

**Eckart Marchand and Alison Wright, eds, *With and Without the Medici. Studies in Tuscan Art and Patronage 1434–1530*. Aldershot and Brookfield, Ashgate, 1998, 187 pp., 52 black-and-white illus., \$84.95 (U.S.) cloth**

**Corinne Mandel**

Volume 28, 2001–2003

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069792ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069792ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer ce compte rendu

Mandel, C. (2001). Compte rendu de [Eckart Marchand and Alison Wright, eds, *With and Without the Medici. Studies in Tuscan Art and Patronage 1434–1530*. Aldershot and Brookfield, Ashgate, 1998, 187 pp., 52 black-and-white illus., \$84.95 (U.S.) cloth]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 28, 89–92. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069792ar>

- loro quella grazia e perfezione che dà l'arte fuori dell'ordine della natura, la quale fa ordinariamente alcune parti che non son belle".
- 9 Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, VI, 69 (Life of Michelangelo): "Basta che si vede che l'intenzione di questo uomo singulare non ha voluto entrare in dipignere altro che la perfetta e proporzionatissima composizione del corpo umano et in diversissime attitudini; non solo questo, ma insieme gli affetti delle passioni e contentezze dell'animo, bastandogli soddisfare in quella parte – nel che è stato superiore a tutti i suoi artefici – e mostrare la via della gran maniera e degli ignudi ..."
- 10 Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, VI, 69 (Life of Michelangelo): "attendendo a questo fin solo, ha lassato da parte le vaghezze de' colori, i capricci e le nuove fantasie di certe minuzie e delicatezze, che da molti altri pittori non sono interamente, e forse non senza qualche ragione, state neglette".
- 11 Sohm believes that Michelangelo thought his art to be natural, not artificial, on the basis of a statement by Cosimo Bartoli, in the *Ragionamenti accademici di Cosimo Bartoli gentil'huomo et Accademico Fiorentino sopra alcuni luoghi difficili di Dante, con alcune inventioni et significanti* (Venice, 1567), about what Michelangelo thought constituted "good art", Sohm admits in note 99, p. 264, that "Michelangelo did not identify his own art as that which is 'good,' but this may be assumed". One needs to exercise additional caution in assuming that Bartoli was accurately recording Michelangelo's opinion. The assertion that Vasari did not recognize style in Michelangelo's art is unsubstantiated, and questionable.
- 12 Rubin, *Giorgio Vasari*, 357–401; David Franklin, *Painting in Renaissance Florence 1500–1550* (New Haven and London, 2001), 229–49.
- 13 For example, Vasari-BB, *Le Vite*, IV, 206 (Life of Raphael): Raphael "si diede non ad imitare la maniera di [Michelangelo], per non perdervi vanamente il tempo, ma a farsi un ottimo universale ... E se così avessero fatto molti artefici dell'età nostra, che per aver voluto seguitare lo studio solamente delle cose di Michelagnolo non hanno imitato lui né potuto aggiugnere a tanta perfezione, eglino non arebbono faticato invano né fatto una maniera molto dura, tutta piena di difficoltà, senza vaghezza, senza colorito e povera d'invenzione".

Eckart Marchand and Alison Wright, eds, *With and Without the Medici. Studies in Tuscan Art and Patronage 1434–1530*. Aldershot and Brookfield, Ashgate, 1998, 187 pp., 52 black-and-white illus., \$84.95 (U.S.) cloth.

To anyone versed in the art of the Italian Renaissance, such names as Sassetti, Strozzi and Tornabuoni bring to mind fresco cycles and altarpieces painted by some of the most famous Tuscan artists, not to mention sculpted marbles, if not also bronzes, palatial residences and country estates. They also evoke one name in particular: de' Medici. The book under review recognizes the obvious, that the politically astute and uncommonly wealthy de' Medici family was an extremely important patron of the arts in fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Florence, so much so that its illustrious members influenced the manner in which their business associates commissioned works of art. Certainly, Lorenzo il Magnifico's conversation with Filippo Strozzi depreciating the puny residence the latter was supposedly envisioning in Florence is so well known as to require no further commentary.<sup>1</sup> Given the obvious, the editors of this book pose a couple of provocative and interrelated questions on page 1: first, to what extent was the Medici family an arbiter of taste in Florence and Tuscany during the period from *circa* 1434 through *circa* 1530 (acknowledging the lacunae marking the periods of the Florentine Republic), and secondly, to what extent was it possible for Florence's moneyed elite to adopt, embrace and, more to the point, publicly manifest an anti- or simply "non-Medicean stance"?

