

Il Magnifico

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It is clear to those of us interested in art, both viewing and collecting it, that our pastime, our hobby, indeed our passion, was born well before we were. It has been nurtured and passed down from one generation to the next. When did it all start? When was the seed of this great tree planted? How far back would one have to go to find it?

In the west from 18,000 to 10,000 BC there were hundreds of cave painters, some very accomplished. They mixed colors, engraved rock and depicted human and animal anatomy. A recent count shows over 275 caves discovered, almost all in Europe. It should be noted that cave art, practiced for over eight thousand years, had a lifespan unmatched by any other form.

The great Egyptian sculptors and painters worked in a two hundred year span from 1200 BC to 1000 BC followed by the Greeks and Romans, highly skilled sculptors and architects working from about 400 BC until 400 AD.

And then the lights went out for a thousand years and the tree died. What art there was was largely confined to religious figures, was of uneven quality and has been found in sparse numbers. It wasn't enough to grow a bush.... let alone a tree.

Fortunately, a new tree was planted in the 14th century in Italy that is still alive and healthy. It blossomed into the Renaissance and has continued to bloom for over seven hundred years filling hundreds of thousands of museums and homes of collectors around the world and providing pleasure to all who appreciate beauty.

The center of the Renaissance was Florence. The reasons aren't certain but it's likely that the city had the right combination of patrons and artists who were descendents of men who had worked in costuming and jewelry manufacturing. For over a century and a half, beginning in the early 1400s, they broadened the art form to include sculpture and painting, much of which still adorns the many cathedrals, churches and chapels in and around the city.

The first of the famous Florentines was not a sculptor or painter but a poet, Dante Alighieri who wrote the Divine Comedy around 1300 in a language he adopted from the Tuscan dialect, which he called 'Italian'. In doing so he became the first important poet not writing in Latin

In 1401, soon after Dante's death, Lorenzo Ghiberti, a goldsmith by training, won the commission to design and cast the bronze doors of the newly constructed Baptistery. Twenty-one years later he completed the set of 28 panels depicting the life of Christ. He was then asked to do another set and twenty eight years later completed ten panels based on the old testament. Michelangelo later declared that they were "fit to be the doors to

paradise”, a name which has stuck to the present. I would agree with Michelangelo, having stood in line for an hour recently to view the doors from ten feet away.

Two early patrons supported Ghiberti in his lifetime quest. They were members of a family that became famous as patrons, Popes and rulers over three centuries, the Medici.

Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici a wool merchant and banker and his son Cosimo, also a banker, were eager to support great art and, in doing so became the earliest of the great Florentine patrons who funded the Renaissance. The money to carry on this quest came from the “Banco di Medici” which, over a century in business was the best known in Europe. It was the first to issue the famous ‘fiorino d’oro’, a coin with 54 grains of fine gold known throughout Europe as the ‘florin’. Its skillful artwork on both faces made it difficult to counterfeit and helped establish the sound reputation of the Florentine bankers.

The bank, with branches in the major cities of Italy, as well as London, Geneva, Lyons, Bruges, and Avignon was also the banker to the Curia, the business and administrative branch of the Vatican. In order to secure the Vatican’s business the Medicis devised a complex system that worked around the Church’s stricture against usury. For the two centuries after Giovanni and Cosimo Medici began helping Papacy save and invest the Church’s riches the family tried, usually successfully, to stay close to the sitting Pope.

But it was not only the banking profits that paid for artist’s commissions. Alum was the other and, once again, the Vatican was involved. Church law not only banned usury; it also forbade monopolies, for God had given the natural world to all mankind, not a chosen few. Alum was, after salt and iron, the most important mineral in medieval Europe. It was used to cleanse raw wool of its grease, fix the dyes in churchmen’s red gowns and cure the leather used in everything from shoes to saddles. A large and valuable source of Alum was found in the Tolfa Mountains near Rome. Pope Pius II claimed the land for the church. He justified the land grab saying that, only by exploiting this valuable commodity could the Church’s enemy, the Ottoman Empire, be denied the European market for alum, which the Turks also mined.

In order to market the mineral, Pius’s successor, Paul II gave the Medici an exclusive right to use their European trade network to sell whatever was produced from the Tolfa mines. The Pope also announced that any merchant found to have purchased Turkish alum would be punished with excommunication since this was, indirectly, an attack on Christendom. This threat, by the way, was the justification for ignoring strictures against monopolies.

By this time, 1469, twenty year old, Lorenzo de’ Medici had taken over the reins of the family and of Florence.

Soon after, Florentines began calling him “il Magnifico” for he carried the love and support of art to new levels. Born in 1449, two decades after Giovanni’s death, Lorenzo, more than any single individual gave young artists hope and older ones security.

Equipped with funds from the bank and the alum concession, from three generations of forbears who were Florentine leaders, and with a love of art passed down by his mother Lucrezia, he had all the qualities needed to keep Florence relatively safe from its enemies while assuring that art in any form would be welcomed.

Meanwhile, back at home it was important to assure the quality and continuity of the Medici family. Lorenzo was eighteen when his parents selected his bride to be, Clarice Orisni, a fifteen year old from a preeminent Roman family. They were, in fact, so powerful that the Medicis avoided lending them money, fearing that repayment could not be enforced. It was thus more a merger than a marriage, not uncommon in the day.

Offsetting this rather impersonal relationship was the freedom given to Lorenzo and others like him to continue sexual liaisons outside of the home. Notwithstanding this freedom, often exercised, Lorenzo and Clarice produced seven children in nine years (one set of twins included) assuring a fair shot at continuation of the Medici name. And what, besides his potent sperm count, assured that the name Lorenzo would be followed by 'il Magnifico' for all of history? Consider that:

- At age 20 he became the effective leader of the Signoria, Florence's governing body, a role that he held until his death twenty-three years later. He formed military alliances with other cities when needed to protect Florence from its enemies but most of his efforts were devoted to diplomacy. He wished to leave a stamp on Florence as the second Athens something that could better be done if it were not always recruiting armies.
- A remarkable poet, playwright and letter writer Lorenzo left a rich record of his love of the arts and his support of well over fifty artists. His respect for Plato led to an annual event at his country villa on November 7th, the anniversary of the philosopher's death. Local academics were invited to engage in discussion of the great philosopher's writings.
- After thirty years of studying Greek and Roman architecture he had built villas, monasteries and libraries, many still standing, and a country retreat that occupied him in his last years.

He also built a remarkable garden at San Marco a few blocks from his Florentine villa. It was not only a beautiful resting place but also the site of Leonardo's work with his master, Verrocchio and, a decade later the place where Michelangelo was schooled on sculpture. Lorenzo was so impressed by the latter's ability that he commissioned the seventeen year old to carve a marble relief, the famous Battle of the Centaurs.

It was as a patron of the arts that Lorenzo made his most memorable mark on history. The Renaissance brought art back to the highest level since the Greeks and Romans, perhaps even surpassing them. The epicenter of the Renaissance was Florence and Lorenzo 'il Magnifico' led the small group of patrons who made it possible.

Francesco Guicciardini, a well known historian of the era, wrote of Florence under Lorenzo: "Men of intellect and ability were contented to live there, for all letters, all arts,

all talents were welcomed and recognized.”

So when you next visit an art museum remember Lorenzo for, without him, the seed that Dante planted may have never sprouted into the art, sculpture and architecture that we still enjoy five centuries after Lorenzo’s death.