Sexuality in the Lives of Florentine Renaissance Artists

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Introduction

"Beware!", warned Fra Bernardino of Siena from his pulpit in 1433, "Florence was never so beautiful and well-adorned, she never sailed so far upon the seas, she was never more powerful nor noble . . . but her people are the most wretched upon earth, owing to sodomy and women's extravagance." Fra Bernardino was chastising the "City of Flowers" for two of its renowned vices, the former being the l'amore maschilo that "tainted" the city's reputation during the years Florence initiated the Italian Renaissance. The reputation went far beyond Bernardino's pulpit. For example, over the Alps in Germany, Florenza was the slang word for a sodomite. Many Florentine males enjoyed their reputation and wrote hundreds of love poems, tracts, and books that celebrated the "vice" of sodomy. Scholars have recently demonstrated that male sodomy was prevalent in Renaissance Florence; one argues that it was probably the norm. Moreover, under the patronage of the Medici, many artists portrayed nude males for the first time since antiquity. This profession could have been attractive to sodomites. It is the sexual behavior of Donatello, Verrocchio, Michelangelo, Leonardo, and their companions Bertoldo, Lorenzo di Credi, Salai, and Tommaso Cavaliere, that is the focus of this investigation. The homo-sociable Medici family patronized most of these artists. All of these primary movers of the Florentine Renaissance led lives that Fra Bernardino so despised; they were sodomites.

Types of Evidence Used

In discussing the sexual behavior of an artist, this paper examines six types of evidence, each revealing a different aspect of sexual behavior. Some scholars could, justifiably, dismiss one or two types appearing in isolation, but three would be reason to question an artist's "heterosexuality". Three might reveal a sodomitical disposition or perhaps even the rare ascetic.
When four or more are present, the artist's sexual behavior was probably sodomitical.

Lifestyle is one category of evidence that brings up many questions to be answered. These include: Did the artist marry? Did he have sexual relationships with women? Did the artist live with men instead? Was he, using a modern term, “homo-sociable” in his relationships? Did he live in or frequent sodomitical haunts? Answers to these basic questions are obviously fundamental to determining an artist’s sexual disposition.

Another type of evidence is purposefully created homo-erotic art. The point here is not are the artist’s works considered homo-erotic today, but did the artist create art that was symbolic as sodomitical. Master artisans used many conventional ideas and techniques. When they purposely broke these loose rules and created pieces that the Florentines thought were homoerotic, the group is significant to this investigation. Renowned experts supply excellent examples of this evidence. For example, H. W. Jansen’s points to Donatello's bronze David group.\(^2\) homo-symbolic art also falls into this category of evidence. As James Saslow has shown in *Ganymede in the Renaissance*, certain subjects represented sodomitical relationships. I believe that an artist’s depiction of such subjects is significant and will again be used as evidence. This paper will not use artistic expression, beauty being in the eye of the beholder, as strong evidence for an artist’s sexuality. For example, some use Michelangelo’s David as an example of homo-erotic. However, I think his David is not a purposely created homoerotic art. David might have been appealing to sodomites, but was not a renowned symbol of sodomy.

Primary sources will also be used throughout this investigation whenever possible. When available the writings of the artists themselves will be analyzed under the heading “artist’s writings”. The historic record often limits this type of evidence. For example, Leonardo da Vinci kept volumes of notes; thus, much of the artist’s writings are available. On the other hand,
Donatello was probably illiterate and left virtually no artist's writings.

Contemporary sources, that is to say the writings of others who knew the artists firsthand, is the fourth type of evidence. Contemporary sources reveal what some literate contemporaries thought about an artist. These will range greatly in scope from respected histories, such as Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, to the scandalous *Book of Dreams* by Gain Paolo Lamaze’s.

The fifth type of evidence is legal: court records, wills, and other official proceedings involving these artists. Sometimes these proceedings probe directly into the sexuality of these artists, as in the case of Leonardo da Vinci.

Lastly demographic evidence newly analyzed statistics by Michael Rocke, treated more fully below. So, it is six types of evidence- lifestyle, self, homo-erotic art, contemporary sources, legal, and demographic of which this paper concerns. Again, scholars might dismiss one or two of these types of evidence found in a single individual. In fact, it would be rare if any one of these types of evidence, excluding perhaps artist’s writings, could stand on its own. Many of these types of evidences in an individual artist’s life is a strong argument for sodomitical behavior. It is a judgment call about a serious sin and crime, which those indulging in it tried to hide and deny and cannot be proven beyond doubt.

