

Manipulating the Magi: The Medici's Pursuit of Power and their Usage of the Adoration Theme

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The Medici, a Florentine family focused on the banking sector, strove to break free of their class and achieve a level of legendary nobility. But in order to do so, they needed more than politically motivated marriages and alliances to succeed in the republic of Florence. By employing the theme of the *Adoration of the Magi*, the Medici pushed their status to the pinnacle of their city's social structure. They then used it whenever they felt their rank needed to be reestablished. The Medici's usage of this biblically based theme cherished across Europe remains highly unique and was one of the most dominant Medicean power icons throughout the fifteenth century. But after the Medici family's second exile from Florence, the persistence of the *Adoration* theme dwindled. Mannerism, as well as the family's eventual return to their city through force of arms changed the art associated with the Medici.

Magi Icon Development

Long before the rise of the Medici, the Magi first emerged in the realm of Christianity through the Gospel of Matthew. The text alludes to men from the East, following a star, in search of the king of the Jews. When they meet the local ruler Herod on their journey through Jerusalem, his assembly of priests and teachers suggest Bethlehem as the location of Christ's birth. Herod, fearing usurpation due to prophecies of a king rising up in Judea, deceptively asks the Magi to return with news of the child so he too can pay deference. The men depart and upon meeting Mary and the Christ Child, each bows and pays homage through the treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The sole mention of these Magi ends with them leaving Bethlehem on a different route home so they may avoid Herod and respect the warning given in their dreams of returning to the ruler.¹

The three men's connection with royalty

came later in the writings of Tertullian (c. 160-230 CE), a Christian writer, who gave such a stature to these gift-bearing individuals.² This third century concept most likely derived from the idea that the prophecy of Psalms 72:10-11, titled "The Reign of the Righteous King", had been realized. The text states, "Let the kings of Tarshish and of the islands bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. And let all kings bow down before him."³ Such allusions to distant lands and treasures can clearly link to the three men who brought such exorbitant gifts and humbled themselves before Christ around the time of His birth. In the eighth century, these kings would be given names. The *Excerpta latina barbari* chronicle lists the Magi's names as Bithisarea, Melchior, and Gahaspas. Over time these evolved into their common forms of Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar or Casper. The Magi's popularity amassed throughout the Middle Ages and they were revered as patron saints of travel with their own feast day on July 23.

In art, the Magi were a subject of focus as early as the fourth century. In the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome, a fresco depicting the first extant *Adoration of the Magi* lines a section of one of the chambers.⁴ The dual levels of this catacomb are located two miles outside of the Italian capital and are named after Saint Priscilla⁵, a martyr who allowed Saint Peter to use her home in Rome as the main location for his missionary work.⁶ Originally created for the second century senatorial Acili family as a pagan tomb, early Christians expanded the site in the third century as a cemetery for their own.⁷ The catacomb remained in great reverence up until the ninth century and held many early bishops of Rome as well as various saints.⁸ And so it was here on this significant Christian site that fourth-century artist(s) crafted the *Adoration of the Magi*. Featured in the *cappella greca*, Greek chapel, the fresco depicting the Easterners displays itself on the arch along with

funerary inscriptions written in Greek.⁹ Three figures bearing items, one can interpret as gifts, walk toward the seated figure of Mary who holds the Christ Child in her lap. There are no apparent details and the silhouettes of the figures remain all that is visible along the arch. Nonetheless, the bearing of gifts conveyed respect for Christ and remained an early popular subject due to the theme's connection with Christ's birth.

The Magi evolved as Christianity grew in prominence and influence throughout Europe. The Middle Ages continued promoting the theme of the *Adoration of the Magi* but closer attention to figure rendering, the rank of the men, as well as their connection to the Epiphany shows a growth in the depiction of the subject matter.¹⁰ Within the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence, a mosaic displays both the three Magi bearing reverence to Christ and the angel Gabriel warning the kings of Herod's plan in a dream (Figure 1). In its original context, this work may have been linked to two other significant events of Jesus' life: His Baptism and the Wedding at Cana. All three of these events reveal Christ's true divinity and were celebrated on the same feast day. But in particular, the *Adoration of the Magi* in this work embodies the Epiphany,



Figure 1. The Story of the Magi in the Life of Christ
1275-1300 CE
Mosaic

the manifestation of Christ to the pagans. Viewing it as so significant an event, the Catholic Church celebrated it as an esteemed feast day on the sixth of January early on in the Church's history.¹¹ And so through the mosaic's connection to a prized social/religious affair and stylistic rendering of the work, one can see a medieval development in the depiction and meaning behind the Magi.

Early Medici History

The Renaissance, however, truly pushed the *Adoration of the Magi* theme to new evolutionary heights. One family, in particular though, spurred the transformation of the theme into a clearly

unique, ornate scheme that was enriched with social and political significance. They came from the mountain valley area known as the Mugello, twenty miles northeast of Florence. Known as the Medici, they arrived to the Tuscan city of Florence in 1216 as bankers and traders.¹² At the time, the city had already begun to shed its medieval tendencies and structures in order to cloak itself with the drappings of the coming Renaissance. The end of the thirteenth century as well as early fourteenth century witnessed new trading families tear down the feudal aristocracy. And by 1340, Florence eclipsed its former self and stood amongst prominent cities of the time in terms of wealth and size. Its shadow even blanketed the likes of Paris and Venice through its precedence in the modern world. For one, Florentine bankers, whose work often permeated into European politics, had dominated European trade and finance. But secondly, the culture of the city was shifting towards a more humanistic outlook in which the intellectual and artistic feats of the individual were embraced.¹³

As Florence grew in influence, so did its prominent banking family, the Medici. In 1418, though still one of several influential families in Florence, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (1360-1429 CE) obtained the entire Papal account for the Medici bank and marked the beginning of the family's ascension towards dominance in Florence and beyond.¹⁴ Giovanni first began his self-made path towards power and wealth through his job at his cousin Vieri's banking branch. After success in the family's division in Rome, he eventually took over Vieri's position as the *Capo* or head of the bank and family. While known for his cautious nature, Giovanni made a risky decision early on in the fifteenth-century to support a friend as well as expirate, Baldassare Cossa, to become pope. But by taking such a chance, Giovanni gained everything when Cossa was elected Pope John XXIII and Giovanni was selected to be "God's banker." When he passed away, Giovanni had helped accumulate so much wealth that the Medici ranked the third richest family in Florence.¹⁵

Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464 CE), after the death of his father, took over the *Capo* position in midst of rival families like the Albizzi plotting against the Medici.¹⁶ But Cosimo was adept at politics and used his banking operations to obtain even greater power in Florence. With costly festivals and gifts, he bought favor with the likes of friends, clients, and even the members of the general public.

