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The Ospedale Degli Innocente: A Microhistory

Hannah Hunt

In many history courses, the Ospedale degli Innocenti is presented as an architectural feat, summarized as the first designated orphanage in western Europe, and passed over. Scholar Euginio Battisti writes, "In [1419] the Silk Guild began building the Spedale degli Innocenti in Florence…. The Innocenti is included in every survey and handbook of architectural history. It is also Brunelleschi's architectural debut and, as such, is expected to shed light on his later development. What's left to be said?"[1]

What's left to be said? A lot.

What Battisti and others overlook is the fact that the Innocenti did much more for the city of Florence and held a life of its own that extended far past Brunelleschi's arched loggia. It became a small city in itself, run by administrators with the aims of helping orphaned or abandoned children become integral members of Renaissance Florentine society by the time they reached adulthood. The Innocenti provided jobs for community members and its residents, grew wheat for the community, and helped encourage female residents to work in household services to support meager dowries for their marriages—to name a few functions.

Many, however, assume the building was nothing more than a single-purpose orphanage, housing the abandoned youths of Florence. It is important to realize that this building played a large role in capturing the culture of Florence, and to understand the origins of the Innocenti as a whole to see how it fulfills its role as an institution and microcosm of Florentine society. This was most obviously seen in the building's conception, headed by the Silk Guild, its construction, run by Fillipo Brunelleschi and Francesco della Luna, its roles as an orphanage, seen through the increase in baptisms across Florence due to its opening, and the economical roles it took on in providing positions to the women of Florence as well as giving back to the community.

The Need for the Innocenti

The socio-economic roles of Florentine guilds play a large part in the creation of the Innocenti. The city's Silk Guild, despite some monetary issues in the early years of construction, wanted to supply Florence with a dedicated home for the orphans of the city. The future tenants of the Innocenti came from everywhere: they were the children of slaves and the illegitimate offspring of prostitutes, they came from impoverished homes that could not support another mouth to feed, sometimes after the deaths of their parents, and from the highest ranks of Florentine society such as: the "Adimari, Bardi, Capponi, Cerrentani, Medici, Della Stufa, Pitti, Rucellai, Ridolfi, Salviati, Strozzi, Tornabuoni, and Vespucci."[2] These children were brought to the Innocenti to escape the entrapment of slavery during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century due to their "mixed" breeding.[3] They would be absolved of their mixed-class status, so to speak, as the Innocenti was seen as a free-standing and fully legitimate institution of Florentine society, meaning its residences became legitimate citizens of the city state upon passing through the doors.[4]

It is clear how some families—the mothers of those mixed-class children in particular—would view the Innocenti as a refuge. But the need for the orphanage itself arose due to the plague, diseases, poverty, and problems with illegitimacy and infanticide running not only through Florence, but also the rest of Italy. It was not uncommon for a struggling parent to abandon a child due to poverty or illegitimacy. Luca Landucci's diary provides a record of tragic events from war to famine to plague and flooding that occurred from the mid-fifteenth century to early-sixteenth. One can only assume that the death of loved ones was a prominent cause for abandonment.[5] Events such as "a bad harvest and a recurrence of plague, [which] intensified the sufferings of the poor," could also prompt the abandonment of a child at the Innocenti.[6] Philip Gavitt, who has done

extensive research on the Innocenti and its charges, found one case: a mother abandoned her child because the father had died. The child, who was left at the Innocenti in 1462, was named Giovanni da Scotia, "John of Scotland": "She said that he had been born from her and her legitimate husband who had died at Santa Maria Nuova…. She said that they were from Scotland and that the boy was one year to fourteen months old—at least as far as we could understand, since we could not understand her language very well."[7]

