LORENZO (THE MAGNIFICENT) DE' MEDICI (1449 - 1492)

Grandson of Cosimo the Elder, son of Piero de' Medici.
Under his leadership, Florence was the epicenter of the Renaissance, due to the intellectuals and artists of his court - Verrocchio, Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci - as well as philosophers, writers and poets.

His intellectual gifts and complex personality allowed him to function in a myriad of roles - scholar, statesman, collector of antiquities, patron of the arts and protector of artists. He founded a school for sculpture in the Medici Orchards where the young Michelangelo studied. Dedicated to the diffusion of Platonism, he expanded the family collection of ancient manuscripts that became the core of the Biblioteca Laurenziana. He spent lavishly on and used the financial power of the Medici bank for extraordinary acquisitions to his gem collection.

Although he never held public office within the republic, he was an extremely astute political leader. Much admired by Niccolò Machiavelli as the perfect example of a benevolent dictator, he was the model for Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

Unfortunately, his death in 1492, the year Columbus discovered America, signaled turbulent times for Florence; his heir was incapable of governing and the family was exiled.

PALAZZO MEDICI

In 1445, Cosimo de' Medici, known as the Elder, began construction of his residence on a street known for its width, Via Larga. The building was designed by the great architect Michelozzo di Bartolomeo, who conceived of a structure, sober and imposing on the exterior, with an airy central courtyard that allowed access to a walled garden. The end result, completed in 1460, is considered the first Renaissance palace in Florence. Within the palace walls, elaborate decoration made the Medici palace one of the most sumptuous homes in all of Europe. The courtyard was also embellished with sculpture and a freize decorated with 12 large marble medallions that reproduced some of the most famous gems of the Medici collection, made by the workshop of the Renaissance master Donatello.

The study or *scrittoio* of Piero the Gouty, son of Cosimo, the Elder, was the most admired room of the palace, conceived as a space for the conservation and study of a variety of objects of great prestige, such as his gems. Although lost today, it is known that the study was a relatively small space without windows; its walls were lined with handsome closets made of intricate, inlaid woods.

The study was used by Lorenzo the Magnificent as a symbol of the power of the Medici family and as a place to proudly show his illustrious guests, such as the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1444 - 1476), a passionate gem collector who Lorenzo received in March 1471. This event was the inspiration for the painting you see here, in which Lorenzo, dressed in red, displays a gem to the seated Duke.

PALAZZO VECCHIO AND THE STUDIOLO OF FRANCESCO I

In 1540, the soon-to-be first grand duke of Tuscany, Cosimo I, established his center of power and the family residence in Palazzo Vecchio, the traditional seat of city administration, in a blatant gesture of the shift from a republican government to Medici rule. Situated in the heart of Florence, Palazzo Vecchio continues to function today as both City Hall and a historical site.

The fabled *Studiolo* (study) of Francesco I de' Medici (seen in the photograph here as it appears today) is located on the second floor. It was originally commissioned in 1570 by the second Grand Duke as a "cabinet of curiosities" for his most precious objects, including his gem collection. The design for the richly ornate decoration of this rather small space (30 x 10 ft.) was the result of a collaboration between the famous late-Renaissance painter and architect Giorgio Vasari and a scholarly prior, Vincenzo Borghini, who conceived of the complex arrangement representing the esoteric relationships between Art, Nature, the Four Elements and the Four Seasons.

Dismantled in 1590, the appearance of the study today is the result of a reconstruction that began in 1910. All the elements of the original décor were reassembled in their original position. Along the lower part of the walls, there were 20 elaborate wall cabinets; their painted doors depicted scenes alluding to the rarities contained within. For example, along the right wall, reserved for Fire, there appeared scenes about the fusion of bronze and the firing of glass and other precious metals, all of which reflected the keen interest of Francesco I in alchemy. On the barrel-vaulted ceiling, the Four Elements - Air, Water, Earth and Fire – are represented, which according to ancient philosophy constituted the universe.

