Lorenzo de' Medici (1 January 1449 – 9 April 1492) was an Italian statesman and de facto ruler of the Florentine Republic during the Italian Renaissance.[1] Known as Lorenzo the Magnificent (Lorenzo il Magnifico) by contemporary Florentines, he was a magnate, diplomat, politician and patron of scholars, artists, and poets. He is perhaps best known for his contribution to the art world, sponsoring artists such as Botticelli and Michelangelo. His life coincided with the mature phase of Italian Renaissance and his death coincided with the end of the Golden Age of Florence.[2] The fragile peace he helped maintain between the various Italian states collapsed with his death. Lorenzo de' Medici is buried in the Medici Chapel in Florence.

Youth

Lorenzo's grandfather, Cosimo de' Medici, was the first member of the Medici family to combine running the Medici Bank with leading the Republic of Florence. Cosimo was one of the wealthiest men in Europe and spent a very large portion of his
fortune in government and philanthropy. He was a patron of the arts and funded public works.\[^3\]

Lorenzo's father, Piero di Cosimo de' Medici, was also at the center of Florentine life, active chiefly as an art patron and collector, while Lorenzo's grandfather and uncle, Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici took care of the family's business interests. Lorenzo's mother Lucrezia Tornabuoni was a poet and writer of sonnets and a friend to poets and philosophers of the Medici Academy. She became her son's advisor after the deaths of his father and uncle.\[^3\]

Lorenzo, considered the brightest of the five children of Piero and Lucrezia, was tutored by a diplomat and bishop, Gentile de' Becchi and the humanist philosopher Marsilio Ficino.\[^4\] With his brother Giuliano, he participated in jousting, hawking, hunting, and horse breeding for the Palio, a horse race in Siena. His own horse was named Morello di Vento.\[^5\]

Piero sent Lorenzo on many important diplomatic missions when he was still a youth. These included trips to Rome to meet with the pope and other important religious and political figures.\[^6\]

Lorenzo was described as rather plain of appearance, being of average height, having a broad frame and short legs, a swarthy skin, squashed nose, short-sighted eyes and a harsh voice. Giuliano, on the other hand, was regarded as handsome; he was used as a model by Botticelli in his painting of Mars and Venus.\[^7\]

### Paintings by Botticelli which use the Medici family as models

- **Madonna of the Magnificat** shows Lucrezia as the Madonna, surrounded by her children with Lorenzo holding a pot of ink.
- **The Adoration of the Magi** includes several generations of the family and their retainers. Sixteen-year-old Lorenzo is to the left, with his horse, prior for his departure on a diplomatic mission to Milan.
Politics

Lorenzo, groomed for power, assumed a leading role in the state upon the death of his father in 1469, when Lorenzo was twenty. Already drained by his grandfather's building projects and constantly stressed by mismanagement, wars, and political expenses, the bank's assets contracted seriously during the course of Lorenzo's lifetime.[8]

Lorenzo, like his grandfather, father, and son, ruled Florence indirectly, through surrogates in the city councils, threats, payoffs, and strategic marriages.[9] Although Florence flourished under Lorenzo's rule, he effectively reigned as a despot, and people had little political freedom.[10] Rival Florentine families inevitably harbored resentments over the Medicis' dominance, and enemies of the Medici remained a factor in Florentine life long after Lorenzo's passing.[9] The most notable of these rival families was the Pazzi, who nearly brought Lorenzo's reign to an end when it had barely begun.[11]

On Easter Sunday, 26 April 1478, in an incident called the Pazzi conspiracy, a group including members of the Pazzi family, backed by the Archbishop of Pisa and his patron Pope Sixtus IV, attacked Lorenzo and his brother and co-ruler Giuliano in the Cathedral of Florence. Giuliano was killed, but Lorenzo escaped with only a stab wound. The conspiracy was brutally put down by such measures as the lynching of the Archbishop of Pisa and the death of the Pazzi family members who were directly involved.[11]

In the aftermath of the Pazzi Conspiracy and the punishment of Pope Sixtus IV's supporters, the Medici and Florence suffered from the wrath of the Vatican. The Papacy seized all the Medici assets Sixtus IV could find, excommunicated Lorenzo and the entire government of Florence, and ultimately put the entire Florentine city-state under interdict.[12] When these moves had little effect, Sixtus IV formed a military alliance with King Ferdinand I of Naples, whose son Alfonso, Duke of Calabria, led an invasion of the Florentine Republic, still ruled by Lorenzo.[13]