This and other cases led Gavitt to the question the structure of the Florentine family, stating, "Fathers seemed incapable of, or ill suited to, the task of raising children in the mother's absence. Certainly the late weaning of children … may have made Florentine fathers fear starvation. Yet this still begs the question of the absence of support from any kind of extended family structure."[8] This could be because of the low status of illegitimate children in Florence at the time. Whether the child of slave and master or an adulterous rendezvous, these children were frequently abandoned with condemnation.[9] Many parents, especially those of the upper classes, abandoned their children at the care-giving homes or other hospitals before the Innocenti's inception to avoid the social disproval of raising them.[10] For example, "a Florentine who turned over a child … explained that he did so not because of poverty or an unwillingness to care for the infant, 'but it is much more fear of scandal that could take shape if such a thing were known.'"[11]

Without the Innocenti, these children would be left to seek shelter, counting on the Italian hospitality of their neighbors more than anything. Most of the charges in the Innocenti appear to have been infants, needing extensive care. Even those parents who could find wet nurses for their children still at times engaged in infanticide.[12] Those older children who wandered the streets could stumble into bad neighborhoods or gangs.[13] The south side of Florence had tough neighborhoods, "home to many of those charged with … rapes, assaults, and frauds." This put children "in danger of going adrift."[14]

With such city-wide crime, child prostitution for young girls, and general poverty, it is clear that orphans "were truly unfortunate, truly outside the familial organization of Florence, and […] were first among the liminal lay groups of Florence to assume a formal public role in the salvational work of city ritual."[15] With children on the streets, it increased their risk of falling ill and spreading such diseases as tuberculosis, which was a ravaging illness among the urban population of northern Italy.[16] Ultimately, in a desperate attempt to aid the other all-purpose hospitals in the area, the Silk Guild of Florence looked to build a revolutionary home for these abandoned children.[17]

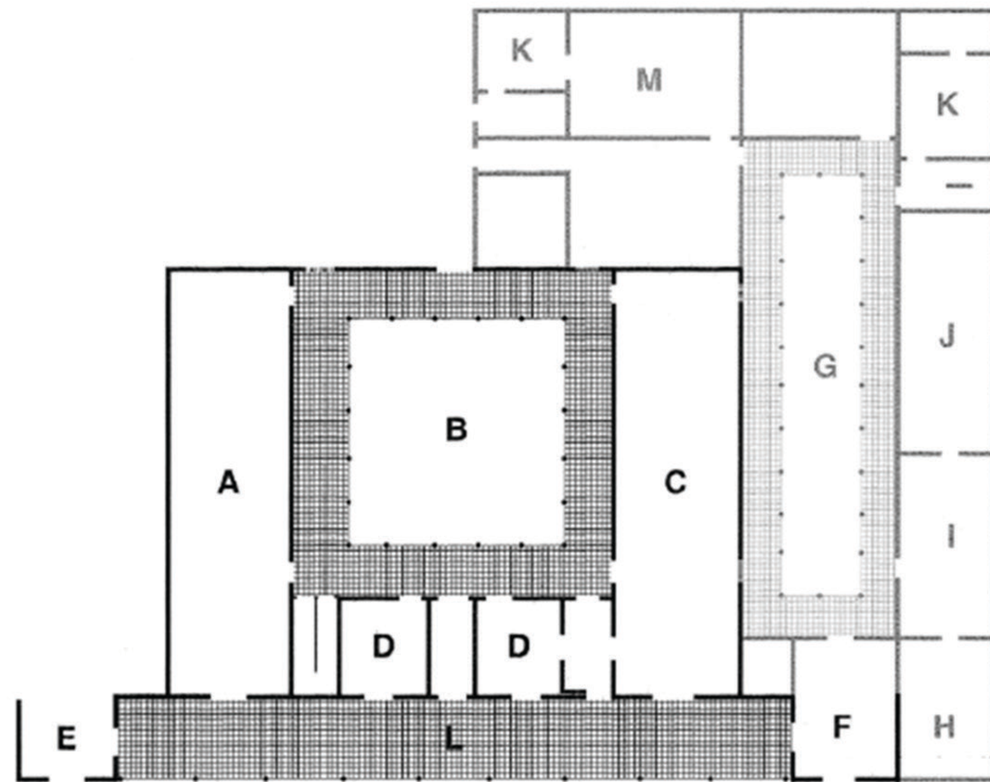

Figure 1: Fillipo Brunelleschi's design for the Ospedale degli Innocenti is shown in bold lines; the shaded lines show the modifications to his original design. From Lawrence Kahn, "The 'Ospedale degli Innocenti' and the 'Bambino' of the American Academy of Pediatrics," *Pediatrics* 110, no. 1 (July 2002): 175-80.

