

Despite all its perils, Florence triumphed. The prime source of its strength and wealth lay in its *arti*—the guilds that drew together its merchants and skilled craftsmen. One of the earliest to be organized was the *arte di Calimala*, and throughout the golden age of Florence it held its dominating position. It was a company of merchants who traded with England, Flanders, and France, bringing undressed cloths to Florence, where they were reworked into fine materials and dyed in the splendid, vivid colors that the Renaissance painters have made so memorable—the blues and crimsons and reds in which they dressed their saints and madonnas. They exported the finished goods throughout Europe, and the stamp of the guild became a guarantee of worth and workmanship. The guild was meticulously ruled and its members subjected to a close discipline not only in their public, but also in their moral life. The *Calimala* became a model for the other great guilds that began to dominate Florentine economic and political life in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Including the *Calimala* there were seven of them—the wool merchants, the silk weavers, the bankers, the notaries, the druggists (Dante was a member of this guild, which also dealt in spices and precious stones), and the furriers. These seven included all the great merchants of Florence, who formed the heart of its economic life. But Florence was a large town, and it served a populous hinterland, and its shopkeepers were numerous enough, and powerful enough, to form their own guilds, which were known as the lesser arts—the innkeepers, shoemakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, grocers, bakers, and the like—fourteen in all. Each guild had its officers of state—its consuls, its notaries, and its banner-bearer (*gonfaloniere*) who carried the emblematic symbols in the great processions that were held on the feast day of their patron saint. Each guild, too, had its church that it patronized and in which were held its special masses, for these merchants were as deeply steeped in religion as in trade. (At the head of each page of one of their surviving account books is the sign of the cross, made to make forgery hell-worthy.) The Florentine guilds were small worlds unto themselves, closely regulated, self-conscious, jealous of their rights and customs, and fully aware of their power.

Naturally, relations between the greater and lesser guilds were often uneasy. The lesser guilds felt their numbers gave them a right to power; the greater knew that, in the last resort, it was their money that sustained the government of Florence both in peace and in war. Yet there were never more than three or four thousand men in these twenty-one guilds, and Florence embraced nearly a hundred thousand souls. The bulk of the population was proletarian—workers for a day wage: spinning, weaving, carding, or hauling the great bales of wool and cloth and silk—the citizens who, in the very beginning, had fought for the liberties within the city and for its rich territories without, the people into whose hearts Savonarola's words burned like fire. They were organized into four districts, each with four quarters led by a gonfalon—the Unicorn, the Viper, the Lion—under which each citizen was enrolled to fight, if needed, for his city's liberty. From these quarters were drawn the members of the city, who made up the Signory that ruled Florence. It made peace or war, and levied the taxes. Naturally, the Signory was attended with immense ceremonial and its chief officers, the priors, lived in grandeur, but their tenure was as brief as a butterfly's, for they ruled for two months only. To control this complex governmental machine, men fought in the streets, assassinated, exiled, pillaged, and destroyed each other

generation after generation, so that one Florentine gloomily remarked that there were enough citizens in exile to populate another city. The main strife revolved about who should or who should not be prior-worthy—whether, in fact, power should be widely distributed or kept close—and whether the major arts or the minor arts should dominate the institutions of government. There was factional strife not only within the ranks of the guilds but among the restless proletariat, often made politically conscious by the hunger of their bellies, for Florence suffered the sharp economic storms of an uncontrolled capitalism. So over the centuries power in Florence swayed like seaweed in a tide, drifting into the hands of oligarchs only to be snatched out, but never for long, by a great upsurging wave of popular feeling.

During most of the Renaissance, political power in Florence was in the hands of a group of very rich merchants, led by the Medici family. This closely knit oligarchy controlled all the elections to office with the sureness of a Tammany machine. Better still for them, they handled the city's taxes. And, of course, they were the inheritors of the vast wealth that the far-flung trade of Florence had drawn from the four quarters of Europe.