Initially, the contributors presented their avowedly provi-

sional findings at what the editors describe on page 2 as an "informal Study Day at the Warburg Institute in May 1996". With the exception of Amanda Lillie of the University of York, all contributors to this volume were living and working in London, England, when the "Study Day" occurred: Kate Lowe at the University of London; Eckart Marchand at City University; Michelle O'Malley at the Royal Academy of Art; Ruth Rubinstein at the Warburg Institute; and Alison Wright at University College. Hence, this book reflects the rather felicitous circumstances that enable a respectable number of art historians living in proximity to one another to carry out research on Renaissance Tuscany, with special emphasis on issues of patronage that necessarily involve the Medici family. Furthermore, it is entirely fitting that this book concerns art and Medici patronage, given that Sir Ernst Gombrich lived and worked in London when his important article of 1960, "The early Medici as patrons of art: a survey of primary sources," appeared.<sup>2</sup>

At the risk of fixating on scholarly geography, as an inhabitant of the "other" London – or of what I like to term the great simulacrum – I can safely state that the interests of colleagues concerned with Renaissance art working nearby, both in Canada and in the United States, would not preclude a book of this nature. Of course, the specifics would differ, for scholars in North America are not necessarily delving as deeply as our counterparts in the British Isles into documentary evidence regarding villas, nunneries and collections – the essential subject matter of the book under review – but the basic lines would not be so different. My point is that the interests of this group of

scholars working in Great Britain are reflected on this side of the Atlantic, and elsewhere for that matter. As such, it is significant that the editors and Ashgate Press chose to commemorate the “Study Day” by publishing a book rather than, say, opting to leave participants to go the course of having papers vetted for publication in scholarly journals (although a revised version of Rubinstein’s paper was published in *Musica e Storia* in 1998), or to invite additional scholars to contribute to the volume, in the manner of the wonderfully erudite and informative collection of studies on Cosimo il Vecchio edited by Francis Ames-Lewis some years ago.<sup>3</sup> The book under review ought to exemplify the very best current scholarship – transcending all national barriers – on the subject of art and Medici patronage.

Aside from the introduction penned by the co-editors, the book begins and ends with chapters detailing the results of painstaking archival research. In both cases, this research was carried out in the course of working toward doctorates in the history of art. Lillie discusses four kinds of chapels in, or in proximity to villas, positing along the way that the Sassetti may well have influenced the Medici, an unusual and very plausible suggestion. She also determines that the chapel attached to a villa had as much to do with religion as the rest of the so-called secular country house. This conclusion makes good sense considering that, with very few exceptions, Renaissance Tuscans were God-fearing, religious people. To be sure, her conclusion has important ramifications for our interpretation of the outwardly secular works of art created for villas.

O’Malley treats artists’ contracts in which the stipulation “sua mano” came to refer more and more to the actual “painter’s hand”, as opposed to the hand of an apprentice in the *bottega*. She concludes that the more famous the artist, and the artist’s clients, the more important it became for patrons to stipulate in contracts that the artist would actually paint this or that – or all – of any given work of art. With the exception of Pinturicchio, each artist considered by O’Malley worked on projects commissioned by the Medici at one time or another. She posits that de’ Medici patronage influenced an artist’s ability to charge a decent sum for a work of art, but points out on page 157 that “the direct consequences of such support on a painter’s reputation and [degree to which the painter was in] demand ... remain open to question”. As John Paoletti earlier recognized, Pope Pius II’s description of Cosimo il Vecchio as “king in all but name and state” certainly suggests that a painter, sculptor or architect in his employ became tantamount to a court artist.<sup>4</sup>

Of the remaining four chapters, two are concerned primarily with identifying historical personages within works of art, mostly patrons with friends and/or relatives and/or colleagues, and the other two, with the meaning of works of art. Lowe provides a survey of some of the better-known commissions and

gifts for nunneries, and draws attention to the fact that, while the Medici did not actually found a female convent, nuns and their agents had no qualms about trying to bring members of the family on financial board. Nor did nuns focus their attention solely on the *ipso facto* rulers of Florence: the presence of the papal and Condulmer coats-of-arms in Paolo Schiavo’s 1448 *Crucified Christ adored by Benedictine Nuns* in Sant’Apollonia, Florence, reinforces Lowe’s recognition that nuns were intelligent beings, well able to determine not only how best to tap into the close ties between Cosimo il Vecchio and Pope Eugenius IV, but also how to choose appropriate subject matter for the paintings adorning their convents.