Figure 2: Loggia, Ospedale degli Innocenti.

Construction of the Innocenti

Space for the new Innocenti was hard to find, however. Florence was a constantly expanding city, experiencing dramatic population growth due to its military endeavors and fluctuating economy. "The location of […] new hospitals depended on the availability of land, and the tendency to build on the edge of built-up areas; the Innocenti looked out over a series of gardens and fields toward the city walls rapidly built up as [they] developed the city."[18] The images of the Innocenti that one may find today in Florence are dramatically different from the building at the time of its construction in terms of the environment surrounding it, as "the urban sprawl [of Renaissance Florence] had little overall organization (beyond the grid pattern at the core that was predetermined by the city's Roman foundation) and few points of focus to pull parts of it together."[19] Therefore, the children of the Innocenti could have been surrounded by numerous environments, and the expansion of the city must have been taken into consideration by the Silk Guild when selecting an architect. Humanist Poggio Braccionlini was quoted as saying, "I think [there are] several men of our own time who have earned great renown by doing remarkable things, and their names will be known through the ages,"[20] and many scholars would agree that his evaluation of the men during the Florentine Renaissance is true—especially for the craftsmen. The silk guild had 1,000 florin from the city to start the construction of the foundling home, and they chose Florence's future favorite architect for the job: Fillipo Brunelleschi.[21]

Brunelleschi took the credit for the design and construction of the Innocenti, but the building would not have survived if it were not for the expansions added by his former apprentice, Francesco della Luna, in 1427—a year after Brunelleschi left the project. During Brunelleschi's time on site, he worked to design the Innocenti to include a church, a central courtyard, separate entrances for women and men, a dormitory on the first level, offices, a reception hall, refectory, kitchen, infirmary, and dormitory for the women living there, as shown in figure 1.[22] However, when building, Brunelleschi was only on the project to supervise the loggia and a handful of basic rooms. It was Francesco della Luna who added:

> a narrow courtyard, the southern wing with a common room for the nursing women, a refectory hall, service space for the refectory and kitchen, and the actual kitchen were begun in 1427. Along with the infirmary, a service kitchen for the infirmary, a central courtyard, an infirmary laundry room (beneath the infirmary), and a covered passage to the chicken coop."[23]

When Brunelleschi left the project in 1426, the Innocenti "was minimal. There was no separate refectory, no kitchen, no infirmary, no laundry, no separate day room for the nurses to gather away from the hoards of screaming infants to be housed in the spedale."[24] Yet Brunelleschi is still attributed to the full construction of the building. Truly, Francesco della Luna was the one who finished the Innocenti and ensured