**Sodomy in Florence**

A sort of Kinsey Report of the Renaissance, Michael Rocke's *Forbidden Friendships* establishes and quantifies what scholars would classify today as bisexual and homosexual behavior of males in Florence. *Forbidden Friendships* thoroughly treats the history and practice of sodomy, focusing on the tenure of the Office of the Night, an organization whose main
function was to police sodomy between males, from 1432 to 1502. All of the artists mentioned above grew up there; some lived there for most of their lives. The Office proceeded on anonymous denunciations dropped in special boxes by citizens throughout the city and the domains. The Officers of the Night would open these boxes twice a month and could summon the accused to answer the charges. All but seventeen years of the Office’s records survived and are well preserved.

The figures in Forbidden Friendships quantify for the first time the "infamous" reputation Renaissance Florence has enjoyed in sermons, letters, and contemporary literature, some of which Rocke uses. According to his computer analysis, 4,426 men were denounced to the Officers between 1478 and 1502. He estimates that over two generations, around 17,000 men were legally implicated in sodomy during the full tenure of the Office. These are astonishing finds for a city whose population was approximately 40,000. When combined with the marriage ages and life expectancy figures established by David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber⁴, Rocke concludes that up to two-thirds of all sexually active males in Florence were at least rumored to be involved in sodomitical activity. Most would go free or would not be investigated at all, but 3,000 men were found guilty in court, while thousands more confessed in exchange for a light fine⁵. Sodomy was so much the norm in Renaissance Florence that Rocke finds no "subculture," contrary to Guido Ruggiero's conclusions about Venice⁶.

Rocke uses the term "homosexual" in describing the male relationships of Renaissance Florence. However, he admits that the Office of the Night’s records shows the norm should be characterized as bisexual activity, a two or three on the Kinsey scale. By the age of sixteen, a typical male was taking the passive role in sodomy with an older partner; that youth might take the active role with others his own age or younger. Citizens accepted passivity as a normal part of
adolescence to such an extent that eventually it was not even prosecuted. By age twenty, most men gave up their passive role and became the active member in relationships. Once in the "manly" active role with adolescents, one could be prosecuted and convicted by the Office of the Night. The average relationship prosecuted by the Office was between an "active" partner around twenty-seven years old and a "passive" partner on average of sixteen years old. The oldest active partners recorded were in their seventies. The youngest passives were eight years old. Although this young age might seem shocking today, they did not have our extended adolescence. Apprenticeships began at around ten, and by fourteen, a male could participate in politics, somewhat. By age thirty most men gave up their passion for youths and married women. (These and other figures, which appear in Rocke's many tables, would be more useful if they included medians and standard deviations). Overall, Rocke's finds are surprisingly similar to the ancient Greeks that also had late marriage ages for males.

These male relationships, unlike most Greek ones, were often mutual and romantic. Florentine sodomy was a reciprocating activity and quite distinctive from some scholars' view of sodomite practices during classical times, where most argue that men unemotionally sodomized youths in pederast relationships. In Florence, though rarely recorded, the active partner performed fellatio on the passive partner. Oral sex between males was never mentioned in any surviving Greek literature or even portrayed in art. An Officer recorded that Antonio di Cristoforo, a goldsmith, had sodomized the youth Lionardo "that is, because the said Antonio sucked his penis". Likewise, a citizen charged that "Tommaso...has sodomized...many boys and, moreover, he has committed this vice with his mouth." Furthermore, there are also rare references to males kissing each other. As late as 1552, for example, a counselor to Duke Cosimo I complained that men were "kissing each other and giving each other the tongue", in
the cathedral! However, anal sodomy seems to have been the norm.

Also, rarely recorded, at least some partners switched positions in anal intercourse. For example, Antonio di Francesco, age 16, confessed that he had sodomy with 20 partners in 1493. With nine of these partners Antonio had exchanged roles. That is, the nine took the active role first on Antonio; then, he performed the active role on them. According to Antonio this was not an isolated instance; he had been involved in role switching twenty to thirty times that year.