On pages 140 and 143, one finds mention of such historical figures as Attilio di Vieri de’ Medici and Piera di Bivigliano de’ Medici without recourse to the Medici family tree. Unfortunately, neither Attilio nor Vieri much less Bivigliano immediately spring to mind as members of either the main or cadet branch of the family. It would have been extremely useful had Lowe explained from whence these personages issued, particularly given the book’s emphasis on the Medici family. Then there is the notion, conveyed on pages 145–47, that works of art commissioned 1) in the early 1490s, 2) in the late 1490s – or, it turns out, more likely between 1472 and 1480 – and 3) in 1515, “postdating the Medici restoration of 1512”, “all date from after the golden age of the Medici”. Since the editors (and title) of the book provide(s) the parameters 1434–1530, one might imagine – since one is not told in certain terms – that “the golden age of the Medici” refers to those periods in which Cosimo il Vecchio, Piero il Gottoso and Lorenzo il Magnifico held sway in Florence, as opposed to the republicanism of 1494–1512 and 1527–1530, or even the authority of the Medici Dukes Giuliano and Lorenzo, and Popes Leo X and Clement VII. But how could works of art commissioned in the early 1490s possibly date “from after the golden age of the Medici” (recalling that those supposedly commissioned in the late 1490s turned out, on balance of probability, to have been commissioned some twenty years prior)? Must we assume either a post-1494 date to coincide with the expulsion of the Medici or, to more properly constitute “early”, a post-1492 date to coincide with Lorenzo’s death and his son Piero’s ersatz rule? If datable to *circa* 1492 or earlier, then each of the three would be contemporaneous with Medici rule, if not also the “golden age of the Medici”.

Curious, too, is the unexplained dearth of imagery in a chapter outlining the systems of patronage of no fewer than twelve nunneries, necessarily including mention and sometimes brief analyses of specific works of art. Lowe’s chapter contains a mere four illustrations, one of which is a detail, whereas another chapter, in which Wright addresses a single fresco cycle, con-

tains a dozen invaluable images. For reasons that are not clear, the reader of Lowe's chapter is treated to a detail of four nuns in Schiavo's *Crucified Christ*, but left to fend for him- or herself regarding the sophisticated treatment of figures in a painting of circa 1460–70 attributed to Francesco Botticini of *Santa Monica as Foundress of Her Order*, currently in Santo Spirito, Florence. Lowe correctly states that seven nuns flank the saint on each side, but evidently expects the reader/viewer to know that the artist painted only the tops of the heads of two of these nuns, overshadowing their bodies by their sisters situated closer to the picture plane: it is patently impossible to see the top of the nun's head to Santa Monica's right (our left) in Figure 6.3 on page 140. Surely a detail of this painting would have been more useful than the detail of Schiavo's comparatively pedestrian treatment of nuns. And what of the identities of the two obscured nuns? Did they not provide appropriate funds to warrant their portraits? Did they exist at all?

Marchand's chapter addresses "bystander figures", namely depictions of contemporaneous individuals in works of art. It is most curious to read on pages 113–14 that the detail of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Exequies of Santa Fina* of circa 1475 (Figure 5.5 on page 115) contains "a figure ... presented in / profile". In fact, there is not a single profile to be found in Figure 5.5: all personages are depicted in three-quarter view. In any case, Marchand points out that artists had included bystanders in paintings since the late trecento, and that by the late quattrocento such figures no longer constituted portraits of individuals parading as historical figures. Now they were undisguised portraits of contemporaneous figures. Drawing on the research of Deborah Krohn and Diane Cole Ahl, he provides discussions of Ghirlandaio's and Benozzo Gozzoli's work for the Commune of San Gimignano, and offsets these with a consideration of Ghirlandaio's even better-known work for the Sassetti and Tornabuoni families in Florence, including the portrait of Lorenzo il Magnifico in the 1482–85 *Confirmation of the Rule of Saint Francis*. Are the bystander portraits of the early quattrocento, of the *Adoration of the Magi* predella panel of Masaccio's 1426 Pisa Polyptych, for example, all that far removed from their late-quattrocento counterparts? Must we focus solely on fresco painting, or may we consider other media so as to test our hypotheses?

