardens.

Despite the elegance and technical virtuosity of much of the sculpture in the exhibition, the paintings are more interesting. While he is better remembered as an art historian and courtier than as an artist, Vasari's

Michelangelo Buonarroti  
*Apollo/David*, c. 1525–30

MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL BARGELLO,  
FLORENCE

painterly skills were not negligible, as witnessed by two attractive works here. *Venus at Her Toilette* (c. 1558, Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart) combines mythological eroticism with elements of the *vanitas* tradition. A *Holy Family with St. Francis* (1541–42, Los Angeles County Museum of Art) shows the obvious influence of Raphael, although the strenuously muscular Christ Child owes something to Michelangelo.

The real star painters, however, are Agnolo Bronzino (1503–72) and Cristofano Allori (1577–1621). Bronzino's *Holy Family with St. John the Baptist*, also known as the *Panciaticchi Holy Family* (c. 1540–45, Uffizi) has a visual excitement that puts Vasari in the shade. The astringent colors of the garments—hot pink, vermillion, royal and lavender blue, dusky violet—and luminous skin tones glow in dramatic contrast to the smoky background. The landscape seems like a painted backdrop, its distant buildings and trees tiny in relation to the monumental figures compacted into the foreground space. These very sculptural figures demonstrate Bronzino's mastery of antique models: the Virgin is based on a Praxitelean Venus and Joseph, on a Roman portrait. Yet the psychological interplay in the four-figure group has a complex tenderness. The way the infant Baptist, closely watched by Mary and Joseph, gravely leans over to kiss the Christ Child raises premonitions of the dead savior.

Bronzino's deployment of space is equally eccentric in a portrait set in an interior, *Young Man with a Lute* (c. 1532–34, Uffizi). Here, Michelangelo—far from instilling anxiety in another artist—seems to prompt Bronzino to experiment with compositional strategies. The pose of the black-clad young thinker with the raised eyebrow derives from Michelangelo's sculpture, especially the *Giuliano de' Medici* but more generally the twisting of the torso. Bronzino's subject is wedged into a tight, architecturally illogical space that intensifies his aura of cultivated introspection. The hands and face—half in shadow—are dramatically lit. His attributes include, as well as the lute, a bathing Susanna or Crouching Aphrodite statuette which doubles as an inkwell. The tiny figure is a neat piece of visual wit, and its scale makes the young man seem monumental. Another Bronzino portrait celebrating the intellectual life of Renaissance Florence is *Laura Battiferra degli Ammanati* (c. 1561, Palazzo Vecchio). No elaborate manipulations of space in this composition, just a simple grey background against which the sitter's severely beautiful Dantesque profile gleams like a cameo. Part of the inner circle of court literati, she was platonically intimate with the artist; they exchanged Petrarchan sonnets. She displays a book open to manuscript pages of Petrarch's own sonnets 64 and 240, a detail that both establishes her literary credentials and shows off her creamy, slender hands. Bronzino's handling of fabric—black silk, maroon velvet and diaphanous white veiling—is exemplary. A gold button and chain add a note of restrained luxury.

State portraits were a crucial part of the job description at the ducal court. Bronzino's *Eleonora of Toledo and Her Son Giovanni* (after 1545, Detroit Institute





Agnolo Bronzino  
*Young Man with a Lute*  
 c. 1532–34  
 GALLERIA DEGLI UFFIZI,  
 FLORENCE

of Arts) presents Cosimo I de' Medici's wife and son invested with the full panoply of dynastic privilege. With their pretty faces and smooth hands, they are an appealing mother and child, but the true focus of the composition is Eleonora's sumptuous gown. Stiffly encased in black velvet arabesques and gold pomegranates on white satin, with pearls at her throat, ornamenting her netted snood and tasseling her jeweled belt, she has the hieratic authority of a Byzantine or Spanish colonial Madonna. Cristofano Allori's pendant half-length portraits of *Cosimo II de' Medici* and his wife, *Maria Maddalena of Austria* (1608–09, Palazzo Pitti), are easily as elegant, with his ceremonial armor and her pearls, and both wear exquisite lace. Yet, while a level of flattery is undoubtedly part of the equation here, Allori manages to establish the individuality of his sitters, especially Maria, with her pensive intelligence.

