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The Medici, Verrocchio, and San Lorenzo

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THE MEDICI, VERROCHIO, AND SAN LORENZO

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in The School of Art

by

Evelyn Diane Pell
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Abstract

This thesis addresses the subject of two Medici family tombs designed by Andrea del Verrocchio for the church of San Lorenzo in Florence. One is the tomb of Cosimo de’ Medici and the other a dual tomb for his sons, Piero and Giovanni de’ Medici. In dealing with this subject, the paper discusses the Medici’s rise to power in Florence, Verrocchio’s career leading up to the tombs, and the important relationship between the Medici and San Lorenzo.

The family donated lavishly to the rebuilding of the church and received in return spiritual aid and extraordinary burial sites. Upon first looking at these tombs, they seem beautiful, but simple. They are a stark visual contrast to the ornate Medici tombs in the New Sacristy of San Lorenzo that were later designed by Michelangelo. The tomb of Cosimo is marked with a simple floor slab in the crossing of the church, and the tomb of his sons in the Old Sacristy, though decorated with intricate bronzework, seems to be a rather modest monument in some respects. It is the work of this thesis to disprove these first impressions. Upon closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that Verrocchio and his patrons chose sumptuous materials, unusual locations within the church, and inspiration from classical sources to create enduring monuments that serve the purpose of not only memorializing the men, but also aiding their souls in the afterlife.
Chapter I: The Medici and San Lorenzo

Just as the Medici of Florence worked very hard in the fifteenth century to make the church of San Lorenzo their personal shrine, Andrea del Verrocchio used his talent as a sculptor and goldsmith to commemorate the family through the tombs he designed and executed for them. Both the austere tomb for Cosimo and the ornate tomb for Piero and Giovanni express the nobility of the Medici. The tomb of Cosimo appears humble and straightforward in its design, but a closer examination belies its apparent modesty and simplicity. For the dual tomb of Piero and Giovanni, Verrocchio chose an untraditional design to create a luxurious and complex monument. In designing his tombs for the Medici he worked within local Florentine tradition in some important ways but departed from it, innovatively, in others. With his use of sumptuous materials, his exploitation of the highly unconventional locations chosen for the tombs, and his novel approach to classical sources, Verrocchio created enduring monuments for the Medici that guided their souls into heaven and their reputations into eternity.

In the early fifteenth century, an oligarchy headed by the Albizzi family dominated Florence. They made decisions in secret meetings, which the Signoria readily confirmed. Ordinary Florentines were not pleased with this system because only a few people held all the power. This discontent was encouraged by the Medici, a family from

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1 The Signoria was the ruling body of Florence. It consisted of eight priors, representing the four districts of the city, and a ninth member known as the gonfaloniere of justice who held power equal to the other eight men but was in a more prestigious position as the chairman.
the Mugello\(^2\) that had gained notoriety for speaking out against the regime and for being charitable with their fortune. They would come to be the most influential and distinguished family in Florence from the fifteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century. As political leaders and patrons, their power spanned from the government, to the arts, to the Church. They were merchants and bankers who made their money in international trade of wool, silk, spices, and metals. The man who really “cleared the ground and laid the foundations of the house of Medici” was Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici (Fig. 1).\(^3\) One of the richest bankers in Italy by 1400, he was responsible for establishing the family’s political and financial power. A supporter of the *popolo minuto*, he opposed the regime of Rinaldo degli Albizzi. When he died in 1429, Giovanni was the second richest man in Florence. He bequeathed his trading and banking business to his son Cosimo, an inheritance that helped Cosimo become the richest man in Florence and perhaps even in Europe.\(^4\) Although Giovanni had another son, Lorenzo, he left the bulk of his fortune—including banks, land in both Florence and the Mugello, and 180,000 florins—to his oldest son, because Giovanni himself had experienced the “initial setback of a divided inheritance.”\(^5\) Cosimo was forty years old at the time.

Along with money and political power, Giovanni left his sons with a love of being patrons of the arts. Giovanni was the first Medici to really endorse the arts. So far as we

\(^2\) The Mugello is a region located approximately twenty miles northeast of Florence.
\(^5\) Hale, 14.
know, he was the first person in Florence to have the walls of his home frescoed, and he sat as an adviser on the panel for the great competition of the Baptistery doors in 1401. In 1419 Giovanni took on a commission that would become one of the many architectural projects that memorialize his family in Florence. The church of San Lorenzo was being rebuilt, and Giovanni decided to finance a chapel and the Old Sacristy, which would be the site of his burial. His sons Cosimo and Lorenzo completed this project after his death.

![Abbreviated Medici Family Tree](image)

Figure 1. Abbreviated Medici Family Tree

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The life of Cosimo de’ Medici is known from countless contemporary sources and documents, but mainly from his biographer, Vespasiano da Bisticci. Vespasiano’s biography, as well as over thirty thousand personal Medici letters from Cosimo’s lifetime, present us with a wealth of source material, yet the man’s true inner workings still remain surprisingly elusive. 7 Born in 1389, Cosimo used his talents as a merchant and banker to increase the family fortune. He educated himself in the company of scholars and artists in the fifteenth century. This group of men studied humanist manuscripts and supported classicizing artists of their own day, such as Ghiberti, Donatello, and Brunelleschi. 8 During the time of Cosimo’s education as a young man, there was a change in European education. Latin grammar and rhetoric were no longer reserved for professionals such as lawyers and judges, but were taught to all educated men. Possessing knowledge of classical languages became useful to members of the political classes, including Cosimo. He studied Latin poetry 9 and was a member of an informal humanistic school for children of wealthy families. The leader of this circle, Roberto de’ Rossi, had an interest in Aristotelian philosophy that left a lasting impression on Cosimo. 10 Cosimo always chose the company of learned men. He became