THE REBIRTH OF THE MEDICI COLLECTION

COSIMO I DE' MEDICI (1519 - 1574)
The first Grand Duke; son of the secondary branch of the Medici family.
Called to Florence to impose order after the assassination of his cousin, he quickly consolidated power and through military prowess defeated rival city-states. In 1569, he was proclaimed Grand Duke with rights of hereditary succession. His building plans were equally ambitious. His wife, Eleonora di Toledo purchased Palazzo Pitti on the other side of the Arno River, and initiated its massive renovation into a royal palace. His favorite architect, Giorgio Vasari was hired to construct the Uffizi, (offices) to administer the duchy. With a pragmatic eye towards the arts, he commissioned the best artists of the day to produce portraits and masterpieces that glorified the Medici family. He responded to the dispersal of the original gem collection with an aggressive strategy to rebuild the prestigious collection through acquisitions. Both his sons would continue the policy.

FRANCESCO I DE' MEDICI (1541 - 1587)
First born son of Cosimo I.
He succeeded his father as Grand Duke in 1574. More scholar than sovereign, his interests were in the natural sciences, chemistry and alchemy. He hired architect Bernardo Buontalenti to enclose the loggia of the upper floors of the Uffizi to create a gallery to house the family art collections, including the Medici gems, in effect creating the museum that today is known as the Galleria degli Uffizi.

FERDINANDO I DE' MEDICI (1549 - 1609)
Second son of Cosimo I.
Upon his brother's death in 1587, Ferdinando I would give up his life as a cardinal in Rome to assume his role as Grand Duke in Florence bringing with him his collection of antiquities. For 22 years, he would prove to be an accomplished statesman, bringing peace and prosperity to Tuscany.

BAROQUE TASTES &
THE FLORENTINE “COMMESSO”

The span of the 1600s was a tumultuous century, marked by war, religious tension and absolute monarchies battling for colonial possessions. A new world had been discovered and was open to conquest. Pirates sailed for plunder; pilgrims sailed for sanctuary. The Catholic Church had responded to Martin Luther with the Counter-Reformation. It was the century of Galileo and Shakespeare, Rene Descartes and Sir Francis Bacon.

During this era, first Italian and then European art also underwent a profound change. A new artistic period was established: the Baroque, a term allegedly coined from a Portuguese word meaning an irregular pearl. It was characterized by sinuous sculptural forms, the use of curved lines and the elaborate interaction and fusion of all artistic expressions.

In Florence, the creativity of the Baroque was best expressed in the manufacture of sumptuous furniture - cabinets, massive tables and decor of various kinds - adorned with “*commesso*” (also known as the Florentine mosaic), a type of mosaic created by the inlay of multi-colored hardstones, cut in articulated profiles that matched perfectly to form the whole of the image.

The prestigious court workshop founded by Grand Duke Ferdinando I de’ Medici in 1588 was specialized in creating mosaics of such perfection that they rivaled masterpieces of painting. In fact, Florence was famous throughout Europe for its hardstone production in a myriad of forms, due to the continual passion, protection and patronage of generations of the Medici. Until the end of the dynasty in 1737, these sophisticated creations were often sent as gifts to the kings and potentates of Europe, as testimony to the magnificence of the Medici court in Tuscany.

THE MEDICI IN THE 17TH CENTURY

COSIMO II DE' MEDICI (1590 - 1621)
First born son of Ferdinando I.
Only seventeen when he ascended the throne, the family coffers were empty and he closed the Medici bank, yet once again Palazzo Pitti was renovated through tax revenue.
His most significant cultural act was the protection and patronage extended to Galileo Galilei whose controversial observations were making enemies among the inquisitional followers of Church doctrine. He nominated Galileo as "Head Mathematician of the Grand Duke". The dowry of his wife, Maria Maddalena d'Austria would bring valuable gems into the Medici Collection.