Through finances, he gained the approval from individuals like the King of France and Duke of Milan.¹⁷ But in 1433, none of Cosimo's connections could stop his imprisonment and exile. After years of supporting lesser guilds of the poor over the wealthy aristocracy as well as using more cut-throat political tactics to gain influence, the Medici had made many enemies – the Albizzi in particular. Through various political manipulations and maneuvers, anti-Medici factions gained control of the Florentine government and sought to rid themselves of the Medici for good.

Jailed temporarily in Palazzo Vecchio and charged with treason, Cosimo escaped the Florentine city with his life and family by obtaining the lesser punishment of banishment to Padua. He did so only after bribing Bernardo Guadagni, the gonfalonier of justice, one thousand ducats. But this was far from the end of the Medici. Cosimo was asked to return to his home city one year later in October 1434 after a banking crisis and series of military defeats caused mass public resentment to the government that threw the Medici out.¹⁸ When Cosimo reentered his city, he regained his position in society and ruled Florence unofficially, dictating both its foreign and domestic policies while maintaining his banking branches.

The Epiphany and Compagnia de'Magi

So it was in this political and social scene, where affluent families constantly vied against one another for greater influence, that the *Adoration of the Magi* theme was so vividly transformed. One reason this particular subject matter was chosen so frequently by Florentine patrons stems from city's celebration of the Epiphany and the guild that sponsored the event, the Compagnia de'Magi or Company of the Magi. Since the end of the fourteenth-century, this feast day dedicated to the adoration of the Magi was a significant and elaborate event in the city. Every January 6th, select citizens would dress up as the three Magi and members of the procession to parade around Florence. They would begin in Piazza San Marco, where the confraternity Compagnia de'Magi was located, and continue onto Via Larga. From there, the grand procession advanced onto Herod's Palace at Piazza San Giovanni and ended their march through the Florentine streets at the Duomo. Here the Magi figures presented gifts in a festive atmosphere to the Christ Child lying in a manger.¹⁹ After this, those involved in the procession and general public would

move on to witness the performance of Massacre of the Innocents in Piazza della Signoria.²⁰ The Epiphany, rivaled only in importance by the feast day for John the Baptist, consumed the minds and hearts of Florentines with its splendor.

The confraternity behind all of this was the *Compagnia de'Magi*, also known as *Della Stella* or *Of the Star*. One of the many societies in Florence, this essentially charitable organization planned and executed this elaborate parade as well as provided social welfare programs, like a financial aid project for those in need.²¹ But the assemblage of men who sponsored such a beloved event had intentions other than exercising generosity. An entire set of ideological, political, and aesthetic implications came from involvement in the group. Those who assumed the positions of the Magi had their personal characters connected with the Magi's virtues, and could display a level of public ostentation never permitted within sumptuary laws of the time. Most of all, the event allowed these men to briefly act in a royal fashion within the walls of a republic.²² The Medici, in particular, took advantage of such an organization and used the lavish procession to display power and status in the guise of royalty. Cosimo, for example, took part in many of these parades and wore ornate clothing like gold gowns and fur cloaks to show his true position in the city.²³ World power, piety, and affluence came from the Compagnia de'Magi and its political implications made it a force to be reckoned with. The Magi were no longer simply humbled men who appeared at the birth of Christ, they were now a symbol of greatness that Florentine families would replicate again and again to demonstrate their high status.

Gentile da Fabriano's Adoration of the Magi

One sees the Magi first being used as an assertion of wealth and stature in Gentile da Fabriano's altarpiece *Adoration of the Magi* (Figure 2). The artist Gentile, originally from the Marches, spent part of his career in Venice where he absorbed the International Gothic style. This European courtly approach embraced crowded picture planes, exotic elements usually from the East, and luxurious materials. The influences of Venice and Northern styles also appear in the artist's remaining work through elements like atmospheric landscapes and soft texture.²⁴ Due to his refined artistic approach, Fabriano was commissioned to adorn the Doges' Palace in Venice and the Church of Saint John



Figure 2. Gentile da Fabriano
Adoration of the Magi
1423 CE
Tempera on wood

Lateran in Rome.

After building a reputation, Gentile da Fabriano moved to Florence where the wealthiest man in Florence, Palla Strozzi, commissioned him to create an altarpiece boldly displaying the Magi figures.²⁵ The patron selected such a subject matter and an artist with a reputation for effusive, courtly style to illustrate a very certain concept within the sacristy of the Florentine Church of Santa Trinità.²⁶ This public work was meant to show the wealth and power the Strozzi possessed and compete with fellow banking families, like the Medici, who too commissioned various art works throughout the city. While originally friends with of Cosimo de' Medici, Palla turned on him and sided with the Albizzi and other anti-Medici factions in 1433. But this decision to consent to the Medici's exile would haunt the Strozzi family and when the Medici returned to Florence in 1434, all male members of the Strozzi clan were banished to Padua through the careful arrangements of Cosimo himself.²⁷ Nonetheless, the patronage behind this public artwork remains highly significant to the *Adoration of the Magi's* evolution as a symbol of power.

