



INTRODUCTION

This book concentrates on a single collector of antiquities, Lorenzo de' Medici, the leader of the Republic of Florence (b. 1449–d. 1492). It is based on the discovery of 173 letters, which can be added to 48 other ones that had been previously published. Letters about collecting in the fifteenth century are extremely rare, and so finding them over the course of a decade was a continual surprise. By combining the letters with Renaissance texts and Medici inventories, we can now count 345 documents, the most substantial material about an Early Renaissance collector to date.

In particular, the letters give an intimate picture of Lorenzo gathering objects from the age of sixteen until his death at forty-three. They disclose his sources (Chps. 1 and 2) and vividly describe the intricacies and intrigues of the art market (Chp. 3). They show what he collected (Chp. 4) and provide information about the study of objects, their display, why they were selected, and their monetary worth (Chp. 5). During Lorenzo's life and after his death, texts praised him for his interest in antiquities, but the letters reveal this commitment more immediately as they witness firsthand his appreciation of those who helped him and his ever-increasing determination to collect (Chp. 6).

In 1494, two years after Lorenzo died, the French invaded Florence, and his collection was dispersed. A reassessment of the fate of his objects gives new information about what he collected and how his objects were considered, and it creates a poignant picture of the importance of Lorenzo's collection as a cultural legacy (Chp. 7).

LITERATURE ABOUT RENAISSANCE COLLECTORS, INCLUDING CARDINAL PIETRO BARBO AND CARDINAL FRANCESCO GONZAGA

Placing Lorenzo in a framework of early collecting would be desirable, but the following review of literature explains why this is difficult. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, certain authors stand out for their pioneering work, but they were mainly concerned with sixteenth-century collections, especially

those in Rome.¹ It was primarily Eugène Müntz who assembled documents for the fifteenth century.² Still, the history of Early Renaissance collecting remained highly incomplete, as stressed by Richard Krautheimer in his 1956 monograph on Lorenzo Ghiberti.³

More recent scholarship added information about Rome and Florence, with the emphasis on the sixteenth century, and other cities were studied.⁴ Roberto Weiss (1969) and Phyllis P. Bober and Ruth Rubinstein (1986) wrote books that are valuable for a survey of collecting, although neither was written with this aim in mind.⁵

If a general survey of fifteenth-century collecting is lacking, substantial documentation exists for two collectors, the Venetian Cardinal Pietro Barbo, later Pope Paul II (d. 1471) and the Mantuan Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga (d. 1483), summarized as follows. The documents show that information depends mostly on their inventories, with few surviving letters – unlike the new documentation for Lorenzo.⁶

Pietro Barbo was studied by Eugène Müntz (who published his 1457 inventory) and then by Roberto Weiss.⁷ The inventory demonstrates that Barbo was an outstanding collector several years before 1464 when he became Paul II; it listed bronze statuettes, hardstone vases, gems, and coins, and some of these were later obtained by Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga and Lorenzo. Three letters from the 1450s to Giovanni and Piero de' Medici, Lorenzo's uncle and father, depicted Barbo as an avaricious coin collector, and his biographer Michele Camesi remarked on his expertise in coins.⁸ Letters from 1450, 1451, 1459, and 1460 show that he was supplied with objects by Maffeo Vallaresso.⁹ Filarete's *Trattato di architettura*, written 1463–64, cited Barbo as a collector of gems.¹⁰ In 1465, Barbo – now Paul II – oversaw Ludovico Trevisan's estate and obtained the gem of *Marsyas with Apollo and Olympos*, the gem of *Diomedes and the Palladium*, and the *Tazza Farnese*, all later owned by Lorenzo.¹¹ Jacopo Ammanati Piccolomini's letters in the 1460s concern two attempts to augment the collection of coins and hardstone vases.¹² In the same decade, Paul II appropriated objects for his palace at S. Marco (Palazzo Venezia) – a porphyry sarcophagus, commonly called the sarcophagus of S. Costanza, and a large basin, which he placed in front of the residence.¹³ Early-sixteenth-century drawings record that he owned a sarcophagus of *Bacchic Revels*.¹⁴ Paul II's determination to collect is perhaps best demonstrated by his aspiration to obtain a cameo from the basilica of St. Sernin in Toulouse. He offered a large sum of money, privileges for the basilica, and the construction of a bridge for the city; however, he was unsuccessful in acquiring the gem.¹⁵ No inventory was made when Paul II died, and so the full extent of his collection cannot be determined. Of the thousands of objects, known mostly from the 1457 inventory, only the following can be surely identified: eighty-six coins,¹⁶ twenty-eight gems,¹⁷ the *Tazza Farnese*, the basin, the S. Costanza sarcophagus, and the *Bacchic* sarcophagus.

