Architecture as Performance

in Seventeenth-Century Europe

Court Ritual in Modena, Rome, and Paris

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Introduction

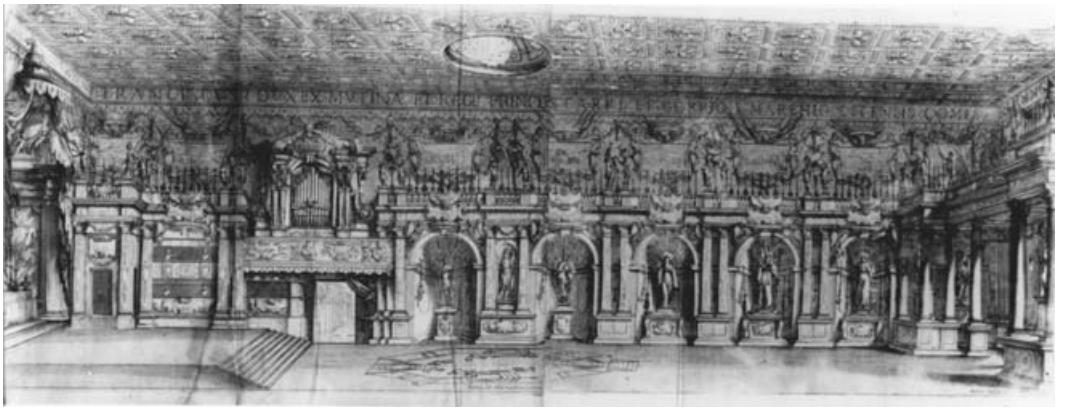
To the accompaniment of stringed instruments and a declamatory oration, the audience of mourners at Francesco d'Este's funeral in the church of San Agostino would have searched in vain among hundreds of images and inscriptions for a statue or a bust of the prince. A fragile architecture of paired columns, balustrades, and a coffered ceiling displayed paintings, trophies, and yet more ornament (Figures 1 and 2). Statues filled every temporary niche of the nave and notch of the temple-like catafalque, but these represented ancestors and virtues rather than the duke himself. In the flickering candlelight of this lavish polychrome theater, shaped hastily by the court's architects and artists from painted wood, stucco, and canvas adorned with gilt and silver highlights, the duke's physical absence confirmed his apotheosis and the political doctrine of absolute rule. Amid the decorative profusion, the duke's particular authority was proven by pictures showing his feats as the builder of military alliances, fortresses, palaces, and theaters.

As the final act in the ruler's career, the funeral was a *summa regnorum* giving order to the disparate events of his political life. The works portrayed in the funeral and in its published commemoration, Domenico Gamberti's *Idea di un prencipe et eroe christiano in Francesco I d'Este* (Modena, 1659), were of course standard commissions for rulers in Francesco's day. To command the making of portraits, palaces, paintings, and theaters was to behave like a typical prince, to signal one's status as prince. Yet the illustrations of Gamberti's book inspire larger interpretive questions concerning the precise nature of the relationship between art, architecture, and political power during the seventeenth century. These engravings by a little-known printmaker named Bartolommeo Fenis show that the power of the duke's works was not merely emblematic but was derived from their active deployment to shape his political image. In marked contrast to the volume's title and to prevailing interpretations, these remarkable prints do not present an ideal, symbolic, or perfected picture of ducal power. Instead, they confirm that the funeral itself was simply the final act in the long drama of shaping Francesco d'Este's political image.

The etchings unmask more abstract concepts of ducal rule by emphasizing the laborious process of creating the duke's image for particular courtly audiences. Images of the ruler's more familiar activities in diplomatic negotiations, wars, and invasions are displayed alongside others that celebrate the work of art and architecture: the duke appears next to fortresses shown in construction, theater scenes in the process of being raised by workers and architects, and palace interiors filled with artists at work. Like the funeral itself, the deployment of the duke's architectural and pictorial works were events routinely observed and interpreted by crowds of citizens and, especially, by foreign diplomats and princes. Francesco d'Este of Modena, even more than other seventeenth-century kings and dukes of his day, understood works of art and architecture not just as attributes but as functions of rule, as working parts of statecraft.