Is it appropriate to distinguish between clearly contemporaneous figures garbed in typical fifteenth-century clothing and attending the Madonna and Christ child at Epiphany, and clearly contemporaneous figures garbed in typical fifteenth-century clothing and standing within the Holy of Holies as Zacharias attends to the incense and the Archangel Gabriel tells him that Elizabeth will give birth to a son? Surely the contemporaneous personages in Masaccio's panel painting stick out

every bit as much as those in Ghirlandaio's 1485–90 Tornabuoni Chapel *Annunciation to Zacharias*. Why should "the viewer ... ignore them [Ghirlandaio's "bystanders"] in order to be able to contemplate the religious event", following Marchand on page 123, but not follow suit for Masaccio's? Does the "bystander figure" change over the course of the century, or does this matter rather concern the type of religious narrative chosen for depiction?

The chapters by Wright and Rubinstein are most thoughtful, thought-provoking and stimulating. Although treating the meaning of vastly different works of art, both discuss Bacchic iconography in various ways. Wright tackles the thorny issue of the nudes in Antonio del Pollaiuolo's recently restored, but sadly mutilated Villa la Gallina fresco cycle, which she dates to the early 1470s. Regarding the vegetation symbolism and the dance itself, Wright concurs with previous scholars in identifying the figures as followers of Bacchus. She also provides a compelling example of source material for Pollaiuolo, on both stylistic and iconographical grounds: an antique cameo of a dancing satyr currently in Naples, but formerly in Lorenzo il Magnifico's collection. Further, Wright points out that Lorenzo knew both Pollaiuolo's Lanfredini patron(s) and the artist himself. To make sense of the subject matter's contemporaneous relevance, the author looks to Northern European prints of exotic dance, such as those in the Medici collection, and suggests on page 66 that Pollaiuolo may well have depicted nudes as a way of "transfer[ing] ... the *moresca* dance to a fantasy world *all'antica*". While a more personal, shall we say Lanfredinian meaning remains elusive, Wright enables us to look at these dancing figures in a new and ultimately very satisfying context.

Whereas Wright focuses on the Bacchic dance, Rubinstein addresses Bacchic *vis-à-vis* Apollonian music in three antique works of art. Each was owned by Lorenzo il Magnifico and features Marsyas: a cornelian intaglio of Apollo, Marsyas and Olympos, and two statues of Marsyas, one of white marble, formerly in his grandfather Cosimo's collection, and one of red, newly acquired and restored by Andrea del Verrocchio. Drawing on the well-known play on words Lorenzo/*lauro* (or laurel), Rubenstein persuasively argues that Lorenzo il Magnifico saw himself as the Apollonian arbiter of taste, culture and cosmic harmony, and player of the lyre (for laurel is one of Apollo's attributes), as opposed to the *aulos*-playing Marsyas, the frenzied and finally flayed follower of Bacchus. Whereas he could have related directly to the sculpted figure of Apollo on the ancient gem, Lorenzo would have understood the garden sculptures of Marsyas in a rather different manner: on page 92 Rubinstein makes the fascinating suggestion that Lorenzo may well have understood the white marble Marsyas, tied to a tree and awaiting his punishment, as an allegory of hubris, and the

red, already flayed one, as a symbol of spiritual release. But did viewing himself as another Apollo preclude a complementary vision as another Marsyas? It seems to me that the evidence of Luca Signorelli's *Realm of Pan* of circa 1490 suggests that Lorenzo donned two diametrically opposed hats. After all, the enthroned Pan-cum-Lorenzo, the god of all, is as much a satyr as Marsyas. What is more, scholars have long noticed that Signorelli depicted this mythological protagonist and his companions in the manner of a *sacra conversazione*, as though to confirm that the outwardly secular subject contains Christian nuances.<sup>5</sup> As Lillie argued for a closer examination of the inherently religious nature of the so-called secular villa, so the Bacchic symbolism treated by both Wright and Rubinstein likely yields a fundamentally Christian meaning.