Fabriano's masterpiece features scenes in the predella below the main panel displaying *The Nativity*, *Flight into Egypt*, and *Presentation in the Temple* – all biblical scenes relating to the *Adoration*. In the roundel of the central cusp, just above the *Adoration*, stands a half length figure of the Judging Christ to exemplify the theme of the coming of Christ.²⁸ At the bottom of the central work, one witnesses the three Magi presenting the traditional gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The oldest magus

kneels on all four appendages with his aureate crown lying next to his side as Baby Jesus accepts the king's kisses and lays one hand on the man's glabrous head. The middle-aged Magus prepares to bow in a similar fashion, illustrated by him taking off his crown as he kneels on one knee and bearing an ornate gold chalice of perfume.²⁹ The third, youngest one meanwhile takes a less reverent approach and appears to have just dismounted from his horse. While gazing amiably at the Holy Family, the Magus holds a golden pyx as a servant quickly fixes his spur.³⁰

The Holy Family stands under a simple stable structure while the handmaidens of the Virgin look on with amazement at the treasures being unveiled to the Christ Child. Notably, the traditional ox representing patience and strength, appears in a cave, a shelter for the Holy Family promoted by apocryphal and devotional texts like the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew.³¹ Finally, Gentile da Fabriano completes the work through the display of the departure of the Magi journeying away from Jerusalem. This corresponds to the Bible's description of King Herod's fear of usurpation from the prophesized king born in Judea, as well as the Magi following God's command of not returning to Jerusalem.³²

Away from the immediate vicinity of the Holy Family lie the varied characters of the Magi's procession. These consist of soldiers, doctors, an astrologer, hunters, as well as what Antanas Melinkas has dubbed buffoons. Gentile da Fabriano places exotic creatures amongst the crowd – a falcon rests on the arm of one of the figures while two monkeys play on the back of a camel. A white greyhound can also be seen lying in the foreground while horses proceed by as cheetahs and hunting hounds intermix in the mass of figures.³³

Within these well-crafted details and figural renditions of the *Adoration of the Magi* lies the intended suggestion of Strozzi power. First, the class and wealth of the family glimmers boldly in the work through the use of gold. While the Renaissance innovation of a blue sky has yet to come in effect with Fabriano's aureate sky, the ornate embroidery of the retinue and Magi demonstrates sophistication in displaying such a coveted material. Secondly, the artist included figures and symbols directly linked to the Strozzi clan. Mignosia claims the figure in the central part of the composition holding a falcon, the family's emblem, is none other than Palla Strozzi. With him stands Lorenzo Strozzi who was only

eighteen years old at the time of the painting. She further suggests that Emperor Sigismund, the Holy Roman Emperor at the time of the work, takes the form of the oldest Magus.³⁴ Such an inclusion of figures marks a distinct break with *Adoration* scenes of the past. No longer simply illustrating an event occurring at the site of Christ's birth, the Magi's reverence was turned into a scheme for patrons to associate themselves with worldly power, royalty, and piousness.

Medici and Development of Iconography Post-Exile

The Medici, however, would attempt to strip this icon usage from their rivals and perpetuate the theme solely for the promotion of the family's dynasty. They took notice of the Strozzi's public assertion of paramountcy and decided to use the theme their rivals had selected against contending Florentine families. Their goal was to reassociate the *Adoration of the Magi* theme as a reference to Medici power and they did not wait long to do so. After the Medici returned from exile and families like the Strozzi found themselves banished from Florence, two notable works were erected in the monastery of San Marco: Fra Angelico's *The Annunciation and Adoration of the Magi* (Figure 3) as well as Fra Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli's *Adoration of the Magi* (Figure 4). Notably, Cosimo de Medici commissioned the building of this secluded religious place and frequented it often. He even had a cell in which he retired to on occasion.³⁵

Fra Angelico's The Annunciation and Adoration of the Magi

The first work came from the hands of Fra Angelico in the early 1430s work and was a single tablet that formed part of a group of reliquaries. It features the *Annunciation* in the upper half while the lower contained the *Adoration* scene in which the oldest Magus bows completely at the feet of the Holy Family. Meanwhile, the other Magi lower their heads and clasp their hands as if in prayer, while their procession crowds in the upper right corner in front of a gold stone-block wall. One can see how soft forms as well as detailed usage of color and auric fill the work.³⁶ This *Adoration of the Magi* scene, while not differing substantially in presentation of the figures or craftsmanship of the surroundings, is significant based on the time of its commission. It occurs in the same period of the return of the



Figure 3. Fra Angelico
The Annunciation and the
Adoration of the Magi
1430 CE
Tempera and gold on panel

Medici as well as exile of prominent families in Florence. The work was chosen specifically to be a marker of the reemergence of Medici power in a place beloved by the family. The artist behind such well-defined craftsmanship was originally named Guido di Pietro. He was first documented as a lay painter in 1417 and later as Dominican friar between 1420 and 1423. He stayed at the priory of San Domenico at Fiesole where he



Figure 4. Fra Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi
1440 CE
Fresco

adopted the name Fra Giovanni da Fiesole and continued to pursue painting. Fra Angelico's work in San Marco began in the early 1430s when his Order took over the Sylvestrine monastery.³⁷ One can see his mastery of space, refinement of materials, and attention to detail in the works he created throughout the religious community.

Fra Angelico and Benozzo Gozzoli's Adoration of the Magi

The second work created by Fra Angelico and his student Benozzo Gozzoli adorns Cell thirty-nine, otherwise identified as Cosimo de' Medici's cell. It was painted toward the end of the 1430s and occupies the entirety of the end wall. In a petrous, desert landscape, the Holy Family gathers in the lower left section while the Magi show their

reverence for the Christ Child. The oldest Magus conforms to the traditional pose of prostrating as he reaches up slightly to Baby Jesus. The artist(s) demonstrate his deference by placing his dark crown next to him in front of Mary's cream and slightly azurite-based garb. The second Magus kneels with his still crowned head bowed while the third stands with a gift in hand to present to the Holy Family. The center of the work partly contains a *Vir Dolorum* in which the artist's presented a *tromp l'oeil* effect of Christ crucified. The remaining section displays the Magi's procession that contains horses and Eastern figures bearing exotic garments and headdresses.

