

The Medici and Gozzoli's Magi

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Malcolm Oxley on how the Christmas story was co-opted into politics and social aspirations in Renaissance Florence.

The modern visitor to Florence rightly seeks out the Medici town palace on the Via Cavour. A major attraction of the visit is the family chapel on the first floor whose walls are adorned with the frescoes of Benozzo Gozzoli usually called 'The Procession of the Magi' executed in 1459. Restored in 1992 to celebrate the quincentenary of the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-92), the pictures dazzle today's visitor as they must have impressed contemporaries by their glorious colours, dynamic, perspectival composition and superbly detailed observation.

Cosimo de Medici (1389-1464) commissioned the building of the palace in 1444 from his 'in-house' architect Michelozzo in what was then the Via Larga. This town house, with its references to the architecture of antiquity, was one of several major pieces of patronage following the return of the Medici from political exile in 1434 and marking Cosimo's arrival as the effective ruler of the Florentine republic. These commissions which expressed visually the reality of his power and status included the rebuilding of his parish church of San Marco and the re-foundation of San Marco as a convent for the reformed Dominicans.

At San Marco, remodelled by Michelozzo, Cosimo employed its resident painter, Fra Angelico. One of Angelico's leading disciples and assistants was Benozzo Gozzoli (1420-97) who was sufficiently regarded by the Dominican painter to travel with him to Rome to help decorate the chapel of Pope Nicholas V in the vatican. Gozzoli copied and developed the rich colour schemes of his master and, like Angelico, employed classical innovations when it suited. Overall, though, he remained rather traditional in his approach to the new pictorial realism of fifteenth-century Florence and clung to that passion for decorative detail associated with the so-called International Gothic style,

Entering the newly restored chapel for the first time the visitor might think he was encountering tapestried, rather than painted, walls. This is not by chance, for the influence of Flemish art, also notable for its sense of colour and minutely accurate observation, not least in tapestry work, was powerful in Florence. Medici banking interests in northern Europe facilitated such artistic imports. Here though, Gozzoli paints in the manner of a wall-hanging while creating a unique work of art in fresco. The plan of the chapel decoration is clear. The central focus was, of course, the altar with its wooden panel painting by Filippo Lippi (c.1406-69) of the Virgin adoring the Christ child. The original is now in Berlin and a near contemporary copy takes its place. The whole chapel is naturally focused upon this painting.

On the walls of the small sanctuary, the domain of the heavenly host, angels add their ecstatic adoration. On the sanctuary walls which face out into the body of the small chapel, we enter the earthly realm and see the shepherds preparing for their own worship. From the nativity

stories there remain only the Magi to join the visitors. They wind their way around the three sides of the chapel. There is a huge procession rather than a pilgrimage or tough spiritual search. The Wise Men, or they might indeed double as kings, are accompanied by a very numerous entourage of men, women, children and animals. They are all richly dressed and caparisoned as if about to enter, not a small Palestinian village with a stable, but a huge welcoming city. As they journey they are not troubled by a star or a visit to Herod, but appear to enjoy the rich vegetation which punctuates their rocky road. There are hunting scenes a delight in agriculture and in the animal kingdom. There is not a speck of dust on the rich, highly coloured costumes and harnesses. Yet this aristocratic fantasy, for such it is, takes place in a naturalistic setting with exciting perspectival effects.

As we join the procession, reading it from the right hand wall nearest to the sanctuary and facing the entrance, we immediately join part of the Medici family and household leading the way. Prominent on his horse and with his pet leopard is Giuliano, Cosimo's younger grandson and son of Piero, Cosimo's eldest son, and as we shall discover, the key figure in understanding the cycle. Behind the young boy rides an old man, now rather squeezed into the corner by the staircase well, created in the eighteenth century. This is the old magus, or king, and is also the late Patriarch of Constantinople, one Simeon. He lies buried in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. On the rear wall of the chapel the mature king/magus dominates the scene. Superbly bearded and dressed, this is also a rendering of the Eastern Roman Emperor John VIII Paleologus.

