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Ann E. Moyer
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The Intellectual World of Sixteenth-Century Florence

By the sixteenth century, Florence was famous across Europe for its achievements in the arts, letters, and humanist learning. Its intellectual life flourished anew at midcentury with Duke Cosimo and the leadership of the Accademia Fiorentina. In this study, Ann Moyer provides an overview of Florentine intellectual life and community in the late Renaissance. She shows how studies of language helped Florentines to develop their own story as a people distinct from ancient Greece or Rome, trace the rise of the city's medieval government, and explore how the city evolved into a hospitable environment where the letters and the arts could prosper and excel. Florentine scholars also developed principles to define the study of living languages more generally. Their studies of Florentine art gave rise to art history, while those devoted to Florentine traditions and customs inspired broader questions about how to think about cultural change. Demonstrating how the intellectual activity around language, history, and art related and supported each other in the later Renaissance, Moyer's book documents the origins of the modern narrative of the Renaissance itself.

Ann E. Moyer is Associate Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. A scholar of the intellectual and cultural history of Renaissance Europe, she serves as one of the executive editors of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*.

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Humanists and Culture in the Age of Cosimo I

Ann E. Moyer
University of Pennsylvania

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Preface

> Would that God immortal give me eloquence worthy of the city of Florence, about which I am to speak, or at least equal to my will and my affection for it; for either, I think, would amply demonstrate the city's magnificence and splendor.[1]

Leonardo Bruni's readers have long echoed his words and his wish. Florence and its citizens had already achieved great things by the time he wrote his famous panegyric, and they went on to further greatness thereafter. Bruni himself, of course, did far more than simply sing the city's praises; he too contributed to the growing list of Florentine accomplishments. He strove to master the language and letters of antiquity, and used them to write new works that both examined and celebrated his modern world. Bruni's colleagues and successors shared these dual interests. They worked both to recover, revive, and reappropriate ancient models and ancient culture, and to create new works as well. These twinned goals maintained an immensely creative tension in Florence and beyond.

The Florentines who read these words a century and a half later knew that the list of great achievements and their creators had continued to grow. By the middle decades of the sixteenth century, the city boasted an even greater number of notable buildings and celebrated works of art. People from across Italy and across Europe read the writings of

[1] "Vellem michi a Deo immortali datum esset ut vel Florentine urbi, de qua dicturus sum, parem eloquentiam prestare possem, vel certe meo erga illam studio meeque voluntati. Alterutrum enim, ut opinor, abunde esset ad illius magnificentiam nitoremque ostendendum." Leonardo Bruni, *Laudatio Florentine Urbis*, ed. Stefano Ugo Baldassarri, Millennio medievale (Tavarnuzze [Florence]: SISMEL edizioni del Galluzzo, 2000).

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Florentine authors and sought to learn their language. The city had also established an increasingly sophisticated tradition of scholarship devoted to the ancient past. It is hardly surprising that Florentines with humanistic training and interests would also use the tools they developed for studying antiquity to examine their modern world and their own past. Indeed, they had long supported lectures and scholarship on Dante, a postclassical author whose esteem rivalled that accorded to many of the ancients. A consensus, even a commonplace, developed that some of these modern achievements in the arts, letters, and learning approached or even surpassed those of the Romans and Greeks.

The crises of war caused some years of uncertainty and difficulty in the city; yet when the city regained its political stability under the leadership of Duke Cosimo, Florentines returned to arts, letters, and learning. They founded an academy with a regular schedule of public lectures and a distinguished publication program; soon they founded a second academy to promote the visual arts. The city's learned citizens began to take a particular interest in the study of Florence's own noted traditions and achievements, including its history, language, arts, and customs. Pierfrancesco Giambullari, Benedetto Varchi, Giorgio Vasari, Vincenzio Borghini, and more all wrote and published on regional history, language, and art.

The members of the Accademia Fiorentina might compose poetry in the style of Petrarch, but they did not share his dour assessment of his own times. Petrarch had lamented his age, recalling Roman antiquity with longing and hoping to contribute to a return to greatness. The sixteenth-century Florentines who looked back two centuries to Petrarch's world and beyond generally agreed that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had been simpler times in many ways, often bearing signs of rustic habits. Yet this was the era that had seen the first flowering of their language, and the first signs of its greatness in arts and letters; it was the age that had produced not only Petrarch himself but also Dante, Boccaccio, Giotto, and a host of others. Editors compared Giovanni Villani, Franco Sacchetti, or Ricordano Malispini to Ennius or Cato, and devoted themselves to studies of manuscript transmission just as they studied Cicero. They wrote biographies of medieval figures such as Matilda of Tuscany; they studied medieval land contracts to understand how relations between elite families and church powers had contributed to the rise of civic governments.