Ferrara/Florence Council Meeting Influence

Giovanna Damiani notes the possible influence of the 1439 meeting of the Council on the work's display of such foreign elements.³⁸ This Council gathering was an assemblage between the leader of the Eastern Church, John Palaeologus, and the pope of the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Eugene IV, to diffuse tensions between the two branches of Christianity.³⁹ Originally planned to occur in Ferrara, Cosimo de'Medici used his financial power, influence, and plague that infected the originally chosen city to have the meeting moved to Florence. With this reassignment, the Medici's home city became consumed with greater economic growth as well as culture and the event spurred an interest in collecting antique manuscripts as well as learning Greek. From these incidents, the Renaissance bloomed further in the city with the appearance of Orthodox church members. While ultimately months of deliberations ended with no resolutions between the two churches, Cosimo and Florence benefited in prestige, wealth, and culture.⁴⁰ Thus it should be no surprise that such particular exotic influences would find their way into a work made primarily for the Florentine Cosimo de'Medici. It draws from the current events of the time in terms of artistic inspirations as well as political and social events involving the Medici. The two mentioned works of San Marco, thus, demonstrate the family's attempt to connect themselves with the Magi and mark the return of their power in Florence.

Medici Ascendancy in the 1440s

By the 1440s, the Medici's shadow of influence extended far beyond the walls of their Tuscan city. It crept to the north in Venice through a successful

alliance against Filippo Maria Visconti,⁴¹ head of an influential family that dominated Milan in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He was defeated at Anghiari in 1447 and passed away in later that year – leaving an opening for the duchy of Milan.⁴² From there, the Medici's ascendancy fell upon Milan through Cosimo's military support of Francesco Sforza for the duchy position. Finally, the decade concluded with the Medici aligning with Ferrante of Naples over the French Angevin claims, resulting in a triple alliance based in Florence.⁴³

Domenico Veneziano's Adoration of the Magi

Due to such gains in power, it should be no surprise that this decade witnessed the production of Magi-based artwork from the patronage of the Medici family. Between 1440 and 1443, Domenico Veneziano paused his work on the choir frescoes of Sant'Egidio in Florence to begin painting the roundel *Adoration of the Magi* (Figure 5). While little has been found on the artist's life, many scholars believe Veneziano began his work in Venice and he permanently settled in Florence by 1439.⁴⁴ His work shows a procession of aristocratic figures that travel down a spiraled path from a walled city that cuts through rolling hills and fields of sheep.⁴⁵ In the foreground, one finds the Holy Family underneath a wooden structure while the Magi gather in front of them. The oldest Magus kneels as he kisses the feet of Christ while the other Magi bear gifts. The donkey and ox nestled



Figure 5 Domenico Veneziano
Adoration of the Magi 1440-1443 CE
Poplar

in the structure witness the scene while a peacock perches on the roof. Meanwhile, an African figure rides a camel in the background as birds dart about

in the blue sky for fear of the attacking falcon, which has recently been freed by the falconer in the foreground.⁴⁶

Within this scene of deference and splendor lie numerous Medici allusions promoting the family and their goal of association with power. First, the inclusion of the peacock and falcon do not simply serve their biblical significance. While traditionally the peacock represents immortality, referring both to Christ and the Christian Church, here it also stands as Cosimo's son Giovanni's attribute. To reinforce such a connection, the artist included the figure of the family member next to his older brother Piero, who holds the falcon. This particular animal, along with its birds of prey, signifies the three Magi's nobility as well as their eminence and victory over their adversaries. The latter attribute most likely appealed to the family who still felt the stings of exile and political manipulation. But its inclusion went beyond its biblical reference: the falcon stands as Piero de' Medici's symbol, the next in line to rule after Cosimo.⁴⁷ One can see simply from these two inclusions that the Medici manipulated more than one facet of Christian-based art. The family drew from old themes and associations to legitimize their recent rise to power from their banking realm.

Secondly and finally, Medici family motto can be found lining the horses' bridles and trappings. While minute in its depiction, its inclusion in a seemingly religious artwork further demonstrates the family's pursuits of emphasizing its prominence as well as connection with the *Adoration*.

Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi's Adoration of the Magi

Another work commissioned during this decade of Medici ascension came from the hands of Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi. Born in Florence, Lippi was a member of an impecunious family. After the death of his parents, he lived with his aunt for a few years before she placed him in a convent of Carmelite monks. Lippi left the religious institution in 1432 and worked in Padua in 1434. It would only be in 1437 that the artist would return to his home city to work for patrons like the Medici.

The two artists' *Adoration of the Magi* (Figure 6) utilize the round shape of the panel by winding the Magi's entourage around the composition to end in front of the Holy Family. In front of a rocky outcropping, the oldest Magus takes his traditional pose while female figures hold gifts. A

walled city, identified by scholars as Bethlehem, has a crowd full of indeterminate figures that are anxious to pass under the wide arch and reach the end of the pathway.⁴⁸ A group of nudes among the ruins may reference the outcasts of society referenced in the gospels Mark (Mark 5:1-20) and Luke (Luke 8:26-39). These people resided outside the city walls among the remains of ancient structures but learned of Jesus' teachings.⁴⁹



Figure 6
Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi
Adoration of the Magi 1445 CE
Wood

Familial references can be found throughout the work. One can see the familiar symbol of the peacock on the roof of the wooden structure – representing both the Resurrection and Piero de' Medici. But the shape of the work remains highly significant to the Medici. Boskovits asserts that the circular format may signify a family event and can be associated with a *desco de parto*. Known as a birth salver, it is a type of celebratory gift that was given on the successful birth of a child.⁵⁰ So in this decade of prominence, the Medici chose to celebrate the coming of a new family member with the Magi theme. They wanted their growing family to be connected with their rising ascendancy throughout Europe.