Additionally, Florentine men, "in love with boys", often gave them money, presents, and sometimes jobs. In 1502, for example, Christoforo di Giovanni, age 17, confessed that a priest sodomized him on a regular basis and gave him a "large sum of money". The Officers recorded gifts in 20% of their cases. These gifts varied from paying for dinners to "a carved chess board, a bird cage, a bow for shooting birds, a painted Carnival mask, a silver chain,...". Furthermore, successful businessmen sometimes gave jobs to their favorite youths. For example, the banker Antonio Landi gave Lorenzo Bonsi, apparently his favorite youth, a job at his bank, where Lorenzo "was of no service to the bank", according to one witness. A powerful older partner in a sodomitical relationship might be welcomed by the whole family. Take the case of Domenico di Francesco Boscoli. A successful Florentine, Domenico "was said to keep a young man publicly, in place of a wife." Moreover, the youth's father approved of the relationship because the father "receives certain favors from Boscoli". Rocke shows that sodomitical relationships were integrated into the complex web of patronage which characterized Florence.

Most Florentine men gave up their youths when they married women, some did not. A few married men continued to sodomize youths and certainly could be classified as solid threes or fours on the Kinsey scale. For example, from 1478 to 1483, thirty men who were married to women in 1480 were denounced as sodomites. Remarkably, nine of the thirty freely confessed to
sodomizing youths and adolescents. Some unfortunate wives were beaten by their husbands if they interfered with their husbands’ sexual antics. For example, an Officer recorded that master Maso beat his wife after he had sodomized his apprentice Salvatore in front of her and she had complained. Still worst were wives driven to poverty due to the expensive gifts their husbands gave to young male lovers:

“Around the end of October 1467, Mona Bindilla, wife of the baker Piero di Nofri di Gimignano ran out of the house very angrily, and told [three female neighbors] that she had found her husband Piero in bed with a lad named Oriente, and he was sodomizing him. It’s his old evil, according to his wife, since Piero is dedicated to nothing else, and he’s become poor on account of this wickedness because he spends everything he has on boys.”

At the high end of the Kinsey Scale, there were men who never married but continued exclusive sexual relationships with other males. These could be appropriately classified as fives and sixes. For example, from the age of thirty-three until at least fifty, Salvi di Niccolo Panuzzi was denounced and fined a minimum of five times. Even at sixty-three he admitted that “he had solicited several young men to sodomize him”\(^\text{15}\). He is a rarity in Rocke’s statistics, still enjoying the passive role. Over the years, roughly 7% of the males were repeat offenders and were implicated many times to the Office of the Night\(^\text{16}\). This “core group of offenders” had established social venues to interact. The infamous Buco Tavern was such a venue; this was an establishment where older partners brought their youthful "dates" for dinner and then perhaps a room.\(^\text{17}\)

Most telling was a vow of marriage made between two men investigated in 1497. According to the proceedings, Michele di Bruno da Prulli, had sworn an oath to remain sexually faithful to Carlo di Berardo d’Antonio on the Bible “over the holy stone”. Subsequently, it was stated that Carlo had been in love with Michele for several years and “kept him as his wife”. Surprisingly, the magistrates believed the couple to be married and decided on a total fine of 200
florins for the couple, and two years of exile for Carlo. Whether or not Michele followed Carlo into exile was not recorded.

In addition to introducing sexuality, *Forbidden Friendships* also establishes a demography of sodomy. Rocke breaks down the accusations by parishes. These charts, when combined with a map of Renaissance Florence, reveal neighborhoods and districts in Florence that had high rates of sodomy. For example, the San Lorenzo Parish, located in the heart of the city's business district, was the center of sodomite activity.

However, sodomy could occur almost anywhere in Florence. For example, 28% of the cases before the Office of the Night were people caught outside, many in fields, private and public gardens. After sunset, many men were caught in the shadows of sheds, stables, and merchant booths that made up the city streets. An almost comical encounter is worth retelling. In 1482, Jacopo di Niccolo Panuzzi was soliciting youths for sex. "In the twilight, he mistook the guard for a willing youth, and fondled him and used other shameful gestures to convey his evil desire and shameful longings." Jacopo was arrested by the guard and fined 20 florins. Sodomy was not, however, only a night time occurrence. A youth confessed that he was sodomized regularly during his swimming lessons in the Arno during the day.