The left hand wall as we face the sanctuary is the most crowded of all. Dominating it is the youngest of the magi here represented as Cosimo's grandson, Piero's eldest son, Lorenzo, later to be called 'the Magnificent'. In 1459 he was ten but is shown here as confidently adolescent. Behind him travel the bulk of the Medici family, their household and their political allies. On the white horse with the family motto, 'semper', on its harness is Piero, Cosimo's eldest son who commissioned Gozzoli. Is he accompanied by his legitimate brother, Giovanni, and his illegitimate one, Carlo, or is the old man just behind him Cosimo himself? Certainly in the picture are three Medici daughters, some of the family tutors, supposedly the Pulci brothers and Marsilio Ficino and two important political allies, Sigismondo Malatesta, Lord of Rimini and Galeazzo Maria Sforza, ruler of Milan. Gozzoli paints himself too in this crowd – the family painter in residence.

What was Piero de Medici's intention in commissioning this lavish spectacle? In one sense the answer is easy. Here, in a private chapel it would not have seemed too presumptuous to portray both family pride and family piety at one stroke, combining a secular enjoyment with a genuine religious belief, promoting for their own enjoyment, while at prayer, the rather droll notion that the Medici and the Magi are as one. It is a grand piece of family showing off. But showing off what? Just their wealth and status? Like most works of art and literature, when placed in context, the 'Procession of the Magi' becomes much more meaningful and therefore more enjoyable.

Piero, nicknamed 'the Gouty', has rather been ignored, sandwiched between his eminent father Cosimo and his glamorous son, Lorenzo. Yet for five years from 1464-69, in spite of chronic ill-health, he ruled the Medici clan and therefore, in effect, Florence. Dogged by faction fighting he yet showed a grasp of political realities and added practical skills of government and a marked magnanimity to his interests in culture and the arts. He it was who commissioned Gozzoli's 'Procession' while his ageing father lived mostly at the family villa at Careggi nursing pain and old age.

The fresco was not just a glorification of the Medici family as a whole but a tribute to Cosimo's

role in creating their prestige and power. Today we can still see in books, buildings, sculptures and paintings exemplars of Medici status but we can easily forget equally lavish but more ephemeral examples of it, notably processions and festivities. These were a major feature of Florentine public life. They were costly, colourful and power-asserting. The Medici paid for many of them. For instance, in 1459, the very year of the Chapel fresco, Pope Pius II was given a lavish processional entry into the city.

Gozzoli's fresco not only recalls such processions but may indeed be, in part, a tribute to Pius who was received at the palace during his visit. As significant was the purpose of that visit. The pope was on his way to Mantua, there to convene a council of the church which would promote a crusade against the Turks. This scheme resonated with events of the past, notably the recent past, when Florence and the Medici had been closely associated with the search for unity between the Eastern and Western churches and stemming the tide of Turkish advance against Christendom. When visitors to the Medici chapel viewed the 'Procession' they would immediately recall another one of twenty years before, the arrival of Pope Eugenius IV and his entourage with that of the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Paleologus at Florence. That procession too and the whole church council which followed it was paid for by Cosimo de Medici.

When Cosimo returned to Florence from exile in 1434, he arrived in the same year as Pope Eugenius IV who subsequently resided in the city. The pope was in flight from a Rome which had thrown him out and from the Papal States which were in a state of near anarchy under the control of numerous warlords. Eugenius' position looked bad. The Council of Basel was sitting against his will, supposedly reforming the church without him and re-stating the case that a church council was superior to the pope. Eugenius seemed to be without friends in the church and without a power base in Italy. But he was a persistent and tenacious man devoted as well to bringing about the end of schism which had for so long split the Eastern (Orthodox) Church from the Western (Catholic) one. In eastern Europe the Byzantine empire was on its last legs controlling only pockets of territory and the capital, Constantinople. The Emperor John desperately sought help from the princes of the West. They might be more inclined to give it if the schism between the churches was healed. He would come to Italy himself with the Patriarch of Constantinople, Simeon, and bring about, at an ecumenical church council, both church unity and a crusade.

