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INTRODUCTION

Francis Ames-Lewis

This volume of essays on the history of Florentine Renaissance art speaks largely for itself. It does not need a lengthy introduction, but some comments on recent developments and the current state of scholarship on Florentine Renaissance art, and on the aims and approaches of this book, are called for. In light of the ambitions of Marcia Hall, as General Editor for the series, that it should serve "as a revisionist history of the arts produced in Italy during the early modern period," I encouraged my contributors from the outset to exploit and apply methods of art historical analysis that have been developed in recent decades, where appropriate to their particular subject and to their own critical standpoints. To state that the past three decades have seen a sea change in art-historical method is by now a commonplace. Critical approaches evolved under the general heading of "the new art history" are not always easy to apply to earlier periods of historical study; there is an ever-present danger of anachronism or of the overinterpretation of relatively limited evidence. Nevertheless, many scholars working on Italian late medieval and Renaissance art have in recent decades developed new critical methods that have proved very productive in helping to analyze art works as artifacts of the material culture of their time and place. This has served as a vital counterbalance to more traditional viewpoints, whereby works of art are regarded as independent aesthetic objects, as we tend to see them on the walls and in the showcases of our museums and galleries.

Many such newly developed approaches are employed by the contributors to this book to widen and deepen their engagement with the historical contexts that gave added meaning and purpose to works produced by visual artists. A case in point is gender studies. When Michael Baxandall published his *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* in 1972, questions about the role of women as patrons or consumers of art had scarcely begun to be asked, and women gained little attention in that seminal book. Later in the 1970s and in the early 1980s, however, feminist studies began to impinge on the writing of the history of Florentine art, in the work, for example, of Christiane Klapisch-Zuber. In the more recent decades, Patricia Simons (1988) on portraiture and Cristelle Baskins (1998) on *cassoni*, among others, have made significant contributions to our perception of how gender studies can be exploited as a critical tool in the study of Florentine Renaissance art. Issues in female portraiture were also debated in contributions to the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, exhibition catalog *Virtue and Beauty* (D. A. Brown, ed., 2001). The study of women in Italian Renaissance art in general has been taken forward by Paola Tinagli (1997) and of Italian Renaissance women as art patrons by Catherine King (1998), although there are few good examples in Florentine art patronage before Eleonora da Toledo. More recently, Anabel Thomas (2003) has studied the art produced for female religious communities, its iconography, and how nuns as consumers of these artworks may have responded to

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them. Perhaps the most original recent contribution in this field, however, is by one of the contributors to this book. In his *Engaging Symbols: Gender, Politics, and Public Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (2002), Adrian Randolph marshals a range of critical strategies based in gender theory to develop new interpretations of a series of major artworks of the Florentine Renaissance, culminating with his persuasive reading of the iconic bronze *David* of Donatello in terms of the notion of "homosocial desire."

This is, however, but one, although in some ways perhaps the most significant, of the new approaches followed in studies on Florentine art in recent decades that are reflected in the chapters of this book. With regard specifically to this volume in the series, the Series Editors proposed that " . . . the work of those artists who have traditionally defined the Renaissance would be reexamined within a broader artistic and cultural context." In terms of "a broader artistic . . . context," contributors have identified not only what is indigenously "Florentine" about Florentine late medieval and Renaissance art but also how the artists and their patrons responded to non-Florentine artistic activities, both those of other Italian artistic centers and those of major centers north of the Alps. One characteristic of the pro-Florentine stance adopted by Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists* is his desire to construct an autonomous Florentine Renaissance art, one that drives independently forward in the vanguard of Italian (and indeed of European) artistic progress, fuelled by the heritage of antiquity but seldom susceptible to contemporary external influence. Recent reappraisal of the breadth and strength of Florentine artists' responses to early Netherlandish paintings and painters build on Aby Warburg's seminal studies – especially, but not only, Warburg (1902b) – that were published at the beginning of the last century but that prompted only occasional responses until the 1970s. Books such as Rohlmann (1994) and Nuttall (2004), exhibitions (Borchert, ed., 2002; Meijer ed., 2008), and numerous articles on individual Florentine artists, works, or issues published in the past thirty-five years or so in scholarly journals and in volumes of collected papers (e.g., Poeschke, ed., 1993b, and Schmidt, et al. eds., 1999, and now Alexander-Skipnes, ed., 2008) demonstrate that Vasari's position clearly needed to be revised. To take one striking example, Vasari observed that the altarpiece in the Cardinal of Portugal's Chapel in San Miniato al Monte was painted in oil and that the Pollaiuolo brothers took "great delight in *colorito*" (see Nuttall, 1993). We can forgive him for not noting that the work is painted on oak panels, typical of Netherlandish painting technique, but almost unique in Florence. Also eminently Netherlandish, however, and, in 1466, remarkably precocious but ignored in Vasari's account of the painting, are the deep, saturated colors and the intricate, indeed "Eyckian," details of pearls and gemstones, brocade fabrics, and glimpses of landscape far behind the figures. Contributors to this book have looked with critical eyes beyond Vasari's narrow, chauvinistic outlook to assess both the responses and the contributions of Florence and her artists to developments throughout the peninsula and further afield, especially in the Low Countries.