8 Ibid., 23.
10 This is according to Vespasiano da Bisticci, Cosimo’s biographer, as noted by Hankins, 71.
a patron of humanists and also gave gifts to literary men without receiving compensation.\textsuperscript{11} In addition, he possessed perhaps the largest and most illustrious personal library in Florence in the early fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{12}

Like his father, Cosimo was an avid supporter of the people. This resistance toward the ruling party led to his banishment in 1433 by Rinaldo degli Albizzi.\textsuperscript{13} The Medici had decided to form their own political party to challenge the rule of the Albizzi family. Support from the Florentine public was split between the two families at re-election time in 1433, and neither side could take power from the other to dominate the Signoria. Rinaldo degli Albizzi wanted Bernardo Guadagni to be elected gonfaloniere of justice. This had not been possible because Guadagni was wanted for outstanding taxes. To get him the position and secure a majority support for the Albizzi, Rinaldo paid Guadagni’s debt. With the Albizzi maintaining control, Cosimo was sent to prison. Rinaldo wanted to sentence him to death “as a traitor who had planned to overthrow the legally constituted regime,” but instead he was sent into exile in Padua.\textsuperscript{14} It seemed as if Rinaldo would succeed in killing him politically and financially, if not physically, but Cosimo had many friends who sought his return. He was supposed to remain exiled from Florence for ten years but was recalled a year later by the Signoria. Cosimo’s beloved book and manuscript collection, which he had taken with him into exile, was then

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 72, 77.
\textsuperscript{12} Kent, \textit{Cosimo}, 33.
\textsuperscript{14} Hale, 22-23.
carefully packed and returned with him after his pardon. Upon Cosimo’s return, Rinaldo was exiled along with many members of his party.

Cosimo’s business had actually increased while he was in exile in Venice and Padua. As Cosimo himself said, “It would hardly be believed that, having been driven from my home, I should find so much honor.” He was treated like a hero when he returned home and dominated Florence as the unofficial ruler from 1434 until his death in 1464. It was after his return that Cosimo’s patronage flourished. Through his support, three churches (two of which included convents) were rebuilt and refurbished: the Dominican church and convent of San Marco in Florence, the Augustinian church and convent of the Badia in Fiesole, and the church of San Lorenzo in Florence. In addition to these commissions, he had several chapels and altars built in various churches and renovated Medici estates and palaces.

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The church of San Lorenzo was originally founded in 393 by St. Ambrose. After serving as the first cathedral of Florence for several years, it was replaced in the eleventh century. In 1419, with guidance from Filippo Brunelleschi and funds from wealthy Florentines, reconstruction started on the aging Romanesque church. The most influential of the patrons was the Medici family. The Medici patronized San Lorenzo, located

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15 Kent, Cosimo, 23.
17 Kent, Cosimo, 131.
behind their family palace, by donating money in order to have private chapels built for their family. Brunelleschi’s sacristy and a chapel for the new church were commissioned by Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici in 1419. These were finished in 1428 and stood alone while the rest of the church was being built. The rooms were to be burial chapels for the Medici family. When Giovanni di Bicci died, he was buried with his wife, Piccarda de’ Bueri, at the center of the Old Sacristy (Fig. 2).

The tomb, completed by Buggiano in 1433, rests under the table in the center of the Old Sacristy. The table had been consecrated and often held the clergy’s vestments, thereby increasing the sanctity of the tomb’s location. It was made of marble with a porphyry disk inlaid in the center, a motif to be seen again in the floor slab dedicated to Cosimo. The room that houses the tomb is decorated with roundels and bronze doors surmounted by lunettes, which were all designed by Donatello (Fig. 3). The images in the roundels and lunettes include Medici saints Cosmas, Damian, John the Evangelist, and Lawrence. To the sides of the tomb lie two floor markers that indicate tombs in the pier below. Giovanni’s younger son, Lorenzo, was eventually buried in one of them, and it is possible that Cosimo was meant to be buried in the other—until his decision to commission his grand floor slab and tomb in front of the high altar. An inscription on Giovanni’s tomb identifies Cosimo and Lorenzo as the donors, which is unusual for a

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Florentine funerary monument but was probably included to signify the filial piety of the sons’ completion of their father’s project.19

Figure 2. Buggiano, Tomb of Giovanni and Piccarda de’ Medici, Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence

To ensure the Medici’s place of importance in the church and to reserve a grand burial site for himself, Cosimo donated 40,000 florins to San Lorenzo in 1442. This grant restarted the stalled construction and secured for him a burial spot in front of the high altar. His patronage is significant, because, as Caroline Elam puts it, “no other private patron in fifteenth century Florence before or after Cosimo assumed responsibility for the construction of a large parish church.”20 Cosimo did far more for the church than donate money. In 1444 he made sure important relics of Saints Amato, Concordia, and Mark of Rome were retrieved from the old church and placed in the high altar of the new church. He also endowed San Lorenzo with a college consisting of twelve clerics and a master to

educate them. He funded feasts that were associated with the Medici, such as those honoring the family patron Saints Cosmas and Damian, martyred physicians to whom the new chapel was dedicated, and St. John the Evangelist, to whom the sacristy was dedicated.

Figure 3. Interior view of the Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence

These patron saints were very important to the Medici. Cosmas and Damian were first associated with the family by Giovanni di Bicci. His wife Piccarda gave birth to twin sons named Cosimo and Damiano in 1389, and when Damiano died in 1390, Cosimo

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20 Caroline Elam, “Cosimo de’ Medici and San Lorenzo,” in ibid., 158.
designated the two saints as his family’s protectors. Cosmas and Damian were more than personal symbols for the Medici; they fulfilled the purpose that all saints do for Catholics, serving as spiritual mediators or, in effect, representatives of the family in heaven.