Benozzo Gozzoli's Adoration of the Magi

The 1450s and 1460s would witness the continuous prosperity of the Medici. To commemorate an era of ensuing success and ever-growing power, the family commissioned the artist Benozzo Gozzoli to decorate their private chapel in 1459.⁵¹ Born in 1420 as Benozzo di Lese to a Florentine tailor family, the artist began to make a name for himself through assisting Fra

Angelico with three major works in San Gimignano, Florence, and Montefalco.⁵² In 1449, Gozzoli broke from apprenticeships in Montefalco to become a master. He painted the lunette *Madonna and Child between Saint Francis and Saint Bernardine* as his first independent work.⁵³ But Gozzoli would be best known for his wall paintings in the chapel of Florence's most infamous family.

Approved officially in 1442 by Pope Martin V, the Medici created their personal chapel from the architectural designs of Michelozzo di Bartolomeo.⁵⁴ It was an unusual structure for a home during this time period and most likely was approved by the pope due to Cosimo de Medici's status as papal banker and less upon his piousness.⁵⁵ It was built on the *piano nobile* or first floor of the residence between 1446 and 1449 and hallowed to the Holy Trinity. While it has been altered significantly since the 1659 purchase from Gabriello and Francesco Riccardi, the chapel took on a rectilinear shape with a square room and orthogonal chancel flanked by two sacristies.⁵⁶

Within the architectural details of the religious-oriented room lie multiple allusions to the Medici. The in-laid door of the sacristy on the right, for example, references the Medici emblem as it bears candelabra balancing on a tripod base that has ferine paws grasping a ball. Besides this, the door also includes a complete Medici coat of arms that surrounds itself with bowls of ribbons and fruit, referencing perhaps familial vitality. Another allusion can be seen in the inlaid and carved choir-stalls. Four interlaced rings, the family's coat of arms, as well as public heraldry like the shield of the Signoria and Guelph party line the seats. Even in the ceiling's blue panel with the monogram of Christ one can find a carved garland of tricolor feathers held together by pairs of diamond rings – both cherished insignia of the Medici.⁵⁷ Simply from assessing these architectural elements, one can see the unique status of the chapel and its predominant leanings towards political/social realms over the intended religious one.

Benozzo Gozzoli would, like the architect Michelozzo, weave familial pride, politics, and social references into an awe-inspiring masterpiece. A tripartite iconic scheme wraps around the room from the entrance to the altar. The procession of the Magi makes up one section of this and displays the Magi meeting beneath the star that will lead them to Bethlehem. While shepherds and herdsmen watch over their sheep unaware of the holy event

taking place, the three kings travel through jagged plains and paths carved through the mountains. With them they bring groups of foot-followers and horsemen. They seem to extend from the white castle, possibly referencing Jerusalem, near the top of the east wall.⁵⁸ The procession is broken up into two cluttered, close-knit groups and only seems to break from the group in regards to the noble hunting party that contains exotic felines and falcons.⁵⁹ Each wall dedicated to the Adoration of the Magi theme features one of the Magi with his retinue carefully placed in proper ranking positions and colors within the work.⁶⁰

On the west wall (Figure 7), the oldest Magus Melchior looks out to the viewer in the lower left corner of the section as his page helps lead the Magus' albescent mule across a small creek. While ferocious felines attack game in the background, the procession continues to wind up the path with pages, hunters, camels and horses bearing supplies, as well as a collection of individualized figures. Some if not most of the latter group came from contemporary Florentine civic life but are now remain unidentifiable to modern scholars. They may have been diplomats, politicians, associates,



Figure 7
Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi, West Wall
1459-1460 CE
Fresco

allies, relatives, or other types of associations within the Medici sphere.⁶¹ In the far distance, one sees Gozzoli's preference for the exotic with his inclusion of slave-like figures, dignitaries with Eastern garments.⁶² Notably, the female figures in the high section of the fresco, who travel at the rear of the

procession group that enter the woods, may have been Cosimo de' Medici's wife Contessina de' Bardi and daughters-in-law Lucrezia and Ginerva.⁶⁵ This begins the inclusion of familial emphasis in what should have been a predominately religious work within a chapel. While the other human figures may not be able to be discerned currently, there are various animal references and detail works that allude to Medici power and influence. For example, the falcon disemboweling a recently slaughtered hare can be seen as Piero de' Medici's symbol as well as the general family's dominance over their enemies.

The southern wall (Figure 8) contains the Magus Balthazar looking to the heavens on his white steed. He wears a verdant robe with trim adorned in fur and an exotic looking crown. Scholars linked this particular Magus figure for quite some time with John VIII Palaeologus, the Byzantine emperor. Di Lese contests such a claim, however, and says the Magus lacks similarities with the Emperor's description in primary sources and other art works.⁶⁴ Regardless of argument, the Magus figure clearly references Eastern culture with his dress and physical characteristics. This may allude



Figure 8
Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi, South Wall
1459-1460 CE
Fresco

to Cosimo's success in transferring the ecumenical council in 1439 to Florence and its positive influence on the city.⁶⁵

As Balthazar takes this moment for contemplation, the Magus' lightly armed personnel pause in the Tuscan landscape to look around at

their surroundings or fixate their gazes upon their spears. The two figures that would have held Balthazar's sword and gift for Christ are lost now due to alterations in the late 1600s by the Marchesi Riccardi.⁶⁶ Medici symbolism can be seen here in details like the horse's harness lined with golden Medici diamond rings.⁶⁷ It also is demonstrated in the feathers projecting from the headdresses of the three young figures, a simple play on Medici symbolism.⁶⁸

Lastly, on the eastern wall (Figure 9), the youngest Magus Caspar gazes outwards into the realm of the viewer while his *brigata* or brigade follow faithfully behind. This type of courtly formation had been custom to the aristocracy since the thirteenth century in regards to festivals, games, and shows. It had been limited to twelve in the fourteenth century after incidents of violence so Gozzoli's procession would have been a fantastic number for the time.⁶⁹ Two mounted pages ahead of Caspar bear a sword and what appears to be a pyx. Behind the Magus is a distinct crowding of



Figure 9
Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi, East Wall
1459-1460 CE
Fresco

figures that walk or ride on horseback. They proceed down a rocky path that cuts through the Tuscan countryside.

