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**Private Palaces and the Roman Republican Style: Michelozzo's Medici Palace, Florence, 1440-60**

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In the 1440s, the architect Michelozzo designed a Florentine palace in the "Roman" manner for the Medici family. After that, the "Roman" manner spread quickly into private architecture in Florence and elsewhere.

The exterior of the *Medici Palace* is divided up into three stories with a series of classically ornamented windows along the upper two floors. The lower story was rusticated, that is, built from stones whose outer surface was left roughly cut. Stone benches project at the street level where visitors could wait (and be kept waiting). The Medici coat of arms - five balls - appears at the top of each window and in the metal rings for tying horses.

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## *Rustic and Civilized: Architecture as Inner Nobility and Burgher Social Climbing*

Rustication was a common exterior in ancient Roman and medieval architecture, as seen on the Palazzo Vecchio, the old town hall in Florence. In all such earlier architecture, rustication appeared over the entire exterior, never on one story as in Michelozzo's *Medici Palace*. Its restricted appearance on the lower story suggests a new architectural self-consciousness in fifteenth-century Italy and a deliberate use of architectural forms as a coded aesthetic language. It also suggests a Florentine audience capable of reading the language of architectural forms and the way architecture worked in the highly urbanized world of Renaissance Italy as a public language of civic identity.

The rusticated facade served at least two purposes. One was defensive. In an age when the wealthiest families needed secure, fortress-like homes to protect themselves against the private armies of rival families and the mobs of the poor which were periodically roused against targeted families, private residences were solid, fortress-like structures, especially at the street level. The greater the wealth, the more-fortress-like was the building to protect that wealth. By rusticating the first story of the *Medici Palace*, Michelozzo made it look rock solid on the more vulnerable street level.

The selective rustication of the first story also expressed social values. It is significant that the Italian term for the second story with its residential quarters is *piano nobile* or noble floor. By relegating medieval rustication to the lower floor, the Medici claimed for themselves the inner nobility prized by burgher humanists (and quickly taken up by Renaissance nobles as well). This inner nobility was especially appealing to bankers and businessmen as a way of offsetting the stigma attached to economic pursuits. At the same time Cosimo de' Medici was happy to follow fourteenth and fifteenth century custom in dividing much of the first story of his palace into shops rented out to artisans. As elsewhere in late medieval Italy, many palaces combined private residential quarters with commercial space.

Despite this lucrative tolerance of small-scale commerce, late medieval and renaissance discussions of the relative nobility of the various occupations always distinguished between a lower, base world of petty retail with its proverbial dishonesty and private greed and a higher, more honorable world of grand finance and long-distance trade with its larger civic benefits. I used the phrase “relative nobility” because all banking and commerce was traditionally relegated by aristocrats to the base and demeaning world of work. In courtly society, all economic pursuit was seen as a degrading enslavement to greed. Following a long-standing Western idea going back to classical writers such as Aristotle (*Politics*, ch. 1), inherited wealth “freed” aristocrats to pursue the higher world of politics and philosophy. In the real world of late Medieval and Renaissance court life, this meant government and refined leisure. This is the original meaning of the term “liberal” arts – they liberated the human psyche from the base economic passions tied to work and all economic necessity.

Of course all of this was the convenient, self-serving social ideology of aristocratic privilege which helped confirm the “innate” superiority of nobles to all those below them on the social ladder. It was especially appealing to the great mass of aristocrats with neither land nor wealth who were most threatened by the “arrogant” urban commercial elites who had seized power in republican city-states like Florence and expelled the aristocracy from their traditional monopoly of political power.

Despite the wealthy burgher challenge to court power, bankers and merchants were far more interested in buying into the prevailing social hierarchies than in overthrowing them. While they brought a new set of practical values and worldly wisdom tied to business and finance, they also aped their superiors in a wide array of habits and tastes including grand, palace-sized homes. On the other hand, traditional burgher republican values which governed Florentine society until the 1480s prevented Cosimo de’ Medici from indulging outwardly in any form of architectural splendor or ornate decoration, especially in a private residence. (Churches were a different matter.) Here his burgher, republican ethos – which frequently contrasted burgher morality, austerity, simplicity, hard work, civic obligation, and conjugal fidelity to “courtly” luxury, pride, greed, lust, and selfishness - was well served by the rustication of the lower floor with its simple, unadorned, natural look.

All this shed light on the exterior and interior of the *Medici Palace*. Since big financiers like the Medici were eager to distinguish themselves from the sordid world of petty commerce as "honorable" merchants with noble virtues, lofty civic concerns, and intellectual aspirations to humanist culture, the rusticated lower story of their new palace signaled the lower, rougher, less civilized world of petty retail vs. the higher, civilized world of Cosimo de' Medici spelled out in the classical arches and moldings of the upper, residential floors, the *piano nobile*. Here one thinks of a passage from Brunni's *Panegyric to Florence* – a treatise rich in proud tributes to the magnificent architecture and civilization of Florence - where he attributes to his hometown a lofty interest in a literature and high culture far from all sordid economic concerns.

