Elegance and Refinement
The Still-Life Paintings of Willem van Aelst

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On the morning of October 22, 1667, after hearing Mass at the church of the Santissima Annunziata, the twenty-five-year-old Prince and future Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de’ Medici (fig. 1), set out from Florence with a retinue of more than fifty people—including a valet, a doctor, a secretary, a quartermaster, a treasurer, a confessor, and five cooks—on the first of two journeys across the Alps. The party passed through Switzerland and Germany on the way to the Netherlands; nearly two months after leaving Florence, they entered the Dutch Republic. Cosimo’s maestro di casa, Filippo Marchetti, noted that Arnhem, the first city they entered, was “very beautiful, clean, and lovely, highly populated, and in particular full of very beautiful women who are very tall and white-skinned.” The rest of the Republic proved equally attractive to the visitors. After a brief visit to Utrecht—whose great size and beauty, wide and straight streets, network of canals, large and beautiful buildings, indescribable cleanliness, and very beautiful women drew Marchetti’s attention—the party proceeded to Amsterdam, “the largest, most beautiful, and richest” city in all of Holland, Flanders, and Germany, where they remained for three weeks. The party moved through the Republic: Haarlem (Marchetti notes more beautiful women), Leiden, The Hague, Scheveningen, Delft, Rotterdam, Dordrecht, and then on to Antwerp (still more beautiful—and notably large—women!) and elsewhere in the Spanish Netherlands, and back to the Republic for further touring before returning to Florence, where they arrived on May 12, 1668. The prince was home only a few months before setting out again, this time to Spain, England, France, and back to the Netherlands. Cosimo traveled grandly; he was often met with salutes of trumpet, drums, and artillery. He toured a variety of public institutions, where he was entertained by local officials. On one occasion, for example, the Amsterdam burgomasters and other officials showed his party the town hall, with its richly decorated rooms and magnificent clockwork, and treated them to pastries and exquisite wine.
Hague, strolled among the people, and joined a crowd to watch a woman skillfully and grace-fully skating on a frozen Amsterdam canal. As Cosimo’s personal secretary Apolloino Bassetti wrote in a letter from Amsterdam, in spite of the gloomy weather, the prince remained “ever in full health and no less fully satisfied with the sojourn in this city, where his inquisitive desire finds continuous nourishment.”

On both trips and throughout the Netherlands, Cosimo was welcomed into the homes of well-known private collectors who showed him their paintings, sculptures, decora-tive arts objects, and cabinets of curiosity filled with exotic wonders—both natural and artifi-cial—often from the Republic’s far-flung trad-ing posts, from which the prince would order the prince gifts. Paintings were brought to Cosimo for his delectation and possible acquisition, and artists visited him. He was introduced to the studios and homes of leading artists, and some-times ordered or acquired works. Among them were Gerrit Dou, Frans van Mieris, Caspar Netscher, Jan Davidsz. de Heem, Otto Marrese van Schrieck, and Willem van Aelst, who was described by Corsini as among “the best masters of the country, . . . who painted many things for the Signor Cardinal Giovan Carlo [de’ Medici] in Italy.” He also saw paintings by Rembrandt and may have met this “famous painter,” as Corsini called him.

The eighteenth-century biographer of the house of Medici, Jacopo Rigagio Galluzzi, asserted that the Dutch paid homage to Cosimo because of his high opinion of his father, the Grand Duke Ferdinand II, as prince and protector of artists and men of letters. But Ferdinando and Cosimo were only the latest in a long line of wealthy Italians to value the art and culture of the Netherlands. In the fif-teenth century, even the Italians accounted Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden among the best painters in Europe. High-quality Netherlandish paintings made their way to Italy, where one could find Van Eyck in the collection of Pope Eugenius IV, part of whose collection of Pope Eugenius IV, part of whose compound that was spent in Florence; a Rogier van der Weyden Deposition triptych in Ferrara, seen in 1449 and praised by the antiquarian Cirico d’Ancona, a Medici agent; a Jan van Eyck Saint Jerome owned by Lorenzo de’ Medici; and, perhaps most important for Florence, Hugo van der Goes’s monumental triptych, the Adoration of the Shepherds of around 1473–78 (fig. 2), commissioned and sent to Florence by Tommaso Portinari, the manager of the Bruges branch of the Medici bank.

