

The Greatest Family in History

*The Medici set an example
that survives after 500 years.*

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TO THE AMERICAN VISITOR who cherishes a sense of the historic, the literary, and the artistic, Florence, Italy, is one of the most radiant cities in the world. The splendor of its Palazzo Vecchio, its famous il Duomo or Cathedral, its priceless art galleries, unrivaled statues, churches, libraries, and palaces are fairly breath-taking. Florence is one great monument to the Athens of the West, which flourished five-hundred years ago.

It takes superior men and women to build a civilization, and they were the most astonishing product of Renaissance Florence. The roll of Florentine genius in the fifteenth, and parts of the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, dwarfs anything else in the whole pageant of human history. To name but a few, and not necessarily the greatest, Florence in that period gave to the world in the fine arts: Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Giotto, Verocchio, Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, Masaccio, Ghirlandajo, Fra Angelico, Del Sarto; in literature: Petrararch, Dante, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Pulci, Pico della Mirandola. And we could go

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on naming scientists, philosophers, theologians, statesmen, men of business — all of whom endowed future ages with their genius.

The great Spanish thinker, Ortega y Gasset, ascribed the decay of Spain through the centuries to "the lack of eminent directing minorities and the undisturbed predominance of the masses." Florence had no such lack; her greatness was in the number and quality of her superior sons and daughters. In that respect Margaret Oliphant has compared Florence favorably with Venice. The difference between the two republics, she wrote, was the absence in Venice of a galaxy of great names and personalities such as was possessed by Florence, "the mother of those who live by thought."

Limited Government

What accounted for this unparalleled burst of creativity? Miriam Beard in her *History of Business* asks whether the culture of Florence was so rich because of the city's wealth, or was the city wealthy because her children were so exceptional? Such speculation suggests the ancient riddle of which comes first, the chicken or the egg.

Savants tell us that the fourteenth century witnessed the beginning of a revival of the learning amassed by the ancients and

submerged for twelve centuries through the Dark Ages. The poet and scholar, Petrarch, had much to do with this movement through his industry in collecting and translating Greek and Roman manuscripts. But there are other influences that we have to assess in trying to account for Florence. One is the kind of government of the city-state of Florence, as the capital of Tuscany. This government was for nearly a century, at the very peak of Florence's greatness, the benign rule of the Medici family. In a sense, the Medici of this period did not rule. They were clothed with power but were too intelligent to use it upon a people as superior as the Florentines.

The name and fame of the Medici have suffered what we would call today a "bad press." A preponderance of historians, including Sismondi, Trollope, and Symonds, have written in a partisan way of the Medici, ascribing to them ambition, embezzlement, and even cruelty. Others of great weight, such as Hallam, Burckhardt, and G. F. Young find nothing in the annals that sustains this view. They accept the judgment of a noted Florentine, Giovanni Rucellai, who in his memoirs thanked the Almighty that he was "a native of Florence, the greatest city in the world, and lived in the days of the magnificent Medici."

The Florentine historian Guicciardini called the century of the Medici dominance "the most prosperous period experienced for a thousand years." Burckhardt said that under the Medici reign "Florence was the scene of the richest development of the human individuality." Macaulay wrote that the wealth and civilization of the Florentine Renaissance had not been exceeded in most of Europe four hundred years later. The revenue of the Republic in the latter part of the fifteenth century exceeded that of England and Ireland two centuries afterwards, he added.

So we may conclude that Florence enjoyed in this age a climate favorable to the genius of a whole people. It was induced by several factors: an enlightened government with a minimum of repression, a devotion to freedom by the people, unhampered trade with the rest of the known world, and a love of the beautiful that encouraged the emulation of great works.

Giovanni Bicci, Cosimo, Piero, Lorenzo

We are concerned here with the first four leaders of this remarkable Medici family. They were Giovanni Bicci, born 1360, died 1429; his son Cosimo, called Father of his Country; Cosimo's son Piero; and Piero's son, Lorenzo the Magnificent, who died in 1492,

six months before the discovery of America by Columbus. Thus, the era of these four Dukes of Florence embraced practically the entire fifteenth century. Even if there were no other Medici in the annals of Europe, they would rate as probably the most celebrated family of all time.

