

Florence Celebrates The Uffizi

The Medici were acquisitive, but the last of the line was generous.
She left all the family's treasures to the people of Florence.

by Milton Gendel

Whenever I visit The Uffizi Gallery, I start with Raphael's classic portrait of *Leo X and Two Cardinals*, in which the artist shows his patron and friend as a princely pontiff at home in his study. The pope's esthetic interests are indicated by the finely worked silver bell on the red-draped table and an illuminated Bible, which he has been studying with the aid of a gold-mounted lens. The brass ball finial on his chair alludes to the Medici armorial device, for Leo X was Giovanni de' Medici, the second son of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Clutching the chair, as if affirming the reality of nepotism, is the pope's cousin, Cardinal Luigi de' Rossi. On the left is Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, another cousin, whose look of reverie might be read, I imagine, as foreseeing his own disastrous reign as Pope Clement VII. That was five years in the future, of course, and could not have been anticipated by Raphael, but Leo had also made cardinals of his three nephews, so it wasn't unlikely that another member of the family would be elected to the papacy. In fact, between 1513 and 1605, four Medici popes reigned in Rome.

Leo X was a true Renaissance prince, whose civility and love of the arts impressed everyone - in the tradition of his father, Lorenzo the Magnificent. At 13 he was a cardinal and at 37 he became pope. For me, his emblem - the yoke - might represent the destiny of Florence, which he considered his property, under the autocracy of the Medici family from his time on.

Of course, the city had been ruled by the Medici for almost a century. But Cosimo the Elder, who was called "father of his country," his son Piero the Gouty and Piero's son Lorenzo the Magnificent had respected the old municipal forms. They were citizens only, although they were richer and more powerful than other Florentines, and the family, through its banking operations, was a European power.

The Medici were exiled from Florence by revolution in 1494, but they returned in 1512. There was another short-lived republic between 1527 and 1530, until it was destroyed by the Emperor Charles V. With no legitimate Medici available to rule Florence, Charles appointed Alessandro, an illegitimate son in the direct line. His assassination by a kinsman, Lorenzino, was the first of no less than eleven murders of members of the family and their intimates in the two generations between 1535 and 1585. As always, room could be made at the top.

After the extinction of the elder branch of the family, Cosimo, the quick and clever 17-year-old son of Giovanni delle Bande Nere, a descendant of Cosimo the Elder, was chosen to head the state. With the emperor's approval, Cosimo I, or Cosimo the Great, as he was called, conquered the neighboring republics of Siena and Lucca and laid the base for the grand duchy. His son Francesco I was the first grand duke of Tuscany, and his successors bore that title for three centuries, until 1737.

Uffizi means “offices” - and that is what the Uffizi originally was. Cosimo I was determined to centralize the state and to give clear visual expression to that fact. Vasari planned and constructed a modern complex to house the government offices, including the judiciary, the mint, workshops and archives. Cosimo had already dropped the pretense of being just one prominent citizen among others, and had moved from the Medici Palace, a mansion no more impressive than those of other Florentine magnates, to the Palazzo della Signoria, the medieval stronghold of the former Florentine commune. This significant identification of the person of the autocrat with his residence and the seat of government gave the city a new aspect.

It was Cosimo’s son Francesco who founded a gallery on the top floor of the Uffizi, carrying out an idea of his fathers. It was opened to visitors in 1581. The public at that time and for many generations subsequently was quite unlike the blue-jeaned throng I am part of today. Only those who were decently dressed and could pass as ladies and gentlemen were allowed inside. The number of visitors would have been modest in proportion to the population of the city, which was about 70,000. Florence now has about half a million inhabitants; last year about 1.3 million visitors went through the Uffizi. The gallery they crowd through has at least double the space and the works of art it had in the 16th century. At that time, the Medici collections, going back to the days of Cosimo the Elder, were installed in the east wing, in halls sumptuously designed by Bernardo Buontalenti, Vasari’s successor as architect of the building, and frescoed by Alessandro Allori and assistants.