The Medici donated lavishly to San Lorenzo, more so than any other family, making their name known there with expensive gifts, funding for daily memorial masses, and even a day reserved to commemorate the souls of the family and their friends. Generations of Medici are buried in San Lorenzo. In the fifteenth century Buggiano designed the tomb for Giovanni di Bicci in the Old Sacristy, and Verrocchio made the tombs of Cosimo and his sons. In the sixteenth century Michelangelo built the New Sacristy to complement Brunelleschi’s Old Sacristy and to house the tombs of Lorenzo and Giuliano. Finally, the huge Cappella dei Principi was added to the church in the seventeenth century and serves as the burial chamber of Grand Dukes Cosimo I, Ferdinand I, Francesco, Cosimo II, Ferdinand II, and Cosimo III. Thus the church of San Lorenzo is more than a place of worship, more than a masterpiece of Renaissance architecture, and more than the repository of famous works of art. It is also, to all intents and purposes, the Medici family pantheon.

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21 Kent, Cosimo, 11. Kent notes that some scholars doubt the existence of Damiano as well as Cosimo’s brother Antonio. The two are, in fact, excluded from De Roover’s genealogy of the Medici family. See ibid. and 393, n. 24.
22 Ibid., 12.
23 Butterfield, 34.
Chapter II: The Tomb of Cosimo de’ Medici

Andrea del Verrocchio, trained originally as a goldsmith, was a sculptor, painter, woodcarver, and draftsman. He was born Andrea di Michele Cioni in Florence in 1435, the fifth of eight children born to Michele, a brickmaker and later a customs official, and Gemma Cioni. Little is known about Andrea’s youth, with the exception of an event that happened in August of 1452. Then a seventeen-year old, he was fighting with another young man when Andrea struck his opponent’s head with a rock, causing him to die thirteen days later. Verrocchio was legally absolved of guilt from this incident in a document signed by both his family and the family of the deceased boy the next year.24

In his adult life, Verrocchio remained unmarried and worked to support the family of his sister, Margherita, for many years. Her children even stayed with their uncle from time to time. Verrocchio also provided for his brother’s family; he supported his nieces, Marietta and Agnoletta, and provided their dowry. 25

Verrocchio’s artistic career is equally vague in its documentation. Where he began his training is unclear, but it is speculated that his father may have taught him early in his life to work with clay and stone, since Michele was both a brickmaker and a member of the stoneworker’s guild. The goldsmith Giuliano da Verrocchio officially trained Andrea, who adopted his last name. He became a member of the goldsmiths’ guild, and after broadening his skills to include architecture, sculpture, and painting, he joined the

24 Ibid., 3.
sculptors’ guild in 1469 and the painters’ guild in 1472. Being trained in a goldsmith’s workshop, Verrocchio would probably have studied perspective, mosaic, enamel techniques, inlay, engraving, and different treatments of metals. According to Vasari, he also studied the sciences and focused on geometry. This education gave his work range and diversity, and he was respected as a well-rounded artist.

As well as being trained in many artistic fields, he was also highly literate. Like Cosimo de’ Medici, Verrocchio owned humanist texts and may have been able to read Latin. Many of his sculptures were executed as a response to classical art. The pose of his David (Fig. 4) is derived from a walking stance seen in Roman copies of various ancient Greek statues, and the Putto with Dolphin (Fig. 5) was inspired by well-known classical garden statues. Donatello was the only other Tuscan sculptor of the fifteenth century to respond to the ideal form of ancient art in such a steady and personal way.

Verrocchio’s David and Putto with Dolphin were both commissioned by the Medici. It is not clear when the David was commissioned or where it was meant to stand. However, it is thought to be from the estate of Piero de’ Medici, based on documentation of the sale of the sculpture from Piero’s sons, Lorenzo and Giuliano, to the Signoria of Florence in 1476. Whatever its original location, clearly the work was not

27 Passavant, 9.
29 Butterfield, 2.
sculpted for placement in a niche. It was meant, like the *Putto with Dolphin*, to be seen from many angles. The latter was commissioned for a fountain at the Medici villa in Careggi and dates to the end of the 1470s. Neither work has a specific viewpoint, and although the *Putto with Dolphin* is slightly more successful when viewed from all sides, there is a movement to both works that causes the viewer to circle around them, in order to discover the best viewing angle.  

![Figure 4. Verrocchio, *David*, Bargello, Florence](image)

In the second half of the fifteenth century, Verrocchio was the leading sculptor in Florence. Numerous well-reputed Renaissance artists apparently spent time in his studio, including Leonardo da Vinci, Ghirlandaio, Perugino, Signorelli, Lorenzo di Credi, and possibly Botticelli. Verrocchio came of age at a time when Ghiberti and Donatello were just finishing their careers, leaving a space for gifted sculptors in Florence. After the  

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30 Passavant, 15, 17.
death in 1466 of Donatello, who was the protégé of the Medici, Verrocchio stepped into his place and did a significant amount of work for the family. An inventory of 1496 drawn up by Verrocchio’s younger brother lists works commissioned by the Medici that range from parade armor to fountain sculpture to portraiture and tombs.

Figure 5. Verrocchio, *Putto with a Dolphin*, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

One such tomb was for Cosimo de’ Medici, who died on August 1, 1464. He was buried in the crypt of San Lorenzo in a tomb commissioned by his son Piero, who took over power after his father’s death. The tomb is located at the center of the church crossing with a floor marker above it placed directly in front of the high altar (Fig. 6).

