Visualizing dynasty and dissent in Jacopo Pontormo’s *Portrait of Cosimo il Vecchio*

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[Figure 1](https://www.example.com/figure1) Pontormo, *Portrait of Cosimo il Vecchio*, c. 1519, oil on panel, 90 x 72 cm Uffizi Gallery (inv. 1890, n. 3574), Florence. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain)

The *Portrait of Cosimo il Vecchio*, c. 1519, marked the first Medicean portrait commission for the rising young Florentine artist Jacopo Pontormo (b.1494). [Figure1] It proved pivotal in his career, garnering him the favour and patronage of the Medici, who would continue to give him commissions and eventually place him on their payroll, where he remained for over twenty-four years until his death in 1556. At the time this commission was given, however, there was no such future surety: the family was facing a crisis, and the survival of the Medici line was in grave doubt. In 1516, Duke Giuliano de’ Medici, the youngest son of Lorenzo the Magnificent and ruler of Florence, had died childless at the age of thirty-seven. In 1519, his twenty-six-year-old nephew and successor, Duke Lorenzo, succumbed to a combination of syphilis and tuberculosis just twenty-one days after the birth of his only daughter Catherine. Their unexpected deaths left the family with no legitimate heir to power. There was one

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glimmer of hope, and of a hoped-for change in fortune: the birth of a healthy son to Maria Salviati, granddaughter of Lorenzo the Magnificent, on 12 June 1519, only one month after Duke Lorenzo’s death. To mark the occasion, the baby’s godfather, Pope Leo X, christened him with the name Cosimo, celebrating him as a future scion of the family while linking him to the illustrious past. The infant Cosimo was not only an heir to the primary branch but also a Medici who could unite both sides of the family, since his father, the condottiere who would come to be known as Giovanni delle Bande Nere, was a member of the distant cadet, or ‘popolo’, branch.

Scholars have long recognized that Pontormo’s Portrait of Cosimo was of singular importance for subsequent Medici art and even served as a template for Vasari’s later Portrait of Lorenzo the Magnificent, (Uffizi, inv. 1890 n. 1578), commissioned by Ottaviano de’ Medici in 1534. However, scholars have largely focused on the meaning of the laurel and said nothing about the rich iconography of the painting and the other elements of design, including the presentation of the figure of Cosimo, the possible meanings of the knotted banderole and its text, and the presentation of the acronym ‘P.P.P.’

Pontormo’s portrait of the elder Cosimo is a complex exercise in both citing and ‘updating’ earlier themes found in extant images of the patriarch; it brings them into line with the politics of 1519, after the return of the Medici to Florence and the accession of Cardinal Giovanni to the papacy. It employs an iconography that projects the elder Cosimo’s princely status and his role as father and founder of a dynasty, celebrating the birth of a new heir to the Medici line and the rebirth of Medici hopes, as well as his scholarly and pious pursuits. It is a self-consciously learned image, quoting exemplary, papal and medallic portraiture in addition to ancient literary texts. The changes Pontormo makes to Cosimo’s iconography contribute to the elevation of Cosimo’s status from republican citizen to prince and make the hereditary nature of his rule seem more palatable.

This paper will focus on examining and interpreting several of the iconographic symbols found in the portrait, tracing their sources and noting the manner in which Pontormo modifies their presentation. Over the course of his career, Pontormo tended to avoid the use of common attributes in portraiture, instead investing character and

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meaning in the elements of design (*disegno*). In 1547, he was asked by Benedetto Varchi to compose a letter on the relative merits of painting and sculpture and in his written response, Pontormo embraces *disegno* as the foundation of all art, cautioning that ‘whosoever lacks its fundamentals will run into errors.’

He states that the painter must compensate for the artificiality of his medium by surpassing nature (*superare la natura*) in order to animate the figure and make it seem to be alive. The *Portrait of Cosimo il Vecchio*, made early in his career, relies more heavily on traditional iconographic symbols to evoke character than some of his later portraits, but even at this early stage, Pontormo uses these symbols in original ways, precisely shaping their visual presentation—their line, colour and spatial characteristics—in ways that inflect the interpretation of the work and inject a brimming vitality into the depiction of the elder Cosimo.

The commission proved pivotal in the career of the young painter, garnering him the favour and patronage of the Medici. As soon as he finished this portrait he began work on the fresco at Poggio a Caiano. He went onto their regular payroll no later than 1537, and remained there for the rest of his life. Vasari narrates the circumstances of the commission of the *Portrait of Cosimo il Vecchio* in his *Life of Pontormo*:

> Then afterwards, for Messer Goro da Pistoia, secretary to the Medici at that time, he did a picture with the portrait, from the knees upwards, of the Magnificent Cosimo de’ Medici the elder, which is also truly praiseworthy; and this is today in the house of Messer Ottaviano de’ Medici, in the possession of his son Alessandro…By means of this work, and particularly the head of Cosimo, Pontormo became a friend of Messer Ottaviano; and when the great hall at Poggio a Caiano had to be painted, he was commissioned to paint the two ends, where the oculi (that is the windows) give light, from the vaulting right down to the floor.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Frederick Clapp, *Jacopo Carucci Da Pontormo, His Life and Work*, 285-86, Doc. XXXII. ‘[C]he la importà sia superare la natura in volere dare spirito à una figura, a farla parere viua, e farla in piano...’

The ‘Messer Goro da Pistoia’ Vasari refers to is Ghoro Gheri, who served as secretary to Duke Lorenzo in the second decade of the sixteenth century and was responsible for the administration of the city of Florence until the Duke’s death on 4 May 1519. Gheri would only have hired Pontormo at the behest of one of his employers. He could have been acting for any one of the following: Leo X; Cardinal Giulio; Ottaviano de’ Medici, who oversaw the artistic patronage of Leo X in Florence; or even Duke Lorenzo before his death in 1519. The likelihood of Ottaviano’s involvement is strengthened by Vasari’s observation that, in 1533–34, the painting was hanging in Ottaviano’s palazzo. Portraiture was of great interest to Ottaviano; he commissioned a number of portraits of the Medici, eventually accumulating a comprehensive visual archive of the family. Ottaviano’s biographer, Anna Maria Bracciante, argues that the symbolism of the portrait of Cosimo, in which he appears as a modern sage with a saturnine temperament, reflected a return to Laurentian culture and traditional Florentine style that was well suited to his taste. The portrait’s restricted colour palette, its streamlined style and its erudite allusions to ancient literature and philosophy link it to the personality and preferences of Ottaviano, who grew up next door to the fabled Rucellai gardens known as the Orti oricellari, where he was exposed to Platonic and Ciceronian ideals.

**A description of the portrait**

The aged Cosimo is seated diagonally across the edge of a throne-like chair that is pushed up against the picture plane. His head and body are turned with considerable contrapposto toward his right, while his shoulders and arms angle to the left, his left elbow leaning heavily on the broad arm of the chair. His face is seen in profile. A strong directional light shines from overhead, to the left, illuminating the scene and

testa di Cosimo, fatto il Puntormo amico di messer Ottaviano, avendosi a dipignere al Poggio a Caiano la sala grande, gli furono date a dipignere le due teste, dove sono gli occhi che danno lume (cioè le finestre) dalla volta infino al pavimento. For English see Vasari/Bull Lives, II, 251.


8 Philippe Costamagna, *Pontormo*, Milan: Electa, 1994, 150. For primary source see ASF, Guardaroba 126, c. 121 verso. In 1533 Ottaviano requested that Vasari paint a pendant portrait of Lorenzo de’ Medici to hang next to the portrait of Cosimo which was displayed in his palazzo.