The members of the procession directly following Caspar have intent and individualized faces; they were most likely valued members of the Medici sphere. Unfortunately, the majority of these forty figures who show more than half a face have become unidentifiable to modern scholars while others remain under heavy argument over their true identities.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, all were significant at

the time of the Medici's ascent in power and many represent key figures of the family. For example, the older man in blue garments who rides upon a mule is none other than Cosimo de'Medici. His form of transportation was intended to reflect humbleness and was in fact used by the infamous head of the family during one of Florence's Epiphany celebrations.

The figure in profile that leads off the group on the white horse is Piero, Cosimo's son⁷¹ who oversaw much of Gozzoli's work on the frescoes (Figure 10).⁷² His technical ruling over Florence would come in 1464 upon the death of Cosimo and span only to 1469 when Piero himself would pass away. In that short time and despite being terribly crippled by the gout, Piero's brief ascendancy to power increased the influence of the Medici. He decimated a plot made against his rule in 1466 as well as obtained Saranza and Sarzanello under the peace agreement of 1468 that arose from Venice's attempted war on Florence.⁷³ While the fresco was commissioned while Cosimo de'Medici still



Figure 10
Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi, detail
of Piero
1459-1460 CE
Fresco

maintained the position of head of the family, Piero's involvement in the artwork and rising role in the Medici clan can be seen in the artist's placement of him leading the group of figures. Besides this, Cosimo's eldest son outfit bears the insignia of the Medici in auric and crimson. The word *sempre* or always in Italian can be seen on this individual and alludes to the Medici family's length of reign.⁷⁴

In between these two previously mentioned, influential figures might be Carlo, the illegitimate son of Cosimo de'Medici and a Circassian slave. Being treated as a member of the Medici family along with his mother, Carlo displayed his prowess when he became Bishop of Prato in 1460.⁷⁵ To the left of Carlo are the sons of the family's allies,

Galeazzo Maria (Figure 11) and Sigismondo Malatesta (Figure 11). Galeazzo wears a red cap on the white horse while Sigismondo wears an emerald vest upon the light brown steed.⁷⁶ In the center of the work, just to the left of Galeazzo's head, stands a young Lorenzo de'Medici at age ten (Figure 12) with his brother Giuliano only age six. Behind these figures with a hat bearing the words "Opus Benotii" or "The work of Benozzo" is the artist Benozzo Gozzoli (Figure 13).⁷⁷

The most controversial figure in the work regarding true identity, however, is the Magus Caspar. Traditional views hold this figure as representative of Lorenzo de'Medici and the third dynasty of Medici rule. One issue appears due to the Magus residing in front of what appears to be an



Figure 11
Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi, detail of procession
1459-1460 CE
Fresco



Figure 12
Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi,
detail of
Lorenzo de'Medici
1459-1460 CE
Fresco



Figure 13
Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi, detail
of Benozzo Gozzoli
1459-1460 CE
Fresco



Figure 14
Benozzo Gozzoli
Adoration of the Magi,
detail Magus Caspar
1459-1460 CE
Fresco

evergreen laurel tree or *lauro*, Lorenzo de' Medici's personal device. It stood as a symbol of rebirth as well as the resilience of Medici rule. It also evoked the meaning of the Golden Age's return and thereby implied the benevolence bestowed by Medici authority.⁷⁸ While it may have been an eventual symbol of the *Magnifico*, the tree may have been intended to display a different meaning for the family at the time of the work's conception.

Hagen, for one, argues against such a theory about the Magus and emphasizes the fact that Lorenzo was still very much a child with immature, unappealing features. The author states, "He [Lorenzo] was unabashedly ugly, with bulging eyes and a flattened nose."⁷⁹ The clearly idealized, golden haired youth with light eyes and perfect nose (Figure 14) does not reflect the physical reality scholars know of Lorenzo de' Medici. While Lorenzo would indeed become *Magnifico* and be worthy of emphasis in artworks, the Medici did not attempt to directly make him embody the role of Caspar.

A more plausible theory would involve the youngest Magus representing the future of the Medici family regarding rule. Besides his already mentioned idealization, the figure and his horse promote various Medici symbolisms. For example, the figure's horse trappings are adorned with the family's coat of arms and the bridle contains golden balls and ostrich plumes. With his good looks, regal status, worldly influence, and Medici allusions, one can see how the figure represents dynastic hopes

more than anticipation of a specific heir reaching greatness.

The Medici's chapel, after all, was dedicated more to the family and their own power rather than the influence of Christ. For one, numerous portraits of contemporary figures were never intended to simply show individuals' piousness. They instead were included to promote the Medici's family in sacred but more importantly civic life, ever more increased by Gozzoli's positioning of the family directly behind the Magus. The Medici wanted to show themselves as a family of power, wealth, evolving dynasty, and faith.⁸⁰ If not, Cosimo would never have accepted dignitaries or influential figures like Pope Pius II, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, and Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta with their escorts or later for the young Galeazzo Maria in a room dedicated solely to prayer and contemplation.⁸¹ By 1459 the *Adoration of the Magi* theme clearly lacked the religious meaning born to it and had become the property of the ever-growing, influential Medici family.

Lorenzo de' Medici's Era: The Beginning of Greatness

Lorenzo de' Medici would continue the Medici's hopes for greater power after the death of his father Piero in 1469.⁸² While he had been participating in the Renaissance political world since age five, Lorenzo de' Medici was now the official head of the Medici clan and would have

the beginning of his rule over Florence be riddled with turbulence. A few years before the death of his father Piero, Lorenzo had to deal with a crisis in which reformers sought to unclench Medici power over government offices and restore office rights to those banned from participating. This uprising was only suppressed through the appearance of Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano in front of the Signoria as well as the arrival of 3000 mercenaries. Leaders of the reform movement were bullied into silence or exiled. Medici power was reestablished and Lorenzo was voted to the Balìa and the Council of One Hundred.

Also amidst the early years of Lorenzo's reign were tensions between the Medici, prominent families like the Pazzi, and figures like Pope Sixtus IV that eventually reached a boiling point. Major blows occurred between the groups, particularly in the hit to the Medici's banking sector. In 1474, Pope Sixtus dismissed the Medici as their principal bankers and put a large volume of business in the hands of the Pazzi.