The Medici, one of Europe’s premier banking families of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, had been active collectors of Netherlandish art since the fifteenth century. After the family, in the person of Cosimo I (1519–1574), gained the hereditary title and powers of Duke of Florence in 1531 (and then Grand Duke in 1569), their collecting acceler-ated, and they began employing artists, as well as scientists, musicians, literati, and craftsmen, from all over Europe at their court. Some art-ists from north of the Alps gained international renown under the aegis of the Medici, foremost among them the Flemish sculptor Giambologna (Jean Boulogne, 1529–1608), who spent almost his entire career in Florence, rising to the position of court sculptor to the Medici, and the Flemish painter and draftsman Johannes Stradanus (Jan van der Staert, 1523–1605), who also spent many years in Florence produc-ing frescoes, oil paintings, and the designs for numerous tapestries and prints for the Medici, such as the Boar Drive toward a Pit, part of a series of forty-four engravings of hunt scenes dedicated to the late Cosimo I and published by Philips Galle in Antwerp in 1578 (fig. 3). The Dutch artist and biographer Karel van Mander lamented in 1604 that the “beautiful city of Florence . . . enticed and retains for her own enrichment . . . pearls from our Netherlands”—that is, artists of merit.

In the seventeenth century, the Medici’s pri-mar historical portraitist, and one of the most renowned portraitists anywhere in Europe, was a Fleming: Justus Suttermans (1597–1681). He and his assistants painted innumerable portraits of the Grand Dukes Ferdinando II and Cosimo III, other Medici family members—brothers, sisters, and spouses, both in Florence and elsewhere—and various luminaries associated with the Medici court. One of his more unusual portraits is The Wardrobe of Paintings with Gods and Hunters of the Medici Court of around 1634 (fig. 4), which, like Stradanus’s print and tapestry designs before it (fig. 3) and Willem van
Aelst’s still lifes after it (Still Life with Game, 1652 [cat. 9], and Pronk Still Life with Fruit and Game, 1654 [cat. 10]), demonstrates the ongoing interest of the Medici in the hunt and in game still lifes. No other artist could rival Giambologna or Suttermans for longevity at the Medici court, but many worked there for shorter periods— including Van Aelst—and many, many more must have paused in Florence during their travels up and down the peninsula.

But the Medici engagement with Northern artists goes far beyond employing them at court. Through their agents elsewhere in Italy and north of the Alps, the Medici were able both to commission works and to acquire works already executed. By the time Van Aelst arrived in Florence, the Medici collections already comprised a significant number of Northern pictures, most of them recent. Cosimo II acquired important works by the Caravaggist Gerrit van Honthorst, then resident in Rome, as well as small-format landscapes on panel and copper by several artists, including Adam Elsheimer, Paul Bril, and Cornelis Poelenburgh (fig. 5). Poelenburgh, whose works are particularly numerous in the collections, may have been in residence at the Medici court around 1620, at Cosimo II’s request. In the next generation, Cosimo III’s nephews, Cardinal Giovanni Carlo (1611–1663) and Cardinal Leopoldo (1617–1675), added many Northern works to the Medici collections. Giovanni Carlo, whose vast collection of paintings was particularly strong in landscapes and still lifes, was Van Aelst’s primary patron in Florence: thirteen of his paintings are documented in Giovanni Carlo’s house in the via della Scala, among them Still Life with Ram’s Head (cat. 8), and Still Life with Game (cat. 9). Several of Van Aelst’s works hung in a luxurious room next to paintings by Raphael and Correggio. Cardinal Leopoldo, one of the most prolific collectors in the history of the Medici family, owned five paintings by Van Aelst, among them Pronk Still Life with Fruit and Game (cat. 10), and four by the innovative Dutch nature painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck (1619/20–1678), an associate of Van Aelst who may have spent some time at the Medici court. The Medici collecting of landscape and still-life painting, both Northern and Italian, in the seventeenth century may be associated with the family’s long-standing interest in the natural sciences, especially horticulture. Cosimo I was renowned for his personal knowledge of plant species and, in 1543–44, established the first botanical garden in Europe for the University of Pisa. Cosimo’s elder son, Francesco I, who was particularly keen on gardens for both pleasure and scientific investigation, expanded Cosimo’s botanical gardens and developed new gardens on Medici property, with the direction of the Flemish botanist Giuseppe Casabona (or Benincasa; that is, Iodocus De Goethuysen). The Medici’s personal gardens, along with their villas, were painted in 1598–99 in a series of fourteen lunettes by the naturalized Flemish painter Giusto Utens (d. 1609) for the Villa di Artimino, commissioned by Grand Duke Ferdinand I (fig. 6). The gardens were further developed in the seventeenth century. Giovanni Carlo’s lifelong passion for botany and horticulture, manifested in his choice of still-life and landscape subjects for his paintings collection, is especially notable. Indeed, the natural sciences in general flourished under the aegis of the Medici, exemplified by the founding of the Accademia del Cimento under the patronage of Leopoldo in 1657.

