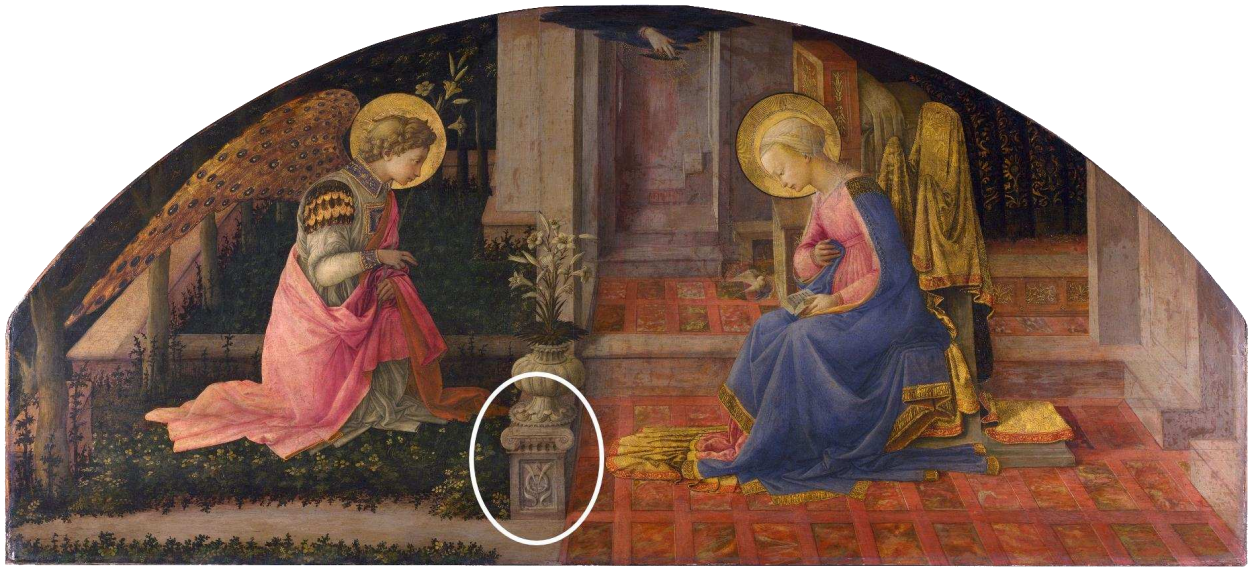




The Annunciations of Leonardo and Lippi in the Light of Medici Iconography

Carl Balowski | February, 2025

Abstract

In mid-15th-century Florence, Medici patronage became a transformative force that intertwined art, dynastic symbolism, and political ambition. Piero de' Medici, eager to commemorate his responsibility for the family's legacy, commissioned Filippo Lippi's Annunciation for the Medici palace as a deliberate celebration of the 'miraculous' conception of his first son, Lorenzo. In this work, Lippi ingeniously rendered Piero's innovative emblem—a diamond ring entwined with three feathers—as a marble relief boundary dividing the archangel Gabriel's celestial garden from the Virgin Mary's porch. This boundary, echoing the divine threshold of incarnation, symbolically asserts that Piero's patronage was the driving force behind the commission, linking his personal vision of Medici continuity with the sacred narrative of divine conception.

Lippi's altarpiece not only pushed forward the visual language of Medici iconography but also was emblematic of an emerging 'double entendre' precedent throughout Renaissance art. In 1472, the young Leonardo da Vinci, who had entered Andrea del Verrocchio's workshop around 1465, was commissioned by the Church of San Bartolomeo a Monte Oliveto (under the auspices of Lorenzo de' Medici) to create an Annunciation. Leonardo's composition features a lectern that, like Lippi, divides the archangel Gabriel's celestial garden from the Virgin Mary's porch, and stunningly replicates the ornamental details of Piero's tomb, thus mirroring the theme of Lippi's work. This parallel design, coupled with the use of the Medici palette—red, white, and green—for the Gabriel's garments, signals that Leonardo was deeply influenced by the iconographic program of Lippi, one that celebrated Piero's role in securing the Medici legacy.