In 1483 Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga's will specified that except for two gems and his bronzes, which he left to others, his precious objects (and books) were to be sold to pay his debts. An inventory was made, and letters were written about the sale of his collection, published by Clifford M. Brown and David S. Chambers.¹⁸

Other records demonstrate Gonzaga's contact with collectors and his interest in antiquities. In 1462, while he was en route to Rome, he saw the coins, gems, and hardstone vases owned by Lorenzo's family; in Rome he stayed with Prospero Colonna and was greeted by Ludovico Trevisan, two notable collectors, and he was offered a tour of Pietro Barbo's collection. Within a week of his arrival, he had visited ancient sites and churches, and later he made other expeditions in and outside Rome, including Trevisan's house in Albano.¹⁹ The humanist Giovanni Antonio Pandoni, called Porcellio, gave him a marble head of *Portia*, probably in the autumn of 1463.²⁰ In 1464 Gonzaga told his father, Ludovico I, that he had sent sculptures to Mantua and wanted to show them to him.²¹ In the same year, he wrote to his mother, Barbara of Brandenburg, about sending pieces (*pezzi*) of alabaster and "other antiquities."²² In 1471 Gonzaga bought gems and coins from Paul II's estate.²³ In 1472 he sought Andrea Mantegna's opinion about his antiquities,²⁴ and he sent Barbara of Brandenburg a small ancient vase.²⁵ Gonzaga owned inscriptions, listed in corpora beginning c. 1474, and some of them were installed on the exterior of his palace in Rome.²⁶ Shortly before his death, he left Rome, having commissioned the artists Gaspare da Padua and Giuliano di Scipio Amici to obtain "some coins or other ancient things."²⁷ Despite Gonzaga's detailed inventory, only twelve of his antiquities can be identified: a cornelian of *Julius Caesar* (Doc. 24, n. 2), the *Felix* gem (*Appendix 1*, Doc. 25, n. 2), and ten coins.²⁸

With the material about these two collectors and with scattered information about others, we can begin to see Lorenzo's collecting in some kind of context (Chp. 8).

LITERATURE ABOUT LORENZO DE' MEDICI AS A COLLECTOR

The assessment of Lorenzo has been surprisingly sparse until quite recently. Older literature briefly mentioned his collection, praising him for his interest in Antiquity along with his other interests in the arts.²⁹ Ernst H. Gombrich wrote the first critical study ("The Early Medici as Patrons of Art," 1960 and revised in 1978 in *Norm and Form*, London and New York, 35–57). Although Gombrich's title did not indicate it, he made a crucial distinction between a *patron* of modern artists and a *collector* of older objects, a distinction often ignored by writers before and after him.³⁰ Gombrich said that of the three generations of the fifteenth-century Medici, Lorenzo was the most elusive. To him, Lorenzo did not seem to be a great "direct" patron who commissioned works of art like his grandfather Cosimo or even his father Piero; rather, he was a patron in "indirect" ways. Gombrich then suggested (p. 55) that Lorenzo's commitment may have been as a collector: "We have come to suspect that such moneys as he had to spend on art went into the buying of precious antique gems."