9 Cox-Rearick, *Drawings*, I, 153. Ottaviano commissioned the work at Poggio a Caiano in 1520/21 and again in 1533/34. He was connected with Pontormo’s portraits of Alessandro and Ippolito c. 1525. He asked Pontormo to paint a picture in the 1530s that was never executed and he bought three pictures by Pontormo from the mason, Rossino, that had been given by Pontormo to Rossino. For primary source see Vasari/Milanesi, *Le vite*, VI, 264-73.

casting a shadow of the figure of Cosimo onto the chair back. In the strong light, his face is lined, the flesh sagging, with deeply hollowed cheeks. Grey hair is seen at his temple, and it strays from under the edge of his woolen hat. He is dressed in a simple but costly red robe, discreetly lined with fur—the traditional costume of republican Florentine citizens who were qualified to hold office.\footnote{Patricia Lee Rubin, \textit{Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence}, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, 109.} His hands, emerging from the sleeves of his robe, are pressed together into fists, with each forefinger clasping the other hand. On the scroll-shaped back of the chair, behind Cosimo’s left shoulder, is written: ‘COSM’ MED/ICES P.P./P.’

Immediately to Cosimo’s right, also pressing against the picture plane, is a laurel tree with two sturdy stems bifurcating at the root. One is green and alive with many leafy branches, while the other has been lopped off at a sharp angle just above the juncture of the root. The pruning looks recent, as the stem has a light-coloured centre. The live stem, intact and leafy, has a gleaming white banderole, knotted and entwined in the laurel branches at the level of Cosimo’s torso. It reads: “NUNC AVUL/LSO.NO.DEFIC/ALTER”. Behind the figure, the space is dark and undefined. Cosimo does not make eye contact with the viewer but looks intently off to the right of the pictured space toward the banderole, his head lowered and his eyes fixed in a steady gaze.

Though the portrait is clearly encomiastic and reinforces the idea of the inevitability of Medici rule, a quiet undercurrent of reserve and doubt, injected by the artist, can be detected in the elements of design. The construction of the space that Cosimo inhabits, the tangled words that form his motto and are echoed in his knotted fingers, as well as the shadowed acronym behind his head, suggest that a second, less sanguine reading is possible. These visual cues modulate the overt themes of glorification and inevitability that dominate the portrait, complicating its tone of authority. The knotted banderole is of particular interest. It has been overlooked by art historians as having symbolic meaning beyond the text it displays. This essay will offer a new interpretation of the presence of the banderole in the context of the life and history of Cosimo il Vecchio and the events of the early-sixteenth century, arguing that its knotted form lies at the crux of the meanings, both positive and negative, of the portrait.

\textbf{Cosimo and Medici-family history}

Cosimo il Vecchio began his public life as a wealthy scion of a merchant-banking family; he gradually engaged in politics, intertwining the honour of the Medici family with that of the Florentine commune, and extended his patriarchal authority as head of
the family to an ever-widening circle of friends and political supporters.\textsuperscript{12} He built a power base with the \textit{popolo}, in opposition to the oligarchy, and suffered exile in 1433 as the result of a ploy by the Albizzi to dismantle his growing power. After his return from exile, in 1434, he succeeded in establishing a de facto rule of the city by his family that would continue unbroken until the expulsion of the Medici in 1494.

In 1512, 18 years and two governments after the second expulsion of the Medici, the family was once again welcomed back to Florence as the Soderini government collapsed under pressure from the League of Italian States.\textsuperscript{13} The Medici seized this moment to present Cosimo as a nostalgic, sagacious figure, reviving the public festival of the feast of Saints Cosmas and Damian, the Medici patron saints.\textsuperscript{14} They presented him as a figure whose heirs would restore the city to the peace and prosperity of the first Medici era.

Cardinal Giovanni’s election to the papacy in 1513 reinforced this notion of a renaissance of the fortunes of the Medici. All of Florence celebrated in anticipation of the return of a golden age. Verses were written linking a new generation of Medici with the days of Cosimo, Piero the Elder (‘The Gouty’) and Lorenzo the Magnificent. Poets used the laurel, long associated with poetic and military triumphs, as well as with Lorenzo the Magnificent, as a symbol for Florence itself, rhyming ‘\textit{lauro}’ with ‘\textit{restauro}’. The Medici \textit{broncone}, the stump of the laurel bush, was said to be sending out new roots.\textsuperscript{15}

In the second decade of the cinquecento, with the untimely deaths of the Dukes Giuliano and Lorenzo, it appeared that the hopes for a political and familial Medici dynasty might be foundering. Few candidates to rule Florence remained. Catherine de’ Medici was a baby and female. Ippolito and Alessandro de’ Medici, born in 1511 and 1512 respectively, were illegitimate. Ippolito was the natural son of Duke Giuliano, and Alessandro is commonly accepted to have been the natural son of Cardinal Giulio (although he was passed off publicly during his lifetime as the natural son of Duke Lorenzo).\textsuperscript{16} Their illegitimate status presented problems of succession. Paolo Giovio, bishop and secretary to Giulio de’ Medici, wrote in his life of Pope Leo X that the pontiff believed that Alessandro de’ Medici could never be ruler of Florence, since he

was ‘twice illegitimate’ (both his own birth and that of his father [Pope Clement VII] had occurred out of wedlock). 17

Pontormo solved the problem of depicting a dead subject, never known to him, by working with extant images of Cosimo, whatever the medium, and infusing his quotation of these sources with contemporary-Italian portraiture style. The painting projects a nostalgia for the former first citizen of Florence. Placing him next to the two branches of laurel suggests a cycle of death and rebirth for the family. The flourishing laurel branch can be explained as a reference to young Cosimo’s birth, while the severed stump represents the death of Duke Lorenzo, the lost leader of Florence. Visually linking both branches to Cosimo suggests the ideas of succession and the hereditary right to rule, which was essential in establishing and maintaining Florentine support for Medici rule as it evolved into something more permanent. Pontormo’s portrait emphasized Cosimo’s patriarchial relationship to Florence. It also provided an opportunity to enlarge the limits of dynastic succession.

Visual sources for the portrait of Cosimo

In the early sixteenth century half-length portraits of members of the merchant class were starting to be seen, but the choice, in 1519, of a three-quarter-length format for the image of Cosimo is unusual for a private, family portrait and must be considered strategic. 18 This longer format is characteristic of the *uomini famosi* seen in Justus of Ghent’s twenty-eight portraits of famous men, made for the ducal palace at Urbino in 1475. The *studiolo* created by Montefeltro at Urbino was influential, and the gallery of famous men was copied repeatedly until the end of the sixteenth century. 19 Styling the portrait of Cosimo in a way that echoes the *Portrait of Vittorino da Feltre* strengthens the scholarly resonance. 20 [Figure 2] Vittorino (1378–1446) was a legendary teacher and humanist who worked in the court at Mantua. His teaching followed a model for educating the whole student: he emphasized not only the humanist subjects, but also religious and physical education. Federigo da Montefeltro and the children of the Duke of Mantua all studied with him, and his school became known as *La Casa*

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Putting Cosimo in a pose and setting similar to Vittorino equates Cosimo with the learned scholar.

