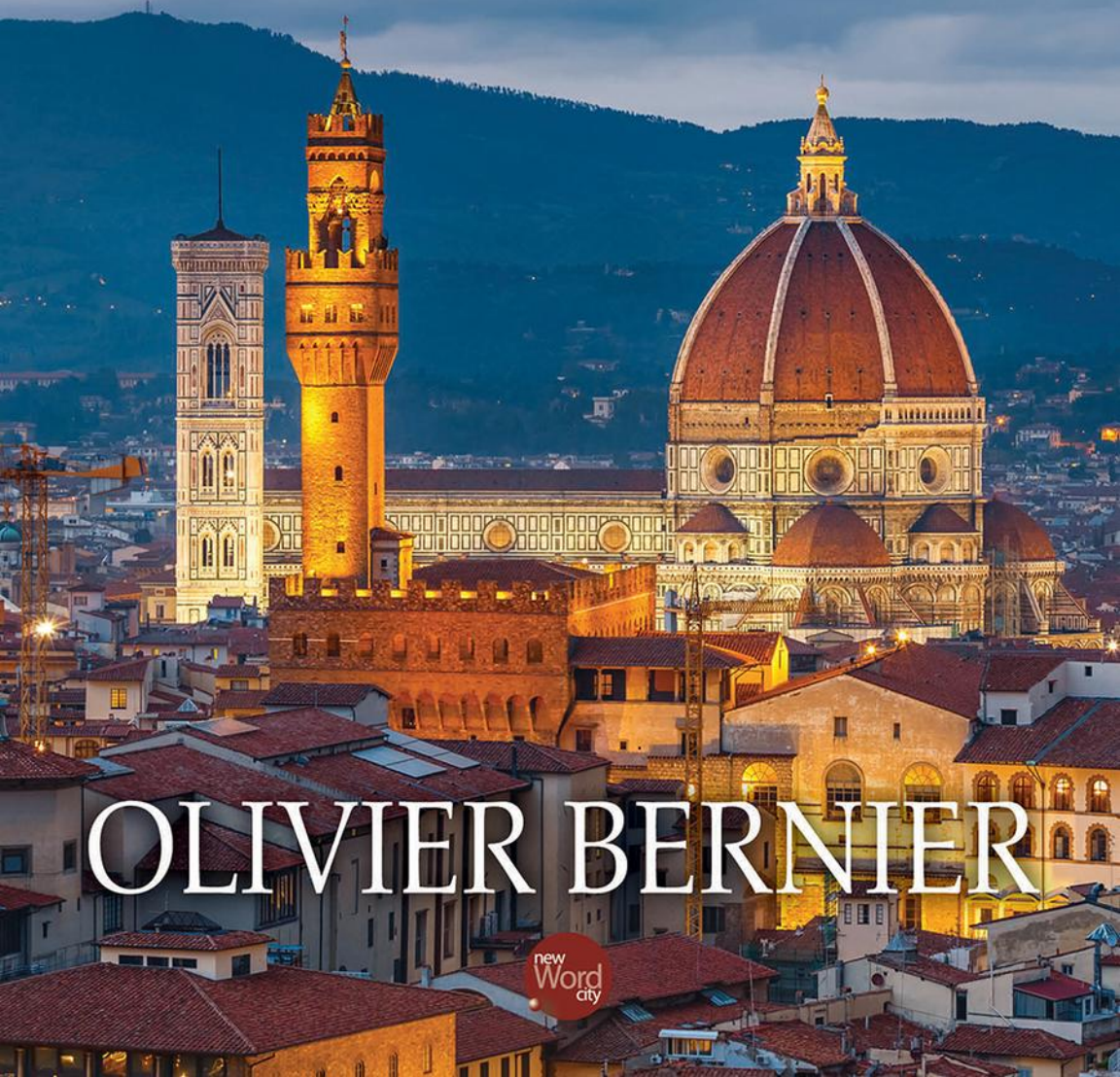


PRINCES OF THE RENAISSANCE



OLIVIER BERNIER

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I
LORENZO
THE MAGNIFICENT

Europe in 1469 numbered many ancient realms and countless noble families, but few kings were as rich or as powerful as Piero de' Medici - an unassuming banker who, along with his friends, ran the government of Florence. And when Piero's son Lorenzo began to celebrate his betrothal in February 1469, the festivities were as splendid as anything the greatest monarch could devise.

Preceded by nine trumpeters, three pages, two squires, twelve nobles on horseback, and his younger brother Giuliano - who was wearing a brocade tabard, a doublet embroidered with pearls and silver, and jeweled feathers in his velvet cap - Lorenzo de' Medici himself arrived, a picture of splendor. Introduced by a corps of drummers and fifers, he rode into the Piazza Santa Croce - the square where jousts and games were held - on a magnificent horse caparisoned in red and white velvet embroidered with pearls. Lorenzo himself wore a fortune in gold thread, pearls, rubies, and diamonds. After a carefully organized tournament, the judges proclaimed Lorenzo the victor and awarded him a silver helmet that bore the figure of Mars, the Roman god of war. But the celebration was only just beginning; the bride had yet even to leave Rome. After she arrived in Florence, the Medici staged a feast for 800 of the citizens of the city, a banquet of many courses for some 2,000 guests, and rejoiced for another three days.

