Laurie Fusco and Gino Corti  
*Lorenzo de’ Medici: Collector and Antiquarian*  

Historians of Renaissance collecting, and particularly of fifteenth-century collecting, usually have to make the most of meagre evidence: laconic inventories compiled after the collector’s death, occasional demands or requests for objects, rare and brief references to the collection by observers. The case of Lorenzo de’ Medici— even though his collection was dispersed during the French occupation of 1494—is a glorious exception, to which this long-awaited, bountiful book pays fitting tribute. It includes the evidence for Lorenzo’s collection from letters, inventories, and other descriptions, prefaced by a long analysis of his collecting practices and context. The work is a significant resource for information about many of the objects that Lorenzo owned, for the figure of Lorenzo himself, and for the history of collecting in the fifteenth century in general.

Fusco and Corti have gathered together 320 separate pieces of testimony for Lorenzo’s collecting. There are 197 extracts from letters, mostly from Florentine archives, spanning the years 1465 (when Francesco Tornabuoni sent coins from Rome to the sixteen-year-old Lorenzo) to 1526 (the year in which Isabella d’Este saw what were described as Lorenzo’s antiquities in the possession of Pope Clement VII in Rome). Eighty-nine “texts” follow the letters, including descriptions of objects that Lorenzo owned, accounts of Lorenzo himself, accounts of the French invasion of Florence and the dispersal of Lorenzo’s possessions, and governmental records for this dispersal. These excerpts include information from a very wide range of sources, from published works like Giovio’s history or Vasari’s lives, to the testaments of other collectors and Francesco d’Agostino Cegia’s secret ledger of the Medici possessions. Then there are excerpts from 34 Medici inventories. Notes, often detailed, and commentary follow each document; the numbers involved give some idea of the value of this hoard.

The body of the book, interpreting the mass of evidence, is by Fusco alone. She chooses a synthetic approach closely tied to the documents that follow, offering a chronological account of Lorenzo’s acquisitions. She then discusses what the sources tell us about the art market; about individual pieces, their display and reception; about the tastes of Lorenzo himself; about the dispersion of the collection; and finally about the place of Lorenzo in the context of contemporary collecting. Fusco’s structure necessarily involves the repetition of particular ideas and themes. One important example is the danger of using a single inventory for the value of objects, a common enough habit for collections less well documented than Lorenzo’s. We
would expect a general inflationary trend—and so when the figure for a medieval French reliquary remains the same, we can assume that Lorenzo, or the market in general, was turning away from treasures of that type—but some inventories show wildly different values for particular objects. It is no surprise to find out that Medici partisans underestimated the values of the family’s possessions for the benefit of the Signoria; the pieces that the family secured later shot up in value. Because of the repetition, one feels that this is not a book designed to be read cover to cover. Unlike many books of that kind, though, this one is equipped with an engagingly detailed and sub-divided index, with entries such as “Exchange of cloths for objects instead of using cash,” “Este, Isabella d’: Encouragement of illegal exportation,” or, a personal favorite in the section devoted to sculptural heads and busts, “Three Heads which were not very good.”

Despite the weight of evidence, it is often difficult to identify or envisage particular objects that Lorenzo owned, with the exception of some iconic pieces. The testimony of inventories and letters is usually vague, and Fusco demonstrates considerable ingenuity in trying to match words with either the objects themselves, or their representations. The question of the appearance of the Sleeping Cupid, copied by Michelangelo, is probably the most famous problem that Lorenzo’s collection inspires, and Fusco duly investigates it at some length. She also tackles less well-known cases. An example is a bronze head of Jupiter that arrived as a gift from Siena in 1489, which Luigi Beschi has identified with an example now in Vienna. On the basis of separate descriptions of the piece in three letters and Sigismondo Tizio’s unpublished history of Siena, Fusco rejects Beschi’s identification, and instead speculates that our best evidence for the appearance of this head today is a detail in Bertoldo di Giovanni’s frieze for Palazzo Scala, dated to around the time that the donation was made.

Bertoldo was probably the most important and prolific of the many artists and scholars that Lorenzo sponsored to work with his antiquities and other objects as inspiration. Vasari refers not only to artists in the sculpture garden, but also to metalworkers, mosaicists and gem cutters, and Fusco substantiates his account, demonstrating that it is unwise to sever completely Lorenzo’s activities as patron and collector. Lorenzo emerges as a committed and aggressive collector, amassing objects using the weight of the family bank and a network of friends and servants, but also someone sensitive and receptive to a variety of uses and pleasures that his possessions provided. The evidence here confirms that he valued Greco-Roman antiquities above all other objects. He did inherit several medieval treasures. He owned many tapestries, for example, but the silence about them in his correspondence
suggests they left him profoundly uninterested. Although he was presented with an urn containing the ashes of Porsenna, he seems to have escaped the mania for all things Etruscan that gripped his Florentine successors.

Given the paucity of comparative information, it is difficult to know how unusual Lorenzo’s tastes were in contrast with those of his contemporaries. In a measured final section, though, Fusco makes some suggestions based on what we know about Quattrocento antiquity collecting, and doing so presents the best survey that exists of the phenomenon. Lorenzo was not alone in valuing the “minor arts” as equal to sculpture—sculpture only emerged as the foremost ancient art in the early sixteenth century—but he seems to have been atypical in his preference for cameos over gems. His commitment to sharing his objects with artists and scholars also seems unusual, which complicates any categorization of the collection as “public” or “private.” Finally, the testimony reveals a strikingly passionate response to the objects. Fusco describes Lorenzo as loving his possessions’ “sensuous materiality,” an evocative portrayal of the ardour that fired the collector uncovered so diligently here.

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Colin Kidd
*The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000*

While scholars widely agree that the history of race reveals more about culture than it does about biology, the origins of racial thinking continue to attract attention. Colin Kidd’s new work of intellectual history is a productive addition to this field. Kidd deploys close readings of the writings of a varied group of Protestant thinkers to argue that religion, as a central part of Atlantic culture, had an under-recognized, long-term influence on the development of racial concepts.

After summarizing the grounds for understanding race as a cultural construct, Kidd presents various “problems,” such as whether Adam was black or white, designed to illustrate how theological concerns have shaped thinking about human difference. In four ensuing chapters, Kidd examines intersections between race and religion in periods between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. In the early modern period, Kidd argues, “race was not a central organising concept of intellectual life or political culture.” When intellectuals were interested in human cultural and physical