Later scholars followed Gombrich's lead but emended his view that Lorenzo was not a significant "direct" patron, and they added material about Lorenzo's "indirect" patronage; they also demonstrated Lorenzo's use of art to further

diplomacy, to promote his image as an enlightened leader, and to reaffirm his family's supremacy.³¹ In addition, literature furthered information about Lorenzo's objects, beginning with groundbreaking catalogues of two exhibitions held at Palazzo Medici Riccardi: N. Dacos, A. Giuliano, and U. Pannuti, *Il tesoro di Lorenzo il Magnifico. I. Le gemme* (1973), and D. Heikamp and A. Grote, *Il tesoro di Lorenzo il Magnifico. II. I vasi* (1974); they were followed by more studies on gems and hardstone vases.³² M. Spallanzani surveyed Islamic metalwork, porcelain, and maiolica in the Medici collections.³³ A. Parronchi and L. Beschi studied Lorenzo's ancient sculptures.³⁴ Three publications gave a broader view of Lorenzo's collecting: C. Acidini Luchinat (1991), L. Fusco and G. Corti (1992, a state-of-research report), and P. Barocchi (1992).³⁵ In 1992 C. Elam, writing about Lorenzo's sculpture garden at Piazza S. Marco, and J. D. Draper, writing about Bertoldo di Giovanni, demonstrated that Lorenzo's antiquities were studied by artists (see Chp. 6, 11). The fifth centenary of Lorenzo's death was celebrated in 1992 with exhibitions and symposia, resulting in literature about various kinds of objects in his collection, published from 1992 to 1996.³⁶ From 1997 to 2002, seven essays concentrated on individual works of art, and O. Merisalo published records of committee meetings held in 1495, which discussed Lorenzo's objects that had been confiscated by the Florentine government (1999).³⁷



Our image of Lorenzo as a collector is based on letters, texts, and inventories given in three Appendixes (see Prologue: The Documents). This image differs from much of the literature about Renaissance collecting, which focuses on sculpture as the hallmark of the "Revival of Antiquity." As well as sculpture, Lorenzo cared about other media. He was particularly fond of small precious objects – coins, hardstone vases, and gems. He collected not only antiquities but also postclassical objects, such as Byzantine and Renaissance mosaics, ceramics, and Islamic metalwork; he also sponsored medallists, mosaicists, and gem cutters who revived ancient techniques. Because of this, our book gives a great deal of attention to the so-called minor arts, an area central to the taste of Early Renaissance collectors. Later, after the discovery of large-scale sculptures, such as the *Apollo Belvedere* in 1489 and the *Laocoön* in 1506, a new chapter began in the history of collecting. But that is another story.



THE FIRST PERIOD OF COLLECTING: 1465–1483

I. THE ADOLESCENT YEARS

Lorenzo began acquiring antiquities at the age of sixteen, along with his brother Giuliano aged thirteen. In 1465 Francesco Tornabuoni told Lorenzo about the coins and medals he was sending from Rome (Docs. 1–3), and the next year he wrote to Giuliano (Doc. 6): “I have assembled about 30 coins to send you, which I would have already sent except that I am waiting to get a good cornelian, which I have not been able to obtain.” Giovanni Tornabuoni, the manager of the Medici bank in Rome, was also looking for antiquities and reported to Lorenzo in 1465 (Doc. 4): “I have nothing here that seems to me either worthy or suitable for you, but if I can get some good marble figures or coins, I shall keep them upon your request.”

In 1466 Lorenzo was in Rome. Though sent by his father for business reasons, Lorenzo found time to acquire objects, as follows. His brother Giuliano, who had remained in Florence, wrote to Mariano Panichi, Lorenzo’s secretary and travel companion (Doc. 5): “I heard about the antiquities that you saw over there, which seem to me very magnificent and stupendous. The figure you sent us, which I think a most beautiful object, has arrived here.” Lorenzo bought silver coins and one in gold from Lorenzo Agnolo Biliotti in nearby Aquila and enlisted him to find as many coins as he could. After Lorenzo’s return, he received seventeen silver coins and one in bronze, and Biliotti promised he would get more (Doc. 7). At this time Francesco Stagnesi in Rome gave Lorenzo a small group of coins, known about because two years later he sent another group that he deemed better than the first (Doc. 8).

