Spectacular Antiquities: power and display of *anticaglie* at the court of Cosimo I de’ Medici

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Cet article examine certains moments importants de l’histoire de la décoration de la résidence ducale de Florence, le Palazzo Vecchio, et de la collection d’antiquités de Cosme 1er de Médicis. Les modes de développement de cette collection s’avèrent cohérents, d’une part, avec les traditions familiales des Médicis, et d’autre part, avec le développement de l’archéologie au XVIe siècle. En continuité avec ces observations, cet article montre aussi comment la politique culturelle de Cosme a été maintenue après 1560 au Palazzo Pitti (acquis en 1549), en particulier par ses fils François 1er et Ferdinand 1er, et dans quelle mesure cette politique a eu un effet à long terme sur le développement des collections à l’extérieur de Florence.

The *soffitto* of the Salone de’ Cinquecento in the Florentine Palazzo Vecchio bears depictions of many key moments in Florentine history (Fig. 1). A prominent place on the central axis of the ceiling is given to the *Foundation of Florence* in the presence of Octavian Augustus, Marcus Antonius, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. The panel depicts Roman *Florentia* being built, with all the necessary components of a Roman city already in place: a regular grid of streets, city walls with gates, an amphitheatre, and the temple of Mars, which according to popular belief was a precursor of the Baptistery of San Giovanni.

Florentines were interested in the early history of their city. Several founding legends were developed over the centuries, some of which owed more to fantasy than to history, but all of which insisted that Florence was an ancient city, going back at least to the late Roman Republic. The version that duke Cosimo de’ Medici came to favour over all others dated the foundation to the days of the second triumvirate. This choice was to a great extent

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prompted by Cosimo’s own identification as a new Augustus: *primus inter pares*, a duke who was also Capo della Repubblica and had saved his dominion from civil strife. Ancient history and ancient material culture served, accordingly, to underpin Cosimo’s political power and to legitimize his rule over Florence and Tuscany. Hence, it seems appropriate to examine where and how Antiquity and *anticaglie* (ancient artworks and materials) appeared in the decoration of the ducal residences and to explore the role they played as part of the Duke’s cultural policy from 1540 onwards.

Long before the Salone de’ Cinquecento received its decorative make-over in the 1560s, Cosimo commissioned Francesco Salviati to embellish another hall, the Sala dell’Udienza on the second floor of the Palazzo Ducale, with *all’antica* frescoes from the life of the Roman hero Camillus. In this project Cosimo emulated another Medici undertaking, the Sala di Costantino in the Vatican palace, which had been devised and executed for two Medici popes, Leo X and Clement VII. Of particular interest in the Camillus cycle
Fig. 2 Francesco Salviati, *Brennus Throwing his Sword onto the Scales*, Sala dell’Udienza, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, detail, 1543–1545 (photo: Lionel Devlieger, reproduced with the kind permission of the Servizio Musei Comunali di Firenze; this photo must not be used or copied without further authorization by the Servizio Musei).
in Florence is the almost whimsical inclusion of several ancient works of art in the backdrop of the scene depicting Brennus throwing his sword onto the scales while the Roman ransom is being weighed. If it were not for these statues, the scenery in the background would be a generic *all’antica* townscape. Roman pieces of sculpture, however, manage to turn the ruins into a quasi-archaeological reconstruction of ancient Rome.

These statues, a *Crouching Venus*, a *Satyr* or *Faun*, and the famous *Torso Belvedere*, are particularly interesting for their connection to the young Duke’s family. The first looks very much like a *Venus* once owned by Alfonsina, the widow of Piero di Lorenzo il Fatuo and included in a drawing by Martin van Heemskerck of the loggia of the then Medici palace in Rome.8 It is difficult to tell the second statue’s date of entry into the Medici collections, but an almost identical *Satyr*, possibly once owned by Cosimo, has long been displayed in the vestibule of the Galleria Palatina.9 The third antiquity is the *Torso Belvedere*, which—despite a Renaissance preference for restored antiquities—remained a fragment in accordance with Michelangelo’s expressed opinion.10 Despite his disenchantment with the later Medici and his refusal to come back to live in Florence, perhaps no other artist’s life and reputation was so closely intertwined with the Medici; Cosimo continued to court Michelangelo’s favour until the artist’s death in 1564. Not least through his influence on Vasari, Michelangelo’s artistic and antiquarian preferences carried much weight in Florence.