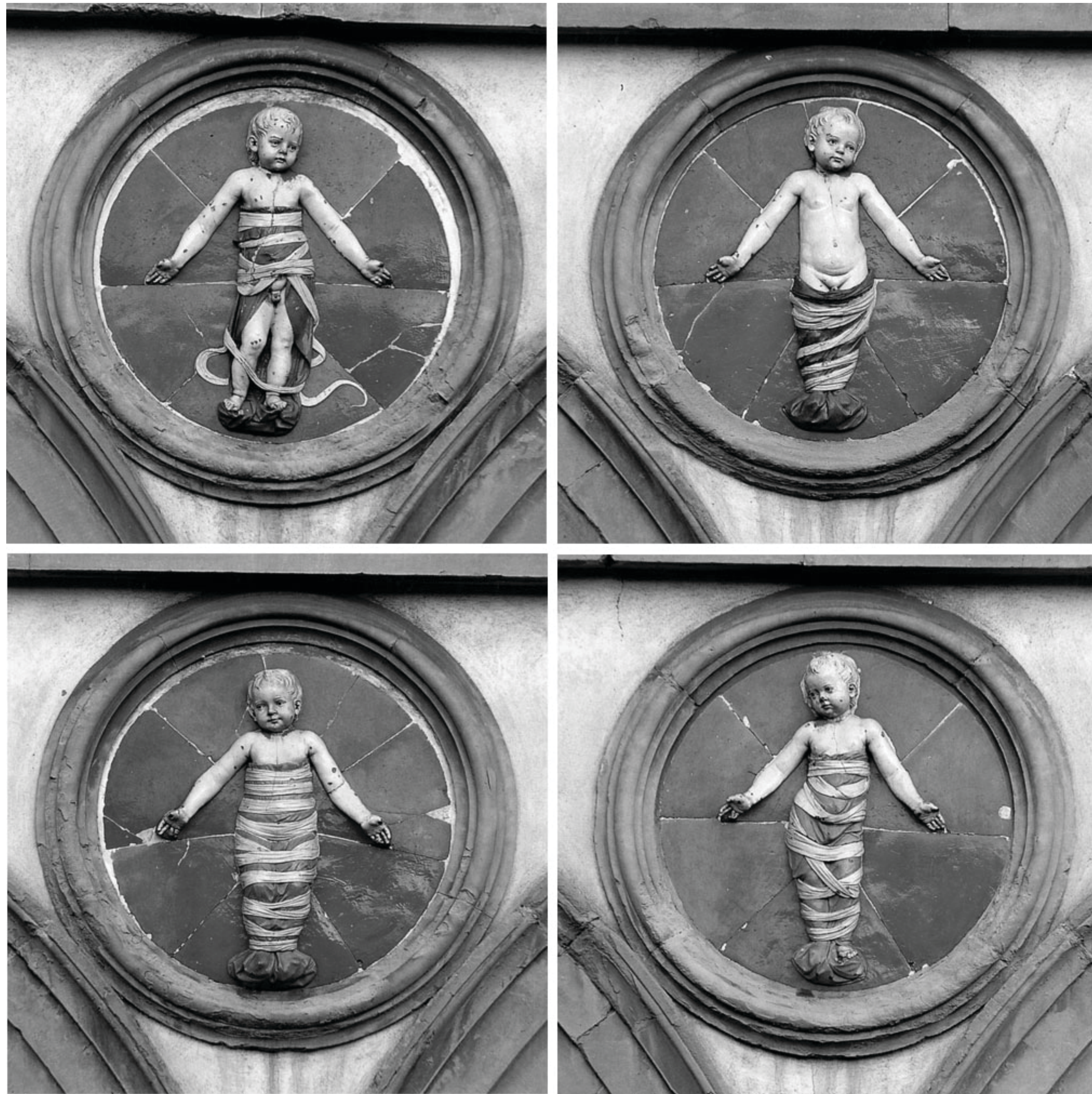

Figure 3: Andrea Della Robbia's bambini, Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1487.

they had the facilities they needed to operate (and also some debt to repay as the additions cost an additional 2,000 florins).[25]

Perhaps Brunelleschi received credit because he was the first to be considered rooted in the logical ideal of proportions and city planning, but in terms of the Innocenti, his influence is seen mostly in the loggia.[26] The loggia itself hangs as a sort of culmination of public and private space on the building. Loggias in the Italian tradition are meant to provide a public space for citizens to meet and talk, and tended to house important decision-making and discussions beneath their arches.[27] The loggia of the Innocenti, however, works to harmonize the differences of the public and private spaces. It allowed for shelter for parents and children from the heat, as well as a place for discussion and visitation, as some parents returned to speak with the children they left there.[28] The loggia itself operates on a 2:3 width to height ratio of each arch.[29] The façade covers the main entrance, service doors, and a dormitory entrance as well. The elevated height of the Innocenti—needing nine stairs to reach the entrances—gives the space a feeling of power, pride, and a strong sense of antiquity.