The Urbino series was notable for its use of perspective, and though Pontormo does not use the perspectival ‘box’ characteristic of the *uomini famosi*, he places Cosimo in a tight space, with the figure casting a shadow on the structure behind him. Cosimo, like Vittorino, faces in profile toward the left side of the panel, though Cosimo is positioned in contrapposto, with his body and clasped hands angled back to the right. He gestures similarly with his index finger slightly extended in a bent, pointing position. He wears the same flat-topped style of hat, a style often seen in images of the erudite physicians Cosmas and Damian.

Pontormo also turned to Raphael’s portraits, as he would continually during his lifetime, adopting elements of Raphael’s recent *Portrait of Pope Julius II*, which had been painted from life. Raphael portrayed Julius II using conventions reserved for princes and popes, displaying an enthroned and angled central figure, and Pontormo adopts and adapts this pose for his portrait of Cosimo. [Figure 3] The portrait of Julius II was first put on public view in 1513, after Pope Julius donated it to his family church of S. Maria del Popolo in Rome, where it was displayed on one of the three pillars of the

church during each of the solemn feast days of the liturgical year. The Venetian ambassador, Mario Sanuto, commented in his diary on 12 September (during the eight-day feast of the Virgin) on the portrait’s extraordinary popularity; people were flocking to the church, he wrote, ‘so that it seemed like a jubilee’. This format was replicated many times, becoming the model for ecclesiastical portraiture over the following two centuries. It was regarded by contemporaries as being breathtakingly alive, and so would have provided Pontormo with an example to emulate in his painting of a deceased subject. Pontormo borrows, as well, the sense of dramatic narrative that Raphael brought to the battle-weary Julius, imbuing the figure of Cosimo, slightly hunched and turning in his chair, with an expression of intense reverie and concentration.

25 Chapman, Henry and Plazzotta, Raphael, 274.
26 Vasari/Milanesi, Le vite, IV, 338. ‘[T]anto vivo e verace, che faceva temere il ritratto a vederlo, come se proprio egli fosse il vivo.’
The relief bust by the workshop of Rossellino and the obverse of Cosimo’s posthumous commemorative medal

Figure 4 Workshop of Antonio Rossellino, *Cosimo de’ Medici*, (detail) c. 1460, marble, 37 x 33 cm without frame. Skulpturensammlung, Bode Museum, Berlin. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons by Andreas Praefcke (Public Domain).

Figure 5 Anonymous, [obverse] Posthumous medal of *Cosimo de’ Medici* inscribed: MAGNVS COSMVS MEDICES PPP, c. 1465-69, bronze/later cast, diameter 74 mm., weight, 124.75 g, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1975.14.839.a, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Image courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Open Access, (Public Domain).

Figure 6 Anonymous [reverse] *Florence Holding an Orb and Triple Olive Branch*, c. 1465-69, bronze/later cast, diameter 74 mm., weight, 124.75 g, Samuel H. Kress Collection 1975.14.839.b, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, Image courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Open Access, (Public Domain).

Existing images of Cosimo, though few in number, provided vital source material for Pontormo’s painting. A marble relief portrait by the workshop of Antonio Rossellino, now held in the Staatliche Museum in Berlin, is believed by scholars to be the earliest surviving sculptural likeness of Cosimo, and was probably made from life.27 [Figure 4] It is also most likely to be the marble bust listed in Duke Lorenzo’s 1512 inventory of

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27 Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici*, I, 385–406, no. 26. Cosimo’s appearance was well known in Pontormo’s lifetime, with multiple images extant in painting and sculpture. These images were nearly always in profile and all derive from only a few images made during Cosimo’s lifetime. The earliest secure identification is found in Gozzoli’s fresco of the Magi on the Palazzo Medici chapel east wall, made in 1459, five years before Cosimo’s death. Here Cosimo is seen in profile, riding on a mule, and is dressed in a dark blue robe and wears a soft felt foggetina on his head, typical of the artisan class. Most of the subsequent images derive from the second secure image found in the marble relief bust (c. 1460) from the workshop of Antonio Rossellino that is now found in the Staatliche Museum in Berlin: J. Graham Pollard and others, *Renaissance Medals*, The Collections of the National Gallery of Art: Systematic Catalogue, 2 vols, Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2007, I, 296.
his grandfather’s estate and so to have been available to Pontormo. From this source derives a commemorative portrait medal believed to have been executed between 1465 and 1469, shortly after Cosimo’s death. [Figures 5 and 6] The obverse of the medal displays a bust profile of Cosimo based on the marble bust, and inside the rim of the medal is written: MAGNUS COSIMUS MEDICES P P P. The first two P’s refer to the title ‘Pater Patriae’ (‘father of the country’), a title the Florentine republic conferred on Cosimo on 18 March 1465, ten months after his death.

It can be seen that both the relief sculpture and the medal provided physiognomic and iconographic details for Pontormo’s depiction of Cosimo. Pontormo’s portrait, like the portrait medal, shows a slightly older, thinner and more frail Cosimo in comparison to Rossellino’s relief bust; however, the position of Cosimo’s head in Pontormo’s painting, modified from a strict profile, is closer to Rossellino’s sculpture, with Cosimo’s chin turned slightly upward and tilting away from the viewer, allowing one to see under his chin and lending a more sculptural feeling to the figure. [Figure 7]

![Figure 7 Details from Figs. 4, 5 and 1. (see captions for information).](image_url)

Pontormo preserves the hat and robe that Cosimo wears in both the sculpture and the medal, except that in the painting they are given a vibrant scarlet colour. Cosimo is clothed as a citizen in the traditional red robes of the Florentine republic—

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29 Langedijk, *Portraits of the Medici*, I, 390. 26, no. 15. The terminus post quem dates to 1469 when Francesco del Chierico copied the design of the obverse, including the inscription, in his illumination of a manuscript of Cicero that had been commissioned by Cosimo’s son, Piero.
clothing that expressed the continuity of civic traditions. Carole Collier Frick has theorized that the red wool mantle worn by the designated leaders gave a certain egalitarian aspect to their appearance that effectively directed all attention to their individual heads and head coverings. The ruling group differentiated themselves from one another by wearing the wide range of headgear for which Florence was famous, from cappucci rolled in individually distinctive ways to beretti bearing brooches, as well as a noteworthy variety of other caps and hats. And, indeed, Cosimo wears a distinctive flat cap or beretta that broadens at the top and has a depression between the upper part and the folded-up edge, forming a double rim. This is the same stiff-sided beret that is depicted in the medal and bust, and it is unusual in Florentine dress. It is probably meant to recall both the scholarly Vittorino da Feltre as well as the imagery of the early Christian saints Cosmas and Damian. [Figure 8] Initially Cosimo’s father, Giovanni di Bicci, had associated the Medici family with Cosmas and Damian, naming his twin sons after them, probably because of the similarity of the Medici name to the term medicus, a term used to describe the sainte physician twins. Subsequently Cosimo (his brother, Damiano, died in 1390), adopted the pair as his patrons, and as his family’s protectors. As Dale Kent notes, linking the image of Cosimo to these twin


31 Francis Ames-Lewis, ‘Early Medicean Devices’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 42 (1979), 122–43 (128, fn. 24). SS Cosmas and Damian appear in many of the commissions associated with Cosimo il vecchio including the S. Marco High Altarpiece, the S. Marco cloister fresco-altarpiece, the altarpieces at Chartres, S. Francesco al Bosco for the Convent of Annalena,
martyrs, educated and saintly models, was politically strategic. The pair were prominently, and frequently, depicted in Florence as intercessors with the divine, for example, in the Santa Croce Novitiate’s chapel altarpiece, by Fra Filippo Lippi. [Figure 9] Just as Cosmas is seen to intercede between the viewer and the Virgin, so Cosimo de’ Medici could be seen to have a special relationship with Florentines, as a patron and benefactor.