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31 Ibid., 7.
Figure 6. Verrocchio, floor marker for the tomb of Cosimo de’ Medici. San Lorenzo, Florence

Cosimo’s monument is not what one would expect for the tomb of a fifteenth-century political leader. A person who held power was usually buried in a wall tomb with a sculpted effigy. This tomb has no effigy and, except for several large crosses, contains no religious symbols. Cosimo specified that he wanted a modest burial as well as a simple floor tomb, which was customary for a private citizen such as a merchant or notary, instead of a wall monument. He also requested that there be no more candles at his funeral than an ordinary citizen would have. At Florentine burials only two candles were usually lit, and they were extinguished as soon as the ceremony ended because providing

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33 Kent, Cosimo, 377.
light for the dead was thought to be useless. Cosimo’s request for a plain tomb agreed
with the social convention for burials of private citizens rather than rulers. Since he was
technically a simple merchant rather than a nobleman, and was not the legal ruler of
Florence, this type of burial was all he was entitled to.

The part of the tomb located in the crypt is made of dark gray stone (Fig. 7). On
the north and south sides is the same simple triple cross made of marble. The east side
has the Medici coat of arms, containing six spheres (palle), and the west side of the tomb,
which faces in the same direction that the high altar does on the main floor of the church,
displays a large inscription tablet commemorating his son Piero’s construction of the
monument. This directional positioning of the high altar is unusual for a Christian
church, for typically the altar is at the east end.

The vaulting above the tomb was once covered in fresco but is now in very bad
condition. It was painted to imitate porphyry, a stone also used in Cosimo’s floor slab
set into the pavement of the church proper. The vaulting above the tomb has four round
apertures in it. On the west side the faded fresco shows what was once a painted roundel
with a head in it. This could have been a portrait of Cosimo. The apertures are covered
by bronze grates, three of which are visible to a viewer standing above the crypt in the
crossing of the church. From this viewpoint, the steps leading to the high altar now cover

34 Two torches could also be used at funerals, but the total weight of their wax could not
exceed thirty pounds. Lucas-Dubreton, 122.
35 The inscription reads PETRVS MEDICES / PATRI / FACIVNDVM CVRAVIT.
36 Irving Lavin, Past-Present. Essays on Historicism in Art from Donatello to Picasso
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 5.
Figure 7. Verrocchio, crypt views of tomb of Cosimo de’ Medici. San Lorenzo, Florence

the fourth grate, but the remaining three connect the floor marker in the church with the tomb below it and suggest a flow and openness between the crypt and the rest of the church.37 As Irving Lavin notes, the grates also “recall the grille of the early confessio.”38

37 Butterfield, 35.
Thus the status of Cosimo’s tomb is elevated to that of a martyred saint, and a seemingly humble monument acquires important meaning rooted in the early history of the Church.

The placement of the tomb is honorable enough to compensate for the modest design. Its prestigious location in front of the high altar goes beyond the comparison to a martyr’s tomb and also exhibits Cosimo’s status in society (Fig. 8). It is a sign to the Florentine public of the unmatched support and funding that the Medici family gave to San Lorenzo. The church was the center of spiritual life, and Cosimo was buried in the most prestigious spot in the building. He banned all other families from having tombs or displaying their family crests in the church proper. They could be buried in the crypt, as Cosimo was, but could not have a tomb marker in the main level of the church, thus guaranteeing that the public would only see Medici tombs during services. Cosimo’s tomb would be in sight and hopefully in mind while the congregation celebrated mass and said prayers.  

To ensure this, Cosimo asked Brunelleschi to move the choir and apse behind the altar, giving the congregation a clear view of his tomb. He believed this spiritual focus around his grave would be beneficial for his soul, and it has been said that “the whole church seems to serve as Cosimo’s mausoleum.” The idea that Cosimo was focused on spiritual aid finds support in his biography by Vespasiano da Bisticci, who claims that Cosimo supported churches with his patronage in order to help heal his soul

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38 Lavin, 6. A confessio was a tomb of a martyred saint that was normally located under the altar. Relics of the martyr could sometimes be viewed through protective grating.
39 Butterfield, 39.
40 Lavin, 6.
41 Butterfield, 39.
of the sin of usury. Supposedly, he even kept a book called “God’s account,” which is no longer in existence, to keep the balance of what he felt he and his family should give to the church to absolve them of the great profits they reaped from lending money. As wealth was passed down from generation to generation in the Medici family, it was understood that a certain amount was to be spent on charity and patronage. In fact, all of Cosimo’s commissions were for the building and decoration of churches and chapels, except for the Medici family palace, which was his only major secular commission, and even the palace incorporates a chapel.

Figure 8. Interior view from altar. San Lorenzo, Florence

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Dale Kent suggests that the burial before the high altar can be seen as a humble move because the tomb is in a public place where mass is said for the benefit of the entire congregation.\textsuperscript{44} While Cosimo might have appreciated this interpretation, the presence of a tomb before the high altar in a church expresses prominence and honor, not humility. Anyone who approaches the monument surely concludes that the person buried there must have been a pious and noble man who was important to the history of Florence. His tomb is also distinguished by its size. As well as being the only Florentine tomb to be placed under a dome and before a high altar, it is the largest floor tomb in the city, measuring 3.5 meters on each side. The positioning in front of the altar, though unique in Florentine churches, can be found in other churches in Italy, notably in Rome; in St. Peter’s, the Lateran, and San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, a martyr’s tomb is visible either below or in front of the altar.\textsuperscript{45} By emulating this placement for his own tomb, Cosimo raised his status to the level of an early Christian martyr.