In the past, the patronage of rulers like Francesco d'Este has been understood by reference to the notion of lasting magnificence. From Cosimo de'Medici to François Mitterrand by way of Louis XIV, tremendous expenditures on culture have been justified according to these ends. The particular example of Francesco d'Este shows instead how traditional concepts of largesse mask the more subtle and more ephemeral ways in which works of art and architecture are used to negotiate and maintain power before specific audiences. Although the ruler's commissions are usually justified as manifestations of *magnificenza*, as reflections of personal generosity, as demonstrations of princely largesse, and as abstract virtue given material form, these notions themselves changed radically over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At the end of the fifteenth century, a courtier had evoked ancient Rome when he wrote the first Este duke, Ercole, to proclaim that "magnificence exists in sumptuous, grand, and sublime things" such as "public things and great expenditures."[1] The shift from these exalted and vague conventions inspired by antiquity to more immediate motives for patronage was identified by political theorists like Giovanni Botero, whose treatise *Della ragion di stato* (1598) became a standard guide for seventeenth-century princes. Botero gave a new edge to an old, Machiavellian maxim by emphasizing that the appearance of "magnificence in every operation" was a means of establishing public reputation.[2]

Reputation, in turn, was the fundamental tool for preserving power. Botero's principle of reputation would be extended to make even greater claims for ducal display by Domenico Gamberti, the Jesuit theologian who conceived Francesco d'Este's funeral in 1659 and wrote the first lengthy commentary on the duke's patronage to accompany it. The greater part of magnificence, he explained, was in fact transient, devoted to theaters and festivals that were "so much more Heroic since one feels the hand of the Great even more in destroying pompous Works, than in raising them."[3] Despite Botero's invocation of works as a means toward an end and Gamberti's emphasis upon the immediate value of temporary productions, modern studies have seldom analyzed how art and architecture played spectacular roles in the process of shaping princely identity.



1. Temporary *apparato* of the nave of Sant'Agostino, Modena, 1659; designed by Andrea Seghizzi and etched by Francesco Fontana, from Gamberti, 1659. Biblioteca Estense, Modena.

Even before his better-known follower, the monarch Louis XIV, Francesco d'Este formulated a newly strategic relationship between politics and culture.[4] The duke of Modena made his artistic choices part of a conscious construction of his political self, basing his decisions not only on historical exempla from the pages of books but also upon the contemporary situation. In order to understand the active ways in which form was given meaning at the d'Este court we therefore must consider not only the duke's magnetic personality but also his choice of artists from abroad, the deployment of their works, and the reception of these works by both local audiences in Modena and foreign ones at large. With its broad geographic range and dramatized rituals of display, the creative patronage of the duke of Modena influenced the artistic programs of absolute rulers at more powerful European courts.

Francesco d'Este's commissions therefore not only demonstrate the crucial role played by works in the creation of the absolutist court, they also suggest the need for two specific revisions to the history of seventeenth-century art and architecture. First, and perhaps most importantly, they suggest that the period's reassuringly modern national boundaries should be redrawn to accommodate the intensive international dialogue that took place between ducal, royal, and papal courts. This new scheme would restore the secular courts to their proper sphere of influence and allow a reconsideration of their vital exchanges with Rome, at the center of Catholic power.[5] Second, and more broadly, shifting emphasis to spectacle not only restores the singular importance of temporary architecture and ephemeral works in shaping the modern European court capital but reminds us that works of art and architecture do not instantiate power independently.[6] Instead, they rely upon a social and political field for interpretation.

The grounding for this study of the vital role of Francesco d'Este's works is, at root, archival.[7] Its interpretive emphasis upon the instrumental use of works,

beyond sheer magnificence, is supported by its methodology. Besides the propagandistic printed accounts produced by the court that provide the usual basis for studies of the seventeenth-century court, many unknown or unstudied documents have been consulted in order to reconstruct the more complicated dialogues between politics, works, and display. Ambassadorial reports, once maligned by historians as opinionated sources, show how pictures and buildings were commissioned and interpreted intentionally as part of the emergent seventeenth-century state. In combination with records of court etiquette, these documents contribute to an archeological view of courtly practices and allow a new valuation of the court's deployment within the duke's permanent and temporary buildings. Ducal correspondence with artists, architects, and peers provides further insight into the relationship between commissions, audiences, and political goals. All these sources lay historical foundations for a case study that highlights the court as a locus of intense dialogues and meaningful social performances about works of art and architecture.

The Paradox of the Ducal Monarchy: The Este Exile

The tension between Francesco's ambitions and his political means was part of the paradox of seventeenth-century ducal power in Italy, where rulers of small states had monarchical aspirations but survived according to their skill in managing feudal relationships with the more powerful states of the pope and kings. Though the art and architecture produced by these Italian courts has often been deemed provincial and peripheral in comparison to the papal capital of Rome, a closer look reveals that dukes instead took creative approaches both to the production and to the political deployment of their works, using them as a means of negotiating simultaneously on many levels. For audiences both local and international, at a unique moment in history, Italian dukes styled themselves as monarchs.

