

ART AS POWER

The Medici Family as Magi in the Fifteenth Century

The Medici family of the Italian Renaissance were portrayed in works by Benozzo Gozzoli and Sandro Botticelli as Magi, the venerated figures from the new testament who were the first gentiles to recognize Jesus' divinity. In doing so, the family transformed their desire for power into the physical realm and blurred the boundary between politics and religion.

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In the middle of fifteenth-century Florence, the Medici were at the height of their power and influence. Led by the great Cosimo, this family of bankers resided in the heart of the city. Their unparalleled financial and societal status was measured in part by a consistent devotion to the arts. This patronage is appraised through the Medici's close relationships with their favorite artists, such as Benozzo Gozzoli and Sandro Botticelli, who often lived in the Palazzo de Medici and enjoyed personal relationships with members of the family. As was customary for art of the time, many of the works commissioned by the family featured the biblical trio of the Magi, who were the first people to vis-

it the Virgin Mary after the birth of her son, Jesus Christ. Often, the Medici would commission the artist to present various family members as the Magi themselves, melding religious history and their contemporary world. This biblical trio was held in high esteem by the family due to the family's involvement in the confraternity the *Compagnia de' Magi*, which was dedicated to the group. I will argue in this paper that through an analysis of paintings in which the family is depicted as these biblical figures and the Medici's involvement in the *Compagnia de' Magi*, we can begin to uncover why Cosimo desired to align himself with the Magi, and the political consequences of such a parallel.



Adoration of the Magi, Benozzo Gozzoli, 1443-1445
Source: ARTStor

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To begin, I will examine the concept of the Magi. Often referred to as the Kings or Wise Men, this threesome was comprised of the first gentiles to reach the Holy Family, and to welcome the divinity of Christ. Often, the Magi are shown as representing three different ages (the eldest being Melchior, the middle being Balthasar, and the youngest, Caspar). They are also sometimes shown as being of different races. They are often depicted with an entourage of exotic animals and in vivid, colorful dress. While these qualities often appear in artistic representations of the Kings, the basis of these attributions are fanciful, and the actual definition of the term is vague. Per James Hastings in *Dictionary of the Bible* vol. III, "It is partly owing to this vagueness in the meaning of the word that so little certainty can be arrived at regarding the most important illusion to the Magi in the Bible [when they come to Mary after the birth of Jesus]."¹ However, Hastings then indicates what is known about the trio; the Magi hailed from the East, might have been tied with astronomical theory, and were magicians by profession. The Medici family of Renaissance Florence regularly commissioned paintings in which they were shown as these magical and mysterious biblical figures, and this paper focuses on three of those instances.

The Medici family's dedication to the trio of Kings can be traced back to the family's involvement with the *Compagnia*

de' Magi, also known as the *Compagnia della Stella*. In addition, they belonged to the other lay confraternities who met in the monastery of San Marco: the *Arte di Por Santa* (the Guild of Silk Weavers), and the *Compagnia di San Marco*. The origins of the *Compagnia de' Magi* can be traced to before the end of the fourteenth century, and the Medici's involvement allowed the organization to rise to prominence in the fifteenth-century.² The main mission of the confraternity was to manage the *Festa de' Magi*, an elaborate pageant that was celebrated every five years by 1447. The celebration took place in the streets of Florence on June 23, the day of the epiphany, when John the Baptist (the patron saint of the city) baptized Christ.³ Three different processions would congregate in front of the Baptistery and the *Piazza Della Signoria*, before making their way to the *Piazza San Marco*.⁴ In addition to the religious purpose of the festival, it also served as a form of propaganda for the powerful families involved in the company, as those who marched in the parade "flaunt[ed] costumes, music and banners that exalted the magnificence of the Medici family and the other members of the confraternity."⁵ In fact, the *Signoria* (the government of Renaissance Florence) disapproved of the company and the actions of the Medici, saying that the group had brainwashed the minds of the citizens and threatened the city's security.⁶ After the family's fall from power, the confraternity, in turn, dissolved, demonstrating the power the Medici held within the orga-



Procession of the Magi, Benozzo Gozzoli, 1459

Source: ARTStor

nization. To a great extent, their intense involvement contributed to their patronage of many works of art in which members of the family are depicted as and alongside Magi.