The decoration of the Sala dell’Udienza was one of Cosimo’s early commissions for the palace; the choice of *invenzione* was clearly influenced by political considerations. By this date Cosimo, against expectations, had survived a stormy few years after coming to power suddenly in January 1537.11 Whatever the real reason for the murder of his cousin and predecessor, Alessandro, many Florentines would have been only too happy to return to a republican form of government, shaking off Medici rule once and for all. However, Cosimo, once elected Duke of Florence, proved hard to dislodge. He successfully fought the rebels massing outside his city and slowly won over the population in Florence, against the best efforts of the Farnese Pope, the Habsburg Emperor, and the Medici Queen of France.

Consolidating his hold over Florence while defending her liberty against the foreign powers in Italy was a long and painful process, during which Cosimo had to pay much in terms of personal disappointment and financial loss.12 However, after his marriage to Leonor Álvarez di Toledo (henceforth called Eleonora) in 1539, his political situation finally became more secure. In 1540 he felt able to move from the Medici palace on the Via Larga to the old town hall, seizing the former seat of the republican government as his ducal
residence. His takeover of the palace has been called reuse of the spoils of the Republic; these spoils were successfully recycled by Giambattista Tasso and later by Giorgio Vasari. The erstwhile Palazzo de’ Priori had become a ducal palace; therefore new staterooms worthy of the young Medici duke and his noble Spanish bride had to be created.

Eleonora’s apartment on the second floor was among the first portions of the palace to be renovated. At times used by both Duke and Duchess, as has been pointed out by Bruce Edelstein, it soon offered the amenities of a camera (the Camera Verde), a small scrittoio, and a beautiful chapel with an intricate decorative scheme. Four further rooms were later decorated with scenes from the lives of Famous Women from Florentine history, Holy Scripture, and classical Antiquity under the supervision of Vasari. Cosimo had his own apartment on the first floor, the fourth chamber of which housed four large statues by 1553 at the latest: a Bacchus by Sansovino, a Bacchus by Bandinelli, a David (or Apollo) by Michelangelo, and an ancient torso restored as Ganymede by Cellini. As I have argued elsewhere, this room was used as audience chamber for visitors received in the ducal apartment. It was located behind three anticamere enfilade but lay before such private retreats as the Duke’s habitual place of rest and his scrittoio.

In the 1550s Tasso and Vasari built a new wing to the east of the palace with splendid apartments on the first and second floors. The decoration of these rooms was dedicated to the memory of the foremost members of the Medici family in the Quartiere di Leone X and to pagan deities in the Quartiere degli Elementi. Throughout the palace, Antiquity and ancient material culture played an important role as part of the decorative scheme. And here, once more, Medici achievements and power were set in relation to myths and events of classical Antiquity. So far the discussion of Cosimo’s use of ancient history and art concerned decorative invenzioni employed in the palace; but the Duke was also an enthusiastic collector of Etruscan and Roman antiquities, and was interested in the most up-to-date forms of display for such pieces.

Up to 1560 Cosimo had to rely on gifts and chance discoveries in his own territory as his source for a collection of antiquities. Pieces from Rome were expensive and had to be exported with the help of a papal lasciapassare; hence Cosimo had to make do with small bronze copies of famous statues such as the Laocoon or the Torso del Belvedere. Apart from the crippling cost of such rare and ancient objects, Cosimo’s ongoing difficulties with the Papal States made the acquisition of large-scale Roman antiquities an unattractive option. Collecting Etruscan artworks was, however, extremely advantageous. Not only were such pieces cheap, and easy for the Florentine
Duke to get; they also possessed an unusual artistic quality and the added prestige of legendary age. Thus Cosimo could be original at little cost, show his artistic discrimination, and make a political statement regarding the political independence and artistic achievements of his dominion—all at the same time.21

