

THE IMPORTANCE OF COSIMO DE MEDICI IN LIBRARY HISTORY

by William F. Meehan III



Cosimo de Medici, the aristocratic banker and statesman who enlivened philanthropy in Renaissance Florence, might have made his greatest contribution to the arts through his patronage of humanist libraries. Cosimo himself accumulated a superb personal collection, but his three major library initiatives were charitable activities and included Italy's first public library, which made its way to the magnificent library founded generations later by one of his descendants.

Cosimo's patronage of libraries flourished when a small group of Florentine intellectuals leading a revival of the classical world and *litterae humaniores* sought his support. They fostered a milieu that engendered an appreciation for books and learning in the benefactor who "had a great liking for men of letters and sought their company" (da Bisticci, 1926, p. 213). Moreover, the humanist movement was accentuated by the arrival of connoisseurship, with taste the distinctive purview of the humanist scholars (McCarthy, 1963, p. 184). Cosimo "was enchanted with the delightful and cultivated world of the humanists" (de Hamel, 1994, p. 240) and, starting with the Platonic Academy in Florence, sponsored their endeavors in the renewal of Greek and Roman civilization through its literature.

Cosimo was introduced to the initial wave of humanists in Florence—among them Poggio Bracciolini and Niccolò Niccoli—by his tutor Roberto Rossi. They acquainted Cosimo with the classical world and inspired in him a fascination with finding, collecting, and studying its literature. Heartened by the romantic wanderlust of a true bibliophile, the austere banker even embarked on several journeys in the hunt for books, while guaranteeing just about any undertaking that involved books. He financed trips to nearly every European town as well as to Syria, Egypt, and Greece organized by Poggio, his chief book scout. The intrepid and dependable Poggio famously traversed mountainous Europe to unearth treasures in forgotten abbey and cathedral libraries. His "prowlings" at St. Gall, the monastery founded in 612 A.D. in Switzerland, are "the stuff of legend" (Basbanes, 2002, p. 41), while his finds

in Germany are "epoch-making" (Holmes, 1969, p. 119).

When it came to his personal book collection, Cosimo preferred quality over quantity, and he added to his library wisely. After growing up in a home with only three books, Cosimo by the age of 30 had assembled a library of about 70 exquisite volumes. The collection reflected his literary taste and consisted of classical texts as well as a mix of secular and sacred works typical of collections at the time. Setting his library, as well as other Florentine humanist libraries, apart from others in Italy in the first half of the fourteenth century was the accession of Greek texts, which were exceedingly scarce at the time but central to the unifying theme of Cosimo's excellent collection, as well as a principal scholarly interest of the humanists.

Although Cosimo's library was closed to scholars, he became essential in the effort to revive and study the ancients by supporting the most ardent book collector among the Florentine humanists: Niccolò. With an almost endless supply of florins from the Medici bank, Niccolò formed an uncommonly large personal library of 800 books. He was a collector of such remarkable enthusiasm that he owned multiple copies of several classical texts, which he generously circulated for copying.

Niccolò's taste was exquisite, and he certainly was the connoisseur nonpareil among the humanists. Primarily a scribe, his fastidious attention to form was so unyielding that he copied texts himself instead of relying on commissions. It thus was inevitable that he desired a more pleasing script in his books. In partnership with Poggio, Niccolò successfully imitated the earlier Caroline minuscule in creating a new script called *lettera anitca*, known today as Roman. They also initiated a style now identified as italic.

These innovations in the appearance of a book coincided with a larger humanist effort that inspired a shift in the classical text from a purely literary concern with content to a visual one occupied with appearance. It called for an aesthetic overhaul of the entire book, and the result clearly distinguishes the humanist

manuscript from other styles. With interlaced white vine scroll gracefully bordering the attractive script on creamy white vellum, books in Florentine libraries such as Cosimo's and Niccolò's, to be sure, were more than texts to be learned; they were (and are) objects to behold. "Even the smell of a clean humanist book," observes illuminated manuscript authority Christopher de Hamel, "is strangely seductive" (1994, p. 252).

Niccolò and his circle were the heart of Florentine humanism, so his library was indispensable to their intellectual life. But Niccolò's high-minded mission was to accumulate a library for use not only by scholars but also by the citizenry. He thus wrote in his will the wish that his library remain, in perpetuity, a place of general use open to a public eager for knowledge, and he entrusted a group, headed by his leading creditor Cosimo, with the responsibility of carrying out his bequest. Cosimo, who had curtailed his personal manuscript commissions in the mid-1430s, was devoting his time to restoring the Dominican convent at San Marco; when Niccolò died in 1437, Cosimo had the perfect home that would fulfill the bookman's desire.