Contributors to this volume have also understood the phrase "a broader artistic context" as encouraging discussion both of genres of art work, such as tapestries or furniture decoration, that do not feature highly in standard art historical surveys and of works that are of relatively minor stylistic or aesthetic quality but are of considerable historical and cultural interest. For example, several chapters in this book include discussion of the painted decoration of Florentine furniture, a topic to which much research has been devoted in recent decades. The classic study of *cassoni*, Schubring (1915), classified and cataloged the bulk of the surviving trousseau chests; recently – in Barriault (1994), Miziołek (1996), and Baskins (1998), for instance – discussion of *cassone* paintings and the related *spalliere* (wainscoting panels) that gradually supplanted the *cassone* has focused on the didactic significance of subjects depicted. Interest has centered on who made up the audience for *cassone* representations of the stories of Lucretia (Baskins, 1994), Griselda (Baskins, 1991), Nastagio degli Onesti (Olsen, 1992), and other exemplary women, and how these beholders would have understood them. The primary consumers were women (the newly wed bride and later her daughters), so the outlook of most recent studies forms another important facet of the rise of gender studies in the

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recent history of Florentine Renaissance art. Other recent substantial contributions to our knowledge of Florentine *cassoni* include Hughes (1997) and now the catalogs of two very recent exhibitions, Baskins ed. (2008) and C. Campbell (2009). Others – especially De Carli (1997), Musacchio (1999), and Däubler-Hauschke (2003) – have studied *deschi da parto*, focusing almost anthropologically on the functions of these birth trays within the ritual practices of childbirth, their place within the associated paraphernalia of birth, and the values, both familial and didactic, of the subject matter of their painted images.

This is just one example of a prevailing tendency toward studying art works very much within their sociocultural contexts. Clearly then, it was also entirely right that in this volume of the series the canonical works of Florentine Renaissance art and architecture, as set forth for later generations by Vasari, should be open to reappraisal in terms of "a broader . . . cultural context." For example, architectural historians have recently concentrated on scrutinizing the sociocultural functioning of Florentine Renaissance building types. The internal layout, decoration, and social functions of the Florentine palace have been examined in detail by Lindow (2007), and a significant proportion of the material displayed in the recent exhibition entitled *At Home in Renaissance Italy* (Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis eds., 2006) was Florentine. Shorter studies by architectural historians such as Caroline Elam (another contributor to this book), Linda Pellecchia, and Brenda Preyer in the past two decades have further enhanced our understanding of Florentine palace architecture. The development and sociocultural purposes of the Florentine Renaissance villa are exhaustively researched in Lillie (2005). On the other hand, Burroughs (2003) and G. Clarke (2003) suggest that more formal approaches to Renaissance architecture are alive and well, and this is borne out by a small number of book-length studies of architects and major buildings – Fanelli and Fanelli (2004) on Brunelleschi's cupola, and Tavernor (1998) and Grassi and Patella, eds. (2005) on Leon Battista Alberti, for example – that have appeared in the past decade.

