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Medici Florence

Two Baconalias of Art

The arts are innately a means of expression, though the purpose of this expression is always changing. In the Florence of Cosimo the Elder and Cincinnati at the turn of the millennium, the arts were pivotal in shaping the dialogue of the time. In both of these settings, art was significant in the political and civic realms for reasons that complemented and completed one another. Politically, the arts in both of these eras allowed for the refinement of older ideas for the glory of the state; civically, the arts allowed for both cities to develop their own unique identities. The Big Pig Gig project has much in common with the patronage of art during the “reign” of Cosimo the Elder, with the civic and political motives remaining relatively consistent when accounting for cultural and temporal differences. Through an exploration of the political and civic motives behind the creation of art during the two periods, it should become apparent that it is the details that have changed, not their desired roles.

To begin, politically, art was commissioned to allow for the refinement of older ideas for the glory of both Renaissance Florence and early 21st century Cincinnati. For the Big Pig Gig, the movement began with a recognition of Cincinnati’s history as *Porkopolis*, and for Florence, the Renaissance began as “ancient texts, unread for more than 1000 years, were devoured and debated” (PBS). In both cases, there was a connection with the past and a desire for connecting with the culture of another time. In Florence, this took the guise of paying homage to the culture and architecture of ancient Rome. Filippo Brunelleschi is but one example of an artist who found inspiration from the classical world and sought to incorporate Roman arches and columns into his public art. Cincinnati had the opportunity to work with the more recent inspiration of Chicago celebrating its history related to cattle through large public art pieces shaped like cows. Ultimately, this inspiration was not enough to translate to grand artworks. In both cases, funds were needed to translate a new interpretation of previous works into local interpretations. For Florence, the Medici family funded massive public arts projects to make a statement about their influence and the glory of the city of Florence; for Cincinnati, the organization ArtWorks funded a project to give notoriety and cultural press to the area. To better understand the political motivations for creating art in Cincinnati and Renaissance Florence, it is important to analyze them separately at the crucial point when their respective pieces of art were about to be created, when the precise reasons for creation are most apparent.

Since there was a great deal of art created under the auspices of Cosimo the Great, focus will be given on the tomb of Antipope John XXIII, born as Baldassare Cossa. This man was the first pope to be directly connected to the Medici family, and once he was declared to no longer be the direct link to heaven, almost all of his prestige vanished. The Medici family, however, had an important desire to stand by their man and make a statement about their own power. To a lesser extent, however, the family had a desire to use the most talented artists to add more splendor to the local baptistery. It was this second motivation, occasionally overlooked, that connects the creation of the tomb to the giant fiberglass pigs in post 2000 Cincinnati. If the statement of power was the only important factor, creating a large marble tomb with the inscription “Giovanni XXIII, erstwhile pope” would have sufficed. It is the use of Donatello and Michelozzo that indicates that the political motivation for the creation of the tomb extended beyond mere publicity for the Medici family. The skillful artistry in the creation of the tomb was meant to glorify the city and *add* something to the baptistery…anything less would have been little more than graffiti against the current papal state. Tim Parks gives an excellent description of the tomb, and the level of care that went into its creation: “But the bronze did gleam so brightly in the early sunlight while morning mass was recited; the reclining figure was so very human, so clearly a man of character, and so evidently neither in heaven or hell, that it was hard not to be distracted”. While there was perhaps more glory going towards the Medici family than any individual received for the Big Pig Gig, there was a common desire that linked the two; that desire was one of adding something for the notoriety of the city.

In Cincinnati, the Big Pig Gig was a public relations event from the beginning; it was intended to bring tourists, increase public morale, and imitate the success of Chicago’s “Cows on Parade” project. It is hard not to woo over a project that brought “more than a million tourists…making an economic impact on the city of $200 million” (Findsen). The non-profit organization ArtWorks took the guise of patron in this situation, and thus is differentiated from Florence. There may have been some selfish interest on the part of ArtsWave representatives hoping for brand recognition and positive publicity as the instigators of a successful public art campaign to offset the lack of individual glory. The modern substitute for political glory was tourism dollars. While a passerby during the Big Pig Gig would be forgiven for believing that the event was done out of a sense of duty, an intriguing episode provides a strong counter-argument for why the event was made to specifically aid Cincinnati, and no one else; when one of the fiberglass pigs made their way into Kentrucky, ArtsWave intervened and brought it back into the city. A project made purely for expression would not have had concern for keeping tourist dollars and publicity centered around Cincinnati. When asked, a representative involved in the incident stated, “They said the pigs would be moved to various locations in the Cincinnati area, not the Greater Cincinnati area” (Shroeder). The Big Pig Gig was meant to help the glory of Cincinnati, perhaps even at the expense of other locations; it was not unlike Florence attempting to outdo Venice and Milan through military and artistic pursuits.