Overall, *Forbidden Friendships* establishes sexual norms not as distinctive from our own as was previously supposed. Renaissance Florence contained a thriving sodomitical community that would be described by the Kinsey scale as bisexual or homosexual. Furthermore, at the top of Florentine society was the Medici family who were tolerant of these communities.
Leniency toward Sodomitical Behavior Under Cosimo de' Medici

In 1458, Pope Pious II wrote, "Political questions are settled at his house. The man he chooses holds office...He it is who decides peace and war and controls the laws...He is King in everything but name". This King was Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464), Europe's most successful banker. Although nominally a private citizen, he was the de facto ruler of Florence from 1434 to 1464. He rarely held public office and often shunned the public tournaments and spectacles which were enjoyed by many wealthy merchants. Cosimo dressed simply in public and was usually accompanied by only one servant. His new Medici Palace, though probably the most innovative palace of the time, was not the largest or grandest palace. The Pitti Palace, for example, erected soon after his, was considerably larger.

Although the exterior was plain and understated, inside lived the richest person in Europe who was also the prime benefactor of the Florentine Renaissance. A brilliant businessman, he had built up his family's bank until it had no rival on the continent. Cosimo was a humanist and collected many “lost” classical manuscripts. He characterized Plato as “the true road to happiness”. Cosimo was also the greatest patron of the arts. For example, from 1434 to 1471, he spent 663,755 florins mostly on buildings and patronage of artists.

Ambassadors and officials who arrived at the Signoria, the ruling council packed with his supporters, would inevitably be sent to the Medici residence. Inside Palazzo de' Medici, officials could browse the largest private library in Europe or the finest collection of classical and contemporary art. They might speak with countless artists (such as Donatello, Michellozzi, Filippino Lippi), scholars, mercenaries, bankers, or churchmen (including two popes) who frequented Cosimo's table. He would listen quietly to ambassadors and reply in a few thoughtful words, often using colorful rustic clichés, and send them on their way. He learned these clichés,
perhaps while planting olives, from his peasant neighbors whose company he also enjoyed at his villas. Open to all, Cosimo also enjoyed the company of sodomites.

Tolerance of sodomitical activity can be seen in the lenient legislation and laws that were enacted during his ascendancy. In 1432, two years before his consolidation of power, the Office of the Night came into existence. Although it brought more sodomites to "justice" then before, its creation alleviated many sodomites' inhibitions and minds. Before its creation penalties for sodomy were harsh. For example, sodomites might be fined one thousand florins, exiled, flogged in public squares, or even burned at the stake. By contrast, after 1432, over ninety percent of the convicted sodomites were only penalized with fines. The occasional flogging still decreed was only in cases accompanied other violent crimes, such as theft and rape. In 1432, the previously severe penalties for sodomy were drastically reduced to 50 florins for the first conviction.22 This fine would be reduced to twenty-five florins if the accused confessed. Also, the Officers acted like a democratic committee so prosecution was open to the usual Florentine authorities and inefficiencies.

Throughout his dominion, penalties for sodomy steadily dropped. During the mid 1440's, for example, officers were instructed not to prosecute passive partners; this reflected the social acceptance of youthful sodomy. Also during the period, officers were instructed to proceed only against actives accused within the current year, a statute of limitation that sodomites used to their advantage. For example, many men with accusations of sodomy pending, simply did not appear in court. Only half of the men summoned by the magistrate actually showed up in some years. It probably was not difficult to dodge the six Officers in the city of 40,000 souls.

By 1459, Cosimo's government had further reduced penalties to 10 florins. Again, if
one confessed, the fine would be reduced in half to 5 florins. Additionally, payment plans and discretionary fines were enacted for those who could not pay the 5 florins. The Signoria benevolently recognized "artisans and the poor, who cannot be sentenced to pay the fines ordained by the old laws." Often, the Office of the Night would simply levy whatever fine they believed the convicted men could pay.

Moreover, a loophole was created, which allowed sodomites to confess their "crime" at the beginning of the year and pay an even smaller fine. The self confessed individual would then be immune from investigations into his sexual behavior for one year. There was no limitation put on the number of times he could self-confess, thus many did. Overall, under Cosimo, sodomites were free from the fear of a fiery death and paid steadily decreasing fines which could almost be labeled as a tax-sin.