At a cost of over \$100.00 Canadian, scholars may wish to think twice before purchasing this book for their private libraries. Still, it will be valuable to consult, and we may look forward to Wright's book on the Pollaiuolo brothers, forthcoming from Yale University Press, and to the publication of the theses of both Lillie and O'Malley.

CORINNE MANDEL  
University of Western Ontario

Janice Helland, *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000, 212 pp, 40 black-and-white illus.

As a reader familiar with many texts on women artists in the "western tradition", I always approach a new title with some apprehension, along with more pleasurable anticipation. Many books purporting to discuss women's art history are little more than picture books or general appreciations. Compared with the plethora of populist visual albums, the number of publications that actually seek to redress a relative imbalance of serious analytic art historical studies between men and women is still small. Those that deal with the complicated issues around the historical reputation of women artists and the shape of curatorial and historical memory are fewer still. Asking such questions casts uncomfortable light upon the clichés and stereotypes of cultural and curatorial politics, creating an awkward position in which few publishers or public institutions curating significant exhibitions care to find themselves. Few books on women artists, even since the upswing in historical research on women artists in the 1970s, breach new foundational and formal ground. One searches far to find original, fresh and cliché-free arguments that engage with the forces governing and delimiting women's professional art experience and the rigid, narrow space that was grudgingly assigned to women artists with public ambition before the twentieth century.

## Notes

- 1 Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art. Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 4th edn, rev. David G. Wilkins (New York and Englewood Cliffs, 1994), 307.
- 2 E.H. Gombrich, "The early Medici as patrons of art: a survey of primary sources," in E.F. Jacob, ed., *Italian Renaissance Studies* (London 1960), 279–311. See the discussion in Francis Ames-Lewis, "Introduction," in *The Early Medici and their Artists*, ed. Francis Ames-Lewis (London, 1995), 9–10, concerning the legacy of this article.
- 3 Francis Ames-Lewis, ed., *Cosimo 'il Vecchio' de' Medici, 1389–1464. Essays in Commemoration of the 600th Anniversary of Cosimo de' Medici's Birth*, intro E.H. Gombrich (Oxford, 1992).
- 4 John T. Paoletti, "Strategies and structures of Medici artistic patronage in the 15th century," in *The Early Medici*, ed. Ames-Lewis, 36.
- 5 H.H. Brummer, "Pan Platonius," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, XXXIII (1964), 55, comparing Pan to the Madonna. Cf. Luba Freedman, "Once more Luca Signorelli's *Pan Deus Arcadiae*," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, LIV (1985), 152–59, esp. 157ff.; and Claudia Rousseau, "Botticelli's Munich *Lamentation* and the Death of Lorenzo de' Medici," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, LIX (1990), 253, this latter for contemporaneous, fifteenth-century comparisons between Lorenzo il Magnifico and Christ.

Janice Helland's *Professional Women Painters in Nineteenth-Century Scotland: Commitment, Friendship, Pleasure* is unconditionally welcome for its fine scholarship. In meticulous detail she reconstructs subtle nuances in the social and economic strata of nineteenth-century Scotland, its women artists and the careers they constructed for themselves. The depth of her research is matched by her willingness to engage with the elusive stratagems through which her subjects constructed their working lives. Helland's placement of her arguments in a singular, finely tuned methodological framework allows her to maximize a variety of strategies to make sense of the life and work of her chosen artists. It articulates with confidence a persuasively neo-Marxist strategy of valuing "labour" and defining an individual through the actuality and experience of work. Yet, it cannot be fully characterized as a "Marxist" text insofar as it simultaneously advocates the importance of pleasure through creativity and refuses the leftist masculinist rejection of the feminine world as bourgeois. Helland particularly seeks to unpick the notion of the "middle class" that has, in Anglo-European convention (and particularly in my own culture of white settler Australia), been indissolubly associated with women. Why should middle-class work be surrounded by different historical levels of validation than that of the working class? In Helland's refreshing viewpoint "middle class" cannot be reified into a single unit, but runs from the almost and anxiously near-poor, demarcated through social ritual and gesture as much as economics, to