Cristofano Allori is responsible for perhaps the most splendid single painting in the exhibition, *Judith and Holofernes* (c. 1616–18, Palazzo Pitti), which was an instant success, spawning replicas and inspiring poems by Ottavio Rinucci and Giovanbattista Marino. A highly sophisticated and cosmopolitan artist, Allori deftly appropriates the dark background and theatrical lighting associated with Caravaggio, along with the conceit of

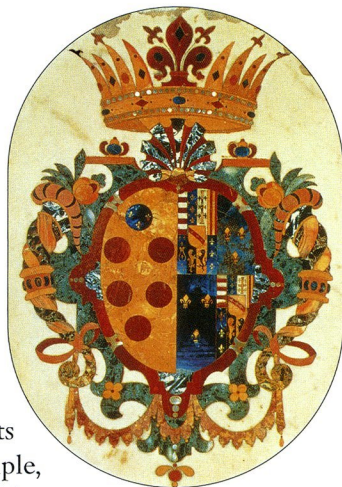
including a self-portrait in the head of the general. Allori takes the autobiographical element one step further by casting his beloved, la Mazzafirra, in the role of the heroine. While Caravaggio—and even more remarkably Artemisia Gentileschi—plumb the violence of the Old Testament encounter, however, Allori finds a majestic serenity in Judith. The composition's rather low vantage point enhances her towering strength, and the movement of the drapery establishes a pyramid of brilliant color. Judith's solemn, heroic yet completely feminine beauty is a perfect balance of dark hair and eyes set off against the radiant gold brocade, white and red of her garments. This is one of the great images of the Italian—and not just the Florentine—Renaissance. Another Mannerist star, Jacopo Carrucci, called Pontormo (1494–1556) is less well represented overall, but his portrait of *Giovanni della Casa* (1541, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) is a standout. The muted grays of his robes and the background, enlivened by white sleeves and a sliver of red lining, give the warm flesh tones of hands and face an attractive glow. He clutches a book, the attribute of a well-known writer, and his somber garb identifies him as an apostolic commissioner. This succinct visual biography continues with the setting: an almost abstractly schematic yet recognizable corner in the interior of the Florentine cathedral's vault. As with the portraits of James McNeill Whistler more than three hundred years later, an arrangement in gray serves to showcase the character of the sitter. Giovanni della Casa's soul seems to blaze from his dark, intelligent eyes, which dominate his elongated face. It's a deceptively simple masterpiece.

Another category of painting figures prominently in this exhibition, a kind of small-scale allegory that overlaps areas of scientific curiosity and decoration. Jacopo Zucchi's (c. 1540–96) *The Coral Fishery* (c. 1580, Galleria Borghese, Rome) is a good example of the genre, which highlights the omnivorous collecting impulse of Renaissance court life. Commissioned by Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici, Zucchi's odd little seaside vignette was intended for a *studiolo*, a cabinet designed to hold natural specimens in drawers, and ornamented with gilded statuettes as well as paintings. Despite the Italianate beauty of the nymphs depicted lounging on the rocks or paddling in the waves, there is a definite Flemish cast to the slightly grotesque proceedings. Although there are a few men among the dozens of tiny figures, including a Neptune-like character bristling with oversized shells, the overwhelming feminine presence underscores the traditional association of women with the sea, source of all life. Here, rare sea jewels—coral and pearls—are the appropriate adornment for the seductive, nearly nude nymphs.

A fascinating chapter in the exhibition catalogue considers how a *studiolo* was organized, presenting a new installation proposal for the treasure vault in the Palazzo Vecchio commissioned in 1569–70 by Francesco I de' Medici.<sup>4</sup> Largely uninterested in politics, Francesco was a dedicated amateur in many fields, including alchemy and geology, and conducted his own experiments



Grand Ducal coat of arms, end of the 16th Century  
MUSEO DELL' OPIFICIO DELLE PIETRE DURE, FLORENCE



with metallurgy and pharmaceuticals. Francesco hired Vasari to design a chamber to house his specimens. The room's decorative scheme was based on the traditional tetrad of the four elements; thirty-four painted panels with religious, mythological, historical or industrial scenes alluded to the contents of the various cupboards. The Fire wall, for example, housed examples of the glass-blower's art and small bronze vessels, along with less decorative materials, such as gunpowder, bullets and sulfur. The scheme emphasized collaborations not only between art and nature, but between nature and technology. Aptly, Prometheus was depicted, in an image by Francesco Poppi, at the apex of the ceiling. In all, twenty-three painters and eight sculptors contributed to the plans. Today, the specimens are gone and the organization is a matter of debate, since the room was dismantled at one point, and a number of images dispersed. While the iconographic detective work is intriguing, the most riveting aspect of the catalogue essay is the comprehensive examination of how science and art fed into the philosophical matrix of intellectual life in late Renaissance Florence. The four humors had medical applications—determined by a predominance of air, earth, fire or water in the individual human body—as well as literary analogies and links to the contemporary Neo-Platonic worldview. The importance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a sourcebook for the scenes of Francesco's *studiolo* is clear; even biblical incidents have correspondences with the ancient stories. In certain alchemical texts, Feinberg points out, Moses' parting of the Red Sea symbolized the division of the *prima material* into the four elements. The central theme concerns what Leonard Barkan calls "the metamorphic arts of nature," which permeate all the layers—"divine, human and animal"—of the universe.<sup>5</sup>

