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**GENTILE DA FABRIANO (c. 1390-1427): INTERNATIONAL STYLE AND COURT CULTURE**

Robert Baldwin

Associate Professor of Art History

Connecticut College

New London, CT 06320

robert.baldwin@conncoll.edu

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International Style is the term used by art historians for most of the art patronized by the late medieval aristocracy and the powerful courts around which they clustered. By the thirteenth century, courtliness had become a powerful social ideal transforming the military orientation of earlier feudal society with the new virtues of restraint, civility, outward grace and beauty in clothing, grooming, and manners, purity of mind, cleanliness of speech, literary cultivation, and a preference (at least in artistic and literary representations) for the refinements of "courtly love". All this was defined in opposition to the unrestrained, base, lustful, physical aspects of human life summed up for the nobility by the peasantry. Typical was the comment of one courtly writer that

*"a prince whose mind is not ennobled by the knowledge of letters degenerates in no small degree from his proper state and becomes like a rustic boor or even a beast".<sup>1</sup>*

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The courtly ideal aimed at making aristocratic life itself a work of art where inner beauty shone in outward forms: manners, speech, dress, architecture, play, ceremony, and festivity. Given the new, positive interest in outward appearances, it is no surprise metaphors of art were commonly employed in descriptions of perfect courtiers as in these two examples.

*"The beauty of his body crowned the grace residing in his bosom. This outer beauty I will neither number among the virtues, nor however will I exclude it from their number, for just as the skill of an artificer [artist] shines forth in a well wrought work, thus virtue radiates the more gloriously from beauty of form".* <sup>ii</sup>

*"Artful as the exterior was, the inner work of art was more skillfully contrived ... both in cut of body and in mind the work within was wrought most admirably. Ah, how the skill of the artificer shone forth from it".* <sup>iii</sup>

Guided by such comments, we might describe "international style" art as an aesthetic where radiant outer beauty served to signify or reveal the inner cultivation and nobility of courtiers and courtly life. Here we can see how the more secular aesthetic principles of court society paralleled the late Gothic religious principles demanding an aesthetic of rich externals for sacred subjects and structures, what the founding patron of the Gothic, Abbot Suger had called, "*with all outer splendor and all inner sanctity*". <sup>iv</sup>

### **Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1420-1423, originally the altarpiece for the Strozzi Chapel, S. Trinita, Florence (now in the Uffizi Museum)** <sup>v</sup>

#### *The Italian Merchant Class: Proud Burghers and Ambitious Social Climbers*

After ousting the aristocracy from political power in the late thirteenth century, the wealthy merchant class governed Florence as a burgher republic until the early sixteenth century. The richest families included the Medici, Strozzi, Albizzi, Bardi, and Pazzi. Far richer than most nobles, these banking families could afford to live like aristocrats. They invested in palaces and feudal country estates and in a courtly lifestyle including all of the accoutrements of court leisure. At the same time, Florentine bankers up until the 1470s kept most of their lavish lifestyle behind closed doors in accord with Florentine republican values which praised "burgher" moderation and simplicity while condemning "courtly" extravagance as wasteful, proud, immoral, and impoverishing.

Although the richest man in Florence for twenty years, Gentile's patron, Palla Strozzi, exhausted his inheritance by living far beyond his means. He spent lavishly on dowries to secure rich husbands for his daughters, on weddings, funerals, and a large marble tomb for his father, on books (hand-written luxury objects at that time), on humanist patronage, and on the family chapel where the family could advertise

its wealth, generosity, civic spirit, and piety all at once. With business losses mounting, Strozzi's net capital fell from 101,422 florins in 1427 to 39,142 by 1433 and he had to borrow heavily from other Florentine bankers. One of his biggest single expenses was Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi*. With its elaborate, gilded frame and heavy use of expensive pigments such as ultramarine, the large altarpiece cost Palla Strozzi the staggering sum of 30,000 florins. It was, by far, the single most expensive painting in all Florence. And it hung in what was then relatively plain interior of a church of the Vallombrosan order, dedicated to poverty and charity.