Eugenius and the Council at Basel both sought to secure the Byzantine visitors and the prestige of hosting the meeting but the emperor decided upon Italy and a meeting presided over by the pope. No doubt he was influenced in this by the fact that all his travel and other expenses were paid for by the papacy, or to be more accurate by Venice and later by Florence at papal instigation. Money ran short after the Council met at Ferrara and there was plague. Cosimo de Medici offered Florence as a new venue. He offered to pay for it all and so the Council of Florence met in 1439 travelling across the Apennines from Ferrara. Gozzoli's 'Procession' is a romantic evocation of this great event glorifying Cosimo and his family not just as paymasters of the papacy but as patrons of Christian unity and promoters of the crusade. No wonder Piero was happy to recall this great event in the rise of the Medici and dedicate it to his father.

All that was still fresh in the mind during the later papal visit of 1459 and yet if the 'Procession's' meaning ended with reference to these ecclesiastical and political events alone we might find the painting's topicality rather stale. But there is more to the pictures yet. Of course it was natural to select the journey of the Magi to worship the Christ child as the theme of the cycle. It enabled Gozzoli to recall the real journey and procession of 1459, the personalities and the pomp. He could recapture as well the purpose of the Council, to re-unite

all Christendom in a common adoration and worship of Christ as well as the incidental but important point that the Medici had facilitated all of it.

For the family there was an additional appropriateness in the Magi theme. The Medici were prominent members of the most prestigious of the lay confraternities of Florence the 'Company of the Afagi'. This was a spiritual club of Florentine patrician families which promoted good works and a good time for its members. Epiphany, the occasion in the church's calendar associated with the Magi, was marked by processions and festivities. The Medici played a key role. When Michelozzo remodelled the convent of San Marco under Cosimo's patronage in the 1440s he designed a special friar's cell for him so that he might retire there from time to time for prayer and a taste of austerity. In that cell Fra Angelico frescoed the story of the Magi. San Marco was used to host the confraternity's celebrations.

When, in about 1477, a Medici client, Guaspare del Lama, commissioned Botticelli to paint an altar-piece for his funerary chapel in Santa Maria Novella, the work was again the Epiphany, with the Medici family headed by the late Cosimo as the old king, worshipping the Christ child. In short there was a family tradition established for associating the Medici with the Magi and hence, by implication, with a form of kingship. It was entirely appropriate both for the reality of their power and their piety.

But there remains another level of interest in the Chapel fresco. When Pius II passed through Florence in 1459 he met a galaxy of humanist scholars with whom he would have been in entire sympathy. Not only did Florentine humanists play an important role in the government of the Republic as chancellors, diplomats and administrators but they flooded the Medici household as tutors (the Pulci brothers and Ficino are shown in the fresco) and cultural advisors. Nor was this new in 1459, for the papacy also hired Florentine humanists and, following the residency of Eugenius IV in 1454, the whole papal court was suffused by Florentine scholarship as well as Medici money.

Though fascinated by classical antiquity and not averse to flirting with paganism at various levels, these scholars enjoyed nothing so much as pointing up links between pagan thinking and Christianity. There is surely an element of this in Gozzoli's 'Procession'. A man like Marsilio Ficino was a Platonist and thus interested in how worldly appearances and signs might betoken the nature of a true 'reality' beyond our sense world, namely God. The Magi have an interesting role here. They were, after all, pagan priests and astrologers, probably priests of the Persian dualist religion, Zoroastrianism. Yet they are present at a great Epiphany, a point in time where God, true 'reality', reveals himself to the world in the person of his Son. Even pagan priests spot the Platonic point, that the Incarnation is a worldly event of the senses which reveals the true nature of the godhead. It is THE Epiphany.

The story of the Magi is thus also a neo-Platonic revelation uniting pagan thought and religion with Christian truth. And there are the Magi and the participants of the Council of Florence of 1439 re-enacting all this. Gozzoli's work is truly rich not just in appearance but in its many-layered meanings.

Gozzoli has been described as a superficial painter. Certainly we gain an immediate surface enjoyment from his masterpiece in the Medici chapel. As the family and their supporters journey across the walls with the patriarch and the emperor we are dazzled by colour and sheer compositional skill. But the artist had a far from superficial task to perform, for he was reminding Florence's ruling family, as he still reminds us today, that the Medici, the rich wise men of their city, helped bring about the short-lived re-union of Christendom in the papal bull 'Laetantur coeli' on July 6th, 1439. In doing so they also emphasised the depth of their piety in

associating themselves with a full and fashionable view of the Epiphany.

9949

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