The reverse of the medal of Cosimo: Florentia

The reverse of the medal reinforces a republican interpretation of the image in which the female figure of Florentia is seen in a matron’s tunic, mantle and veil, embodying peace and public liberty. [Figure 10] Florence was often personified in contemporary writing as a beautiful woman, and here she sits on a faldistorio, or folding chair, with her feet and chair resting on a yoke. The yoke is another of the Medici family

S. Girolamo, Volterra, Rogier van der Weyden’s Frankfurt altarpiece known as the ‘Medici Madonna’, as well as in painted stucco in the Old Sacristy of S. Lorenzo, and in stained glass in the Novitiate’s Chapel, Sta. Croce; Kent, Cosimo de’ Medici, 11.

Kent, Cosimo de’ Medici, 11–12.


Pollard and others, Renaissance Medals, 296, cat. entry 279; Francis Ames-Lewis, ‘Early Medicean Devices’, 128. In 1685, Alessandro Segni (Florentine 1633-1697) wrote a treatise on Medicean imprese. He described the reverse of Cosimo’s ‘pater patriae’ medal as ‘La città de Firenze in abito di femmina & calcante un giogo. Ames-Lewis stresses that Segni’s’ work often
emblems, later adopted by Leo X as his motto, and it alludes to the Gospel according to St Matthew 11:30, ‘for my yoke is easy and my burden is light’.  

_Florentia_ holds an orb or _palla_ in her right hand and, in her left, a triple olive branch. The orb symbolizes the Medici _palle_ and is an allusion to the name of Cosimo, deriving from the Latin _cosmus_, meaning ‘cosmos’. The triple olive branch is a symbol of peace, and it visually reinforces the inscription that circles the edge of the coin: ‘Pax libertas que publica. Florentia’ (‘Peace and public liberty’).  

In Pontormo’s portrait of Cosimo, where the position of the figure of Cosimo differs from those of the _uomini famosi_ and Raphael’s Julius, it echoes the figure of _Florentia_ and certain motifs from the reverse of the coin. These references include his use of a shallow space for the disposition of the figure and setting. Likewise, Cosimo’s position of pronounced contrapposto is similar to that of _Florentia_, with his legs angled sharply toward the lower left edge of the panel, and his left arm positioned with the elbow resting on the chair arm. In the medal, _Florentia_ holds the orb, or _cosmos_, with her right arm outstretched. Pontormo echoes this compositional device through his placement of the knotted, ball-like banderole just to Cosimo’s right, affixed to the laurel tree.

This visual blending of Cosimo and _Florentia_ subtly gives the ostensibly republican imagery of the medal a more monarchical or princely character in the painting. It is an act of visual appropriation, a technique used repeatedly by the Medici in their ascent to power. In imitating _Florentia_’s posture in the figure of Cosimo, and thereby identifying his body with that of _Florentia_, Cosimo is visually likened to the state. While this can equate Cosimo with the republic (if _Florentia_ represents republican values, then he is its chief republican), it also allows him to be seen as a kind of royal body, that is, the personage who embodies the state, and he can be seen as the body politic. Through the deployment of this posture Pontormo suggests, visually, the transformation of Cosimo’s image from citizen to ruler and embodiment of Florence.

Applies sixteenth-century notions of imprese retroactively onto fifteenth-century devices, and therefore must be used cautiously.  

36 Randolph, _Engaging Symbols_, 92. The branch is determined to be an olive branch because it is held in conjunction with the inscription and thereby signifies peace.  
37 Alison Brown, ‘De-Masking Renaissance Republicanism’, in _Renaissance Civic Humanism, Ideas in Context_, 57, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 179–99 (193.) Brown argues that one measure of the Medici’s success at appropriating symbols can be gauged by the rapidity with which the symbols were reappropriated after the Medici expulsion in 1494.
**P.P.P.: Pater Patriae?**

The term *Pater Patriae* has ancient origins and was used chiefly as a title for emperors, but it bears an equally close association with the republican Cicero. Its first recorded use in relation to the Medici dates to the year 1440, twenty-four years before Cosimo’s death, in the text of Antonio Pacini’s funeral oration for Cosimo’s younger brother, Lorenzo de’ Medici (1395–1440). Pacini first praised Cosimo and his brother in a well-established trope, likening them to famous Roman statesmen who acted to defend the liberty of their country, but he then introduced a new idea, asking why, if Camillus or Cicero had deserved to be called *pater patriae* by the Romans, should not Lorenzo, who like them had expelled the enemy from the gates of his city at a time of extreme danger, also be given the title. As Karla Langedijk stresses, ‘only Cicero’s ideas can explain the fact that the first citizen of Florence was honoured with that title’. When the title was bestowed posthumously on Cosimo by the government, in 1465, it was unique in Florentine history, but initially it did not carry too much importance. Rather, it closely paralleled contemporary literary honours that were conferred on Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini at the time of their respective deaths in 1444 and 1459. And the orations at Cosimo’s funeral, by Donato Acciaiuoli and Alamanno Rinuccini, were written in much the same language as was used in the 1440 orations for Cosimo’s brother Lorenzo. The speakers defined the honour of *pater patriae* in republican terms, expressing the wish that, by rewarding his example of citizenship and service to his *patria*, they would inspire future generations to stand ready to defend the liberty of Florence. By conferring this title on Cosimo, they emulated the patriotic and republican tradition and language that they were discovering in their humanist literary studies.

The Medici heirs, however, were quick to exploit and expand the use of the title ‘P.P.’ in their family iconography once it had been conferred by the state. During a four-year period in which the medal of Cosimo was struck, the Medici commissioned two further medals. These were of Cosimo’s sons—Giovanni, who had died in 1463, and Piero. The two medals seem to have been made as companion pieces (one faces left and the other right). The obverse of each medal shows the profile of the subject while around the field is written the subject’s name in raised letters, followed by the phrase ‘COSIMUS PPF’. The PPF stands for *Patris Patriae Filius* (son of Cosimo,

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father of the country). Similarly, Lorenzo the Magnificent used the title in small notarial transactions, as in a document of 6 May 1482, in which he identified himself as ‘the son of the late most outstanding man Piero, son of Cosimo de’ Medici of honorable memory, who for his preceding and persisting merits and deeds, and for his patria, won for himself the name of, and was declared by the public to be, Father of his Country, as indeed he was and was famed to be.’

