November 2017

The Palazzo Medici and its Polyvalent Message: Cosimo de Medici Navigates the Shifting Meaning of Pride

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DEDICATION

My family has been a source of unfailing support. To my parents, James and Betty Morgan, you both have always encouraged and supported my endeavors. I thank you for your help, support, and unwavering patience. To my son, Casey James Thieryung, my proofreader-in-chief, we started this journey together and I would not have had it any other way. The many discussions of my project on those long daily commutes have been invaluable to my success. Finally, to my husband, Kevin, without you none of this would be possible. I thank you for encouraging me to go back to school and to pursue my dreams. Dad, I did it!
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Without the efforts and commitment of Dr. Brendan Cook this project would not have been possible. I want to acknowledge his herculean efforts to help me get this across the finish line. Thank you. To Julie Langford, your guidance has been invaluable. You have taught, encouraged, and helped me more times than I can count in the last three years and for this I thank you. To Scott Ferguson, your thought provoking comments made my work fuller and more comprehensive, thank you. Amy Rust, you helped me understand the process and guided me back on track when I got lost. Last, but certainly not least, Dr. Jeanette Flow. Jeanette, you have given me moral support, advice, and encouragement for the last four years. I cannot thank you enough.

To the professors of the Humanities and History Departments at the University of South Florida who were so instrumental in my education, both past and present, thank you. Andrew Berish, Daniel Belgrad, Maria Cizmic, Benny Goldberg, Bill Murray, Suzanne Murray, Julia Irwin, and Dave Thomas, thank you for your advice, encouragement, and help. I wish to also thank my fellow Graduate Students in the Humanities Department. You gave me feedback, support, and a shoulder. Thank you all.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the Medicean ability to present divergent messages to different audiences through the manipulation of art and architecture of the Palazzo Medici. I examine several works of art commissioned and authored by the Medici. First, Donatello’s bronze David, located in the Medici Courtyard, is interpreted through the traditional Christian perspective as seen by the vicini, making the Medici appear pious, reverent, and religiously devout. This work is also interpreted from the amici point of view using ancient and contemporary authors to trace the development of ideas amongst the circle of Classically educated friends of the Medici. Second, Donatello’s bronze Judith and Holofernes, located in the adjacent Medici Garden, is examined in the same way to highlight the divergent message of humility juxtaposed to pride. This exercise shows the Medici had the ability to use one piece of art to set the stage for several different messages. Each type of visitor would view the same piece of art and come away with a different message specifically tailored to them, which allowed the family to increase support for their political faction and maintain their status as de facto rulers of Florence.

The Medici family’s success is undisputed amongst scholars, but Cosimo’s use of the Augustan model and his use of the palace as propaganda is a subject that has been left scarcely examined. Much research has been conducted on the exterior due to what is extant, but how those in the Medici faction viewed it is non-existent. This work builds upon F.W. Kent’s position that Renaissance palace were built with several groups in mind. Through this examination of the Medici’s use of polyvalent messaging, a new understanding of the Medici
emerges, which shows they were masters of propaganda and can explain why the Palazzo Medici became the model for palaces through Florence, the Italian Peninsula, and eventually greater Europe.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

“There is in gardens a plant which one ought to leave dry, although most people water it. It is the weed called envy.”¹ — Cosimo de’ Medici

A Florentine boy is born in 1389, into a world still largely defined by the traditions of the medieval past. He is not born into the elite; he is the son of a merchant. He is given the name Cosimo di Giovanni de Medici, hardly a well-known name or of noble lineage. From these modest beginnings, his family would acquire power and influence and be recognized as the ruling family of Florence. The Medici would go on to procure the papacy in 1513 and eventually rule as the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, but these glories were a long way off. In Cosimo’s world, power was not easily won.² Cosimo’s father taught him early to project sincerity and humility so as not stir envy amongst his fellow citizens. Cosimo took his advice, but he understood he was living in city undergoing changes. Changes his father did not understand.

The city of Florence was a cauldron of creativeness, innovation, and new ideas. Florence was on the cutting edge of the transition from traditional medieval values to modern values that fit with a more individualistic way of life and the city was shaped by the tension this change produced. Cosimo would harness this tension for the greater glory of the Medici family. While ever mindful of his conviction to remain out of the public eye, Cosimo would use the creative talents of Renaissance artists to expertly navigate the tensions between the old and new values

² Several Medici men were subsequently named Cosimo. I will refer to Cosimo di Giovanni de Medici, exclusive of all others, as Cosimo in this work.
that defined the civilization of the fifteenth century. He would put the talents of architects and sculptors to use in shaping his palazzo. The reconciliation of changing values goes beyond palace design; it gets to the heart of the transition between old and new, which defines the Renaissance palace in Florence, across the Italian Peninsula, and throughout Europe in the Quattrocento. The Palazzo Medici stands as a monument to the conflict between old and new, which Cosimo’s life, and Florence itself, embodied.

The leading citizens of Florence retained their power through political factions. A large faction allowed them to maintain a majority of elected officials in the government. The Medici faction successfully controlled Florence for much of the fifteenth century. The members of the faction gathered at the residence of their leader, Cosimo. When Cosimo undertook the task of building a new palace, he turned to the Classical sources he knew so well to inform many of his choices. He modeled his home on the design of the Roman domus, whose architecture had evolved to support and maintain the client/patron relationship that was the foundation of his political faction. Once the construction was complete, Cosimo filled the palace with art he authored and commissioned. He composed the art to be read in several different ways, which led to several different messages. Relying on the viewer to see the art through the viewer’s own personal lens was Cosimo’s aim, and his ultimate success.

At the crossroads of F.W. Kent’s conclusion that Renaissance palaces were designed with visitants in mind, and the volumes of scholarship on various works of art authored by the Medici, lay new insights on the Medici’s unique deployment of propaganda in the Palazzo Medici.³

Viewing individual works of art through the disparate eyes of the *vicini* (locals/neighbors) and the *amici* (friends/intellectual peers) allow us to ascertain the Medici’s ability to set the stage for a variety of performances.

But how did he address all the different citizens, visiting dignitaries, and members of his inner circle when they visited his palace? Scholars have undertaken the task of examining many aspects of the Palazzo Medici, its art, architecture, and decoration. These endeavors bring us a better understanding of the Medici family, however, they shed no panoramic light on the Medici advertising program’s greatest attribute: its flexibility and polyvalent messaging. Understanding how the Medici controlled and presented their image to the different constituencies of Florence will explain how they became the de facto rulers of Florence and earned the moniker the Godfathers of the Renaissance. They used the Palazzo Medici, and its adornments, as a navigational tool to reconcile the tensions of the virtues of the past from those of the present.

The study, which follows, can best be understood as defining, and then aggregating, different circumscribed perspectives through the eyes of the visitors to the Palazzo Medici. To accomplish this task, we will concentrate on two types of visitors: the *vicini* (locals/neighbors) and the *amici* (friends/intellectual peers). Many attributes of these two classes of visitor will be considered such as status, religion, education, culture, education, and wealth. Layering these attributes on to the backdrop of this historical period, the scholarly discourse on this subject, the physical structure and adornments of the Palazzo Medici, and the classical and Christian ideas that influenced the period will add to our understanding of the Medici propaganda program and its intended effects on visitors.

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Literature Review

The Palazzo Medici has been the subject of more scholarship than any other private residence in Florence and fills library shelves and databases. Most of the scholarship is on what is extant and tends to focus its efforts on trying to prove that the Medici, and other families that followed in their footsteps, built these palaces to show their wealth, enhance their status, and to express individualism. I posit a more nuanced conclusion. The Medici, influenced by trends in Florentine thought, such as humanism and Neo-Platonism, built their palace not as a showpiece to enhance their status, but as a functioning space by which they secured and maintained power in Florence.

The transition from interdependency and community of the medieval commune to Renaissance individualism is supported by one of the first modern scholars to attempt to interpret the motives of the Medici. Richard Goldwaite contrasts the medieval commune and its architecture with that of the new Renaissance palace. He concludes that the design was the expression of the individualism embodied by the Renaissance. The medieval clan was gone with its interconnected buildings, towers, and families. The new palaces replaced the feudal society’s interdependency with an emphasis on the nuclear family—individualistic, private, and inward looking. Isabelle Hyman agrees with Goldwaite’s assessment that the new ruling class of Florence had cut itself off from the old norms of lineage and neighborhoods. Goldwaite and Hyman seem to ignore the importance of the Medici faction. I argue that without the bonds of the client/patron ritual, which necessarily is based on interdependency, the Medici faction would not have been successful.

I argue that the client/patron relationship was alive and well in fifteenth-century Florence and this shows that Goldwaite’s individualistic turn had not been completed, but was in the
process of transition. F. W. Kent, who supports this point, in his essay “Palaces, Politics, and Society in Fifteenth-Century Florence” rejects Goldwaite and Hyman supposition wholly. Kent details three distinct points of contention and provides evidence to support each of his claims. First, he details the importance of ancestral land and its regard as sacred to the Florentines.\(^5\) Second, the fact that, “Despite the existence of tracts of empty land within the walls, and the passing of legislation to fill them, patrician palace builders rarely left their native gonfalone.”\(^6\) Their close ties to their community meant more to Florentine society than new land to build upon. Finally, and most importantly to this work, the change in design initiated by the Medici was not related to individualism, but the reinvention of the classical style of the Roman domus, which served the client/patron relationship that was so vital to the Medici. Here, I extend Kent’s argument that the palace was built for its visitors. I examine the Palazzo Medici, through the eyes of its visitors and it will become apparent that Cosimo designed his home and its decoration to accomplish his goal of creating a space, based on the Classical model of the Roman domus. Cosimo used this space to maneuver through the minefield of the competing definitions of ambition and pride, and to enhance his network of patronage, which was the basis of his power.

This project is meant to be an expansion of Kent’s final point situating Classicism as the impetus for the new (or shall we say renewed) design authored by Cosimo de Medici. When we look to the ancient sources, read by Cosimo and his peers, such as Cicero, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Vitruvius we see how Cosimo reconstituted the basic design elements of the Roman domus. This Classical design supported, as it had in the past, the client/patron relationship. Cosimo applied these same components directly to the Palazzo Medici as a practical spatial solution for maintaining the Medici faction. We can also see how the Medici, consciously

\(^6\) Ibid., 48.
or not, or a bit of both, assumed the role of patron of Florence as Augustus assumed the role of patron of Rome. However, I will take it a step further by showing how Cosimo managed to satisfy the different constituents of his faction.

Cohesion was necessary to maintain a political faction. In his essay, Kent mentions the web of connections the Medici family maintained and designated them as the *amici, vicini,* and *parenti* (friends, neighbors, and kin). How did the Medici keep these disparate groups, with differences in socioeconomics, educational, and religious backgrounds, in cohesion with one another? I contend that the Medici accomplished this through advertisement and propaganda.