As it happened, members of the Accademia Fiorentina had already created what Giovanni Cipriani called a “mito etrusco,” using their own observations of anticaglie found in Florence and nearby, and some of the wilder theories of the antiquarian and forger Annio da Viterbo, all enriched with a large dose of campanilismo.22 As if to confirm these explosive theories, in the late autumn of 1553 a large bronze lion, the famous Chimera (Fig. 3), was found in Arezzo together with a group of bronzetti.23 These pieces were taken to Florence, and the Chimera found a place in the Sala di Leone X in the ducal palace. For the bronzetti a different location was chosen on the floor above: there, Cosimo had the use of a small room or stanzino. According to the 1553 Guardaroba Medicea inventory it was furnished with a few antiquities and books. Cellini tells us how he and the Duke retired to this room at night to clean the small bronzes while exchanging all the latest gossip. Perhaps the restoration of the bronzetti made Cosimo and Vasari decide to

Fig. 3 Chimera of Arezzo, Archaeological Museum, Florence, Inv. n. 1 (photo: Ervin Gáldy, reproduced with the kind permission of the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici).
give this *scrittoio* a complete makeover, turning it into the Scrittoio della Calliope, so named after the *soffitto* painting still *in situ*.24

Pietro il Gottoso and Lorenzo il Magnifico had used a small room in the Medici palace on the Via Larga as their *scrittoio*.25 Set up in the tradition of the study room, such a place now also fulfilled the function of a mini-museum. As in the case of Cosimo’s *scrittoio* dedicated to the Muses, the earlier Medici study was not an exclusive showcase for antiquities, but they formed an important part of the display. In the Scrittoio della Calliope, Cosimo could present himself as a collector of (mainly) Etruscan antiquities, Tuscan *all’antica* art, and exotic objects from the Near East and the New World. He could emphasize his strong links with the main branch of his family as collector and ruler over Florence, thus legitimizing his political claims. And finally, he was able to accentuate artistic and political Tuscan independence.26

The exhibits were taken to the completed *scrittoio* on 13 June 1559.27 The following December Giovanni Angelo Medici was elected pope Pius IV; this event proved important for the relationship between Florence and the Papal States in more ways than one. Although descending from the Milanese branch, Pius was accepted and treated as a family member and in return bestowed numerous favours on the Florentine Medici.28 The Duke’s second son Giovanni, made a cardinal in 1560, was soon inspired by his prolonged visits in Rome to acquire antiquities for himself and his family.29 Suddenly Cosimo had access to the Roman art market and to export licences for his *anticaglie*. On his visit to Rome in November 1560 he made the most of this change of fortune, accepting gifts from the Pope, buying antiquities, and touring the richest collections to pick up ideas on how best to display his new treasures.30 Bartolommeo Ammannati was with him, and only a few months after their return to Florence started to work on the *sala* of the Palazzo Pitti, which had been acquired by Eleonora di Toledo in 1549.31

This later Sala delle Nicchie was turned into a Florentine Belvedere; following the Roman examples Cosimo had seen, it was set up as a display room for large-scale Roman statues, as far as this was possible given the location.32 Originally these sculptures were placed in the ten black niches, which gave the room its name, and on pedestals between them. Over the years, however, so many statues and busts were taken to the *sala* that this scheme had to be abandoned. Although the Sala delle Nicchie is fairly large, the 35 statues finally displayed there by 1574 must have made it appear more like an obstacle course than an orderly exhibition of statuary. Like the *scrittoio*, the *sala* relied on a wall covering in royal red to bring out the antiquities to their best advantage. However, in contrast to the display in the smaller room,
the Sala delle Nicchie was a dedicated room for antiquities, relieved only by portraits of the most famous Medici scions. Its splendour, size, and contents made it appropriate for a powerful Medici prince, a trusted ally of the Pope, and a relative by marriage of the Habsburgs in Spain and Austria. It was even more in keeping with Cosimo’s political aspirations, namely to become the first King of Tuscany. This will have been one of the reasons why the Sala delle Nicchie was set up in the Pitti palace, distant from the old republican centre of power, rather than in the Palazzo Ducale. In the erstwhile Palazzo della Signoria, Cosimo continued to project an image of himself as Capo della Repubblica, for example in the Salone dei Cinquecento.