Furthermore, Cosimo interacted and worked with infamous sodomites. For example, his cousin Averardo, who played an important role in Cosimo's rise to and maintenance of power, was probably a sodomite. In 1432 (a critical year when Cosimo was battling for political control), Niccolo' Tinucci cautioned Averardo in a letter referring to Averardo's relationship with Micheletto degli Attendoli, a condottiere (mercenary captain). "To tell you the truth, it is deemed far too great a shortcoming that you have spent so much time with him, and yet you are unable to say whether he is a man or a woman; I would therefore do everything possible to clarify this, and may the smoke fly wherever it will!" Niccolo latter warned Averardo that people were talking about the two men and that this gossip could have adverse effects on their attempt to control the city. "The blemish [of the relationship] does not come from the doctor" - this was an unsubtitle warning that Averardo's relationship with Micheletto might be politically used against their bid for power. Despite Tinucci's misgivings, they were successful and purged
Florence of their critics by 1434.  

Another document which illustrates Cosimo's tolerance for sodomites is the two volumes, *Hermaphroditus*, written in 1425 by Antonio Beccadelli. The first volume celebrates homosexual and bisexual intercourse; the second volume praises heterosexual intercourse. Beccadelli dedicated both to Cosimo, who accepted them and probably enjoyed them. He certainly did not take offense to the dedication. Antonio Beccadelli remained a welcome member of the group of humanists who frequented his table.  

More telling was Cosimo's adoption of Marsilio Ficino, the son of Cosimo's physician. Marsilio was a medical student with great enthusiasm for the classics. Ficino resided at the Medici villa of Montevecchio and under Cosimo founded a neoplatonism movement. Along with translating Plato's works from Greek, the first in modern Europe, he built a new philosophy that combined Christianity and Platonism. Like Plato, Ficino believed that love between males was superior to any other love form. He combined the love between two men questing for knowledge with Christian love for God. Male/male love was also spiritually superior to male/female love, and include a physical aspect. Giovanni Cavalcanti was the object of Ficino's love. Marsilio Ficino wrote many love poems and letters to him, but he did not return Ficino's love.  

Cosimo relished and enjoyed his leisure time with his adopted son. For example, in 1462 he wrote to him,

"Yesterday I arrived at Careggi not so much for the purpose of improving my fields as myself. Let me see you, Marsilio, as soon as possible. Bring with you the book of our favorite Plato, which I presume you have now translated into Latin according to your promise; for there is no employment to which I so ardently devote myself as to discover the true road to happiness. Do come then, and do not forget to bring with you the Orphean lyre".
Cosimo supplied enthusiasm and the funds to start the Platonic Academy of Florence with Ficino at the helm. In addition to translating Plato, they also celebrated Plato's birthday. Some historians propose that the loose "Florentine Platonic Academy" also revived the symposium where all-male gatherings and sodomitical behavior occurred during classical times.

Cosimo's tolerant attitude towards sodomites might have been a Medici tradition. They were not among the "oldest families" and were not usually as hostile to sodomites. For example, in 1415, the Signoria, under pressure from church, passed a law to crack down on sodomites. Twenty-one citizens, who represented many of Florence's best families, signed a bill supporting the law. The Medici and their allies, however, did not sign the bill.²⁰ Fra Bernardino of Siena seems to have thought the Medici protected sodomites. In 1425, he urged citizens to "Do justice quickly with this sin[sodomy], so that the doctors [de' Medici] don't run to cure the wicked!"²¹ Most of the clergy, often indebted to or patronized by Cosimo would not preach directly against the house.

Pope John XXIII, for example, was a close friend and supporter of the Medici. He was born Baldassare Cossa and led a colorful life. He made his fortune as a young sea captain (many say a pirate) and eventually became a Cardinal Deacon. When Pope Alexander IV died, some say poisoned, Cossa, (using Medici money), bribed the Curia and they elected him Pope. Baldassare Cossa, never having taken holy vows, was ordained a priest and then Pope the next day.²²

In 1414, he was summoned to Constance and Cosimo accompanied him part of the way. At the Council he was stripped of the papal tiara for numerous charges that included sodomy, simony, and poisoning his predecessor, Alexander IV.²³ He was held for ransom (paid by the Medici) and next moved to Florence to live out his last days as Cardinal Cossa.²⁴ In 1520, he
died naming Cosimo's father Giovanni as one of the executors of his will. Giovanni relied on Cosimo's discriminating eye to pick the artists for the Cardinal's effigy. Cosimo hired the master artisan Donatello and his associate Michelozzi for the job. This began a friendship between Cosimo and Donatello that would last until Cosimo's death in 1452.