Fig. 3. Philips Galle after Johannes Stradanus, Four Deer (recto of a print, 1578. Engraving, 8 1/16 × 11 3/8 in. [21.6 × 29.3 cm]). Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston.
The Medici interest in the natural sciences was complemented by support of scientific—especially botanical—illustration (often with zoological elements), which was carried out by artists, both Italian and Northern, specializing in this genre, including Jacopo Ligozzi (1547–1627), the German Daniel Fischel (1563–1613), and Giovanna Garzoni (1600–1670). Garzoni, who was resident at the Medici court in the 1640s and continued to work for them even after her move to Rome in 1651, executed both botanical studies and still-life compositions (fig. 7), bringing the sensibilities of the former to the latter. Her delicate gouache paintings on vellum were highly prized by Ferdinando II, and Willem van Aelst (who might have met her in either Florence or Rome) would have been well aware of them. The precise, descriptive rendering of natural forms required for botanical illustration must have been an equally attractive feature of still lifes and other depictions of nature at its most intimate in the Medici collections by Van Aelst and other Northerners, especially Van Schrieck (fig. 8) and Jan van Kessel (fig. 9).

Many paintings by Northern artists collected by the Medici in the seventeenth century, including those by Van Aelst, feature stylistic characteristics comparable to those of fifteenth-century Flemish paintings known in Italy, namely, a verisimilitude even to the point of trompe-l’oeil illusionism based on the precise rendering of carefully observed forms and textures. Ciriaco d’Ancona made conventional yet telling remarks about Rogier van der Weyden’s Deposition in the mid-fifteenth century, asserting that the figures seem to breathe as if they are alive and that the many objects of different colors and textures—the fabrics, the flora, the architecture, the jewels—are reproduced so realistically that they seem to be the work not of a human but of nature itself. A century later, Antonio Francesco Doni praised the “Flemings” for their great ability to paint cloths of various types with eye-deceiving naturalism. Such practical skill, Doni says, supports the proof that they have their brains in their hands.

Such qualities were not always deemed praise-worthy. The assessment of painting in the Netherlands found a pointedly negative expression in well-known comments attributed to Michelangelo by the Portuguese painter Francisco de Holanda in the 1540s: “In Flanders they paint with a view to external exactness or such things as may cheer you and which you cannot disparage... They paint clothes, masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees and landscapes, with many figures on this side and many figures on that. And all of this, though it pleases some person, is done without reason or art, without symmetry or proportion, without selective choice or boldness and finally without substance or vigor.” To be sure, Holanda had his own agenda, and the comments should not be taken as unmediated expressions of Michelangelo’s viewpoint, but the distinction they draw between the naturalism of depicted objects in Northern painting and a putatively more rational, even intellectual, foundation in Italian art is consistent with much Italian writing on art.