GOZZOLI'S MEDICI AS MAGI

Such was the case with art commissioned by the Medici from Benozzo Gozzoli (ca. 1420-1497) who was among the most respected artists of his time. Born in Florence, he was named Benozzo di Lese di Sandro or Benozzo da Firenze. The second name "Gozzoli" was given to him by Giorgio Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists*. Scholars have determined that he was an apprentice of Fra Angelico, and it was through this master that he would develop an intimate relationship with the Medici family, who commissioned the two works discussed in this paper.⁷

stands and looks at the scene, and to his left is the youngest king, Caspar, who holds in his hands a gift of a golden goblet. Per Professor Allie Terry Fritsch, Caspar serves as the strongest direct connection to the Medici in the fresco. His robes, which are different than the dress of any other figure in the image, correspond directly to Cosimo through the similarity to the clothing worn by Saint Cosmas in the fresco, *The Crucifixion with Virgin and Medici Saints*, Monastery of San Marco, ca. 1440) in a neighboring cell.⁹ Caspar's presence as Cosimo invokes a "theme of benefaction"; just as the magus is shown with a present for Jesus and Mary, Cosimo has bestowed his own offering in the form of the newly restored monastery.¹⁰

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In 1436, Cosimo de Medici funded the complete renovation of the Dominican monastery of San Marco, as part of his generosity and commitment to arts and to his religion. Gozzoli's master, Fra Angelico, was a member of the monastery and lead the painting and fresco work involved in this project. One such fresco, *The Adoration of the Magi* (Monastery of San Marco, ca. 1440-1441) is located in what was Cosimo de Medici's private cell. While previously attributed to Fra Angelico, the painting was later determined to have been the work of Gozzoli. This is explained by Emil Krén and Daniel Marx, who argue that the composition was created by the apprentice, rather than the master, due to the subdued chromatics of the composition, the sharper figures, and the use of the landscape as a backdrop.⁸

The fresco is a lunette, and depicts the Magi and their companions paying their respects to Mary and the newly born Jesus. The artist traded a traditional manger scene for a desert with mountains of sand. Below the work, there is an image of the deceased Christ on the cross. The border of the work has a golden braid, adding to the tan tonalities of the work. The Magi and their associates are dressed in brightly colored clothing associated with exoticism and the East. The entourage of the Wise Men is made of people from a variety of different races and ages, which falls in line with conventional depictions of the subject.

On the far left of the image, Joseph stands behind the Virgin, collecting presents for the newborn child. The Magi are shown as varying in age, and the eldest, Melchior, kneels on the ground and kisses Mary's feet in a sign of respect for the divinity of the newborn. The middle-aged king, Balthasar,

The presence of this lunette in the Monastery of San Marco has particular significance regarding the Medici's involvement with the *Compagnia de' Magi* because the confraternity met in the monastery. For Cosimo to display the Kings in his own private cell might have been a way for him to emphasize his family's individual power within the *Compagnia* and his allegiance to the organization.

Gozzoli's *Procession of the Magi or Journey of the Magi* (Magi Chapel, ca. 1459-1464) is a large fresco cycle occupying three walls showing the procession of the Magi to Bethlehem. It was commissioned by an intimate friend of the Medici, Roberto Martelli, on behalf of the family for the Magi chapel in the Palazzo de Medici Riccardi. The fresco shows the Kings on a journey to the manger of Jesus and Mary, along with many servants, animals, and women walking up the mountain. Per Gozzoli scholar Diane Cole Ahl, the artist's study of the landscape may have been the most extensive of its time, with elaborate and meticulous depictions of botanical elements seen in the trees, the meadow, and the flowers.¹¹ This landscape was likely inspired by Northern European tapestries, which had a similar level of intricacy in their design and depiction of foliage. As part of his magnificent scene of nature, Gozzoli includes deer, buffalo, eagles, and other animals. He also includes creatures as part of the Magi's company, although these are rarer breeds, like leashed cheetahs, monkeys, and camels to fit into the exoticization of the biblical threesome. The Kings ride horses, who don gold ornamental tacking. Those who ride them are likewise lavishly dressed, wearing turbans, colorful outfits of bright blue and peach, and styled in fifteenth-century Florentine outfits, as indicated by their tights. The flamboyant outfits of the fig-

ures in the composition conveyed wealth and status to the contemporary viewer, and Ahl believes that Gozzoli was able to work so finely on the dress because he was the son of a tailor.¹²