Wealthy burgher elites also coveted other forms of noble status such as membership in noble orders. Gentile's patron, Palla Strozzi, was a leading member of the exclusive *Order of the Golden Spur*, the first chivalric order established by the papacy and limited to one hundred knights selected according to merit, not blood. And he owned two large country estates outside Florence near Prato and Empoli. <sup>vi</sup>

The intense competition between merchants for lucrative trading privileges bestowed by monarchs, international partners, and market-share carried over into the political arena. As in any period, political power brought enormous economic advantages as well as opportunities to punish competitors. Not surprisingly, the richest families in Florence were deeply enmeshed in an economic, political, and social competition which periodically spilled over into violence. For all the many strategic alliances, marriages, and business deals, each family struggled to increase its position and profits while staving off the schemes of rivals. Although the Strozzi and the Medici families worked together for the first two and a half decades of the fifteenth century, the reckless decision to wage war on Lucca divided old alliances and led to a period of domestic instability. As Cosimo de' Medici greatly increased his power and wealth, the Albizzi and Bardi families united in 1433 to force the Cosimo's exile. Strozzi avoided taking sides but paid dearly for his inaction. When the Medici faction regained control of the city government a year later, Cosimo retaliated by having exiling the Albizzi, Bardi, and Strozzi families. He even exiled Strozzi allies such as Felipe Brancacci, the patron of Masaccio's frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel. Strozzi lived until ninety two in Padua, unable to return home. (His son was allowed back and eventually built a large palace in the 1480s.)

### *The Patron: Banker, Diplomat, Humanist, and Patron of the Arts*

Although raised to run the family's banking business, Palla Strozzi was uninterested in commerce and neglected the Strozzi bank, contributing to his later economic and political downfall. His main interests were city politics, humanism, and, to a lesser extent, artistic patronage. Well educated in the new humanist fashion, Palla Strozzi (1372-1462) devoted his life to politics, serving as the city's chief ambassador. As ambassador, he traveled widely and was received grandly by the kings, dukes and

marquis who ruled most of the city-states constituting fifteenth-century Italy. (Travel was also fundamental to the life of merchants and bankers.)

Palla Strozzi was also the city's most important patronage of humanist education and scholarship between 1422 and 1433. He brought leading Italian humanists to Florence, transformed the curriculum at the city's schools, subsidized translations from Latin and Greek authors, and developed the first humanist library in Florence.

Like most wealthy merchant families, the Strozzi purchased a private chapel in their parish church, S. Trinita, as a site for burial and family commemoration. The dilapidated church was part of a monastic complex of the Vallombrosan Order. In 1383, the monks successfully petitioned the city council for public funds to rebuild the church. The local families who funded this project received rights to private chapels lining the nave and transept. In exchange for funding the rebuilding of the attached hospital, Palla Strozzi's father received rights to build a private chapel in the sacristy and endowed it with private masses as was customary. The chapel itself was finished by 1405. After Palla's father died in 1418, he took over the project by financing a large, Late Gothic marble tomb monument to his father (executed by Ghiberti), an elaborate Gothic marble doorway, and wood pews decorated with intarsia (complex wood inlay). In 1420, he imported the Northern Italian court painter, Gentile da Fabriano, to paint a large altarpiece for the hospital chapel. At that time, Gentile was the leading local practitioner of the highly ornate, Late Gothic style popular throughout the European courts. Even after he was exiled, Palla Strozzi continued to invest in the decoration of his chapel by hiring Fra Angelico to paint another altarpiece for S. Trinita.

### *The Appeal of the Magi: Religious, Social, Civic*

Central to the Catholic feast day of Epiphany (Jan 6) when Christ was unveiled to the world, the cult of the Magi was widespread throughout Europe. From the early Christian period, the Adoration of the Magi was common on tomb monuments as an allegory of the soul's earthly journey to Paradise. It continued to be used in funerary chapels in thirteenth-century Northern Italy, as Trexler has shown, and presumably imaged Strozzi's salvational journey near his intended tomb. <sup>vii</sup>

The subject also had strong civic significance in fifteenth-century Florence thanks to the role played by the Company of the Magi, a confraternity or lay religious club dedicated to promoting the cult of the

Magi. With permission and funding from the city, the Company of the Magi (*Compagnia de' Magi*) put on a lavish, public festival every five years on the feast day of Epiphany. As the city's most prestigious confraternity, the *Compagnia* attracted the membership of the city's financial and political elites, including Palla Strozzi. They helped fund the festival and dressed up as the Magi or members of their retinue in the large procession which reenacted the magi's journey from Jerusalem (represented by the town hall) to Bethlehem (represented by the Dominican church of San Marco where the company had its base).