In order to regroup and maintain Florentine sovereignty from international players like the Pope, Lorenzo harnessed the creation of a Triple Alliance between Milan, Florence, and Venice in 1475.⁸³ This coalition had the potential to resist papal influence and angered the ambitious Pope, a former Franciscan friar with big ideas surrounding Rome and the Papal States. But the suspicions the Pope had around the Medici's influence on the Papal States or relationship with the French through the Kingdom of Naples did not culminate until a few years later in the Pazzi Conspiracy.⁸⁴ For the time being in 1475, the Medici rejoiced in their continued ability to exert power on the world and Giuliano de' Medici even hosted a joust to celebrate such a happening.⁸⁵

Sandro Botticelli's Adoration of the Magi for Santa Maria Novella

With this event and the birth of Lorenzo's first son Giovanni de' Medici occurring in the same year, naturally the commission of an artwork exemplifying the Medici's continued reign of prominence occurred. It would not come from Lorenzo, however, and instead from a Florentine broker, Guaspare di Zanobi di Lami. Born as the son of a barber, this man obtained his wealth from the financial markets and trades in property. Due to his newly established position on the Florentine banking scene, however, resentment built among the old

banking families that dominated the city. Thus, one can interpret di Lami's choice of the *Adoration of the Magi* for an altarpiece theme in Santa Maria Novella as an attempt for an alliance with the most powerful Florentine banking family, the Medici.⁸⁶

Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, known as Sandro Botticelli, would be asked to create the work. Born in the neighborhood of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, he was the son and fourth child of the tanner Mariano. Botticelli's early career is a bit shrouded in mystery but some scholars conclude that he apprenticed in a goldsmith workshop as a *legatore di gioie* or gem setter. In the early 1460s, Botticelli began his internship with the renowned painter Fra Filippo Lippi and remained with him until 1467.⁸⁷ In the beginning of the 1470s, the artist found himself working for those within the Medici circle,⁸⁸ and by 1475 he regularly received commissions from the prominent Florentine family.⁸⁹

The Santa Maria Novella altarpiece (Figure 15) shows the Holy Family elevated in the center of the work within the confines of a ruined structure. The crowd assembles in two groups around Mary and the Christ Child as the oldest Magus kneels and reaches towards the foot of Baby Jesus. The other two Magi kneel with their gifts in hand while those in their procession look upon the scene.



Figure 15
Sandro Botticelli
Adoration of the Magi
1475-1476 CE
Oil on panel

The work features multiple portraits of the Medici family. While Botticelli most likely included the patron as the elderly man pointing to himself, di Lami's family altarpiece is filled with various

figures of the Medici in prominent roles. The oldest Magus has been linked to Cosimo de' Medici while the second one in a red mantle has been recognized as Piero de' Medici. Cosimo's other son Giovanni has been identified as the third Magus who is intent on addressing the latter figure. The young man on the left who leans on his sword has been linked to Lorenzo de' Medici while the two figures to his left are seen as the humanists Pico della Mirandola and Angelo Poliziano.⁹⁰ Standing on the far right in the yellow garment is the artist Botticelli, gazing out of the picture.⁹¹

With so many inclusions of the Medici, one can infer that di Lami intended this public work to be a declaration of his allegiance to the family and their pursuits of power. By placing members of the Medici family in the roles of the Magi, the artist illustrates dynastic rule as well as the Medici's right to continue being in a position of authority. The theme of the *Adoration of the Magi* here has clearly been ripped from its religious roots almost entirely to fit the social and political schemes of Florence.

Lorenzo de Medici's Continuation of Rule and the Pazzi Conspiracy Aftermath

Lorenzo's reign witnessed growing resentment among prominent Florentine families against the Medici. The Medici's increasing stature in the city and outside world particularly upset the Pazzi, an old Florentine family who wanted the Medici's role as papal bankers. While their loan to Pope Sixtus IV led to Francesco de' Pazzi replacing Lorenzo de' Medici as Treasurer of the Holy See, the Pazzi were not yet satisfied. Thus, they planned with the support of Girolamo Riario, the nephew of Sixtus IV, and Jacopo Salviati, an enemy of the Medici, to assassinate Lorenzo de' Medici. When one attempt failed after Lorenzo declined an invitation to journey to Rome, another plan was drafted to attack both Giuliano and Lorenzo when they were most vulnerable. On April 26, 1478, Giuliano was stabbed to death during High Mass in the Florentine *duomo*. Lorenzo managed to escape the bloody scene with only a few wounds. With murder still fresh in the minds of the Florentines and Medici in particular, the conspirators that included Archbishop Salviati were found and hanged.

Trouble for the Medici had not ended though. Pope Sixtus IV, livid at the hanging of an archbishop, the detention of his nephew Riario, as well as the failed attempt to overthrow the Medici, declared

war on Lorenzo. By not specifically challenging Florence, the Pope hoped this would cause the Florentines to unite against Lorenzo and the general Medici. But Lorenzo would not be overthrown and declared his interests were the same as the city's. He traveled to Naples where his diplomatic work secured peace between the Pope and the Medici in 1480. Marriage alliances and artistic commissions helped solidify peace with Rome.⁹² Due to Lorenzo's political panache throughout all these events, he returned to Florence with the nickname *Magnifico*.

Sandro Botticelli's Adoration of the Magi (National Gallery)

During this turbulent time of Medici sovereignty and eventual victory over those who questioned their position of power, Botticelli was asked again to create a work centered on the *Adoration of the Magi*. The painting (Figure 16) contains the Holy Family in the middle of the work underneath a dilapidated structure. Crowds disperse to two sides of the work as the oldest Magus reaches up to Baby Jesus with his crown to his side while another Magus displays reverence. He lifts up his gift as the donkey and bull look on. The third Magus, meanwhile, stands off to the left with his present held out towards the Christ Child. Boskovits



Figure 16
Sandro Botticelli
Adoration of the Magi
1478-1482 CE
Tempera and oil on panel

considers this work a more stylistically advanced version of the previously mentioned Botticelli *Adoration of the Magi* as well as notes similarities in poses and figural renderings. Thus, this commission remains significant due to the timing of the work in the context of the Medici family. It would remain

one of the last *Adoration* commissions while the Medici were still at their height of power.