The materials used in the monument are also suggestive of Cosimo’s significant role in society. Porphyry, a very hard, purple-red stone, was costly and rare. It had traditionally been used only for elite commissions, such as those for imperial, religious, and later on political leaders. In antiquity it would only have been used for the sarcophagus of an emperor and his family. The use of porphyry for emperors began with the tomb of Augustus Caesar. The stone is also found in monuments dedicated to Christ

\textsuperscript{43} Kent, \textit{Cosimo}, 132.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 378.
\textsuperscript{45} Lavin, 5.
or Christian martyrs, such as St. Lawrence, who was the name-saint of several members of the Medici family as well as the titular saint San Lorenzo. The dark red color of the stone was symbolic of sacrificial blood.\textsuperscript{46} This is significant when noting the earlier analogy of the tomb with a confessio. The Medici used porphyry in three of their family tombs as well as in the chapel in their palace.\textsuperscript{47} In the fifteenth century, the stone was not only rare and expensive but was still held as sacred. Thus the noble tone of Cosimo’s tomb is achieved through the use of porphyry; it is also achieved by means of the pattern on the floor.

The disk pattern used in Cosimo’s tomb was often seen in early Christian churches, including St. Peter’s, on a site in the pavement where the Holy Roman Emperor’s coronation ceremony was held.\textsuperscript{48} The cruciform pattern inside the large circle, comprising two intersecting rectangles with curved ends, is also found in a groundplan for a church drawn by Leonardo, who was a pupil of Verrocchio (Fig. 9). It is evident in looking at this drawing that Leonardo had Cosimo’s tomb in mind while making the sketch. The design is also reminiscent of a so-called Solomon’s knot, which was a symbol for the cross often used in Early Christian mosaic pavements. One such mosaic is in the South Basilica at Aquileia, where the motif is repeated throughout the pavement.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} Butterfield, 43.
\textsuperscript{48} Lavin, 6-23, explores the elements that are suggested in the design for the floor tomb.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 17.
The design may also relate to ideas about Purgatory that are found in Dante’s *Commedia*. He writes that Jerusalem is in the center of the northern hemisphere, which is where the sun crosses the meridian at noon. Below this is Purgatory, in the southern hemisphere, making the two locations antipodes. When it was noon in Jerusalem, it was midnight in Purgatory. This suggests comparison with Cosimo’s tomb, located in the dark crypt below the floor marker containing the cross and circle. In Cosimo’s tomb there are four smaller circles around the cross, which may represent the four stars, or four Cardinal Virtues that, according to Dante’s cosmology, guarded the entrance to Purgatory from the South Pole.\(^5\) Perhaps this reference to Purgatory was a way for Cosimo to acknowledge his own sins, such as usury.\(^5\) As a Roman Catholic, he would have believed that his soul would be sent to Purgatory for purification and forgiveness of sins.

The design of Cosimo’s tomb slab is also reminiscent of medieval diagrams of cosmology, which also contain interlocking circles and ovals set inside one larger circle inscribed within a square.

This reference to cosmology can also be found in the tomb’s location. As well as being in front of the altar, Cosimo’s floor marker is located below the dome, which is a symbol of heaven. Placement directly below it was thus symbolic of his soul ascending

\(^5\) The Cardinal Virtues, when put together, make up righteousness. The so-called stars were only seen by Adam and Eve and are not visible from the Northern Hemisphere. See Marguerite Mills Chiarenza, *The Divine Comedy: Tracing God’s Art* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 59.

\(^5\) As McKillop notes, an intentional reference to Dante is possible because Cosimo was well read and owned two copies of the *Commedia*; Susan McKillop, “Dante and Lumen Christi,” in Ames-Lewis, *Cosimo*, 257.
into the afterlife with ease. The connection between the marker and a cosmological diagram is suggestive of Cosimo’s worldliness and greatness and probably relates to his belief in astrology, a belief held by most Florentines at the time. By the thirteenth century, Florence had a municipal astrologer, Guido Bonatto, whose job it was to read the stars and declare when the best time for great ventures, such as war, would be. Families even had personal astrologers to read horoscopes and advise the master of the house.\textsuperscript{52} The likeness of the slab to the map of the universe may also indicate a play on words, for the similarity between “Cosimo” and “cosmos” (\textit{cosmo}) is too close to overlook. The reference to astrology may or may not have been considered by Verrocchio, but the location of the tomb below a symbol of heaven was probably intentional.

Figure 9. Leonardo da Vinci, groundplan of a church

After his death, Cosimo de’ Medici came to be called Pater Patriae (“father of his country”), an ancient Roman title awarded to him posthumously by the Signoria of

\textsuperscript{52} Lucas-Dubreton, 43.
Florence in 1465. The inscription on his floor tomb reads, “Here lies Cosimo de’ Medici, by public decree father of his country. He lived seventy-five years, three months, and twenty days.” To be designated Pater Patriae was a very prestigious honor that suggests merciful authority, patriotism, and benevolence. The title was traditionally reserved for those who heroically defended the republic. In 1495, a year after Cosimo’s great-grandson Piero fled into exile, the Signoria decreed that the inscription should be removed. There is dispute among scholars over what became of this decision, but it is generally thought that the inscription was removed, then replaced, and then erased again after the second expulsion of the Medici in 1527. It is further presumed that after the return of the Medici to power in 1532, the tomb slab was repaired for the final time. The tablet today appears to be undamaged, but it is probably a good replacement of the original.

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54 Butterfield, 35.
Another work done for the Medici by Verrocchio was the tomb of Cosimo’s sons, Giovanni and Piero (Figs. 10 and 11). Giovanni died in 1463 and Piero in 1469. Although the exact date when the tomb was built or planned is unknown, it is assumed that completion was in 1472, the date inscribed on the sarcophagus. In this tomb Verrocchio took the use of porphyry even further than he had done in Cosimo’s tomb by constructing the sarcophagus out of the stone. He also mixed media, something almost unprecedented in Florentine sculpture, with his use of marble, porphyry, serpentine, and bronze. The red porphyry sarcophagus has green serpentine medallions on both faces, framed with bronze wreaths of laurel (Fig. 11). Bronze decoration covers the sides of the tomb, sprouting from the bronze lion’s claws on which it rests. The lid is white Carrara marble as well as the base, which is inlaid with a porphyry and serpentine design that resembles the slab tomb of Cosimo. Verrocchio’s use of multiple materials and colors sets this tomb apart from others of its time, and Verrocchio has always been admired for this bold step. Whereas most sculptors specialized in one medium, Verrocchio was skilled in both bronze and stone, enabling him to combine the two in a single work. The animated bronzework vegetation that swirls up the sides of the sarcophagus seems energetic and alive, contrasting sharply with the smooth, flat stone.