FERDINANDO II DE' MEDICI (1610 - 1670)
First born son of Cosimo II.
Like his father, he would protect Galileo after his condemnation and sentencing to house arrest by gifting the Villa at Acetri to the old scientist.
Married to Vittoria della Rovere, a dark forbidding religious fanaticism descended upon the family, yet the family art collection was particularly enriched by the works of art brought by her dowry in 1631 from the Court in Urbino, including works by the Venetian master Renaissance painter, Titian, in particular *The Venus of Urbino*, and numerous gems.
An inventory conducted by Ferdinand II registers more than 500 exemplars, many of which were mounted in rings or in simple gold frames.

COSIMO III DE' MEDICI (1639 - 1723)
Son of Ferdinando II.
He would live for eighty-one years, and reign for fifty-three years, the longest in Tuscan history, yet in many ways it was a period of economic deterioration at the once splendid court. Due to irreconcilable differences, his wife would return to her native France and his three children, the last generation of the Medici, were subject to the fanaticism of their grandmother. Although all three would marry, all would remain childless.
Due to his substantial inheritance from his uncle, Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici, the grand-ducal collections were further enriched.

TWILIGHT OF A DYNASTY

GIAN GASTONE DE' MEDICI (1671 - 1737)
Second son of Cosimo III.
Upon the death of his older rebellious brother, the melancholy Gian Gastone would become the last Grand Duke until his death in 1737.
His reign was marked by the reversal of his father's conservative policies; he abolished taxes for the poor, repealed penal laws that placed restrictions on Jews and discontinued public executions.
Although living in the princely Palazzo Pitti, he reportedly led a somewhat dissolute life, completely withdrawn from the affairs of state and pomp of the court for which he had never shown any interest. He spent his time reading scientific works, especially on botany, and collecting antiques, of which he was a connoisseur.

ANNA MARIA LUISA DE' MEDICI (1667 - 1743)
Daughter of Cosimo III, and the last of the Medici.
Upon her brother's death, the Grand Duchy passed to Francis of Lorraine (Austria) as territorial possession, but the family possessions passed to her, by then, the seventy year old widow of the Elector Palatine, Johann Wilhelm von der Pfalz-Neuburg. She would live out her life in relative reclusion in Palazzo Pitti, ever the Medici, working to complete the Chapel of the Princes and collecting still-life painting. Upon her death in 1743, her last testament known as the "Family Pact" expressly prohibited in perpetuity the dispersion of the vast patrimony of the Medici from Florence and the Grand Duchy.

The change in dynastic rule to the Lorraine dynasty of Austria did not directly impact the gem collection. It remained in the Tribune of the Uffizi until 1781 when it was moved to the Cabinet of the Gems, situated at the southern end of the first corridor of the Galleria degli Uffizi.

TECHNICAL INSTRUMENTS & PROCESSES

The instruments and processes used by ancient artisans to engrave gems remained virtually unchanged until the 20th century. Originally done by hand, the work was limited to materials of not excessive hardness. The tools needed by an engraver of gems were few and easily transportable: some metal tips to drive into the stones, a rudimentary drill, a mortar and a bag of abrasive powders.

During the initial stage of processing, the stone was subjected to a preliminary, rough cutting, then trimmed by lime and cleaned with fine abrasives. Next followed the precise incising process by a drill, fixed horizontally or vertically, and driven by an assistant or by one hand of engraver himself, who with the other hand positioned the stone. The metal tips of different forms were immersed in abrasive pastes consisting of powders obtained by grinding or from sand. When the gem was finally finished, it was again polished with fine abrasives.

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the process of engraving gems did not undergo major changes. The artists continued to employ traditional methods, based on the use of metal tools and strong abrasives, such as diamond dust mixed with olive oil. An important contribution to the renewal of this art was the resumption of the use of “wheels”, or metal discs fixed on a horizontal shaft that could rotate at different speeds. This type of device, an ancestor of modern drills, allowed the artist to concentrate the abrasive action on the points to be engraved and more effectively manage the removal of debris from the stone, properly locked onto a support that allowed the operator to handle the stone with greater ease.

Only in the 18th century were more sophisticated instruments introduced: the so-called “*castelletti*” (literally small castles) that functioned on the same principles as the wheels and were attached to work benches such as the one on display.

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