Botticelli's *Primavera* and *Birth of Venus,* Donatello's bronze *David,* Brunelleschi's Duomo, Michelangelo's marble *David,* and Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* – these are some of the Italian Renaissance's crowning achievements, and Florence is considered the birthplace of this artistic movement. The flourishing of art in Florence would not have been possible without the sponsorship of wealthy elites and groups in society known as patrons. At first patronage in Florence was typically a collective endeavor, with merchant guilds commissioning works of art; however, with the rising prosperity of the Medici family private patronage was increasingly effective in manifesting an individual or family's affluence. Through artistic self-promotion the Medici gained a political following in Florence and government offices became filled with their supporters. This domination of political positions meant that the Medici were able to become de-facto rulers of the city. Although members of the family used artistic patronage as a form of self-promotion, they were cautious in keeping within reasonable bounds denying proposals for projects that would seem too ostentatious. Additionally, many of their projects, especially in architecture, benefited the city and people of Florence. This paper argues that the Medici family was following a tradition of self-promoting patronage that was begun by the guilds and extended to other wealthy families in Florence, and that they were motivated by many aims outside of self-promotion, such as penance for the sin of usury and civic virtue; thus, they must be viewed as a product of their time and not a family who was solely dedicated towards advancing themselves within society. This will become clear by looking first at the development of the republic of Florence and the power that the Medici gained within the government.

The independent republic of Florence was established in 1183 during the conflict between the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy. The republic was governed by aristocratic rule, but following independence merchant power rose as trade expanded. This resulted in a

division of Florence's population into two factions: the Ghibellines, mainly aristocrats who supported the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Guelfs, the merchant class who supported the Papacy. By the mid-thirteenth century, the Guelfs had wrested power and established a new government that favored mercantilist interests over those of the aristocracy. With the rise of the Guelf party the basis for garnering political power changed from inheritance to wealth. This is evidenced by the fact that those seeking political office were required to have membership in mercantile guilds.

Guilds elected by the government executed civic projects. These organizations were charged with protecting merchant rights and interests from the exploitative aristocracy. Guild membership was a sign of prestige in Renaissance Florence since it was a prerequisite for political office and a position that was hard to achieve. Guilds used their membership dues to sponsor their projects. Patronage was a way to show the power and wealth of each individual guild in the hopes of getting its members elected to the government. To demonstrate this, a guild's coat of arms was placed on the public works that it sponsored. The guilds had a vested interest in the appearance of their commissions, because they used their projects as a way to manifest their wealth and power. Elaborate and important works would help the guilds gain political seats and a strong voice in the government from which to further advance their craft.

As a result, there was much competitive rivalry between guilds. A look at Orsanmichele, a loggia for grain merchants built in the 1280s, offers an interesting comparison of the status of varying guilds. The building was constructed with niches along the outer walls, so that guilds could display statues of their patron saints. The major guilds secured prime positions for their statues. These included the Cloth Merchants' guild and the Wool Merchants' guild. The material that the guild used was an important indicator of status and wealth. Bronze was one of

the hardest materials to work with, requiring vast sums of money to rectify mistakes that were made in the castings. This material was used by the prestigious cloth merchants, wool merchants, and the bankers as a symbol of their wealth.[1] Many of these same methods were used by private patrons as well.

One such private patron was Cosimo de' Medici, a prominent member of the Bankers' Guild in the early fifteenth century. The success of his banks allowed him to create a powerful Medici party and garner support by providing "preferential loans" to his followers.[2] Cosimo's increasing power threatened the conservative, republican government, and in September 1433 the Medici family was exiled from Florence. However, the following year a new government was elected that contained no conservative members, and Cosimo was allowed to return. Power still remained in the elected bodies and guild membership was still required for political office, but the Medici party took de-facto control of Florence through their hold of most of the office positions. This led to a decrease in the power of the guilds. Beginning with Cosimo, the Medici family used private art patronage as a way of manifesting their wealth and prestige, much as the guilds themselves did. They were able to gain and hold power through the visual representation of their authority.

At first the Medici took a subtle approach to patronage, working through the Bankers' Guild and participating in corporate commissions, but over time there was a shift to private sponsorships that were used to show the power and wealth of the family. The Medici's early participation in corporate commissions was not traceable to the donors, so there was more behind this patronage than self-edification. For instance, in 1419 Ghiberti was commissioned to sculpt a statue of Saint Matthew, the Bankers' Guild's patron saint, for the guild's niche in Orsanmichele.

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[1] Mary Hollingsworth, *Patronage in Renaissance Italy: From 1400 to the Early Sixteenth Century* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 28.
[2] Ibid., 48.