Suspicious, guarded, rich, the oligarchs clung tenaciously to their power, willing to serve the Medici only as long as the Medici served them. Their greed and envy occasionally drew them close to conspiracy, and the plot of the Pazzi family to kill the Medici in the Duomo toppled some of them into disastrous treason. Politically and financially these men had little foresight: they exploited their power to siphon the city's riches into their own pockets. Yet they had one saving grace: they had been born into a tradition of civic patronage. Their fathers, and their fathers before them, had endowed monasteries, beautified churches, and established charities. A sense of sin still clung to usury and to the banker's trade, and they had felt a need to return a tithe of their profits. Naturally, they were stirred by particular acts of God's goodness to them, and then their piety turned more quickly into patronage. Yet about 1400 this tradition began to change, both in its nature and its expression.

This change was wrought by a desperate war, working on the literary and artistic movements that had already seeded themselves in Florence, and the result was a remarkable leap forward in painting, in sculpture, in architecture, in philosophy, and in the countless arts and crafts that adorn the life of man. The change was as dramatic as water turning into ice.

After its failure by 1343 to secure dominion of Tuscany by force of arms, Florence had resolved to ally, whenever possible, with neighboring city-states, to protect rather than absorb. As Coluccio Salutati, the chancellor of Florence and one of its first great humanists, wrote, the Florentines who hated tyranny at home were willing to defend the liberties of others. The feeling was strong in the city's governing circles that Florentines were the true heirs of republican Rome: Salutati, Bruni, and Poggio studied Cicero in their leisure from running Florence's diplomacy and collecting its taxes. His ideas, which lie at the heart of humanism, struck them with the force of a new discovery, and they began to weave afresh the belief that the full life, indeed, the good life, could only be lived if a man dedicated himself to civic virtues. It was about Rome, about Cicero, about Plato, that they talked when they lingered in the sun in the Piazza or gathered together in each other's houses. Nor did they disdain to discuss their ideas with the sculptors and artists—Ghiberti, Donatello, Brunelleschi—whom they and their friends patronized. And how right they seemed in their interpretation of the past and the present, when Florence withstood

poised to overwhelm the city and so bring the whole of Lombardy and Tuscany under his sway. Then, as in some Athenian tragedy, the Fates took up their shears. Gian Galeazzo, in the prime of life, with the cup of success at his lips, sickened and died. So the threat to Florence passed, but, in passing, fused a mood into an attitude to life.

The Florentines did not consider themselves saved by chance. For them it was a triumph of civic virtue, of steadfast republicans thwarting tyrants. The ancient Roman virtues of which Cicero spoke and of which old Cato was the ideal had been, they felt, reborn in Florence, which gave the city an identity with the past. The year 1402 represented a triumph and a liberation, and this sense of freedom renewed, of the breaking of the shackles of the immediate past, invigorated not only philosophy and history but also the plastic arts. It is not surprising that Masaccio's grave saints should wear their cloaks like togas.

Interest in classics, interest in ancient art, delight in new techniques of painting, sculpture, and architecture, existed before the cataclysmic struggle with Milan, but none can doubt that it gave an immense impetus to the peculiar qualities of the Florentine Renaissance. Symbolically, at the height of the struggle the city appointed Chrysoloras, the first and most deeply influential teacher of Greek, a public lecturer. A belief in the value of classical learning as the mold of a citizen's character, a conviction that great moral value could be derived from a study of its philosophy, became as deeply embedded in the Florentine tradition as it did in nineteenth-century England. And when the Medici founded and encouraged a Platonic academy, and patronized handsomely the great philosophers—Ficino, Pico, and the rest—they were no innovators, and the purpose of their patronage was widely understood. It would strengthen an attitude to human life that was thought to be singularly Florentine. Although humanistic study had its roots in civic life, naturally it developed rapidly within the terms of its own disciplines and needs. Scholars dedicated themselves to the textual and philological problems inherent in the study of the classics—and, as scholars will, became obsessed with their own techniques. Yet even if preoccupation with style, grammar, emendation, and the minutiae of criticism often took the place of creative imagination, there was nevertheless a great deal of fine poetry and fine prose, written in a Latin that would have been no disgrace to the age of Augustus. And the encouragement to classical studies given by the humanistic Renaissance in Florence was in harmony with scholarly activity scattered throughout the courts and cities of Italy.