The center of this extravaganza, the twenty-year-old Lorenzo, was not inherently attractive, having an awkward, ill-proportioned figure and an unattractive face with small eyes, a bilious complexion, and a curiously flattened nose. But never have appearances been so deceptive. Lorenzo was friendly, outgoing, and full of zest and energy. Under his father's thoughtful guidance, he had grown up in the museum-like atmosphere of the Medici palace - a bold, innovative piece of architecture that broke with the traditional medieval style. Lorenzo's grandfather Cosimo, who died when Lorenzo was fifteen, had been the first Medici to rule Florence, and despite his generosity to charities, had made a fortune. But Cosimo's greatest contributions to the life of his family and of Florence touched the artistic and scholastic worlds; he patronized numerous artists, and he founded the Medici library as well as an academy for Greek studies.

Piero sought to continue Cosimo's example and make Lorenzo

into a prototype of the new Renaissance man - someone who could draw on the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome as well as that of medieval Italy; appreciate and write poetry; discuss philosophy with the greatest scholars; understand and finance the most talented artists; grasp politics and rule effectively, smoothly, and even justly.

These were great expectations, but Florence provided the perfect setting for the making of such a Renaissance man. The city was in the midst of a dazzling cultural explosion during which interest in painting and architecture revived, scholars rediscovered the glories of Greece and Rome, and sailors charted the world. Piero's library held more volumes than any other, and he opened it to all. His gardens were adorned with antique sculptures that provided inspiration for such great sculptors as the young Michelangelo.

The Medici family was both wealthy and intelligent. To choose Lorenzo's fiancée, the Medici went outside the city for the first time in order to form an alliance, just as other ruling families did. Clarice Orsini, Lorenzo's bride, was the daughter of a great Roman noble family, whose power would now work to enhance Piero's: a remarkable achievement in a highly class-conscious world.

Politically, the world was in a state of flux. The Eastern Roman Empire, with its capital in Constantinople, had endured for over a thousand years. Now, after resisting a variety of enemies, the once-powerful empire, weakened by its own internal dissensions, found itself confronted by a fearless warrior-people, the Turks, who swept in from the steppes of Asia. In 1439, the emperor John VIII Palaeologus, accompanied by the patriarch of Constantinople, had attended a council in Florence in an attempt to reunite the Greek and Roman churches so that the West would be more likely to help him.

His mission failed, for in 1453 Constantinople fell to the Turks. But Palaeologus did succeed in an unintended mission. He had brought books and learned men with him to the council, and after the fall of Constantinople, scholars migrated en masse to Florence. They had a powerful influence on the Florentines. For years, Greek had been a dead, undecipherable language. But now, for the first time since the onset of the Middle Ages, the

Italians learned enough Greek to read the works of Aristotle and Plato - the chief philosophers of Athens - and they rediscovered the great Roman authors in copies that had not been disfigured by the centuries or by careless, ignorant copyists.

Young Lorenzo was immediately influenced, for not only did he study Italian literature and Latin, but he also developed a devouring interest in Neoplatonism - the new philosophy taught by his tutor, Marsilio Ficino. Combining the Platonic cult of ideas with mystical longings and Christian precepts, Neoplatonism provided the perfect philosophic blend for the times. It also provided the perfect rationale for the kind of oligarchic rule the Medici had already established. Ficino taught Lorenzo the importance of classical cultures along with the brilliance of the new Italian achievements.

The Florentines needed money for their pursuits, and two great innovations had provided the necessary wealth: banking and the use of credit. European trade in the fifteenth century consisted of two main commodities: spices and cloth - mostly wool but also silk. Venice, with its maritime empire, supplied the spices, but Florence organized the trade routes across northern Europe to take wool from England to Holland and Belgium, where it was spun and woven, then to France and on to Italy. To facilitate these complex transactions - and to get around the need to send bags of gold from one end of Europe to another - the Italians invented the letter of credit. A merchant might sell his cloth in Florence but then collect the money in Ghent, for example, from the local branch of the Medici bank. Since the Catholic Church prohibited the charging of interest, the bankers made their profit by taking a premium on the exchange from one currency to the other. By 1450, Florence had emerged as the major banking city in Europe and thus the richest. Consequently, the Medici, the leading banking family in Florence, made staggering yearly profits.

The city also had its industries. It produced fine woolen cloth and silk of extraordinary quality. Florence's goldsmiths and jewelers ranked among the finest in Europe. As a result, Florence (with Milan, Venice, Rome, and Naples) reigned as one of the five great Italian powers - the Big Five. The word "Italy," in fact, usually referred to no more than a geographic location.