The Medici donated more for this project than any other person or group, but apart from the guild members involved in the commission no one knew of this contribution.[3] After 1434, however, Cosimo began to privately finance huge, public projects.[4]

One way of demonstrating the "charitableness" of a commission was inscribing the price of the construction on the piece. This was a way to blatantly show the costliness of a gift.[5] The Medici used rare and expensive materials, such as bronze and porphyry, to make their commissions stand out. The Medici also chose strategic locations for their projects. First, they commissioned works in places that were outside their neighborhood as a way of expanding their control. Second, they would commission altarpieces in numerous churches and essentially lay claim to the whole building, since altars were the central focal point of the church. Third, the Medici chose locations that would offer symbolic significance to their projects. For instance, Piero's influence on the altar at SS. Annunziata was symbolic of Medici control over a site that was previously dominated by the Parte Guelfa.

Another strategy that Cosimo practiced was to institute civic rituals that incorporated the churches that the Medici sponsored. These events included parades and feasts for saints' days.[6] Finally, the Medici became involved in certain locations so that they could become intertwined in the important histories of these venues. Medici involvement in San Lorenzo serves as an example of this strategy. San Lorenzo was the earliest church in Florence, and Medici commissioning of the altar meant that the family became associated with the beginnings of Florentine Christian history. A look at individual artists that the Medici frequently worked with shows the power of using patronage as a tool.

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[3] John T. Paoletti, "Strategies and Structures of Medici Artistic Patronage in the Fifteenth Century," in *The Early Medici and Their Artists,* ed. Francis Ames-Lewis (London: Birbeck College, 1995), 20.
[4] Hollingsworth, 48-49.
[5] Paoletti, 28.
[6] Ibid., 29-35.

Much of what is known about the relationship between specific patrons and artists during this time comes from Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists.* Vasari was himself an artist in early sixteenth century Italy, and he worked closely with later Medici family members and other prominent artists. Thus he serves as a valuable contemporary source to the study of art patronage. In his books he gives biographies of many of the leading artists of Renaissance Italy. One artist that he addresses is Sandro Botticelli. Botticelli was one of the Medici family's prime clients. The Medici used much of the art that they commissioned from Botticelli as a form of propaganda.

On of Botticelli's most well known paintings, the *Primavera* (Figure 2), was privately owned by the Medici family and used to represent Medicean themes. The history surrounding the commissioning of the painting is unclear and an appropriate date of production cannot be determined. In the *Primavera* Flora, the goddess of gardens and flowers, is on the right. Chloris, the nymph of the bare earth, appears in a white dress on the right as well. Flora emerges from Chloris because of the nymph's rape by Zephyr, the west wind. In the middle appears Venus with Cupid flying overhead. And on the left is the messenger god Mercury and the Three Graces.[7] This piece was composed from a number of different mythological texts, and does not represent one single story.[8] Scholar Sharon Fermor argues that the general themes of love and spring are what make the piece uniquely Medicean. Lorenzo sponsored festivals and jousts as a way of evoking an image of his de-facto power as a recreation of the Golden Age and returning springtime. She writes, quote "The fertile springtime that brings beauty to the earth and love to men and women is presented within these contexts as a part of a cycle linking contemporary

[7] Sharon Fermor, "Botticelli and the Medici," in *The Early Medici and Their Artists,* ed. Francis Ames-Lewis (London: Birbeck College, 1995), 175.
[8] Ibid., 175-178.

Florence to its near and distant past – a symbol of its own continuity and prosperity, which are both products of Lorenzo's benevolent reign."[9] End quote Botticelli would have attended many of Lorenzo's events and would have been fully aware of the connection he was drawing between the Medici reign and his story in the *Primavera*. The connection to Lorenzo's jousts is seen in the festival dress of many of the figures in the piece. Also Mercury's sword is a parade type and not a typical fighting weapon.

The theme of springtime is also linked to love. This is seen in the presence of cupid, the chaste representation of Venus, and her inviting gesture. According to Fermor, the manifestation of love connoted idyllic nobility that linked Medici power to thoughts of virtue and loyalty.[10] This piece was privately owned by the Medici as evidenced by inventories of the Medici Palace.[11] As a result, the painting was most likely not widely viewed at the time, but this does not eliminate its power as propaganda for Medici rule. Since the piece was located in the privacy of the Medici Palace only privileged members of society would have seen it, and these groups would have been reminded of Medici power and prestige. It can also be argued that even if only seen by Medici family members, it represented an ideal that they strove to achieve during their time, and, as such, was still a powerful tool in shaping their governance.