Lorenzo rallied the citizens. However, with little support from the traditional Medici allies in Bologna and Milan (the latter being convulsed by power struggles among the Milanese ruling family, the Sforza),[11] the war dragged on, and only diplomacy by Lorenzo, who personally traveled to Naples, ultimately resolved the crisis. This success enabled Lorenzo to secure constitutional changes within the Florentine Republic's government which further enhanced his own power.[9]

Thereafter, Lorenzo, like his grandfather Cosimo de' Medici, pursued a policy both of maintaining peace and a balance of power between the northern Italian states and of keeping the other major European states such as France and the Holy Roman Empire's Habsburg rulers out of Italy. Lorenzo maintained good relations with Sultan Mehmed II of the Ottoman Empire, as the Florentine maritime trade with the Ottomans was a major source of wealth for the Medici.[14]
Patronage

Lorenzo's court included artists such as Piero and Antonio del Pollaiuolo, Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli, Domenico Ghirlandaio, and Michelangelo Buonarroti who were involved in the 15th-century Renaissance. Although he did not commission many works himself, he helped them secure commissions from other patrons.

Michelangelo lived with Lorenzo and his family for five years, dining at the family table and participating in the discussions led by Marsilio Ficino. Lorenzo was an artist himself, writing poetry in his native Tuscan. In his poetry he celebrates life even while—particularly in his later works—acknowledging with melancholy the fragility and instability of the human condition. Love, feasts and light dominate his verse.[15]

Cosimo had started the collection of books which became the Medici Library (also called the Laurentian Library) and Lorenzo expanded it. Lorenzo's agents retrieved from the East large numbers of classical works, and he employed a large workshop to copy his books and disseminate their content across Europe. He supported the development of humanism through his circle of scholarly friends including the philosophers Marsilio Ficino, Poliziano and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.[16] They studied Greek philosophers, and attempted to merge the ideas of Plato with Christianity.

Apart from a personal interest Lorenzo also used the Florentine scene of fine arts for his diplomatic efforts. An example includes the commission of Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Pietro Perugino and Cosimo Rosselli to Rome in order to paint murals in the Sistine Chapel — a move that has been interpreted as sealing the alliance between Lorenzo and Pope Sixtus IV.[16]

In 1471 Lorenzo calculated that since 1434, his family had spent some 663,000 florins (approx. 460 million USD today) on charity, buildings and taxes. He wrote,

"I do not regret this for though many would consider it better to have a part of that sum in their purse, I consider it to have been a great honour to our state, and I think the money was well-expended and I am well-pleased."[17]

Marriage and children

Lorenzo married Clarice Orsini by proxy on 7 February 1469. The marriage in person took place in Florence on 4 June 1469. She was a daughter of Giacomo Orsini, Lord of Monterotondo and Bracciano
by his wife and cousin Maddalena Orsini. Clarice and Lorenzo had 10 children:

- Lucrezia Maria Romola de' Medici (Florence, 4 August 1470 – 15 November 1553); married 10 September 1486 Jacopo Salviati and had 10 children, including Cardinal Giovanni Salviati, Cardinal Bernardo Salviati, Maria Salviati (mother of Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany), and Francesca Salviati (mother of Pope Leo XI)
- Twins who died after birth (March 1471)
- Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici (Florence, 15 February 1472 – Garigliano River, 28 December 1503), ruler of Florence after his father's death, called "the Unfortunate"
- Maria Maddalena Romola de' Medici (Florence, 25 July 1473 – Rome, 2 December 1528), married 25 February 1487 Franceschetto Cybo (illegitimate son of Pope Innocent VIII) and had seven children
- Contessina Beatrice de' Medici (23 September 1474 - September 1474), died young
- Giovanni di Lorenzo de' Medici (Florence, 11 December 1475 – Rome, 1 December 1521), ascended to the Papacy as Leo X on 9 March 1513
- Luisa de' Medici (Florence, 25 January 1477 – July 1488), also called Luigia, was betrothed to Giovanni de' Medici il Popolano but died young
- Contessina Antonia Romola de' Medici (Pistoia, 16 January 1478 – Rome, 29 June 1515); married 1494 Piero Ridolfi (1467 - 1525) and had five children, including Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi
- Giuliano di Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Nemours (Florence, 12 March 1479 – Florence, 17 March 1516), created Duke of Nemours in 1515 by King Francis I of France

Lorenzo also adopted his nephew Giulio, the illegitimate son of his slain brother Giuliano. Giulio later became Pope Clement VII.
Confirmation of the Franciscan Rule from the Sassetti Chapel frescos. Among the spectators are Lorenzo's sons, (from the right) Giuliano with their tutor Poliziano, Piero and Giovanni.