Apart from these two specialized display rooms in the two residences, a visitor would have encountered antiquities in courtyards, gardens and terraces, hallways, and in the rooms of the Guardaroba. Plenty of all’antica art, not least the family portraits in the Udienza at the northern end of the Salone, and the depicted scenes of ancient history and mythology, complemented the ensemble. In the majority of cases in which Cosimo appears as part of the decoration—for example in the Sala di Cosimo I and in the Apotheosis in the centre of the soffitto of the Salone—he is clad in all’antica armour, becoming an all’antica artwork by virtue of his imitation of the emperor Augustus.

Classical Antiquity and ancient remains played an important part in the decoration of Cosimo’s residences, in particular of the Palazzo Ducale, which also served as the seat of government. Ancient artworks thus became signs of power and aspiration. They were not any longer admired solely for their beauty and rarity, but also studied by and displayed to the interested observer in the most beautiful order in specialized display rooms. They were able to impart valuable information about the classical world and at the same time to present their owner as the master who had imposed this order on his possessions and his subjects. Unfortunately we have few contemporary descriptions of these rooms, and in fact not much evidence of visitors. Vasari, however, ensured the fame of the ducal collection by writing about it in his Lives and the Ragionamenti. Whatever the actual visitors’ numbers may ultimately have been, Vasari’s writings and many Tuscan artists circulated in Europe, bringing knowledge of Medici collections to kingdoms and principalities far away.

Kings, dukes, and counts everywhere, keen to model local court culture on the Florentine example, relied on Vasari for information and wrote to the Medici grand dukes, requesting the loan of Tuscan artists and architects to embellish their castles, fortify their cities, plan and plant gardens, and devise court spectacles. For example, Costantino de’ Servi travelled constantly in France, the Habsburg Empire, and England to satisfy the huge demand for Italian art in the classical tradition. Some of these northern princes also
wished to collect modern and ancient art works, finding it a tempting and at the same time daunting and expensive project. Few of these places had any local sources of Roman art, hence all such objects had to be bought or copied, then to be imported at crippling cost.\textsuperscript{40} Interestingly enough (and in all likelihood this was due to Vasari’s efforts as much as Cosimo’s), it seems that the Medici example was considered the one worth following, even though there were many contenders, for example in Ferrara, Mantua, and Rome, able to set the fashion just as well.

Thus, Cosimo—and later his sons—not only reaped magnificence in Florence and political prestige in Italy from their collection of antiquities; they also became famous in northern Europe as collectors and art sponsors. Vincenzo Fedeli, ambassador of the Serenissima in Florence during the winter of 1560–61, showed himself convinced that Cosimo was perfectly aware of the political advantages he would gain from such sponsorship:

[Costimo] Si diletta molto di gioie, di statue, di medaglie antique, ed ha tante di queste antiquità, che è un stupore; e di tutte queste cose fa grandissima professione e spende assai e ne lasserà memoria eterna. E l’istorie dei suoi tempi fa scrivere in lingua latina e toscana, e fa fare li commentari della sua vita in una e l’altra lingua da uomini eccellenti, pagati per questo. Di modo che con la pittura, la scoltura, con le statue, con l’impronte e con le sempiterne carte si farà, dopo morto, eterno e glorioso.\textsuperscript{41}

Hence, the Duke’s cultural politics were not only aimed at the short-term survival of his government; Cosimo saw to it that the fame and power of his family would last, and one way to ensure this was by collecting antiquities and commissioning history books. The combined forces of ancient material culture and contemporary paper trail were considered effective means to achieve this goal.

