

you will, a beautiful basin, the River Ar´no meandering through it, and the city, filled with magnificent architecture and artistry of every kind, alongside it. Surround this basin with gently rolling hills dotted with sheep and farms, villas, vineyards, and orchards; add a delightful Mediterranean climate, and you will understand why Florence is the destination of thousands of visitors every year.

That this small city of cloth-makers and money-lenders rose to such prominence in Italian affairs is still a matter of wonder. Dante (dahn´tay), Italy’s greatest poetical genius,



Ghiberti’s Baptistery Doors.

was Florentine, as was the painter Giotto. The greatest of the Renaissance artists were Florentines, among them Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo; and Florentine artists formulated the laws of perspective used in painting. Florence produced the renowned scientist Galileo (gal-lil-lay´o), and the infamous politician Machiavelli (mak-yuh-vel´ee). The Florentine dialect became the national Italian language, and the local coin, the *florin*, became the European standard of money. Even a Florentine navigator, Amerigo Vespucci (ah-mare´e-go vas-poot´chee), gave his name to the discoveries in the New World.

Now Florence was a republic where the nobles were considered simple citizens along with the rest of the people of the town. A double council of elected citizens ruled the city, and we can credit Florence with a revival of democracy such as the ancient Greeks practiced in Athens. But every now and then there were troubled times, and in such times, a dictator was chosen for a stated number of years, just as in the early days of the Roman Republic. At length, power fell into the hands of the wealthier families of citizens, and the chief of these was the Medici.

Cosimo de’ Medici (co´zee-mo day med´ee-chee, 1389-1464) was for many years dictator. His great wealth, gained by commerce and a banking network which became the largest in Europe, placed him in the position of a merchant prince. No Italian of his epoch combined zeal for learning and generosity in all that could advance the interests of arts and letters. Cosimo and his descendants employed many craftsmen and artisans to

build, enlarge, and decorate many of the greatest buildings in Florence, and the patronage of the Medici, and the other wealthy families who were their rivals, necessitated an increasing number of art schools and workshops to be established to supply the demand.

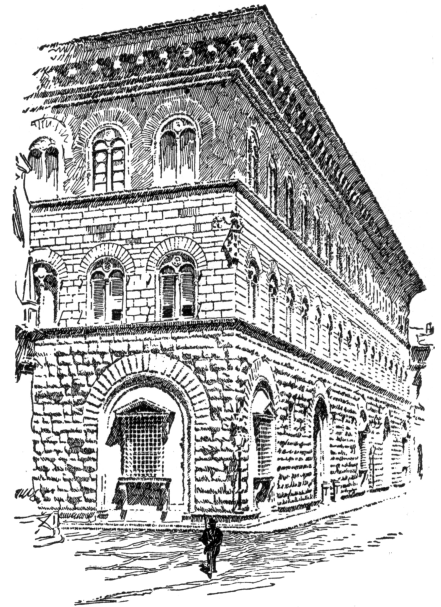
We have seen how the study of Greek ideas was revived in Italy, and with the new influx of Greek scholars from Constantinople, the philosophy of Plato was once more taught by men whose native tongue was Greek. Cosimo founded a new school for the study of the Greek ideas, called the Pla-ton´ic Academy. He also accumulated many precious books and manuscripts and established large public libraries to house them. His virtues, and patronage of arts and letters, made him very popular among the people.

However, by quietly watching the elections and secretly controlling the selection of city officials, the Medici had governed without letting it be suspected that the people had lost their power. Lorenzo de' Medici, Cosimo's grandson, had followed in his grandfather's footsteps, and had got into his hands the sole reins of the state. By Lorenzo's time, the power of the Medici was so absolute, that the pretense of democracy was no longer needed. He set aside the double council of elected citizens, and ruled through a council of seventy men chosen by himself.

The palace of the Medici in Florence, built by Cosimo, and from whence Lorenzo conducted the affairs of government and entertained the scholars and artists with whom he liked to associate, was constructed of great stones, so that it was like a fortress, with the windows of the lower stories barred like those of a prison. Yet within it was furnished with the greatest taste and luxury.

But even though Lorenzo held his high place at the expense of the liberties of the people, the Florentines tolerated him at first, because he flattered their pride by his rule. For under the Medici, Florence had become the modern Athens. Their genius and wealth had filled the city with gorgeous paintings and statues, and made it the home of the greatest artists and sculptors of the age, as well as the most brilliant men of letters.

Politian (po-lish´en), the most polished Latin poet of his day, was always at the palace, directing the studies of Lorenzo's children, and exchanging Greek epigrams with



The Palace of the Medici.