Despite their association with Botticelli, the Medici were not great patrons of painting. They preferred building projects and sculpture where they could really show their wealth while making a contribution to the city at the same time.[12] One important Renaissance sculptor that the Medici worked closely with was Donatello. In Florence, it is apparent that Donatello worked almost exclusively for the Medici family who provided the artist with housing and sufficient

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[9] Ibid., 181.
[10] Ibid., 181.
[11] Ibid., 174.
[12] Ibid., 172.

materials. The *David* (Figure 3), perhaps Donatello's most well known sculpture, was commissioned by Cosimo and showed both Medici wealth and prestige. It is not known when the piece was made and much debate persists between art historians. It is agreed that at some point the sculpture was displayed in the courtyard of their palace, although it might have been housed in other locations first.

The *David* was both the first large bronze statue to be made during its time and the first nude statue since antiquity. The material sent an important message, because bronze was a very expensive metal.[13] An inscription once appeared at the base of the sculpture which is known from contemporary manuscripts that described the piece. This message details the triumph of the Republic of Florence over its enemies, and Medici sponsorship of the sculpture shows their political support of Florentine government. In fact the republican government had sponsored Donatello to create a marble *David* earlier in the fifteenth century, and this *David* was displayed in the Palazzo della Signoria as a sign of the government's power over others. Scholar Sarah Blake McHam argues that the Medici commissioning of the bronze *David,* similar to the earlier marble one, represented quote "an unprecedented appropriation by a single family of a corporate symbol of the state and informed the cognoscenti that true power resided several hundred meters north of the Palazzo della Signoria."[14] end quote In this case the piece does not represent the Florentine Republic as a whole, but instead the Medici dominance of the Republic.

Although the Medici used these tactics to remind the citizens of their power and wealth, not all of the Medici's projects were motivated by political aspirations. Many scholars argue that

[13] Hollingsworth, 67-69.
[14] Sarah Blake McHam, "Donatello's Bronze 'David' and 'Judith' as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence," *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 1 (2001): 34.

one reason for Cosimo's commissions was penance for the sin of usury.[15] According to Christian doctrine poverty was virtuous and wealth was a sinful excess.[16] Inscriptions concerning expenditures on pieces were not a way of flaunting how much the Medici spent, as some have argued, but instead a way of keeping track of the amount that the family had put forth towards their penance.[17] The Medici also took a careful approach to patronage so as not to overstep their bounds. Vasari's depiction of the Medici rejection of Brunelleschi's design for the Medici Palace exemplifies this point. Vasari states that the plan would have created a direct connection between a church and the palace which the Medici believed would be too presumptuous.[18] Thus the Medici were careful to stay within proper societal and cultural bounds.

Additionally, it is important to note that the Medici were not the only wealthy family in Florence using commissions as a way to show their status. Other banking families, such as the Ruccellai and the Strozzi, built elaborate palaces along the same Roman designs as the Medici and sponsored monumental architecture of their own, such as chapels. Cosimo's patronage was not a new concept, but rather it was taken from the example of both the guilds and parties before him and other contemporary wealthy families.

In conclusion, Giovanni di Bicci, Cosimo, and Lorenzo shaped the history of the Medici through their commissions. They used art patronage as a way to garner support and gain a majority of political seats in Florentine government. This majority control by the Medici party allowed the family to become de-facto rulers of the city. They maintained influence through

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[15] Crispin Robinson, "The Early Medici and Architecture," in *The Early Medici and Their Artists,* ed. Francis Ames-Lewis (London: Birbeck College, 1995), 63.
[16] Patricia Rubin, "Magnificence and the Medici," in *The Early Medici and Their Artists,* ed. Francis Ames-Lewis (London: Birbeck College, 1995), 43.
[17] E. H. Gombrich, "The Early Medici as Patrons of Art: A Survey of Primary Sources," in *Italian Renaissance Studies,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 284.
[18] Robinson, 65.

visual representations of their power as seen in pieces such as Botticelli's *Primavera* and Donatello's *David.* Although it is true that the Medici used art to insert themselves into public life, they must be viewed as a product of their time. Other families, such as the Rucellai and Strozzi, also commissioned artwork and public buildings to show their wealth. And the Medici followed the example of the guilds that came before them who sponsored projects such as those at Orsanmichele to further their crafts. Patronage was a form of self-promotion, but it was also a way for wealthy elites to give back to the city that made them and to show their civic pride. Thus, self-promotion is only one component of early Medici patronage of the arts, and their commissions must be viewed in a more comprehensive way to truly understand the motivations for their actions. Above all, the Medici helped promote a revival of cultural antiquity in Florence and unquestionably shaped the history and advancement of the city.