With Cosimo's active involvement, San Marco became Italy's first public library. Designed by Michelozzo, it was "a treasure-house" (Ullman & Stadter, 1972, p. 15) and "a miracle of grace and light" (Parks, 2005, p. 124) from the day it opened in 1444. Writes Medicean scholar Dale Kent (2000):

It was the library ... [in which] the architect's talents and Cosimo's style of patronage most effectively converged. The library—cool, classical, spare, and graceful ... is the architectural master piece of San Marco. The austere character of its design mirrored the character of its patron... The quality of the library also expressed the quality of Medici literary friendships. Cosimo ... was chiefly responsible for making Niccolò's legendary classical library the nucleus of his own donation. The library became a gift to the city as well as to the church, since by Niccolò's wish, his books were to be freely available to all Florentine laymen. (p. 178)

Moreover, in designing the library like a basilica but with medieval library furniture and fittings, "Michelozzo succeeded in creating at the same time the architectural model for the renaissance library and its most effective realization. The long narrow hall, divided into three parts by two rows of plain columns, vaulted and luminous, forms the perfect environment for ascetic study" (Ullman & Stadter, 1972, p. 5). After the library opened, Florence became a popular destination of Renaissance leading lights from all of Europe, because of high regard for the humanists and access to exemplars in the *litterae humaniores*. Cosimo continued to supplement the San Marco collection with books of the highest significance in all subjects.

In the early 1460s, Cosimo also built and furnished another convent library at the Badia in Fiesole overlooking Florence. The greater part of the collection was provided by Vespasiano's 45 scribes who, within two years, copied nearly 200 manuscripts based on a canon list prepared at Cosimo's request by Tommaso Parentucelli who, later as Pope Nicholas V, founded the Vatican Library. Parentucelli's proposal included religious and philosophical works, followed by treatises on mathematics, and finally the humanities. Furnishing the library was Vespasiano's most celebrated commission, which included authority for binding and for fixing chains to the books.

Cosimo's only library endeavor outside Florence, in fact his first library, was a gift in return for Venetian hospitality and goodwill. Thankful for the shelter provided during a short exile, Cosimo built and furnished in 1433 a library for the San Giorgio Maggiore monastery in Venice, which Michelozzo also designed in the conventional style. Meanwhile, the parts of Cosimo's library that did not enrich the San Marco collection were dispersed to his two sons, Piero and Giovanni, who would pursue book collecting vigorously in friendly sibling competition; differing from their father's simple and elegant manuscript style, the sons incorporated decorative miniatures created by leading painters. Over the next century, Medicis intermittently continued to build personal collections of varying size but of consistent quality. In 1571, Giulio de Medici, the former Pope Clement VII, brought together the family collections and commissioned Michelangelo to design a single library to house them in Florence.

Part of the Basilica of San Lorenzo, the Medician Laurentian Library contains some of the world's most spectacular holdings in one of its most celebrated buildings. Designed by Michelangelo as a monument to the Medici collections, it is described by historian Konstantinos Staikos (2000) in *The Great Libraries*:

The library is reached by a superb triple stairway whose steps, balustrades and curves make it look more like a sculpture. It leads up from an entrance hall where pairs of columns stand like sentinels to right and left of harmoniously designed niches. The library itself is a rectangular room ... with two side walls in the same style as the walls of the entrance hall but without the columns. Some of the windows are of stained glass, adorned with heraldic devices ... The floor and ceiling are variations on more or less the same design, consisting of garlands and palmettes framed by the rectangular panels with a conspicuous decorative design of linear and naturalistic motifs. The floor resembles a precious necklace of marble inlaid work, while the ceiling is of natural-colored carved wood. (p. 354)

It is the "the most dazzling library" author and bibliophile Nicholas A. Basbanes says he has visited in his travels (Meehan, 2005, p. 50).

Because the library was closed for nearly 200 years, it lacked a coherent collection development policy. In 1751, however, the appointment of its first librarian and the publication of its first catalog resulted in numerous and substantial accessions from families, convents, courts, and even the Italian government. Since then, the guiding principle has been “the possession of books of highly textual or aesthetical quality,” and it remains today “an inexhaustible source” for scholars (Bibliotecae, n.d.). It comprises nine main collections, one of which is the San Marco Library built by Cosimo, although much of the original library was lost in an earthquake in 1457. The books owned by Medici family members are classified by their red leather binding embossed with the Medici arms. With an initial collection of 3,000 manuscripts, the library holdings now include 11,000 manuscripts, in addition to 566 incunables and over 1,600 sixteenth-century printed books, as well as ancient forms of the book (Bibliotecae).

Shortly after his death in 1464, the people of Florence named Cosimo de Medici *pater patriae* but, according to the Renaissance library scholar Dorothy M. Robothan (1967), he correctly could be called *pater bibliothecae* (p. 544). This recognition, “Father of Libraries,” secures a permanent place in library history for the benefactor whose magnanimous patronage in Renaissance Florence was beyond compare.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William F. Meehan III is senior fellow in rare books in the Ekstrom Library at the University of Louisville. Besides writing descriptive metadata of illuminated manuscript leaves, he authors a monthly newsletter column, “Cool Things about Cool Books,” which features Ekstrom’s rare book collections. He holds an M.L.S. with a special collections specialization from Indiana University, in addition to bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees in English.