55 There are earlier tombs, such as those of Leonardo Bruni by Bernardo Rossellino (Fig. 17) and Carlo Marsuppini by Desiderio da Settignano (Fig. 16), that mix marble and porphyry. The tomb of Pope John XXIII in the Baptistery, by Donatello and
As with Cosimo’s tomb, location is very important. The Medici were concerned with exposing their souls to as many prayers as possible. The monument is placed

Michelozzo, employs marble and bronze. However, none of these approaches Verrocchio’s tomb of Piero and Giovanni in the richness and diversity of materials.
between the Old Sacristy and the Medici chapel of Cosmas and Damian (Fig. 12). This puts the bodies in spiritual contact with the prayers of the daily mass as well as the

Figure 11. Verrocchio, Tomb of Piero and Giovanni de’ Medici, view from the Old Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence

Medici’s own services within San Lorenzo, including anniversary masses for individuals, weekly rites for all deceased Medici, and a daily mass of their own. The location of the tomb in a dividing wall between two chapels is another feature that sets this tomb apart
from others of its time. It is not quite a freestanding tomb, yet, being set in an aperture, it can be seen from two sides, unlike a tomb placed in a niche.\footnote{Passavant, 11.} Though it is not a freestanding monument, it is still comparable to other sculptures by Verrocchio in that it was made with the intent of being viewed from different angles. Making sculptures with multiple viewpoints is a trait that is specific to his work, as we have noted in connection with the \textit{David} and the \textit{Putto with Dolphin}. None of Verrocchio’s contemporaries were very concerned with this, and Donatello was the only previous artist who had much interest in it.\footnote{Butterfield, 2.}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{sanlorenzo.png}
\caption{Groundplan of San Lorenzo}
\end{figure}

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Butterfield, 49.}
\item \footnote{Passavant, 11.}
\item \footnote{Butterfield, 2.}
\end{itemize}
The side of the tomb facing the chapel of Cosmas and Damian is the primary side (Fig. 10). In its tondo, the names of the deceased are inscribed, and the tondo on the other side gives their ages (Fig. 11). The inscription begins on the chapel side, and the Medici coat-of-arms is shown above the frame. Their coat-of-arms is a shield that usually bears between five and nine spheres (palle); in this case, there are six. Its origin is explained in a legend about the Medici. They were supposedly descended from a knight named Averardo. On his way through the Mugello, the mountainous region north of Florence where the Medici family originated, he killed a giant that was terrorizing a village. During the battle, his shield had been damaged in several places by the giant’s mace. Charlemagne, under whom the knight fought, rewarded Averardo by making a gold shield with red spheres his personal coat-of-arms. Despite this legend, it is more commonly believed that the balls represent pills, since the Medici were originally doctors or apothecaries—the word medici literally means “doctors”—or that they represent coins, since the Medici made their fortune in banking and trade.

Lorenzo and Giuliano, the sons of Piero, commissioned the tomb for Piero and Giovanni. It is possible that a humanist adviser helped them and Verrocchio decide on the

59 The tondo facing the chapel reads: PETRO / ET IOHANNI / DE / MEDICIS COSMI P.P.F. / H.M.H.N.S. That facing the sacristy reads: PET.VIX. / AN.LIII.M.V.D.XV. / IOHAN.AN.XLI.MIII. / D.XXXVIII. Around the base is the inscription LAVRENT.ET IVL.PETRI F. / POSVER. / PATRI PATRVOQVE / MCCCCLXXII.

60 Averardo was an early Medici family name. Cosimo’s grandfather was named Averardo, but was called Bicci. He had a grandchild (one of Cosimo’s cousins) who was also named Averardo.

location, materials, and iconography of the tomb. The brothers wanted the monument to memorialize their father and uncle forever, to inspire prayer, and to be “as honorific as we know how to make it.”\textsuperscript{62} Andrew Butterfield suggests that if there were indeed an adviser, it could have been Leonbattista Alberti, the famous artist and humanist who read Greek and Roman literature, studied ancient tombs, and was especially knowledgeable about classical style.\textsuperscript{63} Although Alberti is known to have influenced Lorenzo’s taste, there is no record of his involvement in the tomb. Its architecture, moreover, is not comparable to any of Alberti’s own architectural works, so his contribution, if any, would probably have been limited to general concepts.