Further in response to these recent historiographical developments, contributors to this book also had it as part of their brief to consider how Florentine art production was informed by, and how artists responded to the demands of, political, economic, and sociocultural conditions and change. The opening chapter, written by the cultural historian F. W. Kent, constructively offers a sociocultural framework for Florentine art production that has enabled other contributors to embed their analyses of the art works they discuss within a consideration of their broader cultural context. The inclusion of this chapter both signals and acknowledges the increasing acceptance in art historical study over recent decades that the history of art may best be seen as a facet of cultural history and that it can productively be reexamined by applying analytical tools and methods that have been developed by sociocultural historians and by scholars in other disciplines such as anthropology. Richard Trexler's ground-breaking book *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (1980) was an early prominent work. The formative Baxandall (1972) and the works of Richard Goldthwaite (especially Goldthwaite, 1993), Samuel Cohn, Jr. (1992), Nerida Newbigin (1996), Marvin Trachtenberg (especially 1997), Melissa Bullard (especially 1994), F. W. Kent (2004), and, most recently, Musacchio (2008) are also important. It also needs to be said that historians of Florentine late medieval and Renaissance art have, over the past five decades or so, become increasingly receptive and responsive to the research and publications also of political historians such as Alison Brown, Antony Molho, and John Najemy (e.g., Najemy, 2006) – and of great historians of the previous generation, among whom Nicolai Rubinstein holds pride of place.

The series editors also urged consideration of "patronage, both corporate and individual, and changes in religious and devotional practices [and] how these affected the form and content of art works." A growth of interest in religious and especially devotional practices has been stimulated by two recent exhibitions, *The Art of Devotion 1300–1500* in Amsterdam in 1994 (see Van Os, 1994) and *Seeing Salvation: The Image of Christ* at the National Gallery, London, in 2000 (see Finaldi, 2000). It should be said that both these scholars concentrate their attention on North European late-medieval devotional practices, as do Hand, Metzger, and Spronk (2006) in their more recent exhibition. Research

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on Florentine devotional art is less developed at present, although parts of the territory are charted in studies like Cohn (1992) and Henderson (1994) and the papers collected in Verdon and Henderson eds. (1990), and these offered some foundation for Derbes (1996) and Victor Schmidt's recent book (2005).

Patronage studies have a much longer and firmer history in recent decades. The emphasis laid on "patronage, both corporate and individual" led me to design this book as a series of chronologically sequential chapters. Many chapters are devoted to changes in the functions and styles of artworks as artists responded to the different needs of different political regimes, whether of the long and resilient Florentine Republican tradition or of oligarchic character, groups based around individual families or clans who sought to impose their authority on a reluctant populace. Important general discussion of art patronage and the commissioning process, and of relations between artists and patrons, comes in two recent studies, O'Malley (2005) and Burke (2004), who is another contributor to this book. Even more recently a novel collaboration between an art historian and a historian of economic theory (Nelson and Zeckhauser, 2008) offers original insights into "conspicuous commissions in Italian Renaissance art." More specifically, the principal art patrons in this volume are of course the Medici family in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: Several chapters consider how different Medici generations sought to use the visual arts to persuade the Florentine people of their benevolence while, at first covertly and later more openly, establishing and exerting their political authority and cultural leadership. Studies in Medici patronage have blossomed in recent decades, stimulated by Ernst Gombrich's celebrated study of the early Medici as patrons of art (Gombrich, 1960). One thinks in particular of major studies on Cosimo "il Vecchio" (D. V. Kent, 2000), Piero di Cosimo de' Medici, "il Gottoso" (Beyer and Boucher, eds. (1993), Lorenzo "il Magnifico" (F. W. Kent, 2004), and Duke Cosimo I (Cox-Rearick, 1984). Numerous smaller studies published in academic periodicals by such scholars as Melissa Bullard, Roger Crum, Caroline Elam, Rab Hatfield, John Paoletti, William Wallace (another contributor to this book), and many others have also filled out and deepened our understanding of the motivations behind Medicean patronage of art and architecture.