These quotations must be viewed as dynastic manoeuvres. Lorenzo’s inclusion of the phrase, ‘and was declared by the public to be Father of his Country’ can be interpreted as a preemptive gesture against anticipated criticism for his use of the title. And the polarizing effect on the public of the title ‘P.P.’ can be demonstrated by its history. An instance of its positive reception is found c. 1475 when an unknown follower of the Medici commissioned Botticelli’s Portrait of a Young Man Holding a Medal [Figure 12]. This painting may possibly be a Medici commission, but it may

43 Pollard and others, Renaissance Medals, 294–95.
44 Alison Brown, ‘De-Masking Renaissance Republicanism’, 189–194, esp. 191, fn.38. Brown lists instances of appropriation, by the Medici family, of language, titles, objects and architecture, to enhance an association between their family and Florence itself. An example is the Medici heirs’ use of Cosimo’s posthumous title of P.P. on their everyday notarial transactions, implying the term was hereditary. For the primary source see ASF Notarile antecosmiano 14183, 33v (6 May 1482). ‘olim clarissimi viri Petri recolende memorie Cosme de Medicis qui suis precedentibus et persistentibus meritis et gestis in patriam Patris Patrie nomen sibi vendicavit et ita ex decreto publico declaratus extitit et nuncupatur’; cf. ibid. 9636, f. 57r (12 June 1482): ‘qui Cosma ex publico decreto pater patrie Florentie nuncupatur.’
equally be the gesture of a devoted admirer, or perhaps one indebted to the Medici. The medal in the painting is a three-dimensional copy of the commemorative medal that has been cast in plaster, and gilded. The unidentified young man, whose red berretta may suggest that he is Florentine, holds the medal awkwardly in his hands, directly over his heart. He engages the viewer with a clear-eyed and serene gaze, as if to share his appreciation of the medal. His proud bearing not only indicates a positive appreciation of Cosimo as Pater Patriae but also connotes a proprietary relationship toward the image that ostensibly confirms his own place in the patronage network.

Figure 13 Andrea del Verrocchio, Cosimo de’ Medici’s tomb marker, 1464-65, marble, porphyry, and bronze, Church of San Lorenzo, Florence. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons, photographer: Sailko 25/2/2014. (Public Domain). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license.

An example of a negative reaction to the title can be found in the episodic eruptions of public hostility toward the inscription of Pater Patriae on Cosimo’s tomb slab, a porphyry plaque placed in the floor of the crossing of San Lorenzo, marking the spot of Cosimo’s tomb beneath. [Figure 13] The full text of the inscription reads: ‘Cosmus Medices Hic Situs Est Decreto Publico Pater Patriae. Vixit Annos LXXV, Mense III Dies XX’ (‘Here Lies Cosimo de’ Medici, by Public Decree Father of his Country. He Lived 75 years, 3 Months and 20 Days’). Both times after the Medici had been expelled from Florence, in 1495 and again in 1527, orders had been quickly given, though not eventually carried out, that the title should be removed from the tomb—on the grounds that ‘he did not deserve such a title but rather that of tyrant’ (quia tale

46 Kent, Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance, 377.
titulum non meruit sed potius tyrannus). These episodes suggest an abiding resentment of the Medici’s use of the term among some sections of the population, whose resentment turned to public hostility whenever Medici fortunes faded.

The meaning of the third ‘P.’ on the medal is disputed by scholars. G. F. Hill and J. G. Pollard both propose that the ‘P.’ should be read as princeps (or primus), which can be translated as ‘first’ or ‘prince’, thus making the phrase into ‘The first father of the country’ or ‘The prince and father of the country’. The title princeps originated in the Roman Republic, where it was held by the leading member of the Senate ( princeps senatus). There is evidence that Cosimo was referred to as ‘princeps’ on at least one occasion during his lifetime, when Francesco Filelfo wrote to him, in 1440, to exhort him to recall the exiles back to Florence, promising: ‘if you prefer to restore the exiled citizens to their patria instead of awaiting with such determination for them to restore their patria to its ancient liberty and dignity, then you will most certainly, with no opposition, be called princeps of the republic and Pater Patriae. Then all will honour you, all admire you.’

Pollard and Winner suggest that the use of ‘P.P.P.’ in the fifteenth century resulted from a misreading of an inscription found on Roman coins that represented Pater Patriae Proconsul. A contemporary example of this usage can be seen in Cristoforo da Geremia’s medal of Constantine, probably cast in 1468 to mark the visit of Frederick III to Rome. [Figure 14] Both Janet Cox-Rearick and Philippe


48 Pollard and others, Renaissance Medals, 296, cat. no. 279; G.F. Hill and Graham Pollard, Renaissance Medals from the Samuel H. Kress Collection at the National Gallery of Art, London: The Phaidon Press, 1967, 47, cat. no. 245; Cox-Rearick, Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art, 57–59. Cox-Rearick provides a concise summary of the various interpretations that have been put forward for the meaning of the third ‘P’.


50 A. Brown, ‘The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo De’ Medici, Pater Patriae’, 190. For primary source see Florence, Bibl. Laurenziana, MS. Strozzi. 105, f. 18v.: ‘Si malueris patriae exules cives restituere quam id pertinentius expectare ut patriam ipsi pristinae libertati dignitatique restituant, tum eris sane adversantibus nullis in republica princeps, tum pater patriae appellaberis. Tum omnes te colent, omnes admirabuntur.’


52 Hill and Pollard, Renaissance Medals from the Samuel H. Kress Collection, 41–42, cat. no. 211.
Costamagna suggest that the third P. of the title P.P.P. is a mistaken translation, and conclude that it must instead stand for *Parens*, translating the phrase as ‘parent and father of the country’. This interpretation would also link Cosimo to the image of Cicero, the latter having been awarded the title for his part in the suppression of the Catilinarian conspiracy during his consulate in 63 BCE. Cox-Rearick argues that this was the usage found in the text of Naldo Naldi’s elegy for Cosimo in the fifteenth century, and that this republican meaning was still embodied in Pontormo’s time in Giovio’s programme for Franciabigio’s *Triumph of Caesar*, which he painted for Poggio a Caiano in 1520–21. Cox-Rearick states that a reading of ‘princeps’ or ‘primus’ conflicts with the idea of public liberty that is proclaimed on the reverse of the medal, and is too blatantly dynastic a term for the Medici to have employed in c. 1465.

The Medici may, in fact, have capitalized on the ambiguities of this third ‘P.’, asserting their dynastic ambitions while still remaining plausibly republican in character. History certainly provided an apt model for this ambiguous usage in the figure of Augustus, who had been given the title of *Pater Patriae* in 2 BCE by the Roman senate. Subsequently, Augustus and his heirs had shifted the meaning of the concept of ‘father’ to imply a dynastic right of succession. Augustus adopted ‘princeps’ as the unofficial title for his reign and bestowed the title on his sons, as *principatus iuventutis*, naming Octavius as the ‘young leader’ who would succeed him. Augustus’ use of the title *Pater Patriae* lent credibility to his claim to be the restorer of republican institutions vitiated during the civil wars of the first century BCE while, in reality, he had replaced

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54 Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art*, 58 and fn. 58. See fn. 58 for text of poem.
55 Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art*, 57–59.
the oligarchy of the republic with his own autocratic rule.\textsuperscript{56} Under his successors, \textit{principatus} soon did come to mean autocracy (and in fact gave rise to the use of the medieval title of ‘prince’).\textsuperscript{57} In hindsight, it can be seen that he cleverly shifted the meaning of a republican term into a phrase that described the government of Rome as it transitioned from a republic to a monarchy. If the third ‘P’ on the medal does stand for ‘princeps’, then one could argue that the Medici were using the word in a similar fashion.