To make this point, I will undertake a study of the decoration and architecture of the courtyard and the garden and two sculptures installed in the Palazzo Medici, and authored by Cosimo: Donatello’s *Judith and Holofernes* and his bronze *David.* Each space will be examined from the point of view of the *vicini* and the *amici* taking into account their socio-economic, educational, and religious backgrounds. This exercise will show that with one piece of artwork Cosimo could send divergent messages to different viewers simultaneously. Cosimo appeared humble, patriotic, and reverent to the *vicini,* who were less educated and held to traditional doctrine, and learned and ambitious to the *amici,* who held more modern values. He set the stage for a multilayered, polyvalent performance and he was successful. The architecture and decoration of the Palazzo Medici was explicitly sanctioned by Cosimo to portray him, and his family, as the humble servants of Florence, while simultaneously celebrating Classicism and ambition, all with plausible deniability.

The propaganda Cosimo perpetuates, although not overtly, is that Florence could not survive without the private funds he provided. He wanted citizens and outsiders to see the greatness of Florence, while also implying that she was dangerously close to bankruptcy.
and in need of his wealth to shore up the city’s coffers. Cosimo obliquely implied that he filled the gap with his patronage, but not in the traditional and very overt public way witnessed in the Augustan era. This impression helped him control the city with a continual infusion of cash.

In this era, the consensus was that Augustus was the villain who undermined the Roman Republic and his corruption of the virtues of the republic led to Rome’s demise. Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), Florentine Chancellor, and his student Leonardo Bruni are credited with tying Florence's origin not to the Roman Empire but to the Roman Republic. They proposed that the Florentine’s ancestors were not the Caesars, as was common thought during the medieval era, but descendants of Sulla’s veterans. In the Laudatio, Bruni draws the “first historical picture of the destruction of the virtus Romana by imperial autocracy after the end of republic freedom.”

Bruni suggests that the Roman Republic had seen every human talent, but all talent faded one under the rule of one man. He places the blame for the fall of Rome squarely on the shoulders of the Caesars. Bruni argues Caesar and Augustus established the tyrant rule, which eventually transformed the character of Rome and her people. Augustus’ reputation had taken a downward spiral die to Bruni’s claims. Augustus minted coins emblazoned with his image, he used Virgil’s Aeneid to tout his ancestry and legitimize his reign, and he surely authored the Res Gestae.

Above all, Augustus was fraudulent, professing to be a humble republican statesman, while

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8 Ibid., 61.
governing as a tyrant. Although it seems Cosimo followed the Augustan model, he could not do so openly. Cosimo, as did Augustus, encouraged others to see him as indispensible to Florence. But all the while he was quietly manipulating the concepts and virtues that were in contention during this period: pride (ambition) versus humility.

**Sources and Methods**

I will be using the Palazzo Medici, its architecture, and its decoration as my primary sources. This will include the floor plan, courtyard, garden, and the artwork installed in each space by Cosimo. Taken together, these elements constitute a stage on which the Medici and their associations performed the ritual of patronage.

The architecture of the Palazzo Medici, I argue, is based on Cosimo’s desire to revive the Roman *domus* specifically because it supported the client/patron relationship, which was fundamental to his power. Determining which architectural components of the Roman *domus* Cosimo incorporated into his palace tell us what he thought was of import. The framing of certain “views” were instituted to send a specific message to the visitor, as seen in the pedestal of the bronze *David*. The public and private spaces were intended to showcase the inclusion of the clients, but to also make each aware of his place in the social hierarchy as seen in the distinction of spaces between the courtyard and the garden. The architectural design employed by Cosimo welcomed all visitors while staging different performances to reinforce each group’s idea of the Medici family.

Several works will be examined to frame these performances, the most important being Donatello’s. They constitute the main decorative program of the palace courtyard and garden, which Cosimo authored to relay divergent messages to different types of visitors. The courtyard
is dominated by Donatello’s bronze *David*. This five-foot tall depiction of David stood atop a view-through pedestal approximately seven and a half feet in height. In the Biblical story, David is portrayed as the weak, but virtuous, boy who overcame a tyrant with the help of God. David was also seen as a symbol of Florence, adding the possibility that the Medici were co-opting a government symbol to enhance their power. David is first and foremost a Biblical figure; this allowed the family plausible deniability when their detractors accused them of co-opting power or being tyrants.

Other items adorn the courtyard and subtly add to the stage set by Cosimo. Just under the second-floor windows ran a swag decorated with rondels. Some of the rondels held the Medici coat of arms while others depicted scenes from classical mythology. Just off the courtyard were functional rooms that were probably assigned to business activities. The doorframes of these rooms were topped with busts of ancient Roman dignitaries such as Agrippa, Hadrian, and Octavian Augustus. Although not all of the visitors to the palace could decipher their origin and meaning, they surely left them with the impression of power, wealth, and education.

The impression of power was also apparent in the placement of Donatello’s other major work. The view through the pedestal of the bronze *David* framed the second work contributed by Donatello: *Judith and Holofernes*. This work is over seven and a half feet in height. It is considered to be one of the first statues to be conceived in the round in the Renaissance, and it rested on a triangular pedestal and was originally designed as a fountain. The overwhelming tone of the work is Judith as a powerful, fearless, and faithful woman. The story of Judith, like David, comes from the Bible. She, too, is considered pious and virtuous but she is merely a woman, explaining the theme that the weak, even a woman, can triumph with the help of God. Once

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again, the client would first view this work through the lens of Christianity. Judith is also, like David, a metaphor for the citizens of Florence. They represent the weak and small of Florence, but both overcame tyrants because of their piety.

**Organization**

After introducing the overall themes, literature, sources, and methods, I begin this project by creating a historically informed narrative of a visit to the Palazzo Medici by one of the local neighborhood men, the *vicini*. While fictional, this narrative is based on accounts of the ritual of the client/patron relationship. In chapter two, the building’s exterior and interior public spaces are described as well as the art and decoration it held. The visit by the *vicinus* is set against the societal class system that was fifteenth-century Florence. The importance of the *gonfalone* (neighborhood) and the ties it fostered is explained through first-hand accounts of family *ricordanze* (records), a tradition of Florentines of all gradations of society. These family records also detail the social customs practiced by the *vicini* to safeguard their reputation and to increase their status in the republic. With all these layers in place, a picture of how the *vicini* saw the Medici comes into focus. Finally, a detailed description of the works in the courtyard and the garden are described through the eyes of the *vicini*.

Chapter three presents a new variation on this pattern. The *amici* (friends or intellectual peers) are the subject of this exercise. Using Classical authors that were known to and read by Cosimo and his friends, we gain insight into their view of the world. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and many more contribute to the Classical texts that the *amici* were familiar with, many of which were housed in Cosimo’s personal library. Cosimo’s contemporaries, such as humanist Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) and diarist Gregorio Dati (1362-1435), are also consulted to reconstruct the
humanist approach supported by the *amici*. While remaining profoundly religious, the intellectuals of Florence were attempting to expand the definition of religiosity to include an affirmation of human goodness and a new appreciation for wealth and ambition. The tension this created in Florence, which was just emerging from a feudal medieval society, was palpable.

This chapter also examines how the idea of the Roman *domus* was used by Cosimo to navigate the tension of the changing values of Florentine society. I argue that Cosimo utilized ancient Roman architectural models to dramatize these spaces within the narrative of his residence. The purpose of using such a scheme was to present the visitor with messages and impressions about the Medici by the mediums of art and architecture. How did the visitors see the Palazzo Medici? What thoughts were stirred in the viewer’s mind when they arrived at the Palazzo Medici? What were the cultural cues the Medici used to maintain their position of power in the Florentine Republic? With all these layers in place, a picture of how the *amici* saw the Medici, and to some extent themselves, comes into focus. Finally, a detailed description of the works in the courtyard and the garden are described through the eyes of the *amici*.

To conclude this work, I bring together the historically informed accounts of the *vicini* and *amici* to demonstrate how Cosimo de Medici used his palace as way to navigate the tension between ambition and humility of fifteenth century Florence. The Palazzo Medici’s design, architectural elements, and art are the foundations of this argument. Layered upon this foundation is the historical, intellectual, and religious context of the world in which Cosimo lived. The changing definition and value of ambition and humility required Cosimo to negotiate the acceptance, or non-acceptance, by his associates of this new landscape of ideas. His use of polyvalent messages is demonstrated through the eyes, and attitudes, of his visitors.
The reconciliation of changing values goes beyond palace design; it gets to the heart of the transition between old and new, which defines the Renaissance in Florence. This transition from old to modern values began in Florence, but it spread across the Italian Peninsula and then Europe. These palaces, scattered throughout Europe, were directly or indirectly influenced by Cosimo de Medici’s revival of what he knew to be the Roman *domus*. He used his design to navigate the tensions of a new age, brought about by the recovery of an older age—the Classical past. He used his knowledge of Republican Roman architecture in combination with his use of art and decoration to exploit this tension. The Palazzo Medici stands as a monument to the conflict between old and new, which Cosimo’s life, and Florence itself, embodied.
CHAPTER 2:

THE VICINI PERSPECTIVE

“...acquire at least one friend in your gonfalone and align yourself with suitable men, wealthy... and especially with political influence, or from a traditional preeminent family.”

— Giovanni Morelli, Morelli Ricordanza

As he walked down the Via Larga, he planned his plea. He would enter the palazzo with a smile of compliance. He would then take his seat amongst his fellow citizens and wait. The waiting was always the hardest part. It could take hours, sometimes days, to get an audience with Cosimo. But it was important to wait patiently and show no agitation. It was necessary for him, and for his family, to get this matter resolved, and no one could resolve it except Cosimo de Medici. Therefore, he would wait patiently.

This narrative played out in the minds of many average Florentines day after day. These average citizens, who held little power, had an ally. If they were fortunate enough to be from one of the three contiguous gonfalonì (neighborhoods) the Medici faction encompassed, and had cultivated the proper relationship with this leading family, they had access to a network that was vital to their future success. The Medici faction consisted of many people from all walks of life...

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2 For Discussion: Robert A. Fredona, “A Political Conspiracy in Florence: 1340-1382” (Dissertation, Cornell University, 2010), 327. “Gonfalone was originally the name given to a neighborhood meeting in medieval Florence, each having its own flag and coat of arms, leading to the word Gonfalone eventually becoming associated with the flag.”
from the lowliest wool carder to the foreign heads of state. The *vicinus*, mentioned above, was thankful to be part of the Medici faction.

**The Palazzo Medici**

Florentines, including Cosimo, saw their city as a stage. Patricians defined themselves, and their families, by their patronage, their participation in civic life, and their palaces. Cosimo spent his youth in the Casa Vecchia (Figure 2.1), the home of his father, but now it was time to build a new palace. He needed larger accommodations for a growing family, and he would use the palace as part of his political strategy. Cosimo had convinced many Florentines that the city needed him. He loaned money to the city when its coffers ran dry and made large contributions to public and religious building projects. He was Florence’s patron and his palace would aid in his strategy to be indispensible to the republic.