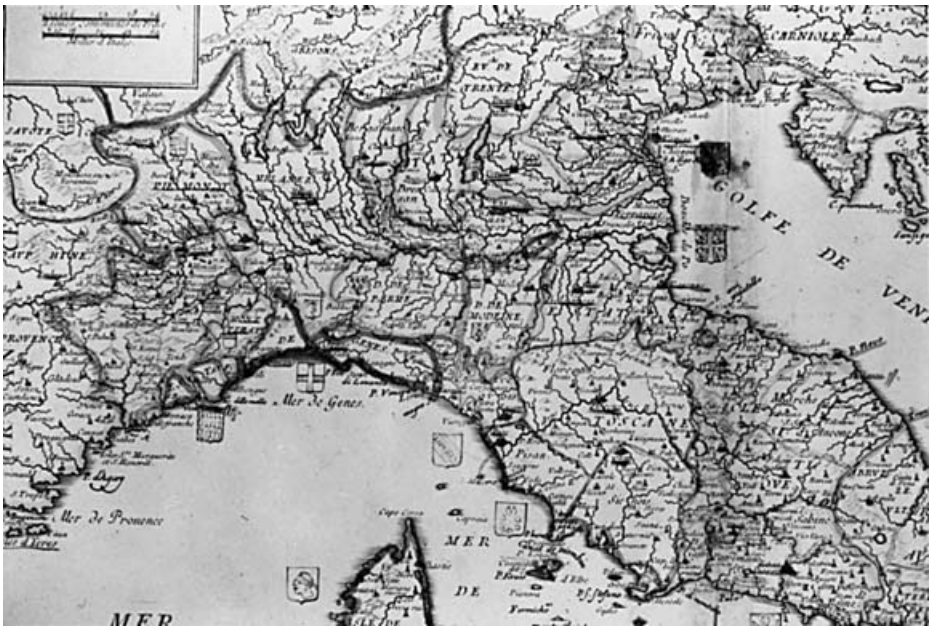
Few seventeenth-century rulers had as good reason as Francesco d'Este to make *magnificenza* their principal virtue, and few had as illustrious familial models for their patronage. The Este, in 1452, had been the first Italian family to receive a ducal title from the Holy Roman Emperor. They established their home in Ferrara, a city whose name remains synonymous with the idea of the secular Renaissance court as a center of creative activity around an "enlightened despot."[8] The family's established position in Ferrara was definitively interrupted, however, in late 1597, when Pope Clement VIII Aldobrandini used the illegitimacy of Duke Alfonso II d'Este's successor Cesare as an excuse to depose the duke and bring Ferrara under papal dominion. Cesare had been proclaimed duke with the support of the Ferrarese people, as well as of the family's Spanish and imperial allies, yet the pope's claims gained spiritual and physical force when he excommunicated

2. Catafalque of Francesco d'Este designed by Gaspare Vigarani, 1659; etching by Francesco Fontana from Gamberti, 1659. Biblioteca Estense, Modena.

Cesare and sent troops to nearby Faenza.[9] When the Este's royal and imperial allies failed to materialize, Cesare was forced to sign accords that stripped his family of half their feudal domains, including the prosperous territories of Ferrara and Comacchio (Figure 3). Ferrara became a papal state on 29 January 1598, heralding the brief ascent of the papacy's temporal power in the seventeenth century. While Clement celebrated his new acquisition with a triumphal entry into Ferrara modeled on the ancient *adventus*, the Este retired with cartloads of their possessions to the medieval city of Modena.

The exile of the oldest surviving ducal dynasty from Ferrara signaled the advent of increased territorial power for the pope and changing times for Italian dukes in the seventeenth century.[10] As minor players in the political chess match staged in central Italy by larger European powers, other families had risen to join the Este in ducal rank when Charles VII descended into Italy in 1527. Once elevated from the level of petty despots with hereditary titles bestowed by the Holy Roman Emperor and the pope, competition encouraged a continued inflation of rank and titles. The pope elevated the Medici in Florence from dukes to grand dukes in 1560, the Farnese in Parma and Piacenza tried to acquire a royal crown forty years after becoming dukes in 1545, and the greatest success story was that of the Savoy dukes, who succeeded in proclaiming themselves kings in 1633, just seventy years after moving their capital to Turin. During a time of relative peace, all these events encouraged the ducal courts to emerge as independent authorities with their own ideas about the visual, architectural, and literary expression of absolute rule.