![Figure 15 Pontormo, Detail, Portrait of Cosimo il Vecchio, c. 1519, oil on panel, 90 x 72 cm Uffizi Gallery (inv. 1890, n. 3574), Florence. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons (Public Domain).](image)

Pontormo’s display of the third ‘P.’ is most interesting: He places it in a line, by itself, separating it from the initials for ‘Pater Patriae’ and positioning it as a single entity. [Figure 15] While the ‘P.P.’ is evenly lit, the third initial is obscured by the shadow of Cosimo’s left shoulder. Pontormo would have possessed some latitude in the design of the portrait. As Vasari’s account of the deference shown him by Vincenzo Borghini in the design of the \textit{studiolo} of Francesco de’ Medici demonstrates, patrons and scholars designed programmes for a given picture but did not interfere with the

\textsuperscript{57} Kenneth Scott, ‘The Identification of Augustus with Romulus-Quirinus’, \textit{Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association}, 56 (1925), 82–105 (100). The events which followed the death of Augustus in Campania in AD 14 clearly show the policy of the princeps’ family, a policy which followed almost to the letter the apotheosis of Romulus.
artist’s depiction of it. The placement of the letter may reflect a subtle resistance to the third ‘P.’ of the title, or perhaps a wish to mute its presence. If its presence is deliberately muted, it is less likely that it stands for ‘Parens,’ and more likely that it represents the more controversial ‘Primus’ or ‘Princeps.’ The third ‘P.’ is the most contentious part of the title, and Pontormo’s design for the acronym may reflect an ambivalence towards it. The shadow cast onto the letter might then be read as a metaphorical shadow cast over the title itself.

The rhetoric of hereditary power

There is no doubt that through a canny programme of representation in a variety of media the Medici shaped public perception of their family and its place in Florentine life. This was especially true for the personage of Cosimo il Vecchio. Pontormo’s portrait presents a visual version of Cosimo as the philosopher king. If his image is compared to the early depiction seen in Benozzo Gozzoli’s fresco located in the chapel of the Medici Ricciardi palazzo, with Cosimo astride a mule and dressed in the red foggettina cap of the popolo, the extent of the transformation is readily visible. [Figure 16]

Alison Brown has tracked the stages of Cosimo’s exaltation in the literature that surrounded him, noting the changes in rhetorical styles, from his initial

58 Lo zibaldone di Giorgio Vasari, ed. by Alessandro Del Vita, Rome: Istituto d’archeologia e storia dell’arte, 1938, 57. Vasari reported that Borghini ostentatiously deferred to Vasari’s superior knowledge on how to depict the four humours on the ceiling of the studiolo saying, ‘le quali quattro complessioni come si abbiamo a dipignere voi lo sapete meglio di me...’
characterization as a shrewd and beneficent merchant who served the republic, to the eventual persona of a philosopher king and Maecenas. Brown has demonstrated how these changes in the language reflect the shift in power to the Medici fuelled initially by Cosimo’s patronage of humanist scholarship. By the time of Pontormo’s portrait, Cosimo had been praised by three generations of orators in three different literary traditions. The earliest generation were humanist writers of international repute, such as Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini. They were peers and friends of Cosimo, and their views of Florentine politics were shaped by the republican models of Cicero and Sallust. They never praised Cosimo as more than the leading citizen of a free republic. And, in turn, Cosimo did not fund their enterprises. As the scholars’ and writers’ independence lessened, so did the republican tenor of their texts. The first major shift in the intellectual climate of Florence occurred in 1456, when Johannes Argyropoulos was appointed to the chair of Greek in Florence. As a foreigner, he was less sensitive to the local traditions of republicanism and more dependent on Cosimo, since his translations of Aristotle’s works were funded by, and subsequently dedicated to, him. He was the first to speak of Cosimo as a divinely inspired philosopher-ruler, and he praised him as a philosopher rather than a politician. In Argyropoulos’s prefaces, Cosimo was referred to, for the first time, as the undisputed head of Florence; this claim was bolstered with metaphysical arguments.

The third generation of humanists in Florence, exemplified by Marsilio Ficino, were, more or less, creatures of the Medici. Cosimo gave Ficino a job and a house, as well as the codices of Plato and Plotinus on which he would base his translations. His reputation was made by Cosimo’s patronage. He and the poets of the ‘third generation’ were the first to describe Cosimo as ‘an imperial Augustus and Maecenas’. Ficino’s depiction of the rule of Cosimo as a ‘Golden age of peace and plenty in which the Muses flourish’ could be interpreted as the aspirational writing of a dependent. Additionally, there was a growing consciousness of the conventional character of such terms as ‘liberty’ and ‘republic’, which could be seen as not only a political ideals but

60 A. Brown, ‘The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo de’ Medici, Pater Patriae,’ 204 and throughout.
63 A. Brown, ‘The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo de’ Medici, Pater Patriae’, 200–01. See also Argyropoulos’ prefaces to his translations of Aristotle addressed to Cosimo de’ Medici. The text is taken principally from Laur. 54,10 (written in the hand of the scribe designated as ‘C’).
also as ‘systems of representation’ that could be manipulated. Meaning could be shifted through association; Cosimo’s image attached to that of Florentia creates the perception that the two are indissoluble. This phenomenon was as applicable to visual images as to the written or spoken word. Picturing Cosimo’s rule as hereditary naturalized the transference of power to his progeny. By 1519, when Pontormo’s portrait was painted, ‘Pater Patriae’ had gone from being a title given in gratitude by citizen peers to a dynastic title that guaranteed the right of succession to Cosimo’s descendants. The accolade had already been banned once by resentful Florentines, but Pontormo’s inclusion of the acronym signals the Medici’s determination to reassert its perpetual claim.

**The banderole: text and visual presentation**

As mentioned earlier, Pontormo deliberately used archaic devices in his portrait of Cosimo. In addition to his use of the profile, the presence of a banderole was rarely seen in painted portraiture by the second decade of the sixteenth century. Moreover,

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mottoes, in any era, are generally displayed as gracefully unfurling and legible scrolls. An example can be seen in the reverse of Leonardo da Vinci’s Portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci (c. 1474). [Figure 17] In this emblem the juniper, a symbol of chastity and a cognate of the name of Ginevra, is gracefully encircled by the banderole, which reads ‘Virtutem Forma Decorat’ (‘Beauty Adorns Virtue’). The word forma is written on the section of the banderole that wraps around the juniper, visually wrapping the word beauty around the form of the juniper, in an exquisite play on words and images.

One must question why Pontormo does not follow this kind of model. He has painted Cosimo’s banderole with great care, and its convoluted form creates an arresting sculptural presence. [Figure 18] It is given the highest formal value of any object in the portrait, directing attention to both its form and its text. But the text written on the banderole is difficult to read. It is presented upside-down, indicating that it is primarily meant for Cosimo’s eyes; but even more significant is its presentation in a knotted form, which is unique in the history of portraiture.  

The text of Cosimo’s banderole is taken from the Aeneid and reads, ‘Nunc Avulso non Deficit Alter,’ which can be translated as ‘When one is torn away, the next will not falter.’ This is a slight corruption of the original text of the Aeneid, VI, 143, which reads, ‘Primo avulso non deficit alter’ (when the first is torn away the second will not falter). This change alters the meaning of the phrase, suggesting a continual and unending renewal. In 1685, Alessandro Segni, an academician, librarian and historian of the Medici, compiled a treatise on Medicean imprese that documents the source of the text on the banderole.  

Segni listed an early device attributed to Giovanni di Bicci, derived from a passage in The Aeneid and based on a description of Aeneas’ golden bough. It reads, ‘il pomo d’oro sul albero che lo produce,’ meaning ‘the golden apple on the tree which brings it forth’. Cosimo il Vecchio had later adopted and adapted this motto in the following way: ‘il pomo d’oro che spunta dal tronco dopo lo schiantarsi dal primo: nunc avulso non deficit alter’. This translates as ‘the golden apple that sprouts

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69 R. W. Lightbown, Mantegna: With a Complete Catalogue of the Paintings, Drawings, and Prints, 2 vols, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, I, 202. The closest example I have found is Mantegna’s banderole on the olive tree in Pallas and the Vices (Minerva expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue). In Mantegna’s picture for the studiolo of Isabella d’Este the writing on the banderole that wraps around the tree (representing Daphne) calls for the goddess of learning and the arts, to expel the vices that threaten a life of chastity, thus explicitly associating learning with chastity. The banderole in Pontomo’s painting functions similarly, associating Cosimo with learning and with the patriarchal figure of Anchises. I have not been able to find another example of a banner, or banderole, that is presented in a knotted form.