In 1468 Filippo da Valsavignone wrote to Lorenzo at the villa in Cafaggiolo about a request from his mother (Doc. 9): “Madonna Lucrezia says to send her the keys to your jewel box, because she wants a cornelian.” The letter may imply that Lorenzo had begun his own collection of gems, adding to the family’s collection. In 1469 Iacopo Gianfigliuzzi, a Florentine who was in Bologna, sent Lorenzo a “worthy and beautiful” cameo, along with other items, because he thought the gem might be of interest to him or his father Piero (Doc. 9 bis).

In 1471 Ludovico da Foligno, who worked in Ferrara and Milan and made medals *all'antica*, gave Lorenzo a present of one of them; it represented Bona of Savoy, the wife of Galeazzo Maria Sforza, and he promised to send medals of the Duke and the Duchess after they had been cast (Doc. 11).

II. ACCESS TO PAUL II'S COLLECTION VIA SIXTUS IV¹

Lorenzo wrote in his *Ricordi* (Doc. 204):

In September of 1471 I was elected ambassador to Rome for the coronation of Pope Sixtus IV, where I was very honored, and from there I carried away two ancient marble heads with the images of Augustus and Agrippa, which the said Pope gave me; and, in addition, I took away our dish of carved chalcedony [the *Tazza Farnese*] along with many other cameos [i.e., gems] and coins which were then bought, among them the chalcedony [the *Diomedes and the Palladium*].²

Lorenzo got these objects both as gifts and purchases, and when he said some of them were “bought,” he did not pay cash; instead, the Medici bank branch in Rome canceled some of the past papal debts and made Sixtus new loans.³ The *Tazza Farnese* (Plate I, Figures 1 and 2) and the *Diomedes* gem (Figure 3) had belonged to Paul II, the best collector of his generation, and so this occasion marked a high point in Lorenzo's acquisitions. It is, however, impossible to estimate the quantity of antiquities Lorenzo acquired.⁴

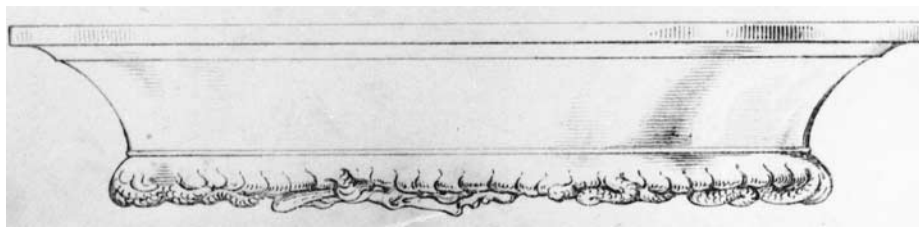
At this time Lorenzo and his Roman bank, which was under Giovanni Tornabuoni's management, contracted with Sixtus IV to sell off objects in the treasury, as stated later by Niccolò Valori in his biography of Lorenzo, c. 1513–15 (Doc. 217, 54–55):

For he [Sixtus IV] immediately put him [Lorenzo] in charge of the treasury of the Camera Apostolica, and he treated his business partners in such a way that in a short time all of them, and especially his uncle Giovanni Tornabuoni, acquired enormous wealth. Indeed, many of the gems and pearls [*gemmas et margaritas*], which Pope Paul collected with single-minded zeal, he [Sixtus] conceded to them either for nothing or for a very small price.