The first thing to note about these men is that they were bankers and merchants. Bankers in those days were truly ambassadors of commerce. The house of Medici had branches all over Europe. In the generation before Giovanni Bicci the houses of Peruzzi and Bardi (later intermarried with the Medici) had loaned to Edward III of England 1,365,000 gold florins to finance the start of the Hundred Years War with France. This loan, equivalent in our money today to more than \$70 million, was never repaid, and the two brothers were ruined by such a prodigious loss.

Although the church still opposed interest as "usury," the Florentine bankers and merchants of the fifteenth century charged interest on loans and deferred payment for goods. The earlier high rates fell to lower percentages as money became more plentiful and it was recognized that interest, as the price of capital, should fluctuate in keeping with the principle of supply and demand.

Patrons of Culture

The four great Medici all had the enlightened attitude of many of our twentieth century business leaders. Giovanni Bicci saw the injustice of the existing tax system, which rested on an irregular poll tax, and got it changed to a more equitable property tax basis. He endowed the Foundling Hospital, an institution still in existence at Florence. He commissioned the architect, Brunelleschi, to build the Church of San Lorenzo, and gave many other commissions to such artists as Ghiberti and Masaccio. At his death he left a very large fortune to his son, Cosimo.

Cosimo continued to lavish more gifts from his own wealth to release the creative energies of the people. Still, he added to the Medici fortune; and when he died, he left his son Piero the wealthiest man in Florence. Piero ("the gouty") was in very bad health and lived only five honorable years after his succession to the dukedom. He was followed by Lorenzo, known as the Magnificent, who carried on the name and the power and the benevolence for twenty-three years that approached the summit of Italy's Golden Age. It was a period of almost incredible productivity.

Lorenzo's beneficences to the Republic were so fabulous as to reduce the Medici fortune greatly in his lifetime as head of the

house. He employed most of the great artists in his city and paid them liberally from his own funds. He was quick to recognize genius in such men as Leonardo, Michelangelo, Filippino Lippi, Botticelli, Ghirlandajo, and to see that they were kept employed. He was willing to share this immense reservoir of genius with other states. It was he who sent Leonardo to Milan to create art and engineering works for the Duke of Sforza.

Although Lorenzo was the head of the state, all tax revenues were paid to and expended by the Signoria or city council. He and his family lived unostentatiously, even austere. Now, half a millennium later, Florence is still the greatest treasure house of art in the world.

Lorenzo had the benefit of one of the most thorough and liberal educations ever possessed by a mortal. This had been seen to by his parents and grandfather. And so he became not only a good judge of practical men and measures, but something of a poet and philosopher as well. In fact, he rivaled that supremely versatile genius, Leonardo, in combining a variety of diverse talents. He fostered the idea of a Platonic Academy and held an annual feast at his country palace of Carreggi to celebrate the birth of Plato. It is a significant commentary on the two men that both Cosimo and Lorenzo

were consoled in their last days by having intellectual friends read and discuss Plato with them.

Unlike the standard leaders of his time, Lorenzo detested war as an implement of statecraft. He believed in exhausting the arts of diplomacy before launching armies to enforce national policy. His greatest triumph in statecraft came in 1480 when a civil war involving Milan, Venice, the Papal state, Florence, and Naples convulsed Italy. Florence was greatly overmatched militarily by her enemies when Lorenzo decided to go to Naples in person and try to win over King Ferrante to making a peace. So persuasive did he prove to be in diplomacy that the Neapolitan king agreed, and Florence emerged from the war with her sovereignty intact and her lost possessions restored. Again in 1490, not long before his death, he effected another reconciliation between Naples and the Pope, and thus kept Florence out of war.

Know the Past and Anticipate the Future

We read history and reflect on the past in order better to understand the present and in some degree to anticipate the future. What does the grandeur of Florence mean to the world in the 1960's? In this consideration three facts about the Florence of the Medici

stand out pregnant with meaning.

1. *A high culture depends, first, on economic factors.*

The fine flowering of Florence was a product of the fertilization, watering, and tillage provided by accumulated wealth. The splendor of the Renaissance would have been impossible had income and wealth been equally distributed among the people. When all income is consumed as it is acquired, there cannot be growth or accelerated production of all those things that minister to the spirit of man. Equality is unnatural, artificial; inequality is a natural state and contributes to the health of a society. Florence became supremely great in part because of its superiority in industry and trade. Fortunately, it was led by a wealthy business family devoted to literature and art, able and willing to spend colossal sums of their own money to foster them. "No other family," wrote Voltaire, "ever obtained power by so just a title."