Among his other avocations, Francesco I is generally credited with the founding of the *pietre dure* or hard stone industry, and there are some splendid examples of the craft in this exhibition. During the late Renaissance, Florence consolidated its position as a decorative arts center, and the *pietre dure* workshops (which continue under the title Opificio delle Pietre Dure) has outlived the Medici dynasty.<sup>6</sup> In the first Medici regime examples of antique stonework and cameos had been relatively plentiful. While archaeological discoveries continued to be made, the market for antiquities had inevitably become tighter

and more competitive. An appetite for beautiful stone objects at all the courts of Europe—and the interest of skilled artisans eager to work with these materials—made the ducal *pietre dure* workshops a thriving concern. In this craft, as in other Renaissance disciplines, nature, art and science were seen as working in a symbiotic relationship. Chalcedony, agate, sardonyx and lapis lazuli were among the splendid raw materials gathered to provide a medium for both abstract and figurative compositions as well as quasi-utilitarian objects. In the last category, an aching blue lapis lazuli *navicella*, or boat-shaped vase, from 1575 (Museo degli Argenti, Florence) by Stefano and/or Ambrogio Caroni and Jacques Bylivelt, justifies the modern poet William Butler Yeats's almost mystical rapture over the stone, in his late 1930s poem "Lapis Lazuli."

As in the case of the *navicella*, the production teams in the ducal workshops were often international; Florentine craftsmen might collaborate with Milanese *intagliatori* (gem-cutters) and Flemish goldsmiths. Inlay was a specialty, both the geometrical patterns, shields and scrolls that derived from Roman intarsia and a more painterly kind of marble mosaic. A 1619 Chessboard (Museo degli Argenti, Florence), after a design by Iacopo Ligozzi (1547–1627), combines both these approaches. The chessboard squares contrast the delicately mottled blue and gold of lapis and jasper, while the surrounding ebony frame is inlaid with exquisitely detailed naturalistic flowers and butterflies in *pietre dure*.

Among the other gorgeous decorative objects in the exhibition are examples from the grand-ducal armory and tapestry workshop. A ceremonial helmet for Cosimo II (c. 1609, Museo Nazionale del Bargello), designed by Gasparo Mola (1580–1640), overlays a steel peaked burgonet with an exuberant pattern of scrolls and grotesquerie, figures of Fame and Charity, a predatory bird beak and a surmounting dragon. It is an impressive reminder of how important pageantry was to statecraft. A lavish *portiere*, or door hanging, with the theme of *Abundance* (1545, Palazzo Pitti) makes an equally strong case for tapestry. Designed by Bronzino and executed by textile master Jan Rost, the composition reflects the shift in tapestry-making from flat pattern to illusionistic space. The perspective view of the garden is framed by a doorway with a putto, his foot making a trompe l'oeil shadow across the gilded frame (another illusion) as he strokes a tortoise, one of Cosimo's emblems.

There are cyclical fashions in artistic taste, as in most things. The influential paradigm popularized by Vasari privileged the titans of the High Renaissance, while nineteenth-century artists and writers tended to prefer the relative austerity and pious charm of the artists before Raphael. The Late Renaissance has sometimes been regarded as a luxurious and awkward phase of transition, with the Baroque waiting in the wings. This fine exhibition and catalogue should help dispel some of the preconceptions. Sophistication here is not incompatible with sensitivity. Intellectually rich and undeniably voluptuous, both high art and decoration are worthy of future study. If the Medici,



astute propagandists, used art, architecture and public works to legitimize and advertise their own political power, they also created an extraordinary creative environment.

After opening at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence last year and continuing on to The Art Institute of Chicago, “The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence” concluded its tour at The Detroit Institute of Arts. The exhibition was organized by the Detroit Institute with the Art Institute of Chicago and the Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Fiorentina.

#### NOTES

1. *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*, with essays by Cristina Acidini Luchinat, Suzanne B. Butters, Marco Chiarini, Janet Cox-Rearick, Alan P. Darr, Larry J. Feinberg, Annamaria Giusti, Richard A. Goldthwaite, Lucia Meoni, Kirsten Aschengreen Piacenti, Claudio Pizzorusso, and Anna Maria Testaverde (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with The Detroit Institute of the Arts, 2002). The 381-page book, with over 225 color illustrations, sells for \$60.00.
2. See Patricia Lee Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari: Art and History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).
3. *The Medici*, p. 18.
4. Larry Feinberg, “The Studiolo of Francesco I Reconsidered” in *The Medici*, pp. 47–65.
5. Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 2–3.
6. Annamaria Giusti, “The Origins and Splendors of the Grand-Ducal *Pietre Dure* Works” in *The Medici*, pp. 103–111.