Central to the tensions between these two broad approaches to politics and governance is how the visual arts might effectively be used for the purposes of political propaganda. The design and decoration of the Palazzo Medici, for example, is replete with visual suggestions of the family's *magnificentia* and their cultural (and hence political) authority. Recent important contributions to our knowledge and understanding of what might be termed the political iconography of the Palazzo Medici are the unpublished doctoral thesis of Roger Crum (Crum (1992)), another contributor to this book, Caglioti (2000), and the collection of essays published in Cherubini and Fanelli eds. (1990). More germane still to the whole period covered in this book is the history of the construction and decoration of the two principal public buildings, the Duomo (and its related buildings on the Piazza del Duomo) and especially the Piazza and Palazzo della Signoria. Critically important studies by Trachtenberg (1997), on the urban planning and political topography of medieval and Renaissance Florence, and Rubinstein (1995), on the planning and decoration of the Palazzo della Signoria, have provided a firmer and broader foundation for further discussion, such as is found in this volume. Changes in the internal structures, functions, and decorations of the Palazzo, as each successive regime required new internal spaces and new programs of decoration, are recorded in almost all chapters of this book. How the visual arts were exploited at the Palazzo della Signoria by successive regimes to convey their own particular messages of political hegemony and sociocultural leadership is a theme that plays loud and clear throughout the book. The Palazzo was given its more colloquial name of "Palazzo della Signoria" only after 1549, when Duke Cosimo I de' Medici established the family's new residence at the Palazzo Pitti. I have retained the name "Palazzo della Signoria" throughout this book if only to emphasize the ironies and tensions that arose especially in the early sixteenth century, when the Medici took full control of what had throughout earlier centuries been the focus of civic life in Republican Florence.

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Finally, however, it must be said that running alongside the remarkable expansion of interpretative studies using the methodological tools developed by the new art history is a wealth of new research on individual works and individual Florentine painters, sculptors, and architects published in recent decades. Of necessity, all contributors to this book discuss many of the iconic works of Florentine late medieval and Renaissance art, for one of the important general editorial policies for this series is that works of art and architecture and their style, material and technique, and formal qualities and the evidence they offer of artistic decision making should always be at the forefront of the discussion. Over recent decades, important contributions to the study of materials and techniques used by Renaissance artists have increasingly been made in the laboratories of major museums and art galleries and conservation laboratories. I write in some detail only of developments in the study of painting techniques, but parallel research has in recent decades been carried out, for example, on bronze-casting techniques. For example, studies published in the *National Gallery Technical Bulletin* by Jill Dunkerton and her colleagues and research by scientists at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery of Art at Washington DC, among others, using techniques such as infrared reflectography, have much extended our knowledge of the use of underdrawings in Renaissance paintings. However, it should be said that Florentine paintings are generally less susceptible to this sort of examination than those of North Italy and the Netherlands. Paint media analyses of Florentine paintings, including research by Cecilia Frosinini and her colleagues at the Opificio delle Pietre Dure and by the laboratory at the Uffizi, has contributed much to our knowledge of the development of painting techniques in Florence. The definition, in Cecchi (1999), of the medium used for the altarpiece for the Cardinal of Portugal's Chapel, referred to above, is a prime example; another is a similar analysis (Bull, 1992) of Leonardo da Vinci's handling of the oil medium in his *Portrait of Ginevra de' Benci*. Remarkable work (Skaug, 1994) on the use of punches for patterned decoration of the gold leaf used in fourteenth-century Florentine paintings has contributed to our understanding of the corpuses of individual painters and workshop collaboration in the period. Further recent general contributions to research on workshop organization and collaboration include Thomas (1995) and Bambach (1999), who studied, in particular, the interrelationships of drawing and painting practices.

