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Abstract

This essay will discuss the topic of Michelangelo Buonarroti's relationship with the Medici during the time of the Renaissance. Using information from lectures and films watched in class, the motives and political meanings behind several of his artworks will be analyzed in order to identify moments when he was in favor of and against the Medici family.

During the time of the Renaissance, the power of the Medici family was felt in many aspects throughout Italy. Lorenzo the Magnificent, the head of the Medici in late fifteenth century Florence, was a sponsor for many avenues of art. Michelangelo was one of the most significant young artists he took under his wing, and thus began a long and complicated relationship between the powerful rulers and the troubled artist. Michelangelo's republican ideals contrasted the tyranny of the Medici while his greed for money surrendered him under their command. His most notable works include the statue of David, the statue of Brutus, the New Sacristy, and the Laurentian library, which showcased the ways in which he despised the dictatorship and also glorified the regal family. His military leadership in the fortification of Florence during 1528-9 also represented his liberal efforts to dismantle the power of the Medici.

Firstly, the statue of David had been considered a political piece of art for the time, but Michelangelo was not exclusively direct about his intention behind the artwork. Nevertheless, the masterpiece was immediately associated as a symbol of liberalism during Florence's first republic. Completed in 1504, David was constructed during a time where the city was free from Medici control. After the death of Lorenzo in 1494, the Medici family were exiled from Florence due to the efforts of the popular party in the city and with the help from French armies under King Charles VIII. As David was emerging in the Piazza della Signoria all powerful and significant, rocks were being thrown at the figure in protection of the Medici. It was observed as an overt symbol of republicanism, partly due to the public majority's bias and also due to the figure's religious significance.

The story of David and Goliath in the Holy Bible represents a town hero defeating a feared tyrant beast. With the timings of the creations of both the republic and the statue, its parallels in significance are undeniable. Michelangelo's piece of art was clearly interpreted in

opposition to the dictatorship rule of the Medici. David was a symbol for how well and successful Florence had been doing without them, and celebrated the defeat of their own town's tyrant. This is only one of the many examples of how Michelangelo acted out against the Medici, whether intentional or not.

Another statue that displayed opposition to a Medici ruler was the statue of Brutus, sculpted in 1538. Arguably Michelangelo's most political work, the statue was constructed in response to the murder of Alessandro Dei Medici in 1537. Alessandro was a horrible ruler, having only held power for 3 years before being murdered by his own cousin. Michelangelo outright supported the assassination of the Duke by crafting Brutus, as he took direct inspiration from Marcus Junius Brutus of the ancient Roman times. Brutus was a prime leader in the infamous assassination of Julius Caesar, and Michelangelo reflected this act within his sculpture. With the parallels between the two ancient leaders and the present murderous events, it may be concluded that he was supporting the fall of the Medici dictator.

However, along with the complicated relationship between Michelangelo and the heirs of the Medici, he did create some beautiful pieces of work that glorified the family in a more positive light. The New Sacristy, or the Medici Chapel located in the Basilica of San Lorenzo, was a significant gesture on behalf of the artist. The mausoleum was completed in 1520 under the design of Michelangelo to honor the mortal remains of Giuliano and Lorenzo dei Medici. Along with his magnificent Renaissance architecture, Michelangelo was successful in portraying the grand rulers in an almost warrior-like form. He sculpted two figures to represent night and day, and placed Giuliano above them in ancient Roman armor to signify that the fame of the Medici would continue to live on beyond time. This beautifully constructed masterpiece favored

the image of the Medici immensely, partly due to the fact that the Pope had requested the commission himself and because Michelangelo was paid a hefty sum.

The Laurentian Library is another architectural work done by Michelangelo starting in 1523, known for its groundbreaking design and 10,000+ manuscripts. His elliptical staircase was ahead of its time, and he certainly pulled out his most original talents for the extravagant commission for the Medici. His creations were hugely in favor of the Medici, as the library emphasized that their power had shifted from just merchantry to an intellectual and ecclesiastic part of society. Along with the Medici Chapel, these buildings embodied the power of the Medici for the public to see, as a result of Michelangelo.

In contrast, just a few years later in 1528, Michelangelo would once again triumph over the exile of the Medici family from Florence when he became the head of the military fortifications during the siege by the Spanish. His pro-republic ideals continued to persist against the Medici reign as he led the construction of fortification walls to defend the city of Florence from invasion. Although unfortunately unsuccessful, it still is a memorable attempt to demolish the tyrannical rule.

Michelangelo, a gifted and yet troubled man, inevitably became entwined with the Medici franchise from a young age. With time, he grew to oppose the tyrannical rule of the Medici leaders and through art began to express his liberal and republican beliefs that would go as far as to have him lead military fortifications in defense against the Medici. Yet, he still produced works of art such as the New Sacristy and the Laurentian Library to honor the glory of the family. His masterpieces, whether for or against the Medici, remain significant political masterpieces still prominent today.