Like the tomb of Cosimo, that of Piero and Giovanni lacks a clear use of Christian symbols. Instead, meaning can be found in its design and in the ornamentation all over the sarcophagus and in the marble frame. The tomb resembles a reliquary chest, a resemblance that may have been deliberate, given that Piero and Giovanni’s father sought out several of the relics in San Lorenzo. If so, the reliquary-like design signals Piero and Giovanni’s appreciation for Cosimo’s leadership in the important search for relics; and it is also appropriate because a sacristy is a room in a church used to store sacred vessels. In addition, the adjacent chapel of Cosmas and Damian was made a reliquary chapel in 1452.\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{62} Butterfield, 47, quoting Lorenzo’s diary: “il più degna che sappiamo.”
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{64} Kent, \textit{Cosimo}, 378.
The vegetation and lion’s feet used in this tomb (Fig. 13) are designs often found on reliquaries, but the lion (“king of the beasts”) is also a well-known emblem of sovereignty and had been used as a Florentine state symbol for two centuries. Lions can also represent resurrection, a notion deriving from the medieval folkloric belief that their cubs are born dead but are brought to life when their mother breathes on or roars at them. There is other ornamentation found in the extensive bronzework. Verrocchio’s skill as a goldsmith is evident in the detailed fruits, berries, and leaves that make up his intricate design. The pyramidal diamond, usually set in a ring, is a Medici emblem used more than fifty times on the tomb. It is first seen in a Petrarch manuscript that was copied for Piero di Cosimo de’ Medici in the 1440s. The rings, which have been used by all members of the family since the middle of the fifteenth century to symbolize eternity (“diamonds are forever”), are repeated throughout the frame and are usually tied to palm fronds and olive branches. This probably symbolizes the Palm Sunday tradition of handing out palm and olive branches to the faithful, which at San Lorenzo were donated by the Medici. The symbol of the ring cannot be associated with one particular member of the family, as some historians have claimed, because several of them used

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65 This subject was painted by Giotto di Bondone in the Arena Chapel in Padua after 1305, appearing in a quatrefoil to the left of the Noli Me Tangere scene. Closer to Verrocchio’s own time, the legend is recorded in one of Leonardo da Vinci’s notebooks; see The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, Arranged, Rendered into English and Introduced by Edward MacCurdy (Old Saybrook, CT: Konecky and Konecky, n.d.), 1084.

variations on the device, ranging from Cosimo’s pattern of three linked rings to Lorenzo di
Giovanni’s rings with the motto SEMPER.\textsuperscript{67}

\hspace{1cm}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure13.png}
\caption{Verrocchio, details of the tomb of Piero and Giovanni de’ Medici, San
Lorenzo, Florence}
\end{figure}

\hspace{1cm}

Some of the designs are general allusions to classical ideas rather than specific
Medici emblems. Verrocchio was very fond of classical style and thought, and probably
would try to incorporate classical elements more or less for their own sake. The leaves of
the acanthus plant, a Mediterranean herb, are often used in classical and Renaissance art.

\hspace{1cm}

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 126.
Here, however, the plant could well symbolize death and regeneration, as it also did in antiquity. The transformation of the leaves into a cornucopia spilling seeds and fruit (Fig. 14) relates to a Roman motif called “vines of paradise.” This can either represent resurrection or the return of the Golden Age, which was believed to be a time when a divinely appointed ruler would bring about harmony on Earth. In Virgilian literature, it is the age of a particular ruler. According to E. H. Gombrich, “it is the divine child of the Fourth Eclogue who will bring the Empire of peace and magic prosperity.”

Some Florentine poets of the 1450s regarded the rule of the Medici as a Golden Age, and three centuries later Voltaire lists three ages preceding that of Louis XIV as worthy of special attention: the ages of Alexander the Great, Augustus, and the Medici. As Gombrich notes, the Medici “did what the kings of Europe ought to have done, and gathered in Florence the scholars whom the Turks had driven from Greece.”

In a famous jousting tournament of 1469 (for which Verrocchio made Lorenzo’s banner), Lorenzo the Magnificent adapted the motto “Le tems revient,” apparently a reference to the “return” of the Golden Age. The turtles that support the base of the tomb may represent longevity; or perhaps they allude to the motto Festina Lente—“make haste slowly.” This was the motto of Augustus, which was adopted by Piero.

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69 Ibid., 30.
70 Butterfield, 53.
71 Ibid., 54.
When designing the tomb, Verrocchio was attentive to elements of design that already existed in the chapel. The repetition of arches and roundels in the architecture of the Old Sacristy is echoed in the structure of the tomb. The semicircular arch of the marble frame around the tomb relates to the windows of the Old Sacristy and to the arches surmounting Donatello’s overdoor reliefs; they all have an arch with an interior rim that recedes further than the outer rim. The arch around the tomb has the same design as the arch around Donatello’s reliefs, in which classical-style vases are shown on each side, containing plants that rise from them and continue upward to fill the entire arch. Bronze netting fills the space above the tomb, creating a pattern that is comparable to the grilles of the windows. Even the wreath on the tomb relates to other elements of the room, as it appears in the stained glass windows. Thus, by accommodating the tomb to its
surroundings, Verrocchio proved that he was sensitive to the work of Brunelleschi and Donatello, the “founding fathers” of Renaissance architecture and sculpture.

Notwithstanding Verrocchio’s originality, his tomb for Piero and Giovanni was also influenced by its immediate predecessors—in particular, by Antonio Rossellino’s tomb of the Cardinal of Portugal in San Miniato, which dates to 1460-66 (Fig. 15). Rossellino’s tomb, like Verrocchio’s, is situated within an arch and rests on legs that terminate in animal claws. The platform on which the sarcophagus stands has a polychromatic design similar to the one beneath Piero and Giovanni’s tomb and to Cosimo’s floor slab. The inlaid latticework design on the wall behind the Cardinal of Portugal’s tomb is also similar to the bronze netting in Verrocchio’s work, which fills up an analogous space.

Figure 15. Bernardo Rossellino, Tomb of the Cardinal of Portugal, Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal, San Miniato, Florence
The shape and design of both Verrocchio’s and Rossellino’s sarcophagi are very similar to the sarcophagus of Desiderio da Settignano’s tomb for Carlo Marsuppini in Santa Croce, which dates to 1453 (Fig. 16). All three have the same bathtub shape, a reference to antique models, and rest on lion’s claws from which sprout leaves that crawl up the sides of the tomb. Furthermore, they are set under an arch with similar floral and vegetal motifs. These similarities are also found in Bernardo Rossellino’s tomb of Leonardo Bruni in Santa Croce (Fig. 17), which served as the direct model for Desiderio’s Marsuppini tomb. Bruni was one of the principal Florentine humanists of the early fifteenth century. Like Cosimo de’ Medici, Bruni asked to be buried in an unpretentious tomb consisting of a floor slab with his name inscribed. His wishes were not respected,
however, and he is buried in a tomb that has similarities to Piero and Giovanni’s but in some respects is more extravagant, most notably in including a life-sized, recumbent effigy of the deceased.  