The End of an Era: Downturns and Exile

While the family had managed to avert many situations in the past to maintain their influence, disaster loomed in the shadows. Caliginosity crept out of the corners in Florence with the arrival of Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican orator, in 1482. He soon got accustomed to his San Marco settings and preached against the Medici family. Savonarola continued to grow in influence with his preaching in the Florentine *duomo* in 1490 and obtained the position of Prior of San Marco in 1491.⁹³

The darkness grew thicker in 1492 upon the death of Lorenzo de' Medici and the rise of his son, Piero, to power. Medici banks, still attempting to recover since the Pazzi Conspiracy, fell under Piero's watch. Weakened and with no popular, skilled leader to maintain the situation, the Medici witnessed Piero agreeing to give up certain Florentine territories to the invading army of Charles VIII, King of France in 1494. The actual government of Florence protested such an action, as they felt Piero de' Medici had no authority. But it was too late and the French army entered Florence. The family took flight from Florence as a mob ransacked their home and watched the last of the light spurred by their influence be snuffed out for what seemed for good.⁹⁴

In December, a month after the Medici abandoned Florence, the Florentine government introduced a law that abolished the Medici councils for the creation of the Great Council. Besides this, the Dominican orator who had only arrived in Florence only over a decade earlier seized control of the city. He abolished the Compagnia dei Magi, one of the last vestiges of the Medici's power,⁹⁵ and held the last Feast of the Quattrocento where he and two other Dominican friars dressed as the Magi.⁹⁶ The Medici clearly no longer held the power within Florence and their own political tactics were being manipulated against them. While Savonarola's pursuit of setting up a theocratic democracy and papal criticism led to his excommunication⁹⁷ and eventual execution, his demise would not have the people of Florence calling the Medici back to power. Piero Soderini, instead, would rise up⁹⁸ and nearly twenty years would pass before the Medici would enter Florence again.

Return of the Medici and Changes in Public View

In 1512, Giovanni de' Medici, son of Lorenzo de' Medici and future Pope Leo X, persuaded Pope Julius II to reestablish the Medici's position in Florence. While the first Medici exile resulted with the Florentines calling back the family to the city, this time it took the Spanish army to persuade the Florentines to let the Medici return.⁹⁹ This use of arms against their own citizens changed the public perception of the family and their right to rule. While Giovanni obtained the position of pope one year after and Giulio de' Medici became a cardinal in 1514, the family's influence could not be coated in the same shrouds of piousness and city-oriented pride as it had with figures like Lorenzo. Resentment clung to the walls the Medici had persuaded a foreign army to tear through and its citizens would no longer view their patronage the same.

Thus, themes like the *Adoration of the Magi* that promoted the family as affluent, worldly, regal, and above all powerful fell out of usage. Their rule was now regarded as tyrannical and the male heads of the family no longer were popularly accepted as kings among the Florentines in events like the Epiphany or on artworks.

Besides this, the artistic styles among European courts had changed since the Medici ruled. Mannerism came into being after the 1520s and was a reaction to the High Renaissance artists' approach. Emphasis to idealized naturalism, for example, was discarded often for complex and artificial poses. With the role of artists elevated during the Renaissance, Mannerist artists pushed their technical and stylistic skills to the limit. They employed intense color choices juxtaposed against one another, astringed spatial relationships, and aberrations in scale.

Jacopo Pontormo's Adoration of the Magi

One can see this shift in stylistic intent and meaning of subject matter through the Mannerist artist Jacopo Pontormo's version of the once highly reproduced *Adoration* theme beloved by the Medici (Figure 17). Commissioned by the Florentine banker and Medici supporter Giovanmaria Menintendi, the work was intended to be part of an antechamber decoration for the patron's palace.¹⁰⁰ It was part of a cycle of biblical episodes that pertain to the Epiphany, which were painted by multiple artists.¹⁰¹ The work shows a crowd of people processing

towards the stable structure housing the Holy Family. The oldest Magus kneels awkwardly towards Baby Jesus, who seems to squirm in his mother's arms as she hunches over to show him off. The other Magi stand elsewhere with their gifts and seem more intent on mingling than demonstrating their deference.



Figure 17
Jacopo Pontormo
Adoration of the Magi
1519-1520 CE
Oil on panel

One figure of the crowd holds his hat as he leans in a contrived pose to speak with the woman who has been identified as a Hebrew midwife. While Diane Kunzelman states the procession of people journeying from afar signifies "the renewed splendor of the dynasty again ruling over Florence"¹⁰², the lack of Medici symbolism or figures seems to negate such an ideal. While she is accurate in her idea that this showed some sort of loyalty to the prominent Florentine banking family, the artist's obvious focus with technical and stylistic over including direct Medici symbols or family figures lessens the intensity of the patron's intent, especially in comparison to ones like Guaspare di Zanobi di Lami's commission. The *Adoration of the Magi* had simply fallen out of fashion for the time of re-established Medici rule and no longer held the same intense meaning to the family or those who viewed it.

The Medici emerged from the Mugello with intent to make a place for themselves in the Florentine scene. Prospering in banking realm, the family eventually sought to strip their current class connotation for regal-like stature in a republic state. Simple alliances or maintaining high political positions

would not alone achieve them such a status. So with this in mind, the family looked to Christianity and manipulated the theme of the *Adoration of the Magi* to elevate themselves within their city. They made it a power icon reflecting regality, worldliness, piety, as well as ascendancy and would commission its rendering whenever they felt the need to emphasize their status. But the usage of such an image fell out of favor with the family after the Medici were exiled for the second time from Florence. The emergence of Mannerism as well as the family's return to Florence through military means changed the art associated with the Medici. They were no longer able to associate themselves with the Three Kings and had to look towards other means of justifying as well as promoting their rule.

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