*The study of literature - and I don't mean simply mercantile and vile writings but that which is especially worthy of free men - which always flourishes among every great people, grows in this city in full vigor . . .*<sup>i</sup>

The most interesting thing about the architectural language used in the Medici Palace was the way it changed when one entered the private space of the courtyard and the personal apartments on the upper floors. In this shift, we see the republican ideal of a modest public face – free of ostentation and wealth – vs. private spaces where wealthy burghers were more willing and able to display wealth and sophistication. This wealth is even more apparent in the more private living quarters of the *piano nobile* where Cosimo maintained a private chapel as was the custom of the great nobles. In 145x, Cosimo commissioned Fra Filippo Lippi's *Mystic Nativity* as an altarpiece and in 1459, Benozzo Gozzoli completely covered the walls of this chapel with sumptuous frescoes depicting *The Procession of the Magi* featuring numerous portraits of the Medici family and their retinue in stately equestrian processions recalling their participation in the annual Florentine civic festival of the Procession of the Magi on the Feast Day of the Epiphany. Housebound with illness for the last five years of his life (1459-1464), Cosimo spent many hours in his chapel, transforming it into a private spiritual retreat with masses celebrated daily by his in-house priest.<sup>ii</sup> Yet even as he contemplated his own mortality, he could also admire the splendor of his family and the future glory promised by his sons who were all depicted in Gozzoli's lavish frescoes.

Inside the Medici Palace, Michelozzo paid homage to Brunelleschi with a beautiful square courtyard defined on each side by three arcades set on strong but slender columns. In the center of this simple, "Roman republican" space, the Medici displayed a prized work of modern sculpture with strong civic connotations, Donatello's *David*. As a classicizing nude, Donatello's

sculpture worked to display Cosimo's humanistic tastes, aesthetic sophistication, and innovation. His willingness to patronize a surprising nudity in religious art also quietly advertised his power to bend the rules of Christian propriety.

In the frieze running around the courtyard just above the arcade, Cosimo de' Medici mounted reliefs of the Medici coats of arms interspersed with carved representations of his prized collection of ancient gems and cameos. Privileged guests could admire the real gems upstairs in Cosimo's quarters. These little sculptures can be seen as early examples of art reproduction. In advertising Cosimo's sophisticated humanist collecting, they allowed him to claim the aesthetic cultivation traditionally reserved for high nobles and rulers as a distinctive badge of identity. With its walls completely covered in frescoes, the private chapel upstairs was also a kind of art gallery legitimized by Christian devotional imagery. It was no accident that the centerpiece of this sumptuously decorated chapel was Fra Filippo Lippi's *Nativity* which located the birth of Christ in a rocky monastic wilderness featuring St. Bernard as a visionary onlooker. In this way, Cosimo could move in his devotions from courtly and mercantile splendor to the traditional monastic retreat of the austere wilderness, only to recoup courtly splendor in the Paradise gardens painted by Gozzoli on either side. Here was a private chapel where a rich banker could have his cake and eat it too.

The striking focus on classical art in Michelozzo's courtyard also allowed Cosimo to separate himself from traditional courtly patrons with their chivalric imagery and to carve out a new, more intellectual humanist identity tied to antiquity. Indeed, it was no accident that the classical style in architecture, painting, and sculpture was first taken up in Renaissance Italy by bankers and burghers, a group which lacked the venerable lineage and family histories of court society and which cultivated a more practical, flexible, cosmopolitan set of skills geared to maximizing opportunities and advancement in a shifting, unpredictable world.<sup>iii</sup> It is these reproductions of classical art in the courtyard of the Medici Palace which underscore the "pagan" qualities of Donatello's nude sculpture – the *David* – the centerpiece of this Medici "museum". The reproduction of Cosimo's ancient carvings also invited comparisons between classical and modern sculpture which highlighted similarities while underscoring Donatello's originality.

As a monumental public language familiar to urban elites, architecture trumpeted the virtues of republican Florence to the courtly city states in Italy and to any Florentine nobles looking to overthrow the republican government. Despite Bruni's reassuring view of a triumphant Florence with an unbroken republican tradition stretching back to ancient Rome, the Florentine republic of the fourteenth and fifteenth-century was fragile and continually threatened by external and internal threats, shifting factions, civil violence, assassinations, overthrows and purges with the Medici, in particular, exiled a number of times. By the early sixteenth-century, republican forces were badly weakened and the city finally succumbed to autocratic governments for the next two and a half centuries.

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<sup>i</sup> Lionardo Bruni, *Panegyric to the City of Florence*, trans. Benjamin Kohl, in Benjamin Kohl and Ronald Witt, eds., *The Earthly Republic. Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978, (1991 ed., p. 174

<sup>ii</sup> Kent, *op. cit.*, p. 306

<sup>iii</sup> This wisdom of practical experience carried the day in court culture as well, though it remained rooted in the burgher civic humanism of mercantile society. One of its most sustained defenses was mounted for would-be court patrons by the Florentine civic humanist, historian, political philosopher, and city chancellor, Machiavelli, in his famous essay, *The Prince*.