Cosimo used the building of his home as a way to speak to his fellow Florentines, his friends, and his foreign allies. Cosimo built his palazzo on the corner of Via Larga and Via Gori. This location is significant for two reasons. First, the palazzo was situated in direct relation to the nearby Duomo and the Baptistery of Saint John on one end of the Via Calzaiuoli and the Palazzo Vecchio on the other. This placed the Medici at the intersection of the spiritual center of Florence and the seat of its secular government. (Figure 2.2) Second, its placement anchored the three contiguous *gonfaloni* that made up the Medici faction with the Medici parish of San Lorenzo located diagonally across Via Larga. He positioned his palazzo, and therefore, himself, at the center of Florence.
Construction began around 1445 and scholars agree it was completed around 1456.³ According to the sixteenth-century art historian Giorgio Vasari, Cosimo was concerned from the start with avoiding unnecessary ostentation. He rejected a design by Filippo Brunelleschi writing, because, in the words of Vasari, “Filippo’s virtuosity was so clearly displayed in this model that it seemed too luxurious and grand to Cosimo, and, more to avoid envy than the expense, he gave up the idea of using Filippo’s plan.”⁴ Rejecting this design because it was “too sumptuous and magnificent and more likely to stir up envy among his fellow citizens than to confer grandeur or adornment on the city, or bring comfort to himself” articulates much about Cosimo’s consideration for public scrutiny of his actions.⁵ He wanted to inspire loyalty and gratitude not envy. After rejecting Brunelleschi’s design, he commissioned Michelozzo di Bartolomeo. Even with Cosimo’s concerns over public scrutiny, the Palazzo Medici was a magnificent home. Most leading families in Florence lived in large homes, but they were not like the Palazzo Medici. When completed, it represented a new style of Florentine architecture.⁶

Cosimo’s approach to building the Palazzo Medici was unique in Florence as it was one of the few residential buildings in Florence built from the ground up. Buying neighboring buildings and constructing a unified frontage to give the impression of one façade was how most residences were built. This meant the interiors were dark with many small, nonfunctional rooms and winding hallways. By constructing the Palazzo Medici from the ground up, Cosimo had

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⁵ Ibid., 260.
control, not only of the façade of the building, and what it represented, but also the interior. He would use the design of his home to promote his family and their relationships with all parties of his ever-changing world.

**The Vicini – Exterior**

As the *vicinus* approaches the Palazzo Medici, he is, no matter how many times he visits, impressed. The building is large, regal, and imposing. (Figure 2.3) It filled the entire city block. The Medici home played host to so many visitors every day that stone benches lined the exterior on two sides of the edifice to accommodate the overflow from the courtyard. (Figure 2.4) Each corner of the building was emblazoned with the Medici coat of arms, a constant reminder of who lived inside. (Figure 2.5) As he makes his way through the crowd to the Via Larga entrance, he arrives at the androne, a barrel vaulted passage from the street into the courtyard. As usual, the gates are open. Even though he is uninvited, he knows he is not unwelcomed. As he enters the androne, he can see into the courtyard, gracing the center is Donatello’s bronze *David*. (Figure 2.6, 2.7) He can also see through to the garden, which is the home to another work of Donatello: *Judith and Holofernes*. (Figure 2.8, 2.9) As he expected, the crowd is large, so he finds a seat on one of the many benches lining the courtyard and begins his wait.

A first-hand account that enlightens our examination of the process and tradition of waiting to have an audience with a Medici patriarch is found in the memoirs of Tribaldo de’ Rossi. Tribaldo came to the Palazzo Medici six days in a row seeking an audience with Lorenzo, Cosimo’s grandson. He waited alongside the other men there seeking audience with Lorenzo. At last “…on the seventh day, Lorenzo put on his coat and came down to the courtyard and gave audience. Ser Piero told me [Rossi] repeatedly to stay close to him, and that he would tell him
Tribaldo was able to begin his petition but his time and pleas were cut short, however, when they reached the street-side of the gate, “Lorenzo was forced to give audience to the forty or more citizens who also demanded his attention.” This account typifies the average experience of the uninvited vicinus to the Palazzo Medici. The time spent waiting for contact with the Medici was sometimes long.

This visitor is an average citizen of Florence, a resident of the San Giovanni District, and more importantly, a vital part of the Medici faction. The relationship the vicinus had with the Medici was vital to his success in the city of Florence, but this relationship was equally important to the Medici. So, who were these local men who supported the Medici faction? How did they see their world and navigate through the complex political, social, and civic milieu that was Florence in the fifteenth century? Before we continue the visit to the Palazzo Medici, first we must understand Florentine society, its class system, the Medici faction, and the vicini worldview.

As noted in the Chapter one, the impetus for this thesis was a passing comment made by F. W. Kent in his essay “Palaces, Politics, and Society in Fifteenth-Century Florence.” He maintained that the web of connections the Medici family maintained included several divergent groups including vicini and amici. His statement led to questions about how did Cosimo speak to such divergent groups with one palace. To begin the pursuit for answers, a brief overview of Florentine society, which informed its governmental administration structure, is necessary. The character and formulation of the Medici factional strategy will be explicated. Finally, the vicini and amici must be defined through their socio-economic status and their educational background.

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8 Ibid.
The Republic – The Society

Florentine society was composed of four social classes: nobles, merchants, tradesman, and unskilled workers. The class of the nobles owned most of the land and lived on large estates. The nobles were barred from office since the adoption of the Ordinances of Justice, 1293, but over the years these sanctions were eased and allowed quasi-nobles to hold office. The next class belonged to the merchants. The merchants were the *nouveau riche* who gained their affluence by working in businesses like wool, banking, or trade. They belonged to the major guilds and were therefore eligible for public office. The members of the lesser guilds, or tradesmen, equate to today’s middle class consisting of shopkeepers and other professionals. Although not wealthy, they could hold office. The *minuto populo* (small or common people) were considered the unskilled workers and had no job protection. The lower class, barred from guild membership, was not permitted to hold office. Our *vicinus* comes from either the lesser guilds or the *minuto populo*.

The Ordinances of Justice, 1293, established Florence as an independent republic. Those eligible for government office were drawn from the twenty-one guilds of the city. Six men were chosen from the major guilds, two from the minor guilds, and the remaining man was the *Gonfaloniere* – the temporary standard bearer of the republic.⁹ As soon as they were chosen, they were required to leave their homes and take up temporary residence at the Palazzo del Signoria for the duration of their term.

By the 1300s, Florence was a city built on trade and banking. Florence minted the golden *Florin* beginning in 1252, and it became the preferred currency of trade across Europe, which

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established Florence as a major power in the banking industry. Florence was not without her troubles, though. The financial stability was disrupted in 1345, the Black Death arrived in 1348, and the Ciompi Revolt of 1378 was brought about by the discontentment of workers. Salvestro de Medici, a distant cousin of Cosimo’s, was sympathetic to the ciopmi cause and this associated the name Medici as supporting the minuto popolo.

In 1398, Giovanni di Bicci de Medici founded the Medici Bank. Within ten years, he was running a multinational corporation in a city that still held the values of the medieval Christian traditions of the past. All this would soon change. Giovanni retired in 1420 and Cosimo took over the bank. Cosimo quietly grew the family fortune. In 1427, the war with Florence’s greatest rival, Milan, ended. A period of rebuilding and prosperity, attributed to political reforms, began to revitalize Florence. Cosimo, having increased his wealth and his political power, was seen by Albizzi and Strozzi families as a threat. Rinaldo di Messer Maso, the head of the Albizzi family, not only knew his rival Cosimo was more successful, but Cosimo also pulled his support for the Albizzi wish to conquer the city of Lucca and then Cosimo retreated to Verona. Rumors immediately circulated, surely started by his enemies, that Cosimo planned to use his enormous wealth to invade Florence. Cosimo’s enemies sought support from Niccolò da Uzzano, a respected elder Florentine statesman. Uzzano discouraged these actions realizing that Cosimo had so many friends in Florence in might be impossible to get rid of him. To complicate their goal, Rinaldo, who was an “outspoken critic of new Classical learning as being inimical to the

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Christian faith, had many enemies.” This quieted the plot for a few years but by 1433, the rumors began again. “He dressed so plainly only to more easily avoid accusations about his ill-gotten gains. His supposed sympathy for the people was nothing more than the calculated duplicity of the self-seeker.” Cosimo’s wealth brought suspicion, which his enemies utilized well. Finally, they had won enough support to call for Cosimo’s exile. He was arrested, convicted, and exiled. Cosimo’s exile was overturned in less than a year due to his political maneuvering. Seventy Medici enemies and family members were exiled. This episode cemented into Cosimo’s core the importance of maintaining his political faction. His exile caused him to redouble his efforts to be seen as the patron of Florence to forestall the past events from ever being repeated. He proceeded to take control of the city, not overtly, but while remaining in the background and claiming to be just another citizen.

Cosimo, a man who rode a mule instead of a horse so as not to arouse envy, was unofficially the ruler of Florence. His strategies were set in motion out of the public eye. First, his faction succeeded in exiling most of the opposition. Second, he instituted policy through others as Vespasiano da Bisticci wrote, “And whenever he [Cosimo] wished to achieve something, he saw to it, in order to escape envy as much as possible, that the initiative appeared to come from other and not from him.” Third, he voluntarily paid at a higher tax rate than others in Florence. Fourth, he did serve as Gonfaloniere, but only three times in his life and never considered assuming a more permanent role in government. Finally, opponents of the

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13 Ibid., 45.  
14 Ibid., 48.  
15 Ibid., 60.  
16 Bennozzo Gozzioli, Journey of the Magi, 1459, SCALA Archive.  
17 Ibid., Hibbert, The House of Medici, 60.  
18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid., 61
Medici were conveniently excluded from election to the Signoria in times of military or political anxiety. Cosimo successfully returned to Florence, and with the help of the Medici political faction, he quietly gained control of the city and assumed the role of patron of Florence.

The Medici Faction

Cosimo proceeded to build his alliances and associations quietly. Eventually, the Medici family was the center of a large network of friends and associates, but so were those families opposed to the Medici. Dale Kent contends that the opposition was formed solely for the purpose of opposing the Medici while “…the growth of the Medici party represented less the natural transformation of interest groups into action groups under pressure of events, and more the planned and purposeful consolidation of existing social ties, and the creation of new reciprocal obligations, with the express aim of more effective political action.” The modification of the old patronage system was what made the Medici faction successful. Instead of relying only on family, the Medici relied heavily on friends and associates. D. Kent’s premise is that “the formation of ties with smaller or newer or politically unpopular families, not solidly entrenched within the ruling group…made the partisans particularly dependent on their wealthy and socially distinguished patrons.” This allowed the Medici to build a vast network of clients that was “particularly dense and centralized” around the Medici. The family’s enormous wealth, its powerful foreign allies, and its vast network of friends, both local and foreign allowed the Medici to eventually supplant the official government of Florence.