Not surprisingly, wealthy patrons had their portraits included in paintings of the Adoration or Procession of the Magi. Gentile included Palla's father, Onofrio, as an older falcon trainer (*strozziere* in Italian) directly behind the youngest king. To his right with a red hat is Palla Strozzi. Forty years later, Gozzoli included dozens of portraits of the Medici and their associates in his *Procession of the Magi* painted for the Medici's private chapel in their new palace. And in 1481, Botticelli imaged three generations of Medici in his 1481 *Adoration of the Magi*.<sup>viii</sup>

Like all Biblical subjects representing godly kings (David, Solomon, etc.), the Adoration of the Magi was a favorite subject in court patronage at this time. See the comparative images by the Limbourg Brothers, painted for the French royal family. The subject also appealed to social-climbing bankers like the Strozzi and Medici who commissioned at least ten altarpieces and frescoes of that subject from numerous fifteenth-century Florentine painters including Fra Angelico, Fra Lippi, Veneziano, Gozzoli, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, and Filippino Lippi. Cosimo de' Medici selected this theme for his private cell in the Dominican monastery of S. Marco (Fra Angelico) and commissioned at least three other renderings for the Medici Palace including Gozzoli's huge fresco cycle in Cosimo's private chapel. His son, Piero, commissioned a fourth (Veneziano). Two of these domestic paintings capitalized on the courtly subject to develop deep landscapes devoted to a variety of noble pastimes.

### *The Magi as Burgher Economic Sanctity*

While the Adoration of the Magi imaged the basic Christian virtue of charity especially prized by the Vallombrosan Order, it had a special appeal to burgher elites like Palla Strozzi, known in his day as the richest man in Florence. In representations of the Adoration of the Magi, the problematic wealth of the merchant class could find legitimacy in the pious example set by the Biblical kings who gave their precious goods to the infant Christ. The more expensive the artistic representation, the more visible the pious transfer of the patron's wealth to the church. If all religious patronage worked to sanctify and launder burgher wealth, the Adoration of the Magi was the one religious subject which actually represented the donation of money to God. Even without the inclusion of portraits, the patron was never very far from the mind of the contemporary beholder, especially when Gentile included Palla Strozzi's coat of arms in the two

lower corners of the altarpiece. In the case of a banker who was also a humanist scholar like Palla Strozzi, the patron could associate on two levels with the magi. For the first eight centuries of Christianity, they were known as wise men rather than kings and continued to be known as great philosophers well through the Renaissance.

*Gentile and the Late Gothic "International Style"*

Though a contemporary of Masaccio, the first Early Renaissance painter, Gentile worked primarily in the late Gothic "International Style" updated with a few borrowings from antique art. The *Adoration* is ornate, rich, tapestry-like, and filled with countless, carefully observed details absent from most Florentine painting in 1420. Compare, for example, Gentile's *Adoration* to Lorenzo Monaco's large altarpiece of the same subject executed around 1422 (attached to this email). In the background, the minor episodes in the magi story were catalogued as if the artist's desire for a comprehensive description had overwhelmed story telling, as if drama had become just one more complex thing to be described in marvelous detail. His sweet, elegant figures in the foreground are adorned with carefully incised gold leaf encrusted with jewels, further emphasizing the decorative flatness of the picture and the late medieval artist's concern with beautiful craftsmanship. (This is in contrast to the more intellectual orientation of Giotto's art with its striking compositions reflecting the ordering intervention of the artist's mind.) For all its careful description surpassing anything in later Medieval art, Gentile's flattened space moved up along the picture plane rather than receding into depth in a typical, Gothic, "vertical perspective".

In general, we can say Gentile's art shows an impasse reached by the more detailed, descriptive mode of Late Gothic naturalism already seen to a lesser degree in Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti, especially the latter's secular works. The sense of space and focus on sacred drama have been overcome by a profusion of vivid secular details such as the pet leopard and monkeys or the page removing spurs from the king's feet. The result was something closer to a rich, decorative tapestry than a view into a convincing, powerfully organized space such as we saw in Giotto or see in the contemporary Early Renaissance art of Masaccio. Such criticisms would have been rare in 1423; Gentile's art was seen by most wealthy patrons as the pinnacle of painting, its descriptive detail a marvel to the eye and its sumptuous style radiating a splendor entirely appropriate to the sacred subject.

Though Gentile's aesthetic display of aristocratic splendor satisfied the tastes of a Strozzi, he was not averse to experimenting with a more modern, early renaissance style in the small, less important panels below the *Adoration* such as the *Nativity*. Here is an excellent reminder that style is not some static, monolithic entity but rather responds flexibly to different settings, sizes, media, patrons, and audiences.