Thus, through a series of interrelated commissions—from Lippi's altarpiece in the Medici palace, which also inspired the Magi Chapel, to Leonardo's later Annunciation—the Medici family established a continuous visual dialogue. This dialogue not only celebrated the miraculous conception of Lorenzo but also underscored Piero de' Medici's pivotal responsibility in commissioning works that fused sacred narrative with dynastic ambition, ultimately influencing Lorenzo to do the same.

San Bartolomeo a Monteoliveto

Perched on the hills just outside Florence (Firenze), the Church of San Bartolomeo a Monte Oliveto traces its origins to 1334, when it was founded as part of an Olivetan monastic complex (Figure 1). While initially supported by the Capponi family, its transformation into a Renaissance landmark came under the influence of the Medici. By the 1450s, the Medici had become key benefactors, and through the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici and his son Piero, the modest church underwent a major renovation, reflecting the family's ambition to shape Florence's religious and cultural identity. At a time when church patronage was as much a demonstration of power as it was an act of piety, the Medici used projects like San Bartolomeo to reinforce their legacy, solidify political alliances, and promote the artistic ideals of the Renaissance. Despite its importance within the Medici's network of religious patronage, records concerning San Bartolomeo a Monte Oliveto remain scarce, leaving much of its early history, and even certain aspects of its Medici-funded reconstruction, open to interpretation.