Florence under the early Medici steadfastly refused to debase its currency as so many states did and still do.

These and other factors led Miriam Beard to write: "The culture of the Renaissance, so largely a Florence creation, was inextricably bound to the capitalism which thrived there."

2. Love of freedom is a characteristic of peoples who achieve greatly.

"Passionately indeed was Florence enamoured of Freedom," wrote G. F. Young, the historian of the Medici. This it proved in 1478 by boldly resisting the decrees of Pope Sixtus IV, who sought to displace Lorenzo and even to have him murdered. The Pope was so furious at this defiance that he excommunicated the entire state of Tuscany. But, devout Christians as they were, Florentines refused to be intimidated into surrendering their liberty to govern themselves. They had bent their necks under the yoke of tyrants in the past and were highly resolved not to do so again. It was this same spirit that caused them to overthrow Lorenzo's son and successor, Pietro. Pietro failed to follow the advice of his father and his grandfathers not to set himself apart as an aristocrat who was above other citizens. Florentines were not amenable to conformity even when it was offered in the guise of national unity. Individualism reached a high tide in fifteenth century Florence.

3. Government is to be judged, not intrinsically by its form, but for its adaptability to a people and a period.

Florence as a republic had

struggled along in a morass of mediocrity. Their very spirit of individualism caused its citizens to throw themselves with too much heat into private feuds. They mixed religion and politics in an impossible combination of fanaticism and violence. Like the Spaniards, they had lacked both leadership and followership. The struggles of the two parties — the Ghibellines, or aristocratic, and the Guelphs, or popular and papal — were almost unbelievably bitter. There was a complete absence of compromise, so essential to the successful functioning of a republic.

The Medici, and particularly Lorenzo the Magnificent, combined autocracy and republicanism in a blend that suited the spirit of the times. They formed a rallying center in a way that a more democratic leader could not accomplish. Hereditary succession provided the element of legitimacy that avoided revolutionary upheavals in periods of transition, as long as the leader paid due regard to the Florentines' jealousy of encroachments on their liberties.

We have to recognize that at the best a Golden Age is not a time of tranquility and happy adjustment. Achievement and not happiness is the motivating force. The Athens of Socrates and Plato

and Pericles and Aeschylus and Empedocles was the Athens of the Peloponnesian struggle. Great works representing the most sublime aspirations of men are born in times of turbulence such as tortured Italy in the fifteenth century.

The ideal in government, whatever its peculiar form, is to bring to the top of the heap leaders who are among the best minds of their time and therefore natural law-

makers and administrators. The Roman, Marcus Aurelius, was at once a philosopher and a king. Lorenzo the Magnificent was more than that; he possessed an almost universal mind in a time when genius grew on the trees in Florence. Peoples in all climes, present and future, may study his career with profit. All of us are indebted to him and his three immediate ancestors, probably more than we realize. ♦

SUGGESTED READINGS ON THE MEDICI

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THE UN TO THE US

WILLIAM HENRY CHAMBERLIN

A VOCIFEROUS BAND of propagandists, official and unofficial, has been presenting the United Nations to the American people as a shield against war, an impartial tribunal for the just and peaceful settlement of disputes between nations, a large installment on the realization of Tennyson's vision of "a parliament of man." Unfortunately, a candid look at the UN record shows that it has been and is nothing of the sort. Far from being a help in the effort to insure peace with freedom and justice, the UN has become the home of a double standard of morals, of a crooked view of

world relations. And, especially in recent years, this organization has been a distinctly bad influence on American foreign policy, inducing the American government again and again to let down allies and to quarrel unnecessarily with friendly countries.

It is perhaps not generally realized that during recent years the prevailing trend of opinion in the UN has changed, in line with its expansion in membership from about 50 original members to the present figure of 111. Most of the new members are African and Asiatic states with little experience in self-government and still less in the conduct of international affairs.

During the first years after the end of the Second World War the United States could count on an

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