Figure 17. Bernardo Rossellino, Tomb of Leonardo Bruni. Santa Croce, Florence

Bruni’s tomb, like the dual tomb in San Lorenzo, is contained within a niche and rests below an arch. The vegetal designs on both works are similar, and both sarcophagi are supported by lion’s claws. The Christian concept of resurrection is present in both monuments. As noted above, the Medici tomb uses images of the cornucopia and the acanthus to represent regeneration. This might refer to the idea of resurrection into

72 Anne Markham Schulz, *The Sculpture of Bernardo Rossellino and his Workshop*
heaven, or to the humanistic belief in immortality through eternal fame. The latter is likely what is found in the Bruni tomb, where a laurel wreath on the head of the effigy denotes the man’s immortal fame. In all probability, the handsome laurel wreaths surrounding the inscriptions on the tomb of Piero and Giovanni have the same significance.

Finally, and surprisingly, an example of Gothic influence on the tomb of Piero and Giovanni may be noted—or perhaps it is preferable to think in terms of a local tradition rather than a specific case of artistic influence. In any event, precedents for Verrocchio’s double-sided tomb surmounted by a bronze grille are found in two prominent tombs in Santa Croce, the same church that houses the monuments of Leonardo Bruni and Carlo Marsuppini: one in the Baroncelli Chapel and one in the Bardi Chapel (Fig. 18).

Located at either side of the transept, these chapels feature large fourteenth-century tombs, set into wall-embrasures, that are visible from both the transept and the respective chapels. Stylistically, of course, the Gothic Baroncelli and Bardi tombs are unrelated to Verrocchio’s full-fledged classicizing monument. But similarities in overall arrangement, including the open grillework, are nonetheless suggestive.

Notwithstanding these similarities, Verrocchio’s bronze grille is strikingly different in form from the Santa Croce grilles. Its netlike pattern of twisted rope is unprecedented and has never been adequately explained. Perhaps the key to its meaning

73 Ibid., 34-35.
74 Passavant, 12.
lies in its function as a sort of transparent barrier between the rather dark space of the
chapel of Cosmas and Damian and the light-filled space of the Old Sacristy. Thus the
grille—which is somewhat reminiscent of the grille of a confessional—can be viewed as
serving a dual purpose. On the one hand, it is a barrier between the earthbound world and
the world beyond. On the other hand, it is a passageway between those realms. The light
that streams through the grille from the sacristy to the chapel can thus be seen as a
metaphor for the transition one makes after death, a passage from darkness to light.
Intended or not, it is hard to imagine a better underlying theme for the tomb of a devout
Christian. By virtue of the location of their bodies in San Lorenzo, Piero and Giovanni
de’ Medici are situated at the threshold between the world as they knew it and the heavenly kingdom in which they hoped to reside for eternity.

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Before he died, Giovanni de’ Bicci left this advice to his children, summing up his recipe for a successful life in the public sphere:

Never hold an opinion contrary to the will of the people, even if this same people should prefer something that is perfectly useless. Do not speak with the air of giving counsel, but prefer rather to discuss matters gently and benevolently. Do not seek public office . . . but wait until you are urged to take office. Try to maintain the people in a state of peace and to promote trade. Be as inconspicuous as possible.75

These words of wisdom exhibit the true politician in Giovanni, and Cosimo, following his advice, always tried to govern without appearing to do so. His thirty-year “reign” in Florence was indeed successful, so much so that upon his death in 1464 power passed without incident to Cosimo’s son, Piero, who continued to rule behind the scenes with support from his brother Giovanni.

For two generations (and beyond), the Medici maintained their dominant position in the city, partly because Cosimo, Piero, and Giovanni were intelligent enough to make Giovanni di Bicci’s credo their own. They were also shrewd enough to realize that posterity would remember them as much for the works of art they commissioned as for their political acumen. The influence of these men over the society in which they lived is
as evident today as it was to Florentines in the fifteenth century. Their major legacy may be found in the church of San Lorenzo, which they financed from the start and filled with objects that we choose to call works of art. Outstanding among those works are the Medici tombs, and outstanding among the latter are the two by Andrea del Verrocchio that have been the subject of this essay. While the tombs of Cosimo and of Piero and Giovanni have obvious points in common with other Florentine funerary monuments of the period, they deviated from the norm in many innovative ways. No doubt they were collaborative efforts and represent the intersection of artistic genius and enlightened patronage. In designing the Medici tombs, Verrocchio availed himself of exceptional materials, paid loving attention to detail, incorporated significant humanist themes, and took advantage of unusual locations in San Lorenzo to promote the interests of his patrons. His tombs are unquestionably glorifications of Medici wealth and power, but they are also expressions of humility and piety, virtues intended to gain favor for their occupants in the eyes of God.

75 Lucas-Dubreton, 52.
Bibliography


Evelyn Diane Pell was raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She attended Louisiana State University where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with a concentration in art history. She later moved to New York City to begin working toward a master’s degree in art history at Hunter College. While in New York, Evelyn completed her first year of graduate school and worked part time at The Frick Collection. She then decided to move back to Louisiana to complete her degree with a concentration in Renaissance art at Louisiana State University. Since returning to her home state, Evelyn has worked at both the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. Upon graduation, she plans to reside in New Orleans and continue working in a local museum.