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20 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 29.
23 Ibid.
Marco Parenti, a reasonably successful silk merchant related to the Strozzi family by marriage, wrote his memoirs and gives us a first hand account of a visit to the Palazzo Medici. The importance of these visitors is apparent in his discussion of the events following Cosimo’s death in 1464. Piero, Cosimo’s son, suffered a great lack of support after the death of his father. Parenti highlighted this fact by stating, “that few frequented his [Piero de Medici] house and they were men of little consequence.”24 Meanwhile, the usurper to Medici power, Luca Pitti “held court at his house, where a large part of the citizens went to consult on matters of government.”25 Several months later the power shifted back to the Medici, and Parenti noted that Luca Pitti “remained cold and alone at home, and no one visited him to talk about political affairs — he who used to have his house full of every kind of person.”26 Consequently, a lack of visitors revealed the poor political standing of the leading citizens of Florence.

The Gonfalone

In Quattrocento Florence, a citizen’s gonfalone (neighborhood) was almost sacred, and Cosimo took full advantage of the social ties it created. The city was divided into four quarters or districts. Each of the districts was divided into gonfaloni. This was the basic administrative unit of the city. The neighborhood maintained a catasto, or record book of the neighborhood, by which taxes were collected, a census was taken, and it was also used to determine who was eligible for office.27 The Gonfalonieri di Compagnia were the local representatives of the neighborhoods, and it was their duty to compile a raw list of eligible men to be voted on by

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 208.
citywide scrutiny councils, which determined who from the neighborhood would be eligible to hold office. The success of these vicini depended on their local reputation. Once on the list, a man could only hope to be confirmed if the political record of his ancestors in the neighborhood was respectable. Not only was the neighborhood the basic unit of civic activity, but it was also the basic unit of social activity. Ancestral land, shops, and homes tied the sentimental Florentines to the past and gave them a connection to history and their ancestors. These ties to the past kept families occupying the same neighborhood for generations and this not only increased the chances of intermarriage it also increased the interconnectedness of the neighborhood. Upward mobility was a constant concern in Florence, and the neighborhood played an important role in one’s ability to climb the social ladder.

As Cosimo’s business and wealth grew, so did his influence. The Medici family lived in the San Giovanni district of Florence, and they were spread across three contiguous neighborhoods: Lion d’oro, Drago, and Vaio. Cosimo’s neighbors relied on his patronage to insure their success.

The Vicini – Socioeconomics

The socio-economic status of our vicinus determined his view of the world. He was likely either a laborer or tradesman of a lower guild. He made a modest income and in times of need, he could not turn to Florence but he could turn to his patron. He was not one of the elites, but he had aspirations to move up the socio-economic ladder. In Florence, with the right virtues,

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29 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 64.
reputation, and friends you could better your status. It was a delicate dance to perform, but if done well, the rewards were unrivaled and could allow the *vicinus* and his family to become wealthier, more respected, and hold more influence in the city. Fortunately, the *ricordanza* (family record) was a hallmark of Florentine life. Most affluent families, and many of nominal means, keep meticulous records of births, deaths, marriages, and baptisms. They often recorded their thoughts in these records. The *Morelli Ricordanza* makes clear how the common man viewed his position in society.

Giovanni Morelli began his record at the early age of twenty-two. Although he details many thoughts on his family and his abandonment by his mother, the main reason he writes this account is due to the early death of his father. In his world, the father teaches all that is important: how to behave and get along with friends, how to act in public, how to handle social and business relationships. In Giovanni’s mind, the loss of his father at the age of two did not allow him to receive the advantages of other youths. He did not receive the social education he thought necessary to be successful. The *ricordanza*, therefore, was written for his own sons in the event he died before he could teach them the ways of the world. Morelli wrote in his record the importance of the father to the son:

> He will make you expert in speaking to citizens, to officials, to rectors. In the embassies he commits to you he will instruct you in the tenor of words, the modes or courtesies which have to be given, the [modes of] entry in embassies according to who [is receiving the embassy]…He will either charge you: “Do this and bear yourself in such and such a way,” or you will be with him, and will see his manner both of speaking and acting, and you will learn.32

He was instructing his sons how to win friends through formal behavior. He divided his lesson into two specific categories: one behavior for dealing with those that needed help from the

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32 Ibid., Trexler, *Public Life*, 168.
Morellis (their *vicini*), and those that the Morellis needed (the Morelli’s patrons). He also defines four groups in society that his sons will have to negotiate. First, boys of their own age, with which they should cultivate relationships of trust and mutual obligation early in life. Second were neighbors, those living in their *gonfalone*. Third, were the powerful men of the district who held power. Finally, he instructed that his sons cultivate one special man, whom he called an honorific resource.

Morelli also gave instructions on how one could achieve standing in the *gonfalone*, the district, and perhaps in the city as a whole. He said to be seen frequently speaking good of those he wished to befriend in hopes that it would get back to the target. They should also make themselves available day and night to these honorific resources and offer one’s services without being asked. Gifts also advanced these pursuits, but only in moderation. One should also entertain those he wished to befriend in his home on feast days, especially those associated with his neighborhood. Morelli’s instruction to his sons goes into great detail, but his most important advice involves the relationship with the honorific resource. He recommends being in his presence as often as possible and imitating all he does in relation to business, family, relationships, civic, and governmental duties. The ideas Giovanni passed down to his sons clarify the texture of Florentine society in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. The

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33 Ibid., 169.
34 Ibid., 170.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 171.
37 Ibid. “Again, exert yourself to associate and be domestic with one excellent man [who is] sage and old and without vice. And watch his modes of operating in words, in counsel, in the way he orders his family and his things. Take the lead, imitate him, and thus follow him and try to make yourself like him. Keep him always present in your mind, and when you do something, mirror yourself in him. If you are to speak before a [government] office or in some authoritative place, keep this capable man in mind, take heart and frankness from him and follow his style. Having allows in mind, you will choose the right ways and will not fall into vileness of spirit, and you will be open and daring, since you will always be comforted by his image.”
Morelli *Ricordanza* proves how important the social bonds were to the average man and allows us to understand their world from the bottom up.

**The Vicini – The Courtyard**

When we last left the *vicinus*, he was waiting to speak to Cosimo in the Palazzo Medici courtyard. After pleasantries had been exchanged with those also anticipating a meeting with the patron, there was nothing to do but wait. As he sat, he accessed his place in the city of Florence. No, he was not a wealthy man, but he had potential. He was aligned with the Medici family, the wealthiest of all the citizens of Florence. Cosimo was a good man, without which Florence would surely have gone bankrupt. Cosimo not only attended to the needs of lowly citizens like himself, but he also attended the needs of the city as a whole. The *vicinus* feels fortunate.

Eventually, his eyes would wander to Donatello’s bronze *David* that took center stage in the courtyard. It was not large, only about five feet tall, but it was on a pedestal approximately seven feet tall.\(^{38}\) The iconic figure of David atop a view-through pedestal dominated the courtyard. The client sees the figure of David as contemplative, his head tilted down and his gaze almost hidden by the brim of his hat. He stands relaxed with his weight on his right leg while his left foot rests atop the severed head of Goliath. He holds a large sword in his right hand, and his left hand rests on his hip.

The *vicinus*, being a Florentine, was most assuredly Christian. He recognizes David, first and foremost, as the Biblical David (*I Samuel* 17:1-58). He knows the story well. The Biblical David saved the Jews from the Philistines, with the help of God. A boy stood up to a giant, and

defeated him, and rose from a lowly shepherd to become a king. He also knew that Florence had adopted David as a symbol of the city in 1416 when they moved a marble David (also a work of Donatello) to the Palazzo Vecchio, officially making him a symbol of the Republic. (Figure 2.10) This was in response to their victory over other cities in Tuscany. The earlier marble David, while being the same iconic Biblical figure and being shaped by the same hands, is very different from the bronze David authored by the Medici and placed in their courtyard. The marble David, which still betrays vestiges of the Gothic Style, is strikingly different from Donatello’s later work. His face and eyes have no life in them. He almost seems unaware that Goliath’s head lies at his feet. He does not wield a sword; he has the traditional sling and stone as depicted in the Biblical story.

The vicini, therefore, sees this as a religious symbol with Florentine connections. The religious lesson of David and Goliath was that God interceded to help His people. The truly righteous would always win because they had God on their side. A plaque mounted on the pedestal gives him a context within which to approach the work: “The victor is whoever defends the fatherland. God crushes the wrath of an enormous foe. Behold! A boy overcame a great tyrant. Conquer, o citizens!”39 According to the inscription, the Medici meant David to be seen as a religious figure as well as a tyrant-slayer. Both of these concepts played well to the audience in the courtyard. Cosimo, through his use of David as a Biblical figure, assured his clients he was religious, virtuous, and a good Christian. Cosimo, using David as a Florentine symbol, was aligning himself with the citizens and against the tyrants, which is ironic in the sense that David usurped power from Saul. David, in this sense, symbolizes ambition; he began as a humble shepherd and eventually became the King of Israel. This nuance may have been lost on the

vicinus because he would first associate David with humility and obedience before God, and secondarily as ambitious.

As the client continued to await his audience, he would surely notice the architecture and the other decorations of the courtyard. Columns separated the covered walkways around the perimeter of the courtyard from the open-air center. (Figure 2.11) Windows from the second floor looked down on the courtyard and were situated atop a running border of swags and rondels. (Figure 2.12) The rondels carried a message of their own. Some depicted the Medici coat of arms, which consisted of a shield and palle (balls). These were symbols of the family’s power and status, not only in the city but also among foreign powers. The accompanying rondels were scenes derived from Roman and Greek mythology. The vicinus probably had enough general knowledge to recognize these scenes as such, but more likely than not, he did not posses the formal education that would have been required to recognize and interpret their specific meaning. Ultimately, these rondels gave the client the impression that the Medici were powerful, inside and outside the city of Florence, and they were learned. The final mode of decoration in the courtyard were busts. There are functional rooms located directly off the courtyard. Above the doorframes of these rooms were stone busts of Romans of prominence such as Hadrian, Agrippa, and Octavian Augustus. These added to the idea that the Medici were interested in Roman antiquity, and therefore inheritors of the greatness of ancient civilizations. The vicinus saw past the Pagan associations of ancient Rome by either self-delusion, ignorance, or in some cases pure denial.
The Vicini – The Garden

Eventually, the client’s eye would peer through the pedestal on which the bronze David stood. The pedestal framed another work by Donatello, Judith and Holofernes. Although he could see the statue well enough to recognize the scene, he could not study its detail; he was too far away. He would never be so presumptuous to enter Cosimo’s garden without a specific invitation. He simply assumed that it, like the David, was paying homage to traditional medieval Christian values. In his world, humility was a virtue; therefore, Judith must be humble.

Commissioned by Cosimo and created by Donatello, this work is over 7.5 feet in height. It sits on a triangular pedestal and was designed as a fountain. The story of Judith, like David, comes from the Bible. The Book of Judith details the story of how the Jews defeated the army of the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar sent his general, Holofernes, to conquer his enemies at Bethulia. Judith takes it upon herself to “deliver the city” by sneaking into the Assyrian camp, seducing Holofernes, then plying him with drink and killing and decapitating him. Once again, the vicinus would first view this work through the lens of traditional medieval Christian doctrine. Judith represents the triumph of a mere woman over the more powerful General Holofernes.