Others devoted themselves to examining the language and speech practices of those around them in their own day, including the vocabularies of

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artisans and tradespeople. Their predecessors, notably Angelo Poliziano, had left a legacy of classical scholarship; Florentines continued, with great success, the traditions of editing Greek and Latin texts and the study of classical languages. Increasingly, however, they also began to turn those tools to the study of the vernacular. At the same time, a number of men of letters assisted Giorgio Vasari in shaping a narrative of the rise of the visual arts that ran parallel to those of the city's other achievements, including its language and letters.

In lesser hands, such studies might have become or remained merely provincial and local. Yet Florentines wrote for a wider audience and with a broader point of view, setting their studies in the contexts of the peninsula and of Europe. When Giorgio Vasari first undertook his great project and then expanded it to a second edition, he strove to include artists not just from Florence but from across Italy. Benedetto Varchi and his colleagues observed that the interest in the Florentine language extended far beyond Florence; they also suggested that others might wish to consider similar studies of other language groups as well. A focus on the particularities of Florentine speech led them to draw careful distinctions between the studies of language and of literature, of living languages versus dead ones, and to propose methods for their study; they encouraged similar scholarship on other regions. So too, studies of Florence's past by Vincenzio Borghini and others moved back and forth between local particularities and general patterns of urban development, custom, and political faction. In these ways and more, Florentine studies looked not only inward but outward as well.

Despite these achievements, Florence in the middle decades of the sixteenth century is probably still more familiar to art historians than to others. The Florentine republic in the age of the priors enjoyed considerable attention from twentieth-century historians. Yet while the outlines of ducal politics and Tuscan administration have begun to take a clearer shape for modern scholars, those of the city's intellectual and cultural life have lagged behind. Giorgio Vasari's great project seemed to lack context, just as Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini seemed to lack successors in the city's traditions of letters and scholarship. It would appear rather that mid-sixteenth-century Florentines pursued a set of interests that did not always match those of twentieth-century historians. Many of those interests developed as collaborative projects, a style that may further have kept their names out of view to those who looked back from a distance of several centuries. Further, these men of letters may

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have been to some degree victims of their own success; several of their arguments, particularly those about the study of language, seem simply to have been naturalized into their respective disciplines. The very acceptance of their foundational contributions thus left them unappreciated as individuals.

Perhaps the greatest success of these Florentines was the shape they gave to the story of the Renaissance itself, a story so pervasive and for so long that it has often seemed to have had no point of origin at all. Vincenzio Borghini identified the era's starting point with the first stirrings of civic governments at the outbreak of tensions between emperors and popes. When he used the term "rinascimento," he referred to this transition in the eleventh century, the pivot point that turned society definitively, he commented later, from Roman to Italian. This new culture took shape in the age of the priors, the age that produced Giotto and Dante. It continued to flower through the age of Bruni up to that of Michelangelo and beyond, and had Florence at its heart. It is a narrative that lacks a clear conclusion; for to these Florentine men of letters who wrote its story, the new learning and the rebirth of the arts still made up the world in which they lived and wrote. Thus, it has remained a tale without a proper ending despite its persistence through the intervening years and centuries. The story of the Renaissance does not belong only to Burckhardt or Michelet, but to these Florentines who saw it all around them, for whom it really was the birth of their modern age.

Not all sixteenth-century Florentine men of letters studied Florence. A full picture of Florentine intellectual life must include them too, although they do not appear here. Yet those who did shaped the intellectual life of their generation. They also left a legacy that would become deeply embedded in new traditions of scholarship that would develop across Europe examining culture and society more generally. The present study focuses on them, their writings, and their contributions not only to the study of Florence, but also to the studies of language, art, and culture.

It has been a pleasure to spend so much time with their works. In so doing I have enjoyed the assistance and advice of too many friends and colleagues to name them all here. Thanks are due to the University of Pennsylvania, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute for Advanced Study, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. I am particularly grateful to the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, the Villa I Tatti; Joseph Connors fostered a welcoming and collegial scholarly community, and the librarians were incomparably

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