Later years

During his tenure, several branches of the family bank collapsed because of bad loans, and, in later years, he got into financial difficulties and resorted to misappropriating trust and state funds.

Toward the end of Lorenzo's life, Florence came under the spell of Savonarola, who believed Christians had strayed too far into Greco-Roman culture. Lorenzo played a role in bringing Savonarola to Florence.[18]

Lorenzo de' Medici died during the late night of 8 April or during the early morning of 9 April 1492, at the long-time family villa of Careggi (Florentine reckoning considers days to begin at sunset, so his death date is the 9th in that reckoning). Savonarola visited Lorenzo on his deathbed. The rumor that Savonarola damned Lorenzo on his deathbed has been refuted by Roberto Ridolfi in his book, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola*. Letters written by witnesses to Lorenzo's death report that he died peacefully, after listening to the Gospel of the day. Many signs and portents were claimed to have taken place at the moment of his death, including the dome of Florence Cathedral being struck by lightning, ghosts appearing, and the lions kept at Via Leone fighting each other.[19]

The Signoria and councils of Florence issued a decree:

"Whereas the foremost man of all this city, the lately deceased Lorenzo de' Medici, did, during his whole life, neglect no opportunity of protecting, increasing, adorning and raising this city, but was always ready with counsel, authority and painstaking, in thought and deed; shrank from neither trouble nor danger for the good of the state and its freedom ..... it has seemed good to the Senate and people of Florence.... to establish a public testimonial
of gratitude to the memory of such a man, in order that virtue might not be unhonoured among Florentines, and that, in days to come, other citizens may be incited to serve the commonwealth with might and wisdom."[20]

Lorenzo was buried with his brother Giuliano in the Church of San Lorenzo, in the red porphyry sarcophagus designed for Piero and Giovanni de' Medici, not, as might be expected, in the New Sacristy designed by Michelangelo. This chapel holds the two monumental tombs of Lorenzo and Giulano's less known namesakes, Lorenzo, Duke of Urbino, and Giuliano, Duke of Nemours.[21] According to Williamson and others, the statues of the lesser Lorenzo and Giuliano have been carved by Michelangelo to incorporate the essence of the famous men. In 1559, the bodies of Lorenzo "The Magnificent" de' Medici and his brother Giuliano were interred in the New Sacristy, in an unmarked tomb beneath Michelangelo's statue of the Madonna.[21]

Lorenzo's heir was his eldest son, Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici, known as "Piero the Unfortunate". He squandered his father's patrimony and brought down the Medici dynasty in Florence. The second son, Giovanni, who became Pope Leo X soon afterwards, restored it, but it was only made wholly secure again on the accession of his great-grandson from a branch line of the family, Cosimo I de' Medici.[21]

In popular culture

- A teenage Lorenzo is depicted in CBBC's Leonardo, played by actor Colin Ryan. However, the historical accuracy of the series is questionable.[22]
- Lorenzo de' Medici appears as a character in Assassin's Creed II.
- Lorenzo de' Medici is portrayed by Elliot Cowan in the 2013 TV series Da Vinci's Demons.

References

4. ^ Hugh Ross Williamson, p. 67
5. ^ Christopher Hibbert, chapter 9
7. ^ Hugh Ross Williamson, p. 70
Further reading

- Miles J. Unger, *Magnifico: The Brilliant Life and Violent Times of Lorenzo de' Medici* (Simon and Schuster 2008) is a vividly colorful new biography of this true "renaissance man", the uncrowned ruler of Florence during its golden age.

- Christopher Hibbert, *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall* (Morrow-Quill, 1980) is a highly readable, non-scholarly general history of the family, and covers Lorenzo's life in some detail.


Historical novels

- Robin Maxwell, *Signora da Vinci* (NAL Trade, 2009), a novel that follows Leonardo da Vinci's mother, Caterina, as she travels to Florence to be with her son.

External links

- Texts of Lorenzo de' Medici
  (http://ilmagnifico.letteraturaoperaomnia.org/index.html)
- Lorenzo de' Medici as patron
  (http://www.themedicifamily.com/Lorenzo-de-Medici.html)
- "Info Please | Lorenzo De' Medici" (http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0832477.html)


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| Burials at the Basilica of San Lorenzo, Florence

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