The high quality of research and criticism in recent monographic publications shows that this form of scholarship has by no means been superseded and that there is still plenty of biographical work to be done on Florentine late medieval and Renaissance artists. Some monographic studies come in the form of exhibitions: One thinks, in recent years, in particular of the exhibitions in Florence on Arnolfo di Cambio (Neri Lusanna, 2005) – apart from Giotto, the only Florentine late-medieval artist to have received large-scale treatment so far this century – on Desiderio da Settignano (Bormand, Paolozzi Strozzi, and Penny, 2007), on Vincenzo Danti (Davis and Paolozzi Strozzi, 2008), and on Giambologna (Paolozzi Strozzi and Zikos, 2006).

It may seem invidious to pick out from the crowd particular book-length studies, but it is instructive to do so. Whereas rather few monographs have recently been published on Florentine fourteenth-century artists, a notable feature of the past fifteen years has been the concentration of large-scale publications on artists of late fifteenth-century Florence: Butterfield (1997) and Covi (2005) on Andrea del Verrocchio, Cadogan (2000) on Domenico Ghirlandaio, Cecchi (2005) and Körner (2006) on Sandro Botticelli, Wright (2004) on the Pollaiuolo brothers, Geronimus (2007) on Piero di Cosimo, D. A. Brown (1998), Zöllner (2003), Marani (2003) and Kemp (1981 and 2006) on Leonardo da Vinci, Zambrano and Nelson (2004) on Filippino Lippi, Carl (2006) on Benedetto da Maiano, and Mozzati (2008) on Giovanfrancesco Rustici, to name only the grandest in scale and depth. Valuable contributions have also been made to the monographic literature of earlier fifteenth-century Florentine art in, for example, Bergstein (2000) on Nanni di Banco, Caglioti (2000) on Donatello, Joannides (1993) on Masaccio and Masolino, Hood (1993) on Fra Angelico, Ruda (1993) and Holmes (1999) on Fra Filippo Lippi, and Cole Ahl (1996)

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on Benozzo Gozzoli. The monographic literature on aspects of Michelangelo's life and career continues to expand: relatively recent examples are Wallace (1994), Nagel (2000), Hatfield (2002), Brothers (2007), and now Wallace (2009). Less biographical attention has been devoted to Florentine sixteenth-century artists, but worthy of note are Costamagna (1994) and Pilliod (2001) on Pontormo and his followers, Franklin (1994) on Rosso Fiorentino, Cole (2002) and Gallucci and Rossi, eds. (2004) on Benvenuto Cellini, and Waldman (2004b) on Bandinelli. Study of the Florentine Renaissance through copiously researched books on its individual artists is evidently alive and well.

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1

FLORENCE, 1300–1600

Francis W. Kent

Renaissance Florence: Setting the Scene

Renaissance Florence has been so admired by both scholars and tourists – not to mention the Florentines themselves, who were unabashed self-promoters – that it is as well to start by pointing out another view of the matter. The Florentines were "weak men by nature and by circumstance," according to a Venetian observer in 1527.[1] A disaffected Florentine, Agnolo Acciaiuoli, had gone further some sixty years earlier. He mocked the city's powerful sense of itself as a terrestrial paradise by applying to it the contemptuous description usually reserved for royal Naples, "a paradise where devils dwell." He was not alone in doing so. His contemporary, Francesco Bandini, in happy self-exile in Naples, described Florence as containing "numerous perverse spirits, by any standards more horrible than otherwise" and as a city poisoned by faction, corruption, and the politics of dog-eat-dog.[2] Both men were making a not-so-veiled attack on the political culture of a city dominated by the Medici family and its followers. Theirs was, however, a critical stance that drew on older discontents: Dante's deeply ambiguous feelings about the city that had exiled him and a traditional Acciaiuoli love-hatred for that family's native city. Niccolò Acciaiuoli, the merchant who rose to become Grand Seneschal of the Neapolitan kingdom in the mid-fourteenth century and then commissioned the splendid monastery of the Certosa just south of Florence, described the Florentines in a letter to a compatriot as "perverse men, thoughtless and lacking compassion, who for their own selfish ends and tyrannical passions are bringing the most noble city of Florence to ruin."[3]