Art historians can identify many of these well-dressed figures. Balthasar is shown on the south-wall.¹³ His crown bears green, white, and red feathers--the colors associated with the Medici family--enforcing the connection between the Kings and the family. The main Magus is the youngest, Caspar, shown on the east wall garbed in the light gold robe and red stockings often associated with the Medici, riding a white horse. He is surrounded by Cosimo and his son Piero on horseback, who lead a retinue of family members. The realistic and recognizable faces of the family throughout the fresco cycle add to the Medici's egoism. They immortalize the role of the family in sacred religious tradition, as well as the Medici's wealth, class, authority, and overall legacy within the city of Florence. Important and influential people of the day would have been invited to the Magi Chapel, where they would have seen these paintings, and therefore understood the glory of the Medici as depicted by Gozzoli would spread to the citizens of Florence.¹⁴

In addition, this patronage serves as a direct connection to the *Compagnia de' Magi*. The chronicle of San Marco directly connects the chapel with the organization, saying, "The same house of the Medici afterwards made over this place to the aforementioned confraternity of the Magi, where it built a choir and a chapel."¹⁵ This assertion indicates that those who knew of the chapel would have seen it as a tribute on the part of the Medici to not only the trio of the Magi, but also to their *Compagnia*. And yet, the organization to whom the fresco was dedicated was linked with the status and wealth of its members, as displayed in the *Festa de' Magi*, where the Medici would celebrate their glory amidst a celebration of the Wise Men.

BOTTICELLI AND THE MEDICI AS MAGI UNDER ANOTHER PATRON

Another artist who depicted the Medici as Magi was Sandro Botticelli (ca. 1445- 1510). Botticelli, one of the great masters of the Italian Renaissance who was acknowledged as such even in his own lifetime, was born in Florence. Originally called Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, he shared the alternative name Botticelli from his older brother. In his early life, it is known that the artist trained and learned about painting from Fra Filippo Lippi, whose style is reflected in some of Botticelli's early works, but by 1470 if not before, he was considered a prolific artist in his own right.¹⁶

Especially in his early career, Botticelli enjoyed a close relationship with many members of the Medici family, so much so that he was often regarded as one of their favorite artists. His teacher Lippi and his brother had close relationships with Piero de' Medici and Lorenzo il Magnifico, respectively,

which likely served as Botticelli's introduction to the family. Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco frequently patroned the artist (See the *Birth of Venus*, *La Primavera*, etc.), as did Giuliano and other family members.

Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* (Uffizi Gallery, 1475) is the composition which first brought him much acclaim. It is an altarpiece, painted for the funerary chapel of the wealthy businessman Guaspare di Zanobi del Lama in Santa Maria Novella. The painting is smaller than traditional altarpieces, but it is extremely vibrant, with the figures donning blue, red and gold hues. The scene is set in an enclosed hut made from spare and cracked bricks, in which Joseph, the Virgin, and Christ are elevated above all else, with a light from the top center of the image pointing directly at the head of the infant. In the background is a landscape with a dilapidated structure made of columns and there are mountain tops in the far distance. The folds and detail of the clothing keep the eye moving, with Joseph's subdued robes emphasizing the fresh light blue of the Mary's.

Although the Virgin and Christ are compelling, the most notable part of the image is the depiction of the Medici and other figures. This picture was commissioned by Del Lama, who was not a member of the Medici family. And yet, the patron occupies a less prominent role (seen on the right, with the old man in blue robes) than the Medici's of the image. Cosimo is shown as the eldest Magus, kneeling as he touches the foot of Christ, below him is Piero, shown as the middle king, and Giovanni as the youngest sits to Piero's right. There are currently no definitive records to explain why Del Lama would choose to so prominently honor these three men, as they all had passed away by the time Botticelli composed this image. Lorenzo and Giuliano, who were alive at this time, are shown as princes and therefore occupy a less dominant role than their deceased relatives. However, it is likely that the patron made this decision because he was noted to be a great admirer of the family and their power in Florence.¹⁷ Perhaps in his great respect for the family, he uncovered their involvement with the *Compagnia de' Magi* and therefore chose the subject matter of his funerary altarpiece as a tribute to the family's involvement and power within the organization that celebrated the Kings. In a way, Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi* serves as the fulfillment of the goal of the Medici in depicting themselves as the Kings: to spread their authority and influence using a biblical context.

RELIGIOUS TRIBUTE OR ATTEMPT TO SEIZE POWER?