Civically, the arts in Florence and Cincinnati allowed for the development and expression of a unique identity. Florence under Medici jurisdiction used the arts as an overt statement about its inheritance of Roman glory and the power of its patron family. Cincinnati, on the other hand, jokingly asserted that the medium of pigs was superior to all others while quietly hoping for the approval of tourists and residents. As with political motivations, the drive to create and sponsor art in both scenarios is cut from the same cloth.

Florentine art is bound at the hip with the needs of the Medici family during the Renaissance Era, yet it is still possible to glean a unique civic identity from the art created during this era. Like much Renaissance era, there is a strong connection to the glory of the Roman Republic; this connection is not merely due to geographical convenience: Florence was also a republic in name. Roman arches were everywhere in Florentine architecture during this time, used in the famous orphanage Ospedale Degli Innocenti. Roman mythology was later the subject of Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and *Allegory of Spring*. This celebration of Roman culture was balanced with a healthy proclivity for religious art. Even in this realm, however, Medici power can be felt. In one painting, “Adoration of the Magi”, the Medici place themselves within the famous procession to see the baby Jesus (PBS). The fascinating dichotomy of celebrating the inheritance of a pagan empire’s culture as well as a commitment to the Catholic church serves as a potential description of Florentine culture during the Renaissance; in both instances, however, the use of previous material like the Bible and Roman myths allowed for the use of new techniques like perspective and propaganda to create a distinctive Florentine genre of art. It could be argued that the art created in this time is nothing more than the expression of Medici interests, but the centuries of classical and religious interpretation create a distinctive pattern that is more than one family’s mouthpiece.

Cincinnati also used ideas from the past to express its own cultural identity. While largely devoid of the individual interests that helped define Florentine art, the desire to own a cultural identity is present in the Big Pig Gig. One citizen commented that “If Chicago can get over its long-standing struggle with being called a cow town, surely we can embrace our humble porky beginnings” (Pulfer). There was an element of shame in Cincinnati being known as *Porkoplis*. This shame was confronted and turned around during the Big Pig Gig, with companies and artists from around the city choosing to complete individual pieces. Much as Florence had competitors vying for the title of the “new Rome”, including Rome itself, Cincinnati had competitors from around the nation trying to play off the success of Chicago’s bovine exhibition: “a couple dozen cities knew a great idea when they saw one, and there will be fiberglass farm animals, fish, fowl, and fauna across America in summer 2000” (Demaline). Ultimately, the Big Pig Gig was a success, with an estimated financial gain of $170 million for the city of Cincinnati (almost as much as Chicago). The Big Pig Gig probably allowed for more individual expression than the Florentine Renaissance, with 400 fiberglass pigs decorating the city. Additionally, Cincinnati worked with a more recent idea in the creation of this project rather than Florence’s exploration of a time over a thousand years prior.

It is remarkable that despite 500 years of difference, the motivations for creating public art remain shockingly similar. It is jarring to think that giant fiberglass pigs could possibly have anything in common with the Uffizi gallery. Yet, when accounting for the political and civic motivations for their creation, they are more alike than different. Politically, the pursuit of glory for the city moved a party (either Medici or ArtWorks representative) to initiate a project. Upon obtaining funding, artists used past ideas and refined them to match the unique identity of their city. In both cases, however, not everyone was pleased. Cincinnati had protestors asserting that the pigs supported the mass slaughtering of thousands of pigs during the turn of the 1900s. Florence had the bonfire of the vanities. Despite the protests, however, both artistic movements created a lasting impression. There are differences, of course; the political realities of Florence during the time of the Medici demanded that wealthy individuals finance the bulk of public art projects to secure their power and please their people, while Cincinnati had no such system; despite the differences, however, both Cincinnati and Florence used the political interest of local glory and the civic interest of local identity to create lasting pieces of art that would define their cities for years to come.

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