These sour contemporary verdicts on the celebrated Renaissance city were part of an understandable reaction to the relentlessly self-congratulatory tone of Florentine myth-making, as well as a shrewd, if one-eyed, judgment on the convoluted and opaque character of Florence's civic and political life. "In Florence, things are often not what they seem," as a Florentine woman, Alessandra Strozzi, herself no friend of the Medici family, commented in the mid-fifteenth century.[4] There is similar dissent on the Renaissance city within modern scholarship. Since World War II, hundreds of books and thousands of essays on almost every imaginable Florentine subject have been said to suffer from "florentinitis," an inward-looking, possibly fatal obsession with things Florentine[5] – not that this narrow and intense focus on one city produced a scholarly consensus on many major issues. There is something to be said for Felix Gilbert's point, made a quarter of a century ago, that to read some historians of Renaissance Florence is to come away with the impression that they are discussing not the same but several different cities.[6] Florentine historiography has even been accused of failing to "transcend provincialism and provoke productive reflection on commonalities and differences [in Italy as a whole], rather than sterile commonplaces."[7]

Yet Renaissance Florence in its heyday captivated many more non-Florentines than it alienated.

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They, on the whole, agreed with the natives that the city was a paradise on earth – and this in an age when many citizens said precisely this of their cities. "I have experienced the sweetness of the good life in Florence," a Mantuan doctor wrote in 1472, "and I want Florence to be my home."[8] It was a "faire city," according to a sixteenth-century English visitor[9] who was impressed by Florence's setting, nestled among the hills in the Arno valley, and by the imposing public and private architecture of the city itself, replete with famous works of art and celebrated throughout Europe for the intellectual distinction of so many of its citizens. Dante's contemporary, the chronicler Giovanni Villani, established the particular form of this topos of praise of the "new Rome." It remained dominant for several centuries: in Leonardo Bruni's Latin panegyric and Gregorio Dati's Italian account of the early 1400s, in Benedetto Dei's vernacular description of the city (jingoistic *avant la lettre*) in the 1470s and in the sixteenth-century accounts of Benedetto Varchi and others. With (more or less) learning, eloquence, and precision, these and other Florentine writers emphasized the lushness of the surrounding countryside, which provided a beautiful setting for hundreds of fine villas and gardens; the magnificence and wealth of the city; and the ingenuity and industriousness of its fortunate inhabitants. Well into the sixteenth century, by which time a renascent papal Rome had actually earned the title *Roma caput mundi*, the Florentines were still insisting, as Villani said more than two centuries earlier, that their city was the true "daughter and creature of Rome," that is, the direct heir of the classical city and its Latinate civilization.[10] Francesco Bocchi's early guidebook, published in 1591 and titled *The Beauties of the City of Florence*, claimed for Florence the first place among the world's most beautiful cities. Images of the city and its grandest buildings have proliferated in several media since the fourteenth century.[11]

This essay must duly acknowledge that the Florentines had an almost irresistible impulse to exaggerate their achievements. Many historians – the present writer included, for all he knows – have been at times seduced by the city's glamorous past. They have perpetrated the myth of Florence's uniqueness. Historians of the distinctive artistic traditions of Venice and Bologna, for example, have long railed against the Tuscan, and above all Florentine, bias that the mid-sixteenth-century account of Renaissance artistic developments written by Giorgio Vasari injected into modern scholarship. Others point out that the achievements of Florentine art from Giotto onward always owed a good deal to external artistic and other influences; to political and intellectual connections with papal Rome at Giotto's time; and, again, in the early fifteenth century,[12] to the brilliant example of Netherlandish painting and tapestries so prized by citizens from the mid-Quattrocento onward.[13] As for Florence's musical culture, it was lively but always dominated by northern European musicians and compositions.[14] Scholarship on Italian Renaissance civilization now more than ever looks "beyond Florence," in the words of a recent collection of essays, to the "other Tuscany" and further afield[15] to "de-center" its subject by emphasizing the "artistic exchange and cultural translation" that took place between many creative centers, Florence among them, on the peninsula.[16]