The bambini or child figures on the façade of the loggia were not Brunelleschi's doing, but that of Andrea Della Robbia in 1487, "four decades after Brunelleschi's death " (see figure 2). There are ten figures in total, seven of which are fully wrapped and swaddled.[30] This leaves three left unswaddled or partially wrapped, and freestanding in their embossments (see figure 3). One may assume that this free-stance pose is meant to represent the freedom that the bambini find through living at the Innocenti, liberated from whatever class status their families held outside the walls. They represented the importance of independence and legitimacy in Renaissance Florence, and the gift that living in the Innocenti gave these children. By 1445, the Innocenti was ready to open its doors.

Effects of Opening the Innocenti

After the doors of the Innocenti opened in 1445, there was a surge of baptisms registered for the city:

> Between 1445 and 1485, for example, only for two years, 1479 and 1480, did the percentage of admissions to the Ospedale degli Innocenti to baptisms in Florence exceed 10 percent (for 1479 the figure is 13.9 percent for 1480, 11.0 percent). By contrast, the average for the years 1531-9 was 21.9 percent, and during the famine of 1539, the percentage of babies abandoned of those baptized reached 38.9 percent, proportions more consistent with the nineteenth century than with the early modern period.[31]

Not only did the Innocenti ensure that the children who came to them received a baptism and, through extension, Florentine citizenship, but they also became the child's free and legitimate parent-figure.[32] Some may have questioned if the Innocenti did not increase the frequency of abandonment due to its existence.[33] Regardless, holding such responsibility for a number of the city's children, the institution had to consider how to handle raising these young citizens, as "the integration into society was perhaps the ultimate form of charity."

As the years wore on, more and more children came through the doors of the Innocenti. They were given a brief education in reading and writing, as well as moral instruction, guided by the philosophy that "the students should learn to live frugally, but neatly and clean, and to be content with little. They should be protected from all forms of dissipation."[35] The goal was to prepare the boys for an apprenticeship and the girls for a spot in domestic services or in the crafts of weaving and cloth manufacturing so they could accumulate a small dowry outside of what the Innocenti was able to give them.[36] The children's education was institutionalized, meaning that the Innocenti would need to provide tutors or add the duties of education to the nurses' loads because there was no confraternity or boy's school to take the children.[37] Girls living in the Innocenti had a different type of education, typical to that of the women of the Renaissance, but different from the boys' grounding in arithmetic and business principles. Girls were encouraged to pursue domestic arts such as sewing, weaving, cooking, and cleaning.

Apprenticeships for children of both genders doubled as a foster system if a family could not be found in its own right.[38] A child would seek an apprenticeship around the ages of thirteen or fourteen. The "child's apprenticeship was much like fostering. Up to half the boys and perhaps a third of all girls left the parental home to spend a few years as an apprentice or domestic servant in the homes of others, and the percentages moved higher with the orphaned children of both sexes."[39] This was done as a way to care for the children, but also level the playing field in comparison to the boys still with their families. Those legitimate sons were typically inducted into a boys' schools during the later half of the fifteenth century to learn arithmetic, accounting, measures, and language, as well as participate in other activities such as music and theater.[40] The sons of the elite still living at home with families would also be encouraged to learn Greek and Latin with a private tutor, while the boys of the Innocenti probably only studied Italian.[41] This put the boys of the Innocenti at a disadvantage in comparison to their elite peers, but also gave them a strong foundation of a typical Florentine education.

Outside of the classroom there was potential that the Innocenti's boys still participated and attended city festivals and played games such as calcio, a sport similar to football that was played more with the fists than hands. They also enjoyed several horse races, or palio, throughout the city, families becoming spectators of the race, the horses owned by the wealthy of Florentine society.[42] These would be days where the orphans were given the chance to feel like full, normal citizens of Florence, and therefore increased their

loyalty to their homeland more than any textbook could, thus rounding out their education.