The overwhelming impression of the work is Judith as a powerful, fearless, and faithful woman. She stands triumphantly over the slain Holofernes with a sword raised high in her right hand. The crumbling body of Holofernes rests at her feet as she holds his head by the hair exposing his neck. Judith, like David, is metaphorical for the citizens of Florence. They represent the weak and small of Florence, but both overcame tyrants because of their piety. Judith is still considered a symbol of virtue, peace, liberty, and victory by the weak over the strong.
Our *vicinus*, vital because they made up the largest percentage of the Medici faction’s base, needed to be reassured of his choice of associates. To accomplish this, Cosimo needed to portray himself and his family as traditionally pious, religious, virtuous, and with the city’s best interest at the fore. The locals, who made up his base, were sparsely educated and surely not well versed in the civic humanism and the Neo-Platonic thought that was sweeping through Florence. They were also religious, but in a more traditional way than Cosimo and his peers. Their religious practices were more public than private and based more in images than in the word. Although they wanted to partake in the civic activities of Florence, this drive came from a practical point of view. The local men wanted to increase their reputation and status in hopes of increasing their wealth and influence. Through Cosimo’s careful authorship, the Palazzo Medici’s public spaces became a stage on which the Medici family played out their role as virtuous citizens and patrons of Florence who used their wealth to uphold and enhance the republic and her standing in the region. Cosimo’s depiction of himself and his family gave solace to the *vicinus* seeking assurance that they were supporting the most virtuous and patriotic patron possible. After all, their reputation and future depended on it.
Figure 2.1 - Medici - Casa Vecchia Floor Plan.
Figure 2.2 – Map of Florence, 1462.
Figure 2.3 – Palazzo Medici – Exterior.

Figure 2.4 Benches – Palazzo Medici.
Figure 2.5 – Medici Coat of Arms.

Figure 2.6 – Donatello, bronze David (front).

Figure 2.7 – Donatello, bronze David (back).
Figure 2.8 – Donatello, Judith and Holofernes (full).
http://museicivicifiorentini.comune.fi.it/palazzovecchio.
Figure 2.9 – Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes* (head).
http://museicivicifiorentini.comune.fi.it/palazzovecchio.

Figure 2.10 – Donatello, marble *David*.
Figure 2.11 – Palazzo Medici Courtyard. 

Figure 2.12 - Palazzo Medici Courtyard swags and rondels. 
CHAPTER 3:
THE AMICI PERSPECTIVE

“I arrived at the house of the magnificent Cosimo, where I discovered a house that is-as much in the handsomeness of the ceilings, height of the walls, smooth finish of the entrances and windows, numbers of chambers and salons, elegances of the studies, worth of the books, neatness and gracefulfulness of the gardens, as it is in the tapestry decorations, chests of inestimable workmanship and value, noble sculptures, designs of infinite kinds as well as of priceless silver-the most beautiful I may ever have seen, or believe it possible to see.”
— Galeazzo Maria Sforza, April 17, 1459

He is on his way to the Palazzo Medici to dine with his old friend Cosimo. He is enthusiastic about this visit; not that any visit with Cosimo is ordinary, but this one is special. A foreign delegation is visiting Florence and, as everyone knows, the business of the city is finalized around Cosimo’s table. He wonders what the topic will be tonight: a business deal, a treaty, or maybe the arrangement of a marriage. Whatever the topic, it will be interesting. Watching Cosimo handle his affairs, and those of the city, was a study in contradictions. Cosimo, a quiet reserved man who tried not to attract attention, regularly hosted the most important people of Italy. He loved his family and extended that affection to his friends and associates. Being in Cosimo’s home was somehow grand and warm at the same time. He had more wealth than any other man in the city, but he greeted everyone as if they were his brother.

The second narrative we will entertain is that of the amici. The amici (or friends) were also tied to Cosimo through the client/patron relationship, but they were a very different lot than the vicini. Some were Cosimo’s intellectual peers, some were artists that he fostered, some were the philosophers, authors, and great thinkers of the era, and some were foreign dignitaries. These
were the men who, like Cosimo, were interested in the Classical past. They were inspired by the unwillingness of urban middle-class men to accept their lot in life. They longed for a better way. Many subscribed to Bruni’s ideas and were convinced that the lineage of their city hailed from the Roman Republic. This stoked a desire to continue to uncover the secrets of the past, an initiative Cosimo had been involved in since his youth.

**A Classical View**

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, a clandestine enterprise persisted. Men searched Europe for hidden treasure. The precincts of the Holy Church concealed their prize. They were not seeking religious relics or hallowed symbols of medieval Christendom. Secreted away in the shadowy caverns of the church, lay a reward much more ancient and precious. What these treasure hunters were actually after was knowledge and eloquence.¹ Young Cosimo and his cohorts were seeking the hidden wisdom and linguistic virtuosity of the ancient world. The shared sentiment at this time was the achievements of the classical past in philosophy, architecture, sculpture, and rhetoric were unsurpassed. Cosimo’s tutor, Rossi, introduced him to humanists Bracciolini and Niccoli, which inspired in him a fascination with finding and studying classical literature.² Cosimo was a true bibliophile, and after he had taken on the responsibility of the bank, he financed trips all over Europe and the East organized by his chief book scout, Poggio.³ Therefore, from across Europe, ancient texts made their way to Florence. The rebirth of Classical ideas helped shape the new interpretation of these texts and Cosimo financed much of

³ Ibid., 17.
Builders of private palaces, like the one built by Cosimo, had many issues to take into consideration. How far should one go for honor and fame? A palace could not be too ostentatious or magnificent. Magnificence was desirable but was even more suspect than it had been in Republican Rome. Should a citizen be civic-minded or should he withdraw from the public eye to appear more humble? Competing ideals of magnificence and ambition versus moderation and humility had to be balanced in concordance with Classical views, all under the watchful eye of the Church.

Florentine humanists read Classical texts, which informed their view of the world. This period of reviving the Classical past fit nicely into the wish to revise the medieval view of wealth, individual status, and civic duty. Civic duty and activity should take precedent over prayer and contemplation. Hospitality and the relationship between citizens and their city are also some of the concepts being reexamined by the intellectuals of Florence.

Many Classical authors provided the framework for the ideas burgeoning during the Renaissance. In one of his letters, Cosimo chooses humanism over scholasticism, writing, “…to be drawn by study away from the active life is contrary to moral duty. For the whole glory of virtue is activity.” The importance of the home in the client/patron relationship is also found in Alberti’s writing. In De re Aedificatoria, he writes:

…we decorate our property as much to distinguish family and country as for any personal display, and who would deny this to be the responsibility of a good citizen? For both of these reasons, it is preferable to make the parts that are particularly public or are intended principally to welcome guest, such as the façade, vestibule…as handsome as possible.

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5 Ibid., Book IX, 1. See Cicero’s De Officiis: “…in the home of a distinguished man, in which numerous guests must be entertained and crowds of every sort of people received, care must be taken to have it spacious…”
Just as in ancient Greece, it is of the utmost import to be hospitable to “guest-friends,” but one must take care not overdo it. Cosimo also felt a need to promote his home city, its citizens, and Florence’s values. Smith explains, “The virtues and vices revealed by their [cities] deeds are the same as in private individuals.” The idea that men and cities were profoundly symbiotic was a well-known Classical view. Dati, in *Istoria di Firenze* dal anno 1380 in 1437, writes that private homes and palaces are seen as contributing to the honor of the city, along with the commemoration of their owners. The civilized quality of life in Florence was often measured by its abundance of beautiful buildings. This was seen as evidence of the virtue and resourcefulness of its citizens. All of these ideas surely influenced Cosimo’s thoughts on honor, fame, and virtue achieved through architecture.

In sum, the ideas expressed by the aforementioned authors were part of the vocabulary of the thinkers and writers of Florence in this period. Civic participation was encouraged. Hospitality shown “guest-friends” was very important. Men and cities were symbiotic in nature and in virtue. The beauty of architecture, including homes and palaces, lent to the beauty and virtue of the city. The decoration of homes distinguished the family, as well as the city, and this is the duty of any good citizen. These practical messages, while seemingly on point, fails to take into consideration one important element — the Church.

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[but] one must be careful too, not to go beyond proper bounds in expense and display especially if one is building for oneself” (*Off. 1.140*).


7 Ibid.
A Religious View - the Sin of Pride

The Church accepted grandeur and display in churches but was much more opposed to spending on material things unrelated to religious buildings. Alberti and Cicero refer to examples from ancient Rome, predating the rise of Christianity and the Church. Yes, the cultures of ancient Rome and Renaissance Florence were very much the same because of political participation and patronage and the relation between the two. In other ways, their cultures were very different. Florence was infused with the traditional Christian concepts of pride and humility. This is where the tension lay. Because of the influx of commerce and trade, many in Florence had become wealthy. From these circumstances grew a need to reevaluate the lives they led, their relationship to God, the sin of pride, and the virtue of humility.

The sin of pride has been an integral part of Christian theology since its inception and is condemned throughout both the Old and New Testaments and every moral treatise on the subject. Pride is denounced time and time again in Proverbs and Psalms, the most famous being “Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18); another is “God resists the proud” (Proverbs 3:34). Psalm also confirms this assessment of pride, “In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”; all their thoughts are, “There is no God” (Psalms 10:4). Augustine of Hippo in The City of God (410 C.E.), uses pride to explain the downfall of the whole human race through original sin. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), a French Abbot, wrote of the seven deadly sins, with pride being named the basest of all sin because it was foundational to all other sin asserts:

“Pride is the throne of injustice, the corruption of man, the ruin of the Devil…the beginning of sin, [and] the mother of strife.” It is through pride, “loathsome to
God, hated by angles, intolerable to men,” that Bernard believes Satan derives his power over humanity. “The Devil reigns in man through pride.”

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), a native son of Florence, also continued the tradition of judging pride as a deadly sin at the turn of the thirteenth century in his Divine Comedy. In Purgatory, those judged prideful were yoked with slabs of stone on their necks to keep their heads bowed. This was an eternal show of humility, the inverse of pride. The worst sins, those that disrupt human faculty, are found at the lowest levels of Purgatory. Pride resides here. Abusing human’s rational faculty with pride or envy weighs the soul the most and relegates pride as the basest of all sins. Dante laid the foundations upon which later writers would rely. He set ancient Pagan writers and philosophers side by side with Christian doctrine. Ironically, he also wanted fame, for how else could a writer earn a living, he needed to be lauded across Tuscany to receive patronage. However, he also believed in the authority of the Church and the pursuit of the medieval notions of humility.

The ideas about pride and ambition sewn by these authors were the traditional view held by most Florentines. But change was underway. A revolution in thought was sweeping Florence and Cosimo and his friends were caught up in this change.

A Changing Landscape

Cosimo, and his peers, were born into a changing world. Their era was one of transition from a medieval world of poverty and feudal communes ruled by the doctrines of the medieval society to one of tremendous economic growth, wealth, knowledge, and luxury. Florence was the

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center of the banking system for the whole of Europe and Cosimo ran its largest bank. As the wealth of Florence grew, so did the wealth and status of some of its citizens, especially the Medici. All this change in status and wealth led to changing ideas about pride and ambition.