Scholars differ in their interpretation of what exactly these objects were: *Gemmas* can mean either ancient gems or jewels (see Prologue, v, Gems).⁵ As early as 1879, Eugène Müntz insisted that because *gemmas* is followed by *margaritas* (pearls), the passage meant jewels, not ancient gems.⁶ Müntz's opinion is supported by records about Sixtus IV's sale of Paul II's jewels and silver, with the Medici bank the



1. Alexandrian, *Tazza Farnese*, sardonyx-agate, bottom of bowl, second–first century B.C. (20 cm. diameter). Museo Nazionale, Naples, inv. 27611. Arditi 2. (Soprintendenza Archeologica delle province di Napoli e Caserta, Naples)



2. Alexandrian, *Tazza Farnese*, sardonyx-agate, in profile, engraving. Museo Nazionale, Naples, inv. 27611. Arditi 2. (C. Gasparri, “‘La scudella nostra di calcidonio’: una Tazza per molte corti,” in *Le gemme Farnese*, Museo Archeologico, ed. C. Gasparri, 1994, Fig. 105)

controlling agent. A summary follows, since most of these records are unpublished and the published ones were occasionally misinterpreted.⁷

In 1471 jewels (*gioie*), along with silver (*argentieri*), were brought to the attention of Barbara of Brandenburg, the wife of Ludovico II Gonzaga of Mantua.⁸ They were also discussed at length in letters exchanged between Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan and his representatives in Rome.⁹ On 29 July 1471, only three days after Paul II died, Sforza was informed about the availability of jewels and silver (*gyoye de grandissima valuta et argento assai*).¹⁰ More letters followed, and the

3. Roman, Dioskourides, *Diomedes and the Palladium*, chalcedony intaglio, inscribed "LAV.R.MED.," c. 30 B.C. (4.5 × 3.3 cm). Recorded in a plaster cast in the Cades Collection: III, E, 283. (Deutsches Archäologische Institut, Rome)



one of 14 August was particularly informative because it mentioned three groups of objects the College of Cardinals set aside to finance a possible war against the Turks.¹¹ The first two groups were the easily salable items: silver vessels and jewels each worth 100,000 ducats. The third group was miscellaneous objects (*oro, argento et altre gioie et adornamenti*) which were harder to sell because their worth depended on what people were willing to pay (*queste gioie così preciosi valerano tanto quanto se trovarà, perché queste cose valeno secundo la opinione delli homini che le volendo comprare*); it seems likely that this group included Paul II's coins, hardstone vases, and gems. In any case, subsequent letters show that Sforza was not interested in the silver but in the jewels, and the negotiations seemed to be going well.¹² Suddenly, on

3 September he was told that he could not buy directly from Sixtus IV but had to deal with the Medici bank and other merchants who had been consigned the most beautiful jewels (*quali hano dele più belle zioie*).¹³ Sforza also got bad news the next day. A particular diamond, previously given to a Cardinal in exchange for a loan, was now with Giovanni Tornabuoni at the Medici bank, and it had a much higher estimate than before.¹⁴

The contract between Sixtus IV and the Medici bank was mentioned elsewhere. In November 1471, the Venetian Zaccaria Barbaro told the Doge Cristoforo Moro the news that Lorenzo's bank was ingratiating itself with Sixtus and his Cardinals, it was conducting all the business of the Curia in order to get the jewels (*zioie*) at a good price, and it promised to pay the lingering debt of Pius II, an enormous sum of more than 35,000 ducats, which Paul II had never wanted to pay.¹⁵ In December a papal treasury account recorded that Giovanni Tornabuoni had been consigned jewels (*iocalia*), which were to be delivered to some of the creditors.¹⁶ In 1472 there were three more accounts, and it should be noted that although these named Lorenzo and Giuliano specifically, they were referring to them and their bank in Rome collectively as the "Depositor General" of the Camera Apostolica's funds. The first account was "about jewels" (*de iocalibus*) with Lorenzo and Giuliano, which were to be turned over to a creditor; the second listed certain jewels being sold by the Pazzi Company, stating that the money should be turned over "to the worthy men Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici, the depositors of the Camera Apostolica's money"; the third said that the Medici were to be paid "for the worth of a great number of jewels" (*pro valore plurimum jocalium*).¹⁷

In 1473 the treasury inspectors spoke out against Sixtus's transactions with the Medici bank, known from a letter of February where Giovanni Tornabuoni assured Lorenzo that the Pope would soon settle this problem.¹⁸ Indeed, in March a papal bull was issued. It mentioned the evaluation of the "very many jewels" (*plurimum iocalium*) given to Lorenzo and Giuliano and stated that the Pope "absolves and frees the same [Lorenzo and Giuliano], commanding and willing with respect to them that no one hereafter should or may injure or disturb them in the name of the aforesaid Camera or in any other way whatsoever."¹⁹