As the Innocenti grew, its administrators implemented a number of additional duties and privileges for its residences. Women were able to work in household services to earn money toward their wages.[43] In addition to the basics of grammar, arithmetic, and such practical skills as weaving, music was also taught.[44] The Florentines believed that "its rapid measures made the body alert and 'trained it to adopt graceful attitudes.' It exercised and nurtured the mind, corrected the voice and rendered pronunciation soft, accented, grave or sonorous."[45] The girls who were given lessons and excelled were allowed to continue their practices as long as it helped to grow their character into one that was acceptable beyond the walls of the Innocenti.[46] The girls were also taught to weave, and "the exceptional women who achieved learning in the period were praised for it, as marvels of their sex. But … in each instance of praise 'was invariably accompanied by words of admiration for her skill with a needle.'"[47]

The emphasis on needlework and weaving was so important in the Renaissance education of women that the Innocenti discovered a way to profit from their efforts by opening a tapestry workshop. It was through selling tapestries that the Innocenti hoped to repay some of their debt to the city from its construction and maintenance. The "workshop at the Innocenti, even though directed by a former male foundling, also functioned to keep the hospital's girls and women gainfully employed, as is clear from the petition that Fra Niccolò Mazzi and Ulivo Ulivieri submitted to Grand Duke Francesco requesting his formal approval of the workshop."[48] The girls of the Innocenti were also educated as nurses, having been surrounded by them their entire lives, and some "of the female physicians [of the Innocenti] were not hired from outside but rather were foundlings themselves."[49] This indicates that the Innocenti was truly determined to provide for its members in whatever way it could, and that the spirit of giving back through one's work was emphasized in the lives of their charges, giving the children something to hope for.

The Innocenti stood as a beacon of hope for parents who could not afford to keep their children, those children who were abandoned, and even those born to a mother of servitude to the elite families. It gave the slave community a means of hope for their children, for when an infant entered the doors of the Innocenti, they became a free and legitimate child of the state. This became a prominent reason for abandonment. Florentine slaves were only permitted if they were "infidels" and not Christian; they came primarily from the Black Sea and Africa to Italy.[50] These slaves were owned by the wealthy of the city, taking the growth of illegitimate children to a new level. Given this, the Innocenti "can be seen as a social necessity: not only as a performance of Christian duty, but as a solution to an embarrassing problem experienced by many prominent Florentine citizens."[51] An infant boy born to a mother in slavery could be abandoned on the steps of the Innocenti and, after entering its doors, be viewed as a fully privileged male of Florentine society. He had opportunities to become a businessman or master of a craft if he so chose, leading many parents to leave their children in hopes of them finding better opportunities, which the Innocenti certainly provided.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence that the Innocenti was far more than just the first orphanage in western Europe. With its educational efforts, social implications, and economic impact, the Innocenti played a strong role in Florentine society. Too often scholars have been focused on the revival of antiquity that took place within the arts of Renaissance Florence, overlooking something truly innovative like the Innocenti. For example, Roy Porter and Mikulás Teich write that, between 1375 and 1550,

> Florence was one among many contributors to the cultural life of Italy. If the Renaissance, however, is taken to mean not the sum total of Italian culture but the attempt to turn away from the recent medieval past and return to the ways of ancient Rome and Greece, then Florence's particular contribution was little short of astounding. The most striking examples of this movement to revive antiquity in Renaissance Florence are still visible today [such as] Brunelleschi's loggia for the Foundling Hospital.[52]

Here, Porter and Teich overlook the entire history of the building attached to the loggia, and only appreciate the Innocenti for its exterior and not its interior—seeing beauty as skin deep, as the saying goes. The beauty of the building was in fact in the Innocenti as a whole. Despite the debt the institution incurred, it worked to give back and improve Florentine society by caring for the abandoned children, participating in the large cloth industries, giving citizens a place for charity as well as employment, and ensuring that Florentine patriotism continued in the hearts of their educated, mild-mannered, moldable tenants. The Innocenti has continued its long history of fostering youths for nearly five and a half centuries; "from 1530-1540 [alone], the foundling home of the Innocenti took in 5,400 children, with 1,000 of those in 1539."[53] That's 5,500 children who could have wound up as prostitutes or criminals with little education, as well as potentially a strong disdain for their homeland due to lack of assistance without the help of the orphanage. All this being said, one must wonder why most scholars give this institution's microhistory such little attention when discussing Florentine history and society.

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Section II. Forgotten Stories: Cartoonists and Kings

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