This intersection, upon which Cosimo is situated, explains the actions he took throughout his life. His father, with traditional views on ambition, had warned him to project sincerity and humility so as not stir envy amongst his fellow Florentines and lived by his words. His father was known to dress, act, and live modestly even as his business grew. Giovanni was alive just a few decades after Dante’s death, so he was definitely aware of the concept of pride as taught by the medieval Church. He also lived at the same time as Petrarch, considered the first humanist, but Giovanni was known to be a man of industry not letters. Cosimo, on the other hand, was interested in the Classics since his youth. He was open to new and different ideas. His travels across Europe as a young man searching for ancient texts attest to the notion of Cosimo as an avid bibliophile with a love of learning. He was also a Christian. Cosimo was the first generation of Medici to be confronted with the tension between ambition and humility.

The desire of men like Cosimo, and his intellectual circle, to find a new way to define themselves, to detach from the ways of the medieval past, led to the search for ancient manuscripts. These men thought antiquity held the answers to the question of how a man should live, think, behave, and participate in civic duties. They were searching for a way to change the course of human development and civilization. They were prideful, ambitious, wealthy, and they were Christians. Pride, as translated into English in the sixteenth century, means ambition. This presented a dilemma for the men of wealth and education in Florence. How could this new direction of civic duty, secular activity, and accumulation of wealth be reconciled with Christian doctrine where ambition is the deadliest of sins? Writers and thinkers in Florence began to
cultivate a new way of approaching this subject. The world was changing. Life was shifting and the expanding of secular activities and business concerns had to be taken into account. The great writers of the time tried to evolve the perspective of the past in order to synthesize the new realities of the age. They were attempting to change the perception of pride and ambition. In the past, pride was a sin. They questioned this premise.

This precipice is where Cosimo, and his amici, found themselves. They were living in a city ruled by traditional medieval ideas. Pride and ambition were to be avoided, and humility embraced. But they were successful, intellectual, and trying to pull Florence out of the mindset of the feudal commune it had been in the recent past. The world was changing, and they thought it necessary that man evolved too, especially in his thinking about his relationship with God. They felt that God had made them in His image, so they should strive to be like God.

However, as with any movement, attitudes did not change overnight. The process of shedding the guilt of pride and ambition moved slowly. It also moved from the top down. The well-educated elite and their well-educated clients would be the first to be exposed to these new ideas and therefore, be the first to embrace them. As described in chapter two, the vicini were not necessarily well educated. They held all the traditional religious values of the past. To many Florentines, overt pride and ambition would still have been seen as sinful and contemptuous of the Church’s teachings. This is where Cosimo found himself, at the intersection of a new way to view the nature of man and the closing chapters of the medieval Church. This is how Cosimo and the amici saw their world—changing.
In God’s Image and Likeness

As stated earlier in this chapter, all sin finds pride/ambition in its foundation. Pride and ambition are also found in the foundation of the answer to the tensions experienced by men of this period as enumerated in the previous section. Many Italian thinkers were trying to reevaluate and transform the relationship between the new more secular life they were living and traditional medieval Christian doctrine. Writers and thinkers in Florence promoted a new notion of human nature shaped by their image of God and wanted to capture the true associations between man and God. Men were operative, effective, and volitional. This new approach to God’s relationship to man and the implications it carried for everyday life, supported by Cosimo and the amici, generated controversy and change.

The dignity of man and the glorification of human nature was a principle characteristic of the new culture inhabited by the intellectuals and elite of Florence, including Cosimo. This new culture was wholly opposed to the traditions of the medieval society’s theme of the misery of the human condition. Human achievement was to be celebrated, not condemned. Ambition was intricately woven into the very fabric of man. Man has an innate need and desire to succeed.

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) was a client of Cosimo’s. He was a Neo-Platonic philosopher whose fundamental commitment was to substantiate his thesis that the nature of the human soul was immortal and divine. He addresses Lorenzo, Cosimo’s grandson, in the preface of his Theologica Platonica that his dual purpose was to “reinforce worship of God and to bring about a new understanding about the nature of man.”

He thought that man wanted to not serve another, because service to another is not in his nature. Instead, man wants to succeed in any endeavor and overcome his competition. Ficino believes that ambition is not a sin; it is quite the

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opposite. In this passage, he states his concept of natural law, “What all men desire, and especially the superior ones, is desired by them as a good by a natural law…” In other words, no human desires anything evil, therefore whatever man desires must be good. Striving for more is the human condition, and one should not suppress this inherent human desire.

Ambition, by the traditional medieval standard, was condemned because it would eventually lead man to compete with God. Ficino fought back against this supposition. He argued that, without care, ambition can be misapplied, but that it is also a sign of man’s nobility. He writes, “And so man desires none to be superior, desires no equal, will not permit anything to be removed from his authority. And since this is the condition of God alone, man therefore aspires to godhood.” He sees ambition and pride, not as the Devil’s work, but “a sign of our inherent divinity.” Ficino believed that “Man is conceived of not only as the image of God, but as a veritable divinity — a god on earth and a god in the world to come.” They based this idea in a Biblical verse from Genesis:

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness: and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (Genesis 1:26)

Here, not only is man created in the image of God, but he is also set to rule over the earth, as God rules over the universe. It is not difficult to envision how a reexamination of this passage could lay the foundation for a change in man’s view of himself.

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10 Ibid., 492.
11 Ibid., 493.
12 Ibid.
13 Trinkaus, 476.
Writers and philosophers of Quattrocento Florence like Ficino, fashioned new possibilities when viewing humankind’s place in the universe. They were attempting to change the notion that pride and ambition were rooted in evil. Their logic was quite simple: God rules over the universe, and if God created man in His image, and gave man the ability to rule over the earth, then man is inherently akin to God. Ficino echoes this here:

Even if [man] is forced to serve, he hates his master since such service is contrary to his nature. In fact he strives to overcome in any business and is ashamed to be overcome in even the smallest matters or the most trivial games, as if it offended the natural dignity of man.14

Man should strive for perfection in all his endeavors and aspire to be like God. This new concept of man’s place in relation to God became the basis for man’s newfound nobility and divinity. The Genesis passage above, allowed them to supplant the negative connotations of what was previously considered “the fall from Grace” with the new idea of man’s natural divinity, within the context of Christianity. This leap allowed the reevaluation of sin, ethics, morality, and virtue. Cosimo and his amici embraced these changes.

The Amici – Exterior

When we last left the amicus, he was winding his way through the streets of Florence to the Palazzo Medici. He passed the Palazzo della Signoria (Figure 3.1), which was the official seat of the Florentine government, but he knew all the important decisions took place at Cosimo’s palace. In the distance, down the Via Calzaiuoli, he could see the Baptistery of St. John (Figure 3.2) and Santa Maria del Fiore (Figure 3.3), the most beautiful church in all of Italy.

14 Ibid., 490.
It stood uncompleted for almost 140 years, until Brunelleschi, with funds supplied by the Medici, completed it in 1459. Projects like the Duomo were among of the reasons Cosimo was so admired. He was a generous citizen and faithful in supporting Florence and her sanctuaries. Cosimo was so integral to the functioning of the city, many wondered if Florence would survive without his patronage. The *amicus* shared this sentiment. Cosimo was such an important part of the city, without him, Florence surely would have not endured. As the amicus walked toward the Palazzo Medici, he suddenly realized that Cosimo’s home was situated between the heart of Florence’s government and her religious center. He thought, “How fitting.”

Finally, the *amicus* arrives at the Church of San Lorenzo. (Figure 3.4) This was the Medici family parish and was diagonal across the Via Larga from the palace. As he approaches, he is reminded that this place is like no other in Florence. Not only is it a grand home, but also it is carefully thought out and functional. The exterior has many windows for light, benches for guests, and an ever-open gate. The *amicus* has visited Cosimo on other occasions during the business day. It was a spectacle. People from all walks of life crowded the courtyard and overflowed into the street. It was more akin to a busy marketplace than a home. When he had come on those occasions, he went directly into the garden to wait for Cosimo, away from the rabble. Fortunately, there are no throngs of locals waiting to see Cosimo at this late hour, which gives him the chance to survey the palace in a more meticulous way than usual. The building is grand from the outside, but looking through the androne from the street elicited memories of Cicero’s and Vitruvius’ essays on the ancient Roman *domus*. Cosimo understood the necessity of the client/patron relationship; he also knew that no one utilized it as effectively as the ancient Romans.
The Architecture of Patronage - The Roman *domus* (Figure 3.5)

Cosimo, in determining the design for his home, surely looked to the manuscripts of his favorite Classical writers for inspiration. Bracciolini, an associate of Cosimo’s and also a Chancellor of Florence, was famous for recovering ancient manuscripts including Vitruvius’ work *de Architectura* (15-13 BCE) in 1414. Comparing his writings to Cosimo’s floor plan leads to only one conclusion; the precedent for the patronage structures within the Palazzo Medici was deliberately modeled upon that of ancient Rome. (Figure 3.6) Vitruvius made the distinction between the public and private space within the ancient Roman *domus* (home). Those of equal or higher social status than the owner, like the *amici*, were allowed into those rooms of the family, earning the title of invited guests. Meanwhile, uninvited guests, like the *vicini*, were allowed only within the public spaces. The layout of the Palazzo Medici drew upon the ancient Roman model. Like the ancient Roman *domus*, the Palazzo was an intentional space. Rooms were set along a linear passageway, with straight walls and ninety-degree angles. While this seems unsurprising today, the labyrinth effect of earlier Italian palaces, such as the Palazzo della Signoria, stood in marked contrast to this arrangement.

Cosimo built the Palazzo Medici around an open-square courtyard much like the ancient central atrium in Roman homes. The courtyard allowed access to all the other areas of the Palazzo. The Roman atrium was the space in which the client would call upon his patron to inquire if there was anything he could do for the patron that day. This ritual, the *salutatio*, was crucial to the functioning of the later Republic and early Empire and dictated the plan of the ground floor of Roman residences during that time. The Palazzo Medici’s use of the same architectural framework likely stems from the similarity in social functioning between the

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Romans of the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. and the contemporary republican Florentines.

Some ancient critics looked upon spending large amounts of money on a home as “worthless or ruinous show,” but others were more practical. In extremely competitive societies like Rome (or Florence), it was a social necessity. The Roman *domus* was not akin to our contemporary conception of a home. We have, in most cases, a separation of our working environment and our home environment. We consider work a public activity carried out in a public place. In our homes, we are afforded a private space, which for the most part, we only share with family and very close friends. To understand the client/patron relationship, we must divorce ourselves from modern ideas of home and supervene upon ourselves the culture of an extremely competitive society like ancient Rome or Renaissance Florence.