In spite of the persistent preference of Italian over Northern style by Italian writers—Giorgio Vasari praised Stradanus precisely for having learned well the Italian style—but Northern art remained highly desirable to Italian collectors, especially because of its fineness of execution. Northern artists, from an Italian...
perspective, exemplified manual skill and technical excellence. Their most notable contribution to the history of art, as implied repeatedly in Italian writings of the second half of the sixteenth century, was the innovative use of oil paint, which was attributed to Jan van Eyck and given visual form in a print by Stradanus (fig. 10). And it was not only veristic painting in oil that drew the admiration of the Italians. Northern prints, especially those of Albrecht Dürer (a German, but often referred to as a Fleming) and Lucas van Leyden, were admired and widely collected in Italy. The Venetian Lodovico Dolce praised Dürer’s engravings, whose “incomparable minuteness represents the true and the alive in nature, in such a way that his things seem not drawn but painted, and not painted but living.”

A curious episode at the Medici court a few years after Cosimo III’s return to Florence confirms the persistence of this Italian view of Northern art, as well as the Medici penchant for such painting. In 1675, the now-Grand Duke sought to have Frans van Mieris execute a devotional painting of Saint Francis Xavier “preaching the Gospel to the nations of the Orient.” Ciro Ferri, the favored artist of the Medici, skilfully executed large-scale altarpieces and frescoes, made a composition drawing which was to be forwarded to Van Mieris to show him the concept, because, as Cosimo’s secretary Bassetti averred, the Dutch were not very skilled in such matters.

Van Mieris was thought to be appropriate for this painting full of people and exotic flora and fauna (much of which was specified) because, in Bassetti’s words, his “strength lies in extremely finished small figures and the most exquisite imitation of reality.” Not surprisingly, Van Mieris demurred, claiming that his vocation was to paint only those things that he could see with his own eyes. Much more in keeping with the rest of his work was a painting of figures in an...
Although the Florentines, in attempting to induce Van Mieris to work outside his normal repertoire in painting a history subject after an Italian design, were perhaps somewhat insensitive to the nature of his art, the episode surrounding the Saint Francis Xavier's confirmation the views prevailing in Florence of not only Van Mieris's work, but perhaps more importantly of the art of the Low Countries during the seventeenth century: namely, that it was, as it was, described, and naturalistic. It is clear that Van Aelst's work in Italy was likewise appreciated for these qualities, which are well evidenced in the works in Italy was likewise appreciated for these qualities, which are well evidenced in the works in Florence, since Cosimo pursued the idea in Amsterdam of the aging, ill, impecunious, of 1675, after several advance payments and interior, known as Saint Francis Xavier soon thereafter. (fig. 11), 42–43 in Florence, to cardinal Giovan Carlo for "the handle of colors with such subtlety that he seems to vie with nature."

On Van Kessel's paintings in Florence, see Bodart 1977, 164–73.


On art and science at the Medici court, see Tongiorgi Tomasi and Tosi 2001, Tongiorgi Tomasi 2002, 37–38.

On Giovanni Tribolo's introduction of medicinal plants, to Fröschl, see Tongiorgi Tomasi and Fumagalli 1997, 141–53.

On Giovan Carlo de' Medici's patronage and collecting, see Papi 2010, 176–87.

On the painting, see Lisa Goldenberg Stoppato in Papi 2010, 276–79.

On Suttermans, see especially Florence 1983; Stoppato 2006.

Notable in this context is the Fleming Jan Fyt, who executed a painting in Rome, to cardinal Giovan Carlo for "the handle of colors with such subtlety that he seems to vie with nature."

On Mascalchi 1997, 105–36. Giovan Carlo seems to have kept few letters in his own hand, unlike his father, in the villa dei Balsi, while the greater part of his collection was in his villa di Castello. The account also had private quarters in Palazzo Pitti, whose walls were decorated in the late 1650s with plaster reliefs of flowers. On Lodescigo di Medici portrait and collecting, see Trümpy 1957, 141–51.

On the Medici's introduction of medicinal plants, to Fröschl, see Tongiorgi Tomasi and Fumagalli 1997, 141–53.

On Giovanni Tribolo's introduction of medicinal plants, to Fröschl, see Tongiorgi Tomasi and Fumagalli 1997, 141–53.

On the Old Lover, see Bianchi 1997, 141–53.

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