Renaissance Florence still demands our aesthetic admiration and deserves the closest scholarly attention, not least for its unmatched archival resources, patient research into which illuminates the workings of its society and culture. The public archives contain astonishing riches, such as the hundreds of volumes of taxation records for 1427, which give detailed profiles of some 60,000 Tuscan households.[17] In the family collection, now at Yale, of the Spinelli, a prominent merchant dynasty that included important architectural patron Tommaso Spinelli, there are some 100,000 documents to delight and weary the researcher.[18] Other private archives abound. On the basis of this embarrassment of archival riches, we find that many Florentine claims about their city survive relatively unscathed. To take a prosaic example, when Bruni tells us that his late-medieval adopted city was a miracle of public sanitation, one's natural skepticism is overcome by a modern scholar's careful demonstration that this was more or less the case. Even the city's Venetian critic, Marco Foscari, agreed that Florence in the 1520s was "clean and beautiful" and its position delightful "for an inland city!"[19]

Florence was certainly extraordinarily creative in the visual arts, literature, and political theory, even

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if its past and present champions exaggerated the degree and uniqueness of the city's intellectual contribution to the western tradition. Dante's supreme achievement in the *Divine Comedy* was unimaginable without early exposure to citizens such as Brunetto Latini and Remigio de' Girolami, teachers who held him at the font of civic culture. The deep-rooted Florentine habit of endlessly speculating on the changes and vicissitudes of its republican political system and the intricate trickiness of its politics that critics derided helped shape the revolutionary theories of Francesco Guicciardini and Niccolò Machiavelli and their early sixteenth-century generation. It goes without saying that Florence was not just the native city of Guicciardini and his political theorist colleagues but also the birthplace or adopted home of some of the greatest artists of the age – Giotto, Masaccio, Donatello, Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Fra Angelico, the Lippis, Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Giuliano da Sangallo, Pontormo, Bronzino, Cellini, and so on. The city was an artistic hothouse in which new styles flourished. To deny that these achievements had a great deal to do with the Florentine environment from which they emerged would be as perverse as contemporary critics said the Florentines themselves were.

Major scholars during the last century gave monolithic explanations of Florentine creativity, seeking to bridge the narrow yet somehow yawning gap between "society" and "art" only to have it dismantled by the hundreds of archival and other historians who entered the field from the 1950s onward. Frederick Antal's argument that the modern painting of Masaccio's generation expressed the triumph of rational and secular bourgeois individualism over a reactionary feudal ethos collapsed as we came to understand better the complexity of Florence's social and economic structures.[20] According to Hans Baron, the mature classicism he famously called "civic humanism" was born when, in the early fifteenth century, republican Florence became locked in mortal combat with a despotic foe and therefore grasped in a revolutionary way the direct relevance of the classical Roman past for its communal well-being and survival. Art historians were quick to apply this explanation to the visual arts by way of accounting for the achievements of the generation of Donatello, Ghiberti, and Masaccio.[21] In the end, however, this "crisis" of the Florentine Renaissance proved too blunt an instrument with which to probe the question of how to explain the immensely innovative culture of the first few decades of the fifteenth century, the "early" or "first" Florentine Renaissance, as it is often known.[22]

It was one thing to tear down these and similar grand explanations, to discard as impossibly *passé* Jacob Burckhardt's suggestion that, as the collective and otherworldly existence of the Middle Ages gave way to the proto-modern world, a new spirit of individualism emerged that expressed itself in Renaissance culture.[23] (The Swiss historian's account of the origins of Renaissance culture is, however, still alive and well in guidebooks and in the popular imagination.) It was another thing, however, to manufacture new ones. Only twenty years ago, it could reasonably be said that convincing explanations of why the Arno city was so intellectually innovative were lacking. This, despite (or, some might say, because of) the stern activities of the Florentine historiographical industry, whose worker bees have swarmed around myriad subjects. Many historians had almost forgotten, it was suggested, "that what originally brought scholars into the Florentine archives was the quest for an explanation and understanding of the unique achievements of Florence's culture." This is less true now than when Gilbert wrote those words.[24] If "big-bang" explanations are a thing of the past, there are now more modest attempts to provide multilayered contexts to help us understand, if not explain, the many complexities and aspects of Florentine culture. Historians study the lives and works of particular painters and sculptors and their workshop practices. Thanks to our increased knowledge about and understanding of Florentine society, they are able to portray their subjects, not just as individuals but as members of interlocking communities of colleagues, friends, neighbours and families. Other scholars examine in remarkable and telling detail the construction histories and functions of individual buildings, among them the Palazzo della Signoria and the Duomo (more discussions of which are found in this book). How patrons, collective and individual, ecclesiastical and secular, collaborated with artists and