70 Ames-Lewis, ‘Early Medicean Devices’, 126; Cox-Rearick, Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art, 47–49.

71 Ames-Lewis, ‘Early Medicean Devices’, 126. Ames-Lewis points out that this device is more convincingly connected to Cosimo il Vecchio’s imagery, and that there is no surviving visual evidence to support Segni’s claim in relation to Giovanni di Bicci.
from the trunk after the first was broken off: as soon as one is torn away, another will not falter’.\(^2\)

Pontormo’s use and adaptation of this motto, and its placement on the laurel branch, emphasizes the generational focus of this portrait. The motto looks backwards in time, to Cosimo’s father, for its inception, while, simultaneously, it looks forward in time, through its content, to future generations, including the just-born baby Cosimo. Cosimo sits at the centre of this lineage that unfolds in both directions.

The line that Cosimo added to Giovanni’s motto is adapted from Book VI of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas travels to the underworld in search of his dead father Anchises, cousin to King Priam of Troy. To make this journey, he must first find the eternal tree that is sacred to Proserpina, Queen of the Underworld, located in a deep wood. He must break off a piece of its golden bough, and take it to Hades to present to Proserpina so that he can have safe passage back to the living world. Aeneas succeeds in finding the bough and journeys to Hades, locating his father in a wooded valley through which the river Lethe flows. Anchises is standing in a lush field, absorbed in surveying the entire company of his family and his own grandsons yet-to-be: their destinies, their opportunities, their characters and their deeds. Aeneas looks around and sees innumerable souls that he describes as resembling bees in a meadow on a still summer’s day. His father explains that they are souls that drink the water of Lethe to forget everything in their previous lives and now wait to return to Earth and live a second time.

Anchises, silent a moment, drawing this son and Sibyl
With him into the midst of the vast murmuring throng,
Took his stand on a rise of ground where he could scan
The long column marching toward him, soul by soul,
And recognize their features as they neared.

‘So come,
the glory that will follow the sons of Troy through time,
your children born of Italian stock who wait for life,
bright souls, future heirs of our name and our renown:
I will reveal them all and tell you of your fate.’ \(^3\)

In Pontormo’s painting Cosimo’s studied gaze is focused in the direction of the motto, which predicts future generations and is entwined in the branches of the laurel. Cosimo, like Anchises, is patiently overseeing future generations. Duke Lorenzo is dead but the family of Cosimo continues. The laurel, like the golden bough,


perpetually renews itself; when one branch is severed, another will take its place. Cosimo is the root of this laurel, and the infant Cosimo is the flourishing new branch. Anchises was of royal stock, being cousin to King Priam of Troy. Associating Cosimo with Anchises raises the status of the family beyond that of simple political supremacy into the realm of myth.

The form of the banderole

On a compositional level, the knotted banderole can be seen to take the place of the orb that Florentia held out with her right hand on the reverse of the medal by replacing the strictly visual reference to the cosmos or palla with a written motto. Its twisted shape is echoed in Cosimo’s ear and again in his hands, which are clasped together in his lap; his index finger curls around the opposite fist just as the ends of the banderole wrap around the laurel branch linking him visually to the banner. The knot is carefully constructed, winding three times around the laurel branches. In its central turn around the laurel, the banderole crosses over itself to form an ‘x’, while the two ends loop around the branches in half circles.

Knots were, and are, potent symbols in literature and imagery and are freighted with meanings both positive and negative. A knot, like a lover’s knot, may bond two people together, but equally, a knot may represent a thorny problem that defies solution; it may represent an obstacle or an imperfection. The fabled Gordian knot found in the ancient Phrygian city of Telmissus promised princely rule to whoever could solve the problem of how to unfasten it. Alexander the Great solved the riddle when he sliced it open with his sword, and he went on to rule all of Asia. The presence of knotted ornament designs, in the arts and sciences, has a long history stemming back to at least the 7th century, and with it is a substantial body of literature. 74 In the third quarter of the fifteenth century a vogue for knotted and laced designs re-emerged, particularly in northern Italy, most likely as a result of a renewed interest in history and the study of Islamic wares. 75 Leonardo, who was fascinated with knots, sketched a series of knotted designs (which he called groppi) in his notebooks in the years between 1482 and 1508 and they appeared as ornament on figures (from the Mona Lisa to the Salvator Mundi) and even in interior decorations, such as the ceiling decoration of the Sala delle Asse for the Sforza Castel in Milan. 76

Pontormo’s knot is a version of a ‘Solomon’s knot’, defined as a loose knot with points in four directions, resulting in a type of cross and implying unending devotion and eternity. Included with this essay is an image of the ‘First Knot’ from the ALV series (Academia Leonardo Vinci) of six engravings, after Leonardo. [Figure 19] These prints were copied by Albrecht Dürer, who embellished them with his own additions, and made them into wood engravings, resulting in the wide dispersal of these designs across Europe. The design of the ‘First Knot’ displays several variations of a Solomon’s knot. The pattern of the outer bands resembles the configuration of Pontormo’s knotted banderole with the crossed design looking more like an “x” than a “t”; when doubled this pattern loosely resembles a ‘figure 8’.

Figure 20 Reconstruction of the crossing of the church of San Lorenzo, Florence, with Donatello’s pulpits, Verrocchio’s tomb marker of Cosimo, Desiderio’s tabernacle and the high altar facing the congregation (drawing by Susanne Phillippson Curcic) in Lavin, 1993, Fig. 12). Reproduction courtesy of Prof. Irving Lavin.

Verrocchio designed a tomb slab for Cosimo’s monument that contained a Solomon’s knot at its centre. It is a geometrical presentation of the knot containing a circle within a square; it refers to humanist thought and neo-Platonic philosophy, and elements of the overall design evoke the early Christian ambition to return to the ancient unity of Christianity and to reconcile it with Platonic philosophy. [Figure 20] In the tomb slab the knot is presented as a rectangle of red porphyry, both an imperial and a Christological symbol, to which four half-circles are added, which is then enclosed within a circle. [see Figure 13] It becomes a cross within a circle, which is a symbol of eternity, as well as the promise of salvation in eternity. [81] In Canto XXVIII of the Paradiso, Dante sees paradise for the first time as a series of unending circles within circles or wheels that are referred to as a knot he cannot untie (i.e., understand). [82]

According to Irving Lavin, this association comes from the Christian cosmology of Isadore of Seville, which relates the human microcosm to the macrocosm of the

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79 Kent, Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance, 379.
80 Susan McKillop, ‘Dante and Lumen Christi: A Proposal for the meaning of the Tomb of Cosimo de’ Medici,’ 289–90. McKillop states that porphyry disks were used in the early Christian world to honour not only emperors but also the body of Christ. See also, Kent, Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance, 379.
82 Dante Alighieri, La Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata: Paradiso, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, Milan: Mondadori, 1966, 419, canto XXVIII: 58–60. ‘Se li tuoi diti non sono a tal nodo/ sufficienti, non è maraviglia:/ tanto, per non tentare, è fatto sodo!’.
universe through tetradic divisions of Man, Time and the World, a neo-Platonic notion that was also expressed in the play on Cosimo’s name, *Cosmos Cosmicon.*

Cosimo had developed an interest in philosophy in his adult life that grew into a passion in the years before his death. In 1464, Ficino read his recently completed translations of Plato to the dying Cosimo, who had commissioned them. Later, Ficino wrote an account of Cosimo’s last moments for Lorenzo de’ Medici, relating that Cosimo had died shortly after he and Cosimo had read Plato’s dialogues ‘On the One Principle of Things’ and ‘On the Highest Good’. These were the names Ficino gave to Plato’s *Parmenides* and *Philebus,* respectively. The *Parmenides* presents an argument on the hierarchical structure of the universe and, as Lavin writes, this last conversation seems to have included a discussion of ‘the idea of the good and the world soul, the universal principle of harmony, expressed in the theory of numbers, geometry and astronomy’.