Not all art historians view the depictions of the Medici as the Magi as an attempt to remind contemporaries of their dominance. Rab Hatfield, in his article *The Compagnia de' Magi*, asserts that "[The Medici's] devotion to the Magi was real and their support of the confraternity a genuine expression of that devotion. The political advantages that attached to their support were natural concomitants of the traditional



Adoration of the Magi, Sandro Botticelli, 1475

Source: ARTStor

system of patronage within which the Medici operated.”¹⁸ To Hatfield, the Medici admired the Kings artistically and through the *Compagnia* mainly as a symbol for devotion, and not for propaganda.

However, some see the Medici’s patronage mainly as an attempt to seize power, and not solely an act of devotion. The website for the Palazzo Medici Riccardi asserts the family had political agency when depicting themselves as the Wise Men and in their activity in the *Compagnia de’ Magi*, saying, “The intention [of the Medici] was decidedly worldly and self-celebrating rather than religious.”¹⁹ Art historian Roger Crum asserts in his article *Roberto Martelli, The Council of Florence and the Medici Palace Chapel* that “Cosimo was not in a position as a Christian to be an obvious critic of papal crusading plans, and it seems that he was also disturbed by the fall of Constantinople [but could do nothing about it].”²⁰ Perhaps, then, the depiction of the Medici as the Magi was an attempt by the family to not only express their power and status, but also to inflate perception of the degree of authority they possessed before the family’s descent from power at the end of the century.

While the Medici may not have had as much power as they wanted to hold, they still clearly wielded an influence among the populace, so much so that De Lama decided to dedicate

his resting place to deceased members of the family. Therefore, if the goal was to spread word of the Medici’s power and garner success for the family, the patronage depicting the family as the three kings was successful. The example of Botticelli’s *Adoration of the Magi* serves as a reminder that sometimes the perception of dominance has a greater impact on public perception than the actual possession of such dominance.

Therefore, these three images are not just valued for their visual and aesthetic contributions to the field of visual art, but also to examine the politics of fifteenth-century Florence. Part of the goal of the Medici in commissioning the first two works from Gozzoli was likely to spread dominion and authority via the depiction of the family as Magi tied to their motivation for dominating the *Compagnia de’ Magi*. Whether or not this was born of true faith, both paintings seem to depict the Medici as holy, to eternalize the family alongside the first gentiles who recognized Jesus as divine. Their power, even if they might have had less control than was perceived, generated admirers such as De Lama, and so the legacy of the Medici lived on even after the death of the great patron, Cosimo. And despite the family’s ultimate fall from prominence, their story survives in the present day, largely due to Cosimo and others’ patronage of these great works of art. 🏛️

Endnotes

- [1] Hastings, James. *Dictionary of the Bible*. New York: Scribner, 1900. Print. 204.
- [2] Hatfield, Rab. "The Compagnia de' Magi." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 33, 1970, 108.
- [3] Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 108.
- [4] No Author. "Mediateca Di Palazzo Medici Riccardi." *Palazzo Medici - The Wall Paintings of Benozzo Gozzoli: 'The Procession of the Magi' - Mediateca Di Palazzo Medici Riccardi*. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 Dec. 2016.
- [5] N.a. "Mediateca Di Palazzo Medici Riccardi."
- [6] Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," 110.
- [7] Ahl, Diane Cole, and Benozzo. *Benozzo Gozzoli*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996. Print. 11.
- [8] Krén, Emil, and Daniel Marx. "Adoration of the Magi by Gozzoli, Benozzo." *Adoration of the Magi by Gozzoli, Benozzo*. Web Gallery of Art, n.d. Web. 2 Dec. 2016.
- [9] Terry-Fritsch, Allie. "Florentine Convent as Practiced Place: Cosimo De' Medici, Fra Angelico, and the Public Library of San Marco." *Medieval Encounters* 18.2-3 (2012). Web. 261.
- [10] Terry-Fritsch, "Florentine Convent as Practiced Place: Cosimo De' Medici, Fra Angelico, and the Public Library of San Marco," 261.
- [11] Ahl, *Benozzo Gozzoli*, 88.
- [12] *Ibid.*, 92.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 92.
- [14] *Ibid.* 83.
- [15] Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi" 139.
- [16] Lightbown, R. W. *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work*. New York: Abbeville, 1989. Print. 22.
- [17] Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work*. 66.
- [18] Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi" 143.
- [19] N.a. "Mediateca Di Palazzo Medici Riccardi."
- [20] Crum, Roger J. "Roberto Martelli, the Council of Florence, and the Medici Palace Chapel." *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte*, vol. 59, no. 3, 1996, 413.