Cosimo understood the close link between social standing and the *domus* is unique to the way Romans, and later the Florentines, viewed public life. For these citizens, the home was the main venue of public life. Men had to perform in the arena of civic and social affairs to maintain status and to sustain, or better yet, improve their reputation. Some virtues were more important than others to these men. Among the most worthy were *virtus* (roughly valor), *mos maiorum* (traditionalism), *pietas* (religiosity, duty), and *dignitas*. The best was for a patrician to increase his *dignitas* was to increase the volume of social activity focused on his home. Wallace-Hadrill posits that a Roman citizen is bound to bring “*aedifictio* [edification] to the aid of his *dignitas.*” In other words, if a patron had the means to build a home that would enhance his social worth, the patron would, more likely than not, do it.

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17 *Dignitas* has no direct English translation and is unique to ancient Romans. It is culturally subjective and is associated with dignity, prestige, or charisma.
18 Ibid., Wallace-Hadrill, 45.
The home has a close reciprocal kinship between the architectural entity of the home and the civic and social activity that goes on within it. Cosimo knew the home was the stage for the client/patron relationship. Wallace-Hadrill’s observations on the ruins of Roman-Pompeian domūs corroborate ancient authors accounts of the architecture of patronage. Although the elements of gender and age seem to be absent from Roman concern, the distinction of social rank was central to the architecture of the domus. The obsession of the Florentine humanists with ancient culture provided Cosimo with a design concept that would inform his palace and its decoration. He put this concept to use in service of his family and their power structure.

The Amici – Courtyard

As the amicus enters the courtyard, the feature that dominates his line of sight is Donatello’s bronze David. His experience differs significantly from that of the vicinus described in the previous chapter. The vicinus saw David as a boy who killed a tyrant and freed his people with the help of God. The vicinus also saw David as a symbol of the city, but would not have inferred the supposition that the Medici had subverted virtually all authority in the city into their hands. Due to the humanist education the amicus had received, the David in the Medici Courtyard represents many things; Biblical stories, the patriotic embrace of Republican Florence, and a tribute to the Classical past, in imagery and deed.

As he assesses the statue, the first impression that comes to his mind is that of the Biblical David. He, of course, knows the story of the lowly shepherd delivering his people from the tyrants attempting to defeat them, but this was different in several ways. First, and foremost, was the nudity. This leads the amicus down several paths. Could this be a reference to sodomy, a
crime that had pervaded Florence for decades? He does not believe so because the Medici were not so reckless as to publically flaunt something that was illegal and such a pervasive problem in Florence that the Office of the Night had been established in the 1420s to curb the practice. He then considers that it might represent what Neo-Platonists called Platonic love. He knew Cosimo was familiar with the idea because one of Cosimo’s clients, Ficino, championed the idea that it consisted of the natural chaste relationship between men. He believed the soul’s spiritual ascent was driven by the love between men. On the other hand, possibly the nudity was Donatello’s attempt to create his own version of the freestanding male nude, so heralded antiquity. Most of these seemed a plausible answer to him, but maybe there is more to be uncovered and more connections to be made.

Another striking facet of this rendition of David is the overall appearance of his body. The amicus takes note of David’s striking beauty. He is young, delicate, vulnerable, and almost androgynous, particularly from the rear. However, since logic tells him this is not meant to be a homosexualized message, he reconsiders Donatello’s motives as a homoeroticized depiction of the male body. Or, could it be related to the religious context that he previously considered? After thinking through the implications of the Biblical account, he decides the vulnerability of David is contextually appropriate for the Biblical story. David must appear vulnerable for the presence of God to be necessary. His vulnerability suggests the existence of God. Even the way his face is cast into shadow by the brim of his hat may suggest that a divine presence

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overshadows David. What Donatello did not show in his sculpture is as important as what he did show. So the *amicus* concludes that, like David, the Medici hold their position of power, less to their own merits, and more to God’s grace and can only continue to be blessed with His grace through virtuous conduct. There is another, less righteous, message he also sees in the association of the Biblical David and the Medici. Dynastic ambition might be suggested by connecting the house of Medici with the house of David.

The educated friend is also aware of the conviction, in Quattrocento Florence among Neo-Platonists, that beneath the surface of Pagan beliefs lay a divine truth that could be reconciled with Christian beliefs. Many Neo-Platonists believed that a confluence of Pagan and Christian ideas could lead to the discovery of the unity of truth and a single reconcilable whole. In the later Middle Ages, some attempted to link Old Testament figures with Pagan figures to reconcile the tension between the Church and Classical antiquity. If the friend subscribes to what Charles Trinkaus calls the “universalization of multiple human traditions” he would retrospectively adjust his earlier assumptions once more.

Employing the “universalization of multiple human traditions” model, the *amicus* searches his mind for a connection. If Donatello were trying to equate David to a Pagan deity, which one would it be? There is no similar iconography portraying David as a “nude” shepherd boy; he also knows that before Donatello’s marble *David*, all depictions of him were as a king, a prophet, a writer of Psalms, and an ancestor of Christ. The *David* in the Palazzo della Signoria was the first to have David triumphantly standing over Goliath’s decapitated head, as this one does, and Donatello created them both.

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21 Ibid., Trinkaus, 470. Charles Trinkaus’ 1970 study documenting the existence of this kind of allegorical exegesis among early humanists in Florence created a suitable backdrop against which to consider the possibility that Donatello and Cosimo de Medici may have on occasion engaged in this kind of thinking.

22 Ibid., 689-711.
Finally, he pulls Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* from the recesses of his memory. The association to the god Mercury starts to become clear. As he continues to notice more elements of the work, he sees the large sword David holds in one hand and the rock he seemingly hides in his other hand. This is yet another connection to Mercury. (Figure 3.7) Although there is no rock throwing in Ovid’s tale, in a sixteenth-century account of this tale, Natale Conti adds an episode where Mercury intends to kill Argus with a stone. The intellectuals in Florence may have known this detail. This episode draws the two stories even closer together. This knowledge allows the amicus to reinforce his new hypothesis; the statue is not of David, but of the Roman god Mercury. His revelation reaffirms his opinion of Cosimo; he is a man of great learning and understands the importance of Florence’s connection to the Classical past and its implications on her future.

The courtyard has other works of art that the amicus now focuses on. Just below the second-floor windows are rondels (a round decorative disk) with scenes from antiquity adorning them. The first one he examines is that of the Centaurs. (Figure 3.8) Centaurs, he knows, are associated with their inability to govern themselves; they are a metaphor for the conflict between the baser appetites of animals and the civilized behavior of man. This connects to the republican theme of prideful tyrants being overthrown by virtuous liberators, or perhaps republicans trying

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23 *P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphoses:* [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus). In Ovid, we meet Mercury, who is asked by his father Jupiter to kill the many-eyed Argus. Argus is jailer to Io, the cow, who before her metamorphosis had been Jupiter’s mistress. Mercury puts on his winged sandals and magic cap and leaps down to earth. There he masquerades as a shepherd and charms Argus with music from his reed pipe. After a wave of Mercury’s magic wand, the many-eyed one falls asleep, and Mercury cuts off his head liberating his captive. In 1 Kings 17, Goliath, the giant champion of the Philistines, challenges the Israelites to send one of their numbers, against him. Whoever wins the contest may claim victory not just for himself but also for his people and their armies. No Israelite steps forward until the youngest son of Jesse, the shepherd David (who had soothed King Saul with the music from his harp), persuades the King that Goliath has defied armies of the living God and that he, David, with God’s help will subdue the colossal Philistine. Rejecting Saul’s armor and taking in hand a sling and five stones, David slays Goliath and cuts off his head with the giant’s own sword and thus liberates his people.

to restrain their own baser instincts. Another rondel is of Daedalus and Icarus. (Figure 3.9) The winged Icarus, like David, is posed nude atop a pedestal. Icarus represents failure at the hands of hubris or pride. The next rondel the amicus examines is the Triumph of Eros or possibly the Triumph of Bacchus. (Figure 3.10) This is the same scene as depicted on Goliath’s helmet, upon which David stands. (Figure 3.11) The final rondel is the Medici Coat of Arms. The David and the rondels, along with the busts of Hadrian, Agrippa, and Octavian tell the amicus there are many layered messages to be found in the Medici program of advertisement. To attempt to reconcile the multiple inferences he has deduced from the courtyard, he moves into the next space of the palace, the garden.

The Amici – Garden

Looking for resolution, the amicus enters Cosimo’s garden. Here he follows the sound of falling water to find another work by Donatello: Judith and Holofernes. The statue is set atop a triangular base containing a fountain. The light in the garden is dim requiring him to get very close to the statue to see its details. He immediately recognizes the scene as the triumph of Judith over the General Holofernes from the Bible. He, as a Christian, knows the moral reading of the story well. Her victory was the triumph of virtue, self-control, chastity, and humility over pride and licentiousness. He takes note that Judith is dressed demurely in long clothing and veil, yet Holofernes is almost naked. The canopy of Holofernes’ bed is wrapped around Judith’s upper back and her thighs. It then winds through her hand, which holds Holofernes’ head by the hair. He has to walk around the fountain to follow the drapery through the scene. He contemplates the intertwined nature of the two figures in such an intimate pose. Judith, straddling his bare chest and bracing his head against her thigh, holds Holofernes unconscious and limp body in place.
She stands on his wrists as she draws his sword high. She pulls his head back to expose his neck. As he walks around the piece, he sees a medallion around Holofernes neck, but it is slung around and lays on his bareback. (Figure 3.12) It holds a galloping horse, the symbol of the deadly sin of pride. \((Psalm \ 20:7-8)\) This is the moment just before the humble Judith beheads the prideful Holofernes.

He realizes, just as the previous statue holds more than one meaning, so does the *Judith and Holofernes*. The connections to the omnipresence of God are apparent to him in the same way it was with the *David*. In so many ways Judith and David are similar in character. They are both considered weak, delicate, and physically incapable of performing the task at hand. But these vulnerabilities make God’s presence all the more necessary. Once again, the notion of what cannot be seen is essential to the coherence of the image.

The *amicus* also understands that Judith might also be seen, by some, as a symbol of liberty and republican values, the same values David embodies. Although both stories rose from a Jewish context, the Medici used them to inspire Florentine patriotism. He reads the inscription for more information: Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues; Behold the neck of pride severed by humility.\(^{25}\) The words, he knows, are meant to inspire patriotism in Florence and to highlight the anti-tyrannical stance of the republic.

Near the closed gate that empties onto the Via Gonori, he sees another figure. As he approaches to get a better look, he is surprised at what he finds, the statue of Marsyas that Cosimo had acquired from Rome.\(^{26}\) The *amicus* had heard talk of this acquisition but had thought it just a rumor. He stepped closer to touch the white marble. (Figure 3.13) The satyr was bound


\(^{26}\) Ibid., Vasari, 271-272.
and hanging from a tree trunk ready to be flayed. The figure of Marsyas evoked three separate and distinct instances in his mind. Ovid’s account of the satyr shows him as suffering from hubris and therefore found to be guilty by Apollo. According to Plato and Aristotle, the lyre represents civilization and culture and so is an apt choice for Apollo, while the Marsyas’ *aulos* (oboe) symbolizes barbaric emotion.27 Finally, the last reference comes from Servius’ commentary on Virgil where Servius refers to the Marsyas as being a symbol of a free city.28 In this instant, he feels sorrowful, for too much knowledge can be a curse. His knowledge led him to three possible interpretations of the Marsyas: a commentary on the sin of hubris, another pitting culture against barbaric emotions, and another stating that the Marsyas was a symbol of a free city.