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their workshops in the production, and occasionally even in the creation, of works of art and how and why one style might compete with or be eclipsed by another are among the important issues with which contemporary scholarship is engaged.[25]

This substantive description of artists and their work restores them to their proper place in the society in which they lived (while in no sense belittling their distinctive genius). It also directly enlists the people and institutions for whom artists produced their wares into the social and intellectual forces that informed the process of creation. "Art" and "society" merge in this analysis – after all, society had no abstract word for art in the modern sense until at least the sixteenth century – and so to contemporary historians, most of them wary of "connecting" theories, there seems to be little point in building explanatory bridges between the two. Our more modest, if still ambitious, task is to show in as much detail and with as much clarity as possible the full circumstances in which works of art were created and to inquire about what purpose art served and what impact it had in this small, intimate, and self-conscious society, in which divisions and tensions – sometimes exaggerated – could be a source of creative vitality.

What follows is a quick sketch of the city and society in which Florentine renaissances flourished. It can only begin to point to the rich and subtle understanding of the context of and preconditions for the creation of works of art that current scholarship is producing. We will emphasize the major changes that Florence experienced in the three centuries under review. Its population dropped dramatically in the mid-fourteenth century, for example, making an expensive mockery of the massive third circle of walls that the citizens of a more populous and optimistic age had proudly constructed. The Florentine territorial state of the autocratic Medici grand-dukes was in many respects a far cry from the republican city of Dante's and Giotto's generation. Had these two founding fathers of Florentine civic culture been transferred by a time machine (of Leonardo da Vinci's making, one would like to think) to Vasari's and Varchi's Florence, they would have been struck by much more than the fundamental political changes that had occurred. The Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella, for instance, sported a sparkling new marble façade (its obvious stylistic debt to the hill-top Romanesque church of San Miniato al Monte they would have found reassuring) while the mighty Gothic cathedral begun in their time, and for which Giotto started to build a superb Campanile, was now crowned by Brunelleschi's cupola. All the people of Tuscany might shelter under its shadow, according to Leon Battista Alberti, the architect of Santa Maria Novella's façade.[26] A whole new style (or, rather, styles) of palatial architecture had emerged since the days when families such as the Mozzi and the Spini built for themselves fortress-like townhouses and towers. Most of those towers had disappeared, and on the hills around the city the fortified manor-houses of the earlier era competed, at a clear disadvantage, with classically inspired villas. Architects whose names they could not have known had created these elegant structures and the new "temples," as Alberti and others called them, such as San Lorenzo and Santo Spirito. One longs to know how Giotto and Dante might have explained the disconcerting fact that these radically new and expensive buildings remained façade-less, like two older churches they knew intimately, Santa Croce and (to a lesser degree) the Duomo itself.

Tout passe, indeed, but in Florence this happened quite slowly. What is remarkable is how much civic and cultural continuity there was over these three centuries, how very much at home our two time travelers would still have felt. The novel presence of many grand buildings and a few wider and straighter streets, the disappearance of some small neighborhoods to make way for palatial houses and the emergence of a Jewish ghetto in the vicinity of the Mercato Vecchio, had not radically altered the topography of the medieval city – nor had the fabric of its society changed very much. Some of the prominent families for whom Giotto had painted and whose names the *Divine Comedy* has preserved for posterity still lived in the same parishes, often in the same houses (a handful still do). Giotto and Dante would have witnessed lay religious confraternities still hard at work in the ducal city, dispensing religious consolation and social services to their members as they had since the thirteenth century. The descendants of the woolworkers and artisans of

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