The new century brought intense pressures to bear as France, Spain, and the papacy extended the Thirty Years' War into the peninsula by forging new alliances with these strategically positioned and powerful duchies in northern and central Italy. Perhaps no other war before World War I so profoundly altered European culture. During Francesco's lifetime, a series of events brought home the fragility of dynastic power. These were terrifying years in which to reign: Francesco's own father abruptly abdicated on 24 July 1629 to become a Capuchin monk only six months after his accession, as French armies descended into northern Italy and Spanish troops besieged the duchy of Mantua. War between France and Spain was initiated by the disputed succession of the Mantuan duke, an event that led to the sack of the Gonzaga palace in Mantua in 1629 and to which King Philip IV attributed the eventual downfall of the Spanish cause. The Della Rovere of Urbino were forced to hand over their provinces to the Barberini popes in 1636 when they failed to produce a male heir. The Savoy were split by familial dissent and besieged by the French in Turin in 1639. The Farnese were attacked by the papal troops of Pope Urban VIII Barberini and deprived of their duchy of Castro in 1642, a conflict that led Barberini armies to burn much of the countryside in allied Modena as well. A printed dialogue between two soldiers records the widespread belief that such papal actions were "tyrannical" and meant "to defend antichristian works."[11] Only aggressive diplomatic and cultural maneuvers could



3. A map of northern Italy shows the duchies in Piedmont, Mantua, Parma and Piacenza, and Tuscany, and locates the duchy of Modena at center, flanked to the right by its former territories (now belonging to the papal state) of Ferrara and Comacchio; engraving from Duval, 1679. By permission of Harvard Map Collection, Harvard College Library.

preserve a ducal state through these combined dynastic, military, and economic crises, let alone extend one with the addition of new territory as Francesco d'Este did. Contradicting Croce's characterization of the seventeenth century in Italy as a time of weakness, foreign domination, and cultural decline, but confirming his praise of its remarkable political theory, this study proposes a reassessment of the period as one of cultural vitality at the ducal courts.[12]

Francesco d'Este's Statecraft and Dynastic Refoundation

In his attempts to preserve his family's position in the new ducal capital of Modena and promote it abroad, Francesco d'Este combined the military prowess of a traditional *condottiere* with the diplomatic finesse of a modern prince. He was styled in his day as "one of the greatest Heroes of the century, and even the Mars of our age."[13] His reign brackets the Italian phase of the Thirty Years' War almost exactly, beginning in 1629, only months after the French and Spanish invasions of Italy during the Mantuan war of succession, and ending with his death a month after the Spanish sued for peace in 1658.[14]

In his attempts to regain Ferrara and restore the original boundaries of the Este state, which soon became a focused effort to obtain financial reparation for these losses, Francesco would frequently exploit wartime opportunities by shifting his alliances and by exerting his military power. Francesco's father reminded him that the "greatness of the Este family depends on that of the House of Austria," yet the new duke questioned this time-honored arrangement by using arms, soldiers, and fortresses to barter with other rulers.[15] He allied himself with Spain from 1635 to 1642, receiving the province of Correggio, titles, and promises of a cardinalate for his brother in exchange for troops and access to Modena's strategic location. In 1642, on the occasion of Urban VIII's war with the Farnese, he formed an independent coalition with Venice and Florence, which sent ducal forces to attack the Barberini papal troops. When Spanish and imperial ties proved increasingly ineffectual in achieving Francesco's political goals, he again switched his allegiance, this time to France, and attacked the Spanish state of Milan, with lasting results. Francesco kept his distance from Rome and the papacy that his father (and history) warned him not to trust. Instead, he knew the major ducal and royal courts of Europe well, and he toured the royal dwellings of the Spanish Infanta in Flanders (1628), of Philip IV in Spain (1638), and of Louis XIV in France (1656, 1658). In exchange for his military services, he acquired titles, money, and three successive brides to guarantee the duchy's future, although his driving ambition – a settlement with the papacy for the lost Este territories – would be successfully brokered only after his death.

