
2. *Florence and Cosimo the Elder*

IN THE MID-FIFTEENTH CENTURY, THE MEDICI WERE NOT MEMBERS of the highest social class. Shrewd Cosimo's success would have inspired myriad ambitious bumpkins like Ser Piero from little Vinci. Indeed, Ser Piero lived in the first period of history in which there was some secular class mobility – so long as one could find a place in the familial, political patronage system that Cosimo had founded and his progeny perfected. In *Della famiglia*, Alberti confidently declared that “men are themselves the source of their own fortune and misfortune.” In those heady, optimistic days, self-proclaimed poets recited in the street verses that celebrated the self-made man who ascends from the lower ranks to aristocracy, loudly voicing the prevalent humanist view that knowledge and virtue conferred nobility beyond that of inherited wealth. Cosimo cleverly exploited this aspirant, bourgeois notion. He frequently hired humble individuals from rural villages such as Vinci, knowing that he would receive fierce loyalty and gratitude in return. Moreover, such dislocated people were less likely to have connections with his rivals in the city, the Pazzi family and other, old-money gentry. His namesake, the equally tough-minded and calculating Cosimo I, continued this effective strategy in the next century and became the first Grand Duke of Tuscany.

Conscientiously following in the profession of his father and his ancestors, Ser Piero would have regarded old Cosimo as a fine model for his personal virtues, traditional values, and comportment. Cosimo eschewed ostentation; generously supported civic organizations, avant-garde philosophers, and artists, like the skillful, if lascivious, painter and Carmelite friar Filippo Lippi; and was, above all, deeply devoted to his family. He went so far as to commission a translation of (Pseudo-) Aristotle's *Oeconomica* (fourth century B.C.), a

treatise that praised family life and dispensed tips on effective household management. More tellingly, on the death of his second son in 1463, Cosimo wrote poignantly, paraphrasing Euripides, “This, which we call life, is death, and that is the true life which is everlasting –. For what is my power now worth? What worth has it ever had?” On a happier occasion, he interrupted a serious meeting with visiting ambassadors to make a whistle for one of his grandsons. When afterward his guests voiced their irritation, he responded “lucky for you he didn’t ask me to play it, since I’d have done that, too.” Although this sort of behavior would have endeared him to Ser Piero and to many Florentines, more important for Leonardo was Cosimo’s almost paternalistic support of gifted individuals and his tolerance for wide-ranging intellectual discourse and for the eccentric, irreverent, and sometimes immoral behavior of extremely talented people. This attitude, perpetuated by his descendants, fostered a culture of creativity in Florence for more than two centuries – and offered Leonardo necessary encouragement and wide latitude.

Beyond that, Florence was a city of endless possibilities. The money from the Medici’s banks permitted them to become major purveyors of commodities, everything from alum (used in glassmaking and leather tanning), wool, and olive oil to gold, silver, and jewels. They could obtain for those favored customers with extravagant tastes almost anything they desired, including exotic spices, giraffes, and slaves – for 50 florins each, approximately three times the price of an average horse or ox. Despite this last abomination, Cosimo was a sincere populist, who believed in Dante’s notion of *il bene del popolo*, the public good. He underwrote much of the entertainment for the countless pageants staged in Florence throughout the year and supported many of the lay confraternities that participated in them. This fare was often far more sophisticated than the festivals and processions Ser Piero and his family had witnessed in Vinci. A higher class of diversion was required for the discriminating Florentine populace, who distinguished themselves from the masses of other European cities and towns. Florentines were extraordinarily literate, even in the lower echelons of stonemasons, wool dyers, and street vendors. Consequently, they were avid and, as today, very critical consumers of culture – quick to praise, quicker to condemn.

Renaissance Florentines elaborately amplified the traditional holiday celebrations, including the ancient religious festival of the Magi,

for which the whole city was transformed into a New Jerusalem. Various districts were decorated to recollect, and sometimes creatively to reenact, biblical events. For wedding festivals and jousts, triumphal, allegorical cars or floats were constructed, their passengers in spectacular costumes or holding standards and parade shields that made classical and chivalric allusions. Eventually, explanatory programs or published descriptions were required to sort out all the learned references and characters from ancient Greek and Roman history and mythology, such as the emperors Julius Caesar and Titus; the horrific, serpent-haired Medusa; and the stately Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom.

Few citizens were better read or more cultivated than Cosimo himself. His modest, everyman demeanor belied a voracious curiosity and fierce intellect. He amassed a substantial library for his time, containing not only the writings of the best contemporary poets and philosophers but also works from antiquity, many acquired on expeditions he sponsored to Constantinople, Egypt, and Syria. The majority of his holdings, which he bequeathed to San Marco, were religious books and manuscripts. In addition to these, he owned the modern contributions of Dante, the lyrical poet Petrarch, ribald storyteller Boccaccio, and esoteric philosopher Marsilio Ficino. These complemented the classical texts of Plato, Livy, and Cicero in the elder Medici's study. To Ficino, for whom his patron had provided education and houses, Cosimo assigned the arduous task of translating ancient volumes of Plato from Greek. As was then the custom, Cosimo often asked the intense, melancholic poet to read aloud to him from these books. One imagines that, intermittently, the two men would break into discussion, debating the practical application of the great philosopher's pronouncements. Cosimo was interested, most of all, in moral philosophy, instruction on how to live in the quotidian world. He owned more than one translated copy of Aristotle's *Ethics* and Cicero's *Letters to His Friends (Epistolae ad familiares)*, full of humane wisdom.

The Medici *padrone* was especially venerated for his blunt pragmatism and dry sense of humor, a gift that, skipping a generation, was passed on to his grandchildren, particularly to Lorenzo. Florentines delighted in recounting Cosimo's jokes, especially his one-liners, like his pithy "you can't govern a state with *paternosters*" (prayers beginning "Our Father"), a rebuke to wishful thinkers and clerics. An enthusiastic supporter of humanist writers and a closet scholar himself,

Cosimo did not suffer fools, especially those of ostensibly grander lineage who tried to feign intellectual sophistication by associating with the learned. He once commented that Franco Sacchetti, a member of the old Florentine elite and host of literary gatherings, was “like the kidney, surrounded with fat and always lean,” implying that the patrician never seemed to absorb much knowledge from those around him. For years afterward, Cosimo continued to refer to this better-born poseur as “the Kidney.” With time, Leonardo would assimilate this puncturing wit, so typical of the worldly Florentines.