North of the Alps, Saxony was one of the many small German principalities looking for guidance in matters of court culture. Its ruling house found itself embroiled in fights between the different branches of the family. They were frequently trapped in the religious struggles between other Protestant princes and the Catholic Empire, while trying to preserve the Wettin’s power over Saxony and status as electors.\textsuperscript{42} When Christian I succeeded his father Augustus in 1586, he faced difficulties similar to those Cosimo had had to confront in 1537.\textsuperscript{43} Most likely it was the political success of the Florentine Duke as much as Vasari’s accounts of the cultural and artistic life that inspired Gabriel Kaltemarckt to propose an electoral art collection based on several Italian examples, but mainly that of the Medici.\textsuperscript{44} Not only had Florence become in his view preferable to Rome as far as antiquities were concerned,
but also the Medici had shown how one could rise from bourgeois origins to almost royal power by dint of collecting ancient art.45

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**Notes**

1. This article is based on research for my Ph.D. thesis, and more specifically on my paper given on 9 April 2005 at the RSA annual meeting (Cambridge) in one of Konrad Eisenbichler’s sessions on “The Spectacles of Power.” I wish to thank my fellow at I Tatti, Alison Frazier, for her helpful suggestions which greatly improved the clarity of this article.


9. Gáldy, “Con bellissimo ordine,” p. 142 and Cat. 93. According to Vincenzo Saladino, “A Bacchus, an Apollo Sarcoconus and a Pair of Victories: four Riccardi Statues never before Exhibited in Public,” in Cristina Giannini, ed., _Stanze Secrete raccolte per caso. I Medici santi—gli arredi celati/ Secret Rooms Collected by chance. The Medici Saints—The Hidden Treasures_, pp. 265–79, see pp. 275–6 and figs. 85–88, and 90; the two Satyrs in the Galleria Palatina only came to Florence from the della Valle collection via the Villa Medici in 1787 (quoting Dütschke, _Antike Bildwerke in Oberitalien_ [Leipzig: W. Engelmann, 1875], 2, nn. 31 and 32, pp. 15–6). At present Louisa Connor Bulman (who kindly brought Saladino’s article to my attention) is working on an Italian eighteenth-century drawing in the collection of Eton College, which depicts a _Faun_ very similar to Salviati’s fresco and to the statues in the Galleria Palatina. This may be coincidence, for classical statues frequently exist in more than one copy; Saladino mentions two further examples of the _Faun_, which may also have been in Florence. According to Dr Connor Bulman the drawing in Eton is most likely based on an actual piece of sculpture, but it is also tempting to think of it as a copy of a hypothetical drawing by Salviati who after the commission in the Sala dell’Udienza worked in Venice for the Patriarch Grimani.


20. Gáldy, “Con bellissimo ordine,” Cat. 3 and 33.


28. Ludwig Pastor, Die Geschichte der Päpste seit dem Ausgang des Mittelalters (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder and Co, 1920), VII, pp. 58–78. The issue of how closely the Florentine and Milanese Medici were related remains unresolved.
38. See the documents in Archivio di Stato Firenze (ASF), Mediceo del Principato (MP) 4467.
Tim Wilks, “Rivalries among the Designers at Prince Henry’s Court, 1610–1612,” The
39. See in particular the first two chapters of my forthcoming book *Collecting and Display at two European Courts*.

40. Jonathan Scott, *The Pleasures of Antiquity, British Collectors of Greece and Rome* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2003), p. 30; Scott quotes from a chapter on antiquities in Henry Peacham, *The Complete Gentleman* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 117, according to which it was the “dead costliness” of antiquities that made ownership so indicative of a princely mind. See also the letter by Costantino de’ Servi (ASF, *MP* 996, f. 75 [old 48]), sent from Weimar on 5 April 1619, in which he comments on the sad state of the finances of many German princes: “Per che veggo che son Poveri Principi con tanti fratelli che lentrare loro non posson suplire alle spese di tanti umori.”


45. Gutfleisch and Menzhausen, pp. 8 and 15.