According to Book III of Marsilio Ficino’s *Platonic Theology,* the soul is positioned half-way between God and the body at the centre of the metaphysical hierarchy. He describes the soul as the ‘fitting knot’ or ‘node’ that binds the upper half of the hierarchy with the lower. On account of its place in the hierarchy, Ficino explains, the soul is at one and the same time drawn to what is above, and responsible for the governance of nature below. It is therefore at the centre of the *nodus perpetuus,* or perpetual knot, that constitutes the world embrace (*copula mundi*) by which all things are bound together.

Turning once more to Dante, the poet uses the image of a knot in the very last scene of the *Paradiso.* It is a moment in the epic where Christian text, in the form of the prayer of St. Bernard, joins with the story of the *Aeneid.* In Book III of the *Aeneid,* the story of the sibyl of Cumae is told. She wrote her prophecies, inspired by Apollo, on the leaves of trees. A strong wind entered the rocky cave where the sibyl had stored them, scattering them to the four winds (*Aeneid* III, 441-452). In the last scene of the

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89 ‘...omnes mundi partes, quia unius artificis opera sunt, eiusdem machinæ membra inter se in essendo & uiuendo similia, mutua quadam charitate sibi inuicem uinciutur, ut meritò dici possit amor nodus perpetuus & copula mundi, partiumq. & eius immobile sustetaculum, ac firmum totius machinæ fundamentum’; See also, Lavin, ‘Donatello’s Bronze Pulpits in San Lorenzo and the Early Christian Revival,’ 267, fn. 58.
Paradiso, Dante gazes into the pure light of Paradise and is given a vision of the form of the universe in which those scattered leaves are seen once more, through the aid of St. Bernard and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. Only now they are bound into a single knot, representing the universe. Dale Kent has argued that Cosimo was thinking of these lines when he chose the design for his tombslab.89

Pontormo’s portrayal of a knotted banderole offers a rich symbol at the very heart of the portrait. The motto predicts the endless future generations of Cosimo’s family. The banderole may be taken as a symbol of all things bound together. It may even be seen as a symbol for the soul. It is the centre of things, cosmic and universal. Cosimo looks intently in the direction of the knotted banderole, just as, from his tomb, he is positioned to gaze up for eternity at the Solomon’s knot within a circle. Like Anchises, Cosimo gazes in the direction of all the souls that are yet to be and have already been. It can be argued that the knotted banderole updates the early motto of Cosimo (‘il pomo d’oro che spunta dal tronco dopo lo schiantarsi dal primo: nunc avulso non deficit alter’) by knotting the words of the motto and, in so doing, recalling Cosimo’s death and tomb, as well as the writing of Ficino which Cosimo sponsored.

Both Dante and Ficino present a vision of this ‘universal form of the knot’ and Pontormo’s inclusion of and focus on the knotted banderole makes possible a Dantine, neo-Platonic and cosmic interpretation of this visual form. In Pontormo’s portrait, the knotted motto can be interpreted as a symbol of eternity and dynasty in the same moment. The ‘fitting knot’ or ‘node’ that contains Anchises’ prophecy represents the souls that came before Cosimo and those that will come after. It is also the metaphysical ‘fitting knot’ or ‘node’ that binds the upper half of the hierarchy that ascends to God with the lower that ends in the body. All Medici history is contained within the knotted banderole. It is a reminder of Cosimo’s embrace of the early motto, his scholarly interests and his deep religiosity. It echoes the programme of his tomb as well as the story of the moment of his death. It is a symbol of the universal knot of all humanity joined together. At the end of the Paradiso, Dante writes:

Within its depths I saw gathered in,
Bound by love in a single volume,
The scattered leaves of all the universe,
Substance and accidents, and their relations,
Almost fused together in such a way,
That what I speak of is one simple flame.

The universal form of this knot
I believe I saw, because more fully,
Saying this, I feel myself rejoice…
As the geometer who dedicates everything

89 Kent, Cosimo de’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance, 383–84.
Irving Lavin has described the programme of Cosimo’s tomb and setting as designed to emphasize Cosimo’s relationship to the rediscovered classical heritage and auspicious future in the Christian universe. According to Lavin, this fits with the Florentine tradition of self-conscious historicism ‘that can only be described as a mystical transfer of identity from the past to the present’. It is precisely that impulse for the transfer of identity from past to present that underlies the themes of Pontormo’s portrait and the knotted motto links the Medici dynasty to Christian and mythological literary themes.

**Pontormo’s comment**

And yet Cosimo’s worried and knotted hands, as well as his cramped posture, must be accounted for. This is the first of a series of Medici portraits in which Pontormo constructs an attractive and compelling image that is sympathetic and regards the sitter as exemplary. Simultaneously, Pontormo registers a hesitation in his expressive presentation of details of the scene with elements that contradict or diminish the eulogium. In the *Portrait of Cosimo*, there is insufficient room for the objects in the picture, and Cosimo barely fits into the frame. Cosimo’s bent figure can be read as worried, while the knotted banderole can be seen as an objective correlative of a perpetual and thorny problem as much as a cosmic metaphor of past, present and future. The separation and casting into shadow of the third ‘P.’ from the title of P.P. (*Pater Patriae*) could imply a reserve. The title ‘*Princeps*’ was never given to Cosimo by a grateful city. Rather, it was taken by his descendants. Perhaps Pontormo’s design for the acronym reflects his own uneasiness with this title. The combination of compressed, worried, tangled and ambiguous details adds up to create an undertone that undercuts the triumphal reading.

This anxiety could be accounted for, in part, by a recognition of the mood engendered by the recent deaths of the Dukes Giuliano and Lorenzo, as well as a concomitant sense of uncertainty about the future, but it can also be argued that

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Pontormo, whether consciously or unconsciously, embeds these details in the portrait, registering his own resistance to the idea of princely rule. This reluctance is buried in the design, and is a small murmur of dissent, not a deliberate strategy, since Pontormo would certainly have been most eager to gain the favour and patronage of the Medici.

Teasing out these themes, both positive and negative, requires the kind of dismantling and reassembling of images and language at which the Medici excelled. It is no wonder that, as Vasari reported, Ottaviano de’ Medici loved the portrait, and rewarded Pontormo with a succession of Medici commissions throughout his career, beginning almost immediately with the fresco at Poggio a Caiano. This very literary and scholarly interpretation would have appealed to Cosimo, and his heirs, and it served to place him in the company of poets and kings. The motto is the mantra of endurance and success. Rather than being concerned with the public weal, this is a picture and motto of private aspiration and triumph, of erudition, history and religiosity.

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