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**Courtly Qualities in Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi*.**

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Nobility as equestrian class, golden spur removed by page suggests Strozzi's membership in the Order of the Golden Spur

celestial king / earthly kings - a universe of kings who meet – Christ born to rule

processions, entries, retinues, servants, hierarchy

Animals tamed/conquered: leopards, monkeys, falcons, horses, deer

wealth, splendor

fashion, beauty (young, blond Madonna sanctifies courtly beauty); feminized knights

castles, villas, courtly land ownership, nature's beauty (flowers) and prosperity

hunting: three scenes of falconry (attendant holds falcon in foreground; falcon attacks dove in foreground; two riders with falcons in rear "Journey"); two leopards in foreground and three in the rear "Journey" including one killing a stag (a classical Roman theme) – like the falcon, the leopard is a warrior animal symbolizing the knightly warrior class)

magi as sanctification of ambassadors like Strozzi

magi as sanctification of an emerging mercantile travel culture (bankers, diplomats)

magi as wise men, as humanist philosopher

wealthy elites submit to spiritual authority; wealthy claim charity as a distinctive virtue

Is the pomegranate imagery on the robes of the middle magus and in the bush behind a Strozzi emblem (in addition to a Christian symbol of Ecclesia)?

## MATERIAL AND AESTHETIC QUALITIES

Style: lavish description in late medieval art is, to some extent, courtly in origin, though there is also a late medieval Christian version of descriptive detail aimed at arousing the beholder's feelings and heightening the devotional immediacy .

Size: large with twenty-seven separate paintings (main scene, three on top, three down below, main and twenty ornamental flower panels)

Materials: expensive, lots of gold leaf and ultramarine

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<sup>i</sup> Philip of Harvengst, letter of ca. 1168 to (count) Philip of Flanders, cited in C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210*, Philadelphia, 1985, p. 225; Epistle 16 in *Patrologia Latina* 203:149B-C.

<sup>ii</sup> William of Malmesbury on the courtly Saint Wulstan, cited in Jaeger, op. cit., p. 148; original text in *Patrologia Latina* 179:1740D.

<sup>iii</sup> Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan and Isolde*, lines 6643-50, cited in Jaeger, op. cit., p. 148.

<sup>iv</sup> See Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Art Treasures*, 2nd. ed., Princeton, 1979, p. 67. Other comments by Suger on the necessity of sumptuous materials for divine subjects appear on pp. 43, 47-49, 63-67, 87, 101, 105-109.

<sup>v</sup> For Strozzi patronage, see Heather Gregory, "Palla Strozzi's Patronage and pre-Medicean Florence," in Dale Kent and Patricia Simons, eds., *Patronage, Art, and Society in Renaissance Italy*, Oxford, 1987, pp. 201-220; Mary Hollingsworth, *Patronage in Renaissance Italy, From 1400 to the Early Sixteenth Century*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994, pp. 39-41; Richard Trexler, *Journey of the Magi*, Princeton, 1997; Rab Hatfield, "The Compagnia de' Magi," *JWCI*, 33, 1970, 197-161; Lawrence Belle, A Renaissance Patrician, Palla di Nofri Strozzi, PhD, Un. Of Rochester, 1972; D. Davisson, "The Iconology of the S. Trinita Sacristy," *Art Bulletin*, 57, 3, 1975, 315-334; John Padgett, article in *American Journal of Sociology*, 98, May, 1993, Tim Parks, *Medici Money*, 2006; Allison Cole, *Art of the Italian Renaissance Courts*, p.21 (on golden spur and ornaments suggesting Order of the Golden Spur).

Also see: 1) *Artibus et Historiae*, 1, 2, 1980; 2) *Burlington Magazine*, Jan 1982, 23-24

<sup>vi</sup> These estates are mentioned in Vespasiano's life of Strozzi. See Vespasiano da Bisticci, *The Vespasiano Memoirs, Lives of the Illustrious Men of the XVIth Century*, Toronto, 1997, p. 238.

<sup>vii</sup> Trexler, *Journey*, op. cit; Richard Trexler, "Triumph and Mourning in Northern Magi Art," in Charles Rosenberg, ed., *Art and Politics in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy*, Notre Dame, 1990. As Davisson points out, the gifts of the three magi were allegorically connected to the Trinity by the Vallombrosans, which helps explain the interest of the monks at S. Trinita in this subject.

<sup>viii</sup> See Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance*, Yale, 2000, p. 62 and ch. 13.