

Patronage outside the Medici Court Florentine patricians commissioning and collecting works of art

Review of: K.D. Botke & H.T. van Veen (eds.), *A Cultural Symbiosis. Patrician Art Patronage and Medicean Cultural Politics in Florence (1530-1610)*, Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2021, p. 320, ISBN 9789462702967, € 59.50.

Jan L. de Jong

Most studies of the arts in Florence focus on the period between c. 1300 and 1530, when in the city and its surrounding territories such great masters were born and active as Giotto, Brunelleschi, Donatello, Ghiberti, Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Botticelli, Ghirlandaio, Verrocchio, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and many more. Less attention is paid to the arts of the succeeding period (1530-1737), when Florence had been turned from a republic into a (Grand) Duchy, ruled by members of the Medici family. During the early years of the Duchy, under the rule of Cosimo I, well-known artists who had started their career or had been trained when Florence was still a republic, remained active in the city, like Pontormo, Bronzino, Cellini and Vasari. Giambologna (not a native Florentine) and Buontalenti held up the artistic reputation of Florence through the later 16th century, but the era of great masters living and working at more or less the same time in the same city seemed to have come to an end.

Studies of Florentine art produced in the period of the (Grand) Duchy mainly consider the situation at the Medici court, creating an image as if it smothered the patronage of prominent Florentine families, which had significantly contributed to the flourishing of the arts during the preceding centuries, when Florence was a republic. The contributions in *A Cultural Symbiosis. Patrician Art Patronage and Medicean Cultural Politics in Florence (1530-1610)*, edited by Henk van Veen and Klazina Botke, adjust this impression and offer a more complete view. In the 'Introduction' (pp. 9-40), Henk van Veen describes how historians since the 1950s have shown how (Grand) Duke Cosimo I and his Medici successors and relatives came to realize that they needed the participation of the long-established patrician families of Florence, as they were a part of international networks and had the discreet skills and cultural backgrounds that were needed to move around in diplomatic circles. These patrician families recognized, from their point of view, that they could gain in prestige and advance their own interests if they accommodated themselves to the new, Grand Ducal rule of the city. This 'win-win' situation meant that the patricians progressively accepted and even supported the rule of the Medici as Grand Dukes, while the Medici granted the Florentine patricians the freedom to maintain and to some extent even glorify their own past and own traditions.

Against this historical background, seven contributions in *A Cultural Symbiosis* focus on a specific Florentine family, or on one or two prominent members (Henk van Veen and Carla D'Arista on the Valori (pp. 41-71); Carla D'Arista on the Pucci (pp. 73-109); Bouk Wierda on Bernardo Vecchiotti (pp. 137-176); Henk van Veen on the del Nero (pp. 177-198); Klazina Botke on the Salviati (pp. 199-227); Sanne Roefs on Agnolo Guicciardini (pp. 229-265); Andrea Zagli on Giovanni di Agnolo Niccolini (pp. 267-305)). The eighth contribution, by Julia Dijkstra, discusses the possible republican overtones of Michelangelo's unfinished *Brutus* (Florence, Bargello; pp. 111-136). All contributions are based on extensive documentation and solid research, not only in the national and city archives, but also in the archives of the various families and the Medici Archive Project, resulting in a wealth of hitherto unknown information that will hopefully stimulate further research. The picture that emerges from these studies fits in with the general portrayal of the situation in Florence as sketched by historians since the 1950s. Just as in the fields of (local) politics and diplomacy, the patrician families of Florence accommodated to the new situation in the field of culture and patronage. They advised and helped the Medici court, but at the same time ordered and collected works of art for themselves, so as to advance their own prestige and interests. Thus, *A Cultural Symbiosis* adjusts 'the received idea' among art historians, 'of an almighty and all-pervading Medici patronage', as well as the notion of 'Florentine patricians [who] in their dealings with art took the Medici court as their role model', aiming 'to study Florentine patrician patronage on its own terms' (p. 18).

This aim leads necessarily to highlighting the patrons - their personalities, family backgrounds, social position, personal ambitions and convictions (p. 19). There is consequently less attention for the individual aspects of the artworks - their topics, makers and especially their quality. Due to this approach, some interesting issues are hardly addressed. How come that the centuries preceding the (Grand) Duchy produced so many more great masters and art works? Were the circumstances of competition and rivalry between artists and between patrons during the republic more conducive to high artistic quality? Did the domination of the (Grand) Ducal Medici, in spite of the relative freedom they granted the patrician families, still smother the arts because implicitly they were not supposed to be rivalled? Did the patricians rather collect already existing artworks than commission new ones? Did the focus shift from monumental artworks to small objects made of glass, bronze or precious stones, which were (more) easily broken, melted down or dispersed, making it hard to reconstruct a complete picture of the art production and quality? Or had propagandists like Vasari and Vincenzo Borghini glorified the arts of the preceding period so effectively, that we still tend to see them as superior to the arts produced during the (Grand) Duchy?

Good studies do not only answer questions, but also offer material for further research. *A Cultural Symbiosis* certainly belongs to this category. It sketches a new view of the patronage and cultural policy of the Medici court and the patrician families in Florence during the first 80 years of (Grand) Ducal rule. It offers a wealth of clearly presented, hitherto unknown information that may lead to interesting speculations about the (possible) relation between the organization of a state or society on the one hand, and (the flourishing of) the arts on the other hand.

Jan L. de Jong

Department for History of Art and Architecture - University of Groningen

Oude Boteringestraat 34

9712 GK Groningen (The Netherlands)

j.l.de.jong@rug.nl