As he sat and pondered all that he saw in Cosimo’s courtyard and garden, he was sure they were connected somehow. Did they mean to portray the family as pious and religious? Were they meant to evoke an image of staunch patriots with only Florence’s best interest at the fore? Was the program of artwork not a program at all and just the collection of an exuberant collector, buying as he pleased because he had more wealth than any other man in Florence? Just then, someone appeared in the stairwell calling his name. He would have to wait for another day to contemplate Cosimo’s multilayered message.

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Figure 3.1 – Palazzo della Signoria
By User:MatthiasKabel - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=16673068

Figure 3.2 - Florence Baptistery or Battistero di San Giovanni or Baptistry of St. John.
Figure 3.3 – Santa Maria del Fiore or *il Duomo*.
By Petar Milošević - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38860057

Figure 3.4 - Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence, Italy.
By I, Sailko, CC BY 2.5,
Figure 3.5 – Plans of Roman *domus*.

By: Domus_romana_Vector001.svg: *PureCore*derivative work: PureCore (talk)derivative work: Papa Lima Whiskey 2 (talk) - This file was derived from Domus romana Vector001.svg:, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18274163

Figure 3.6 – The Palazzo Medici plan of ground floor 1650.

Figure 3.7 – Donatello’s bronze *David* (detail).
By Patrick A. Rodgers - originally posted to Flickr as Florence - David by Donatello, CC BY-SA 2.0,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4854705

Figure 3.8 – Palazzo Medici *Centaurus* rondel.
Buffalo Architecture Index.

Figure 3.9 – Palazzo Medici *Daedalus and Icarus* rondel.
By: Sailko,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palazzo_medici_riccardo_cortile_di_michelozzo_to ndi_di_bertoldo_di_giovanni_da_cammei_med icei_05,1.jpg
Figure 3.10 – Palazzo Medici, *Triumph of Eros/Bacchus* rondel. ACA-F-063821-0000: Triumph of Bacchus and Adriane, tondo with a bas-relief depicting mythological subject matter, part of the frieze in the courtyard of the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, Florence, 1963 ca., Alinari Archives-Alinari Archive, Florence.


CHAPTER FOUR:

CONCLUSION

“Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us.”
— Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice

Through the historically informed accounts of the vicini and amici, this project has aimed to demonstrate how Cosimo de Medici used his palace as a way to navigate the tension between ambition and humility of fifteenth century Florence. The Palazzo Medici’s design, architectural elements, and art are the foundations of this argument. Layered upon this foundation is the historical, intellectual, and religious context of the world in which Cosimo lived. The changing definition and value of ambition and humility required Cosimo to negotiate the acceptance, or non-acceptance, by his associates of this new landscape of ideas. His use of polyvalent messages is demonstrated through the eyes, and attitudes, of his visitors.

Cosimo used his home as a multifunctional tool. The Palazzo Medici housed the family but he also used his home to facilitate the client/patron relationship that was so vital to his success. Here, Cosimo set a scene for all of Florence to see that he was indispensible if Florence were to continue her role as a leading force in Europe. It was also a stage upon which Cosimo set several different scenes for his divergent audience. Reinforcing the vision of himself held by those whose support he needed, was a necessity. He had to ensure that
members of his faction saw him as they saw themselves. This was a problem due to the diversity of Cosimo’s clients. Most were vicini from one of the three gonfalonì that the Medici controlled. The remaining clients were artists, friends, writers, and foreign allies. This group, the amici, saw themselves very differently than did the vicini. Cosimo understood that he was straddling the crevasse that divided two distinct eras. He had one foot in the past, upholding the traditional values of the medieval Church rooted deep in the hearts of the vicini. His other foot was firmly planted in the future with the amici and their newly found (or rediscovered) ideas about the nature of man and his inherent divinity. The purpose of this work has been to describe how he navigated these two positions simultaneously.

The vicini, although of a lower social class than the Medici, were perhaps their most important clients. They were certainly the largest group and made up the foundation of the Medici faction. Cosimo had to situate himself in the eyes of these men in the appropriate and morally acceptable way in which they expected. He had to be religious, pious, virtuous, and generous to his clients. He also had to show loyalty to the city and its republican government. A visit to the palace with the vicini has shown how such men would see Cosimo’s home, and how they would see Cosimo, himself. The bronze David would be seen by the vicini first as a Biblical figure. David was a lowly, humble shepherd who saved his people with the help of God. The depiction of Judith and Holofernes would also be seen first as a Biblical event. Another example of how a humble, fragile figure could overcome tyranny with the help of God. Cosimo was portraying himself as a humble, pious servant of God. Humility, as opposed to ambition or pride, was a virtue in the minds of these men. He
also extended a second meaning to the *vicini*. Florence had a tumultuous history with tyrants, and once they had thrown off the chains of these rulers, they intended never to be subjected again. This anti-tyrannical message was meant to stir patriotism in the hearts of the *vicini* and link Cosimo to the common good of the city, which could not endure without his patronage.

The *amici*, on the other hand, required a different message. These men were well educated and Cosimo’s intellectual peers. They understood and supported the ideological transformation that was happening in Florence. Some of them were the writers and thinkers that were actively formulating these new standards. They were men, like Cosimo, who loved the Classical past and wanted to be portrayed as the inheritors of that golden age. The same home sent a completely different message to the *vicini* then it did to the *amici*: the Medici were wealthy but not excessive, educated but orthodox, powerful but not tyrannical.

A visit to the palace with the *amici* has shown how these men would see Cosimo’s home, and in turn Cosimo. The bronze *David* would be seen by the *amici* in many different ways. First as a Biblical figure. David was a lowly, but ambitious, shepherd who saved his people, with the help of God. Second, David was a symbol of the anti-tyrannical disposition of the city of Florence. Lastly, it could be viewed in praise of human ambition. David was at once both ambitious enough to kill his enemy and ambitious enough to usurp the throne of Saul. Judith, like David, was seen as religious, patriotic, and ambitious. To the *amici*, man was destined for the divine. Men should use all their skills to succeed to become closer to God. To entertain the desire to emulate God’s divinity was what it meant to be human.
Cosimo portrayed himself as having all the traits and qualities of a Renaissance man: religiosity, ambition, success, wealth, and power. He also portrayed himself as Augustus did—as an average citizen of Florence, but he was actually the de facto ruler of the city.

Fifteenth century Florence was on the cutting edge of the transition from traditional medieval values to modern values that fit with a more secular way of life, and the city was shaped by the tension this change produced. Cosimo negotiated this tension for the greater glory of the Medici family. While ever mindful of his conviction to remain out of the public eye, Cosimo used the talents of Renaissance artists to expertly navigate the tensions between the old and new values that defined his time. He would put the talents of architects and sculptors to use in shaping his palazzo to exploit the tension between the conflicting values of Florentine society. The Palazzo Medici stands as a monument to the conflict between old and new, which Cosimo’s life, and Florence itself, embodied. This transition from old to modern values began in Florence, but it spread across the Italian Peninsula and then Europe.

The Renaissance ideas, cultivated and promoted in Florence, began to slowly spread to Northern and Western Europe by the end of the fifteenth century. The lapse in time was due to several reasons: feudalism, tensions between nobles and monarchs, wars, and the Church’s strong hold on the area since its move to Avignon in the fourteenth century. All these factors stifled the evolution of the economic growth of these areas. While the Republic of Florence was the center of the banking industry in all of Europe, the rest of Europe was still dealing with the politics of feudalism, which allowed little room for new ideas.

In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, both France and Germany waged war on the Italian Peninsula. This exposed the European monarchs to the splendors of the Renaissance. Many Italian artisans and scholars were taken back to Northern and Western
Europe. Northern Europe entered a period of peace in the mid to late fifteenth century. This allowed trade to increase, which increased wealth and exchange of ideas. This created a new merchant class in these European cities. These men regularly traveled on business further enhancing wealth and the exchange of ideas.

As this new wealth flowed into the cities of Europe, they faced the same issues the Florentine’s grappled with a century and a half before. By 1550, the population of London was almost 100,000. This is comparable to Florence in Cosimo’s time. The new merchant class in England was gaining wealth and living a life that was quite different from their fathers. They were facing the same circumstances that brought the tension of pride and humility to the surface in Florence. They now had the same challenges Cosimo had in his era. What was once the problem of Florence was now the problem of Europe; how to reconcile the conflict between the old values and new modern values? As Europe joined in the economic success enjoyed by Florence, it began to face the same challenges encountered by Florence. The nouveau riche of Europe, searching for strategies to deal with this tension, turned to Cosimo’s design of the Renaissance palace.

The style, recovered by Cosimo, was carried to France, Germany, England, and Poland. The Louvre in Paris, as seen in a drawing from 1615, shows the centralized courtyard revived by Cosimo de Medici. (Figure 4.1) The Place des Voges, home to Cosimo’s great-granddaughter Catherine de Medici and husband Henry II of France, follows Cosimo’s design on a much grander scale. (Figure 4.2) In Lower Bavaria in 1536, Louis X, Duke of Bavaria began his imitation of Cosimo’s design in the city of Landshut. (Figure 4.3) Hampton Court Palace was renovated by Henry III and incorporated many design elements from the Palazzo Medici

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including the courtyard and gardens. (Figure 4.4) In Poland, King Alexander Jagiellon rebuilt Wawel Castle, in the early sixteenth century, into a Renaissance style Florentine palace. (Figure 4.5)

All these palaces, scattered throughout Europe, were directly or indirectly influenced by Cosimo de Medici’s revival of what he knew to be the Roman *domus*. He used his design to navigate the tensions of a new age, brought about by the recovery of an older age—the Classical past. He used his knowledge of Republican Roman architecture in combination with his use of art and decoration to exploit this tension. The Palazzo Medici stands as a monument to the conflict between old and new, which Cosimo’s life, and Florence itself, embodied.
Figure 4.1 - Plan of the medieval Louvre.
Constructed during the reign of Philippe-Auguste with a blue overlay showing the additions made during the reign of Charles V. By Adolphe Berty - The image was cropped, rotated, and light levels adjusted with Adobe Photoshop CC v14.2.1. In addition, an overlay was added, showing the additions made during the reign of Charles V., Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=33071453.

Figure 4.2 – Drawing of Places des Voges.
Figure 4.3 – Landshut Palace, Lower Bavaria.

Figure 4.4 - "Plan 1: Hampton Court Palace Ground Floor."
Figure 4.5 - Courtyard of Wawel Royal Castle in Krakow.
By: Marku1988 based on photos of Gryffindor - Own work. This panoramic image was created with Autostitch. Stitched images may differ from reality., CC BY 2.5, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10074475
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