Built beside the Palazzo della Signoria and back of the Loggia dei Lanzi, the two long wings of the Uffizi, facing each other across a narrow courtyard, reach to the Arno, where they are connected by a double portico. The long, compressed view focuses at that end on the green hill beyond the opposite bank of the river, and in the other direction frames the bulk and great tower of the Palazzo della Signoria. This urban perspective, scanned by pairs of columns and trios of pedimented windows in a rhythm that accelerates as the long view is foreshortened, derives from Michelangelo’s Capitoline Hill elevations.

The animation in the Piazza della Signoria and in the Uffizi courtyard, created at one time by the business of government, is today the result of the business of sightseeing. Along the arcades linger little groups of aging hippies, latter-day flower children and Italianate punks. Marijuana sometimes scents the air. Bent-wire jewelry and casually stitched leather goods are laid out on the pavement between pushcarts of souvenirs. Sidewalk artists chalk renditions of the *Mona Lisa* or the Riace Bronzes. Portraitists encircled by onlookers do rapid bravura sketches of selfconscious tourists. The old life of the piazza would have been equally colorful, with jugglers, acrobats and shell games along with derelicts and beggars.

The Uffizi’s quadricentennial, which fell last year, reaches its peak this year. (Anniversaries in Italy tend to be approximate.) Two years ago, the Council of Europe, the municipal government of Florence and the regional government of Tuscany joined forces to present a series of ambitious exhibitions celebrating the accomplishments of the 16th-century Medici. Those celebrations might more suitably have coincided with the Uffizi’s 400th anniversary, for the Uffizi is the most notable monument of the Medici autocrats, the greatest of the Italian national picture galleries and the oldest major museum in the world.

The events planned for the quadricentennial are modestly parochial compared to the Medici festivities of 1980. They include an exhibition that focuses on the Uffizi building and its history, with drawings, plans and photographs, and the return to public view of Botticelli’s *Primavera* after

cleaning, along with newly restored prints and drawings from the gallery's great collection. There is also the opening of a new collection of 20th-century self-portraits by artists, all of them donated. The self-portrait collection was started 300 years ago by Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici, the brother of Grand Duke Ferdinando II (reigned 1620-70), and over the generations has acquired self-portraits by Raphael, Titian, Rembrandt, Velazquez, Ribera, van Dyck, Bernini, Ingres, David, Delacroix and Corot. The new additions include William Merritt Chase, Marc Chagall, Giacomo Manzu, Giorgio Morandi, Sam Francis, Isabel Bishop, Jules Olitski, Raphael Soyer and Robert Rauschenberg. For a decade, the older works have hung in the Corridoio Vasariano, the mile-long passage built by Vasari to connect the Uffizi and the Pitti palaces and completed, in five months, for the marriage of Francesco I to Giovanna of Austria. It marches across the tops of the goldsmiths' shops on the Ponte Vecchio and offers commanding views of the Arno and the riverine cityscape. Contemporaries thought of it as an imitation of the passage between the palaces of Hector and Priam, described by Homer, and of the passage Nero built from his Golden House to the Palatine. The Florentines had a large idea of their place in history and were always harking back to their Greco-Roman heritage. During the frequent public celebrations to welcome important visitors, such as Leo X himself in 1515 and Charles V in 1536, as well as for state weddings, temporary triumphal arches and vast stage-set edifices were erected in the city.

But the showy autocrats who followed Pope Leo are less congenial than the earlier Medici. I go back to the east wing, where the parade of Tuscan art starts with the majestic works of Cimabue, Giotto, Duccio and Simone Martini, for since art history hit the Uffizi at the end of the 18th century the paintings have been arranged by school and chronology. After the grandiose scale of the major painters, a more modest work like Starnina's anecdotal tableau of anchorites in *The Thebaid* makes a transition to the cerebral adventures of Paolo Uccello. His *Battle of San Romano* hung in Lorenzo the Magnificent's bedroom in the Palazzo Medici a generation before the family set up as autocrats. We follow the Medici thread through Piero della Francesca, Filippo Lippi and Pollaiuolo to Botticelli, whose *Adoration of the Magi* includes portraits of Cosimo the Elder, Piero the Gouty, Lorenzo the Magnificent and the artist himself. The *Birth of Venus* and *La Primavera*, primal images of Renaissance Platonism and learned classicizing allegory, were painted for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, who was the ancestor of the younger branch of the family - the great-grandfather of Cosimo I. The sweetly grave physical beauty and luminous detachment of Botticelli's paintings visually sum up the lofty atmosphere of Florentine life at its zenith. Michelangelo's *Tondo Doni* is a reminder that he got his start with the Medici. But when it came to a political choice, he opted for a republican Florence and designed its military defenses. The works by Michelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael are there to testify that after Florence rose to dominate Tuscany and became the premier financial power in Europe it became the dominant esthetic power in the world.