Echoing the perennial disparity between the ideals and practices of patronage that is implied in Gamberti's *Idea di un prencipe* with its images of Francesco's works in progress, a schism between exemplary models of rule and political realities pervaded the court in Modena. Rhetoric provided the filter through which the duke was understood. Francesco d'Este modeled his image after sixteenth-century treatises as well as historical examples, defining his princely status in heroic terms and referring to the "grand concept" and to "princely splendor" in his letters. But the duke was frustrated by the realities of his political sphere, as contemporaries noted when they repeatedly praised the "natural greatness of his soul" and wrote that "due to its own vanity, [it] does not fit in the narrow confines of a small state."[16] In reality, as this study shows, the actions perceived as "heroic" by his contemporaries were pragmatic attempts to elevate a family that was then considered "among the most inferior by far" of princes at the papal court and to seek restitution of the family's territorial claims.[17] Francesco d'Este's commissions played starring roles in these international diplomatic maneuvers.

The duke and his artists took familiar patterns of patronage, weaving them into a new whole and giving them added potency through the use of spectacle. Part of the process was the methodical importation of artists and architects, which resulted in an animated dialogue between Modena and the courts of northern Italy, Rome, France, and Spain. Francesco relied upon the fertile traditions of northern Italy for his more immediate festive and theatrical needs, but he turned

to papal Rome in the conception of enduring projects such as his palace and bust. The Emilian engineer Gaspare Vigarani oversaw the duke's innovative spectacles and buildings, and Emilian artists formed teams to decorate palaces, theaters, and urban amphitheaters. Like the artistic reputations of his gifted contemporaries at other ducal courts, Vigarani's personal fame would be largely eclipsed by that of the court he worked for.[18] On the other hand, Roman architects, including Girolamo Rainaldi, Gianlorenzo Bernini, Pietro da Cortona, and Francesco Borromini, were called upon to revise palace designs while complying with ducal traditions. The exchange was not unilateral: the Este court influenced patronage in capitals such as Turin, Rome, and Paris. Through the specific efforts of Rainaldi, Bernini, and Vigarani, the Modenese court would contribute new models to Roman and to royal French patronage.

This book's structure, organized by a chronological consideration of each type of commission, allows examination of the duke's specific political goals as well as of broader changes over time. A spatial development overarches this configuration, as the book moves from the duke's most public (and most temporary) urban transformations by means of amphitheaters, to the deployment of portraits, his smallest and most precious displays, within the controlled precinct of his palace. The first two chapters, devoted to ephemeral works, set the stage for a new consideration of the duke's permanent creations by highlighting the spectacular ways in which his commissions were deployed. Chapter 1 analyzes courtly display in its most explicit yet ephemeral form. It examines the urban setting and the evolution of the temporary urban amphitheaters where the court's relationship to the city was negotiated and where advertisements for the court's military prowess were staged. Chapter 2 explores the more intimate spectacles of ducal theater and their evolution from temporary settings for courtly participation to permanent structures designed for exalted ducal display.

Against this backdrop of explicit spectacle, the duke's more lasting creations can then be reinterpreted in similarly strategic terms. Chapter 3 takes up the ducal residence, where diplomatic receptions were staged, considering the significance of its external evolution from a defensible residence to a regal palace that still recalled a fortified building but was gentled by the court's new ceremonial style. Within this building, new rituals of reception proclaimed upgraded ducal status, and displays of paintings and portraits rewrote the predominant schemes of art's history in order to exalt the expanded borders of the Este duchy. Chapter 4 sums up the discussion of Modena by examining the tension between static ideals and strategic practice as visible in princely portraits, considering how the court's attention to the production, commodification, and ritual display of portraits at home and abroad endowed these ambiguous images with meanings that advanced the duke's political pursuits. How were such images seen, beyond their calculated deployment of familiar symbols, as in Bernini's bust of Francesco (Plate I), the most renowned image of the duke, where the duke's old-fashioned armor is hidden under windblown drapery and stylish French lace? The final chapter

analyzes the means by which Francesco's exploitation of ephemeral and more permanent forms influenced other, more important, European courts. By evaluating the unexpected exchanges between the ducal, papal, and royal French courts that took place in the Este palace built in Rome and in Louis XIV's theater in Paris, the cultural foundations for the representation of absolute power can be questioned.

In his festivals, theater, palace, and portraits, Francesco d'Este staged a dynastic renovation before international and Italian audiences. He used spectacle for statecraft and, in so doing, redefined the look of seventeenth-century rule. By emphasizing the dynamic nature of Francesco d'Este's patronage and its surprising connections with the works of his rivals and allies, we can better understand not only the revolution in princely style that occurred in seventeenth-century Modena but also the performative dimensions of art and architecture in general.