By December of 1474, the amicable relationship with Sixtus IV was over; Lorenzo told Galeazzo Maria Sforza he was offended that the office of Depositor General had been terminated and that the Pope's disfavor was shown so openly.²⁰ Outright conflict between Sixtus and Lorenzo then took place in 1478, the year of the Pazzi Conspiracy when the Pope joined forces with Naples against Florence, confiscated Medici property in Rome, and canceled all his debts to their bank. Nevertheless, at the end of 1480 the bank was reopened (although not reinstated as the Depositor General), and in 1481 Giovanni Tornabuoni was once more working to reach an agreement about settling the papal debts.²¹ In 1484, a few weeks before Sixtus died, the bank was mentioned in a papal treasury account about jewels (*iocalibus*) that were with the "society of the Medici."²²

In sum, Müntz was correct in his interpretation of Valori's text because Sixtus IV's negotiations of 1471 for the sale of Paul II's objects were exclusively about jewels. Similarly, the Pope's contract with the Medici bank from 1471 to 1474 concerned only jewels, and during the renewal of this association, jewels were mentioned again. Ancient gems played no part in this transaction.²³

Still, during Sixtus IV's reign, antiquities were, in fact, obtained by three collectors. A papal treasury account of 1471 summarized a conversation with Giuliano di Scipio Amici, a cutter of gems and hardstones.²⁴ He said that he was a creditor of the Camera Apostolica for supplying Paul II with objects and that he wanted to reduce what he was owed by reclaiming some of those that had been sold to collectors. He named Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, who had bought four ancient cameos. He also named Domenico di Piero, who had helped get the Cardinal one of the cameos and who now owned Giuliano's gem of the *Head of Pope Paul II*. Two additional documents show that Cardinal Gonzaga obtained some of Paul II's gems and coins from the treasury.²⁵ Other records reveal that Domenico acquired more than Giuliano's portrait gem; in 1486 Ercole I d'Este was informed that Domenico had "many things which belonged to Pope Paul" (Doc. 79, n. 2 [5]), and in 1487 he sold Lorenzo the famous cornelian of *Apollo with Marsyas and Olympos* previously owned by Paul II (Doc. 79 and see Figure 128 in Chp. 5).

The third collector who obtained objects from the treasury was Galeazzo Maria Sforza, the same who had been negotiating for jewels. In 1472 he asked Giovanni Arcimboldi, Bishop of Novara, to find out if Sixtus IV would sell some of Paul II's "flasks, jars, and vases of [rock] crystal or chalcedony or similar material."²⁶ Pietro Riario, Sixtus IV's nephew, evidently interceded because Sforza thanked him for sending two rock-crystal vases.²⁷

From this summary, one can surmise that if three collectors obtained ancient objects from the treasury in 1471 and 1472, Lorenzo probably did the same inasmuch as his bank was in partnership with Sixtus IV; this corresponds well with Lorenzo's entry of 1471 in his *Ricordi*, which stated that some gems and coins were "then bought" from the Pope (Doc. 204). It is possible that he was able to obtain objects not only during the initial period of association (1471–74) but also later when their relations were reestablished (1481 and 1484).

III. CONTINUED EFFORTS

Meanwhile, Lorenzo was exploring sources beyond the papal treasury. In 1471 Filippo Martelli in Rome wrote about a *Hercules* Lorenzo had asked him to acquire (Doc. 12).

In 1474 Lorenzo enlisted the humanist Antonio Ivani in Sarzana to find antiquities. Ivani, however, was having little success. He reported that the sculptor Matteo Civitale had bought from a peasant a sculpture of Hercules and a cornelian portraying a man with a very lively face, but Civitale had "stubbornly" refused to sell them (Doc. 13). Soon after, Ivani told Lorenzo that although Mico Capponi,