The great altarpiece by Hugo van der Goes, a major influence on Florentine artists, which Tommaso Portinari, the Medici agent in Bruges, brought back with him in 1478, starts the line of northern masterpieces in the collection. Besides two Rembrandt self-portraits and the portrait of a rabbi acquired probably by Cosimo III, there are the Dürers and masterworks by Rogier van der Weyden, Lucas Cranach, Albrecht Altdorfer, Rubens and van Dyck.

By the middle of the 17th century, acquisitions and legacies, like the della Rovere collection, which came through the wife of Ferdinando II and included the unforgettable portraits of Duke Federigo da Montefeltro and his duchess by Piero and Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, called for more space. The gallery was extended over the Lungarno portico and doubled back over the west wing to Vasari's Corridor. (A bar and a terrace, on top of the Loggia dei Lanzi, has a grandstand view of the Piazza della Signoria. Francesco I in his time had the same idea, and held concerts here on summer

evenings.) There have been further acquisitions and rearrangements by chronology and affinity, but the gallery itself has remained substantially the same ever since.

It is logical for Florence to possess the most complete collection of Florentine art, for the Italian museums have a marked regional character, but the Uffizi has acquired not only paintings from all over Italy in the course of its history, but a wealth of sculpture, *objets d'art*, an armory and scientific instruments as well. Except for some of the ancient sculpture, like the *Medici Venus* and the *Niobe* group, most of these works were moved to other museums during the 19th century, so the Uffizi is the parent of a good many of the collections around the city. The Pitti Palace houses another, related collection of masterpieces and portraits amassed by the ruling family. Eleanora of Toledo, Cosimo I's wife, bought the Pitti Palace and the Boboli Gardens behind it to serve as the grand ducal residence, with the Uffizi and the Palazzo della Signoria, all connected by passages, to be used as government offices.

The Medici were born to surplus value; acquisitiveness was their tradition and their heritage. (As late as Ferdinando I, the prince himself engaged in business.) They collected everything: money, power, status (marrying princes and royalty), paintings and sculpture, tapestries, medals, armor, scientific instruments, books, china and curiosities.

Of all the later dynasts, the last, Anna Maria Luisa, is the one I like best. Her father, Cosimo III, foresaw the end of his line, since his heir, the grotesque Gian Gastone, was childless, and cast about for a solution to the problem of the succession. Most curiously, in a time of absolutism, he thought of reconstituting a republic, after a lapse of two centuries. He also considered having his daughter succeed him. She was now the widow of the Elector Palatine and had returned from Düsseldorf with her art collections. The European powers, however, did not care for either proposal, and eventually, in 1737, the grand duchy of Tuscany passed to the house of Hapsburg-Lorraine. Anna Maria Luisa then secured a place of honor in history by bequeathing the vast Medici inheritance - the Uffizi, the Pitti, the Medici chapels, the Laurentian Library, a number of great villas and much of what is now in San Marco, the Bargello and the Archeological Museum - to Francesco III of Lorraine, with the stipulation that it must never be alienated from Florence but must remain there for the enjoyment of the "nation" and foreigners. In keeping with her public spirit, she had an alert, attractive face and personality, as can be seen in her portraits in the Pitti Palace.

The pastimes of princes sometimes have a greater grip on posterity than what they considered their major enterprises. When the state archives finally move out of the ground floor of the Uffizi, only the art collection will be left in the grand dukes' offices.

Debating whether the Medici were a good thing or a bad thing for Florence is arguing with history. One indisputable good is what they left behind them. The question of turning aristocratic culture into popular culture appears to be just a matter of waiting. And indeed, like the old Italian landscape, carefully cultivated over the centuries so that it came to look like a single continuous artwork, over the generations the accumulated treasures and the buildings that house them have become one great work of art called Florence.