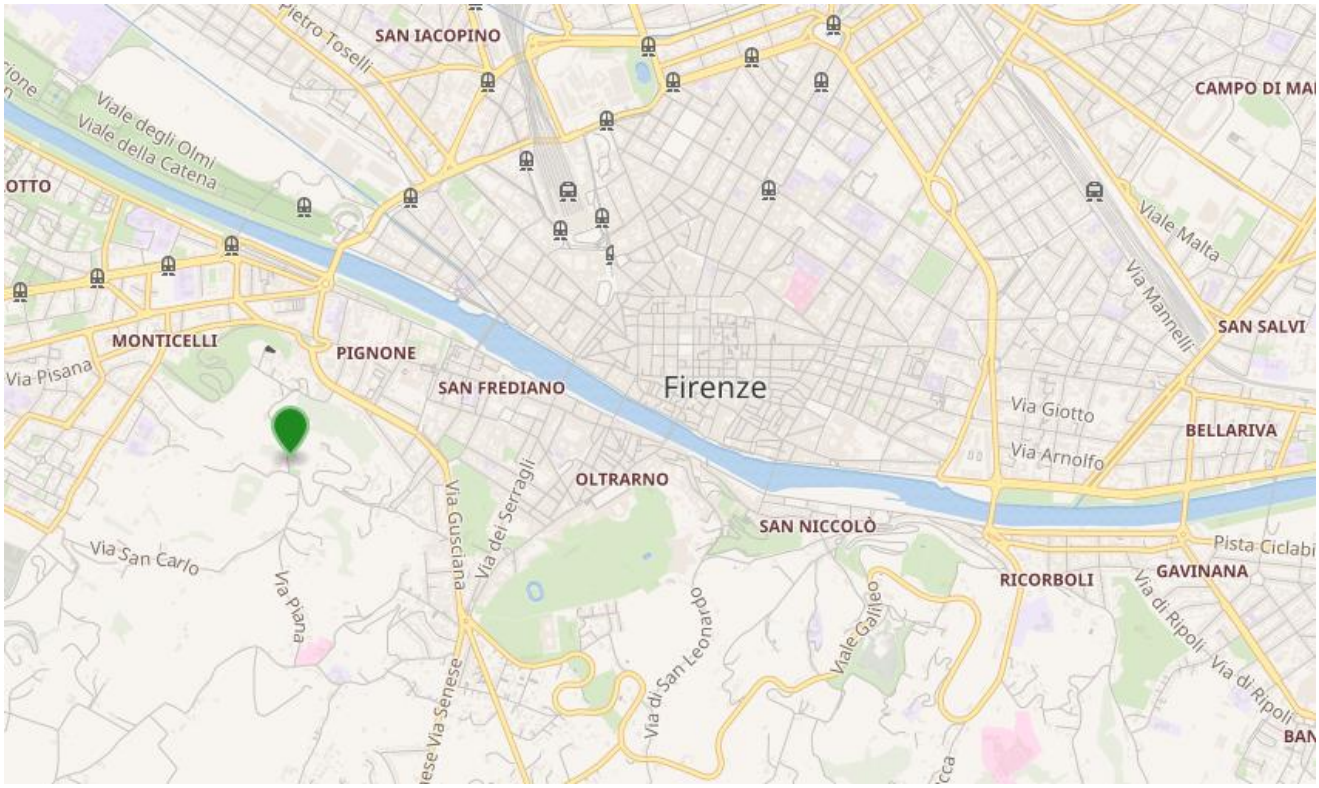


Figure 1

Cosimo il Vecchio (1389–1464) played a central role in the mid-15th-century reconstruction of the church and monastery, a project often linked to his preferred architect, Michelozzo di Bartolomeo. While Michelozzo's name does not appear explicitly in surviving records, the harmonious proportions, classical detailing, and use of pietra serena stone suggest his influence. Cosimo not only financed the structural renovations but also provided funds for a library, furthering his commitment to education and intellectual patronage. A letter from the monastery's prior, published by historian A.D. Fraser Jenkins, directly thanks Cosimo for his financial contributions, confirming that Medici money was a driving force behind the rebuilding efforts. However, unlike San Marco, another Medici-funded project, San Bartolomeo did not bear prominent Medici coats of arms, suggesting that their patronage, while substantial, did not equate to exclusive control over the church. Even so, Cosimo's investment ensured that the once-modest Olivetan monastery was rebuilt according to the latest Renaissance architectural standards, leaving a lasting imprint on its structure and artistic embellishments.

After Cosimo's death in 1464, his son Piero de' Medici ("the Gouty") took over the family's religious and civic responsibilities, presumably continuing support for San Bartolomeo's renovation. Though records of Piero's direct financial contributions are equally scarce, his de facto patronage is evident in the fact that major construction was completed in 1472, three years after his death. During Piero's 'reign', the church's façade and bell tower were finished, and the Medici presumably ensured final payments to builders and artisans, maintaining the family's tradition of honoring long-term patronage commitments. The renovation of San Bartolomeo a Monte Oliveto, which spanned two generations of Medici leadership, exemplifies how Cosimo and Piero used artistic and architectural projects to project stability, piety, and cultural supremacy, securing their influence over Florence's religious and civic life for years to come. Although the precise extent of their financial involvement and specific artistic commissions remains unclear due to a lack of comprehensive documentation, the Medici's role in shaping San Bartolomeo to a large degree undeniable, placing it among the many religious institutions that bore Cosimo and Piero's mark during the height of their power.

Piero de Medici's emblem

By 1450, following the birth of his first son, Lorenzo, Piero de' Medici had firmly stepped into an executive role within the Medici dynasty. As he gradually assumed leadership from his aging father, Cosimo de' Medici, Piero also began overseeing many of the family's patronage projects. This transition was marked by a subtle yet deliberate shift in Medici symbolism. The Medici palle (or balls) were always part of the Medici coat-of-arms, only varying in number based upon application of personage, however whereas Cosimo's personal emblem had been the diamond ring—a symbol of strength, resilience, and divine favor (Figure 2)—Piero introduced a personal variation. Retaining his father's diamond ring as the core element, he replaced Cosimo's often used ring with a new design: three feathers bound together by a single ring (Figure 3).



Figure 2



Figure 3

This innovative change reframed the dynasty's imagery, moving beyond a mere political symbol of generational continuity to one that also reflected Piero's own intellectual and cultural interests. The first recorded appearance of this new emblem occurred in late 1448 with the completion of a marble relief at the Chapel of the Crucifix in San Miniato al Monte, a project commissioned by Piero himself. The monochrome relief, accompanied by the shield of 7 Medici palle, subtly displayed the diamond ring with its three feathers, and being carved entirely in white marble it did not yet feature the characteristic colors that would later become closely associated with the Medici name (Figure 4). At that stage, the motif functioned primarily as a personal device for Piero's own commissions—yet an extension of Cosimo's emblem imbued with additional meaning. Given Piero's deep appreciation for the humanities, some scholars suggest that the feathers may have also symbolized quills, hinting that Medici power was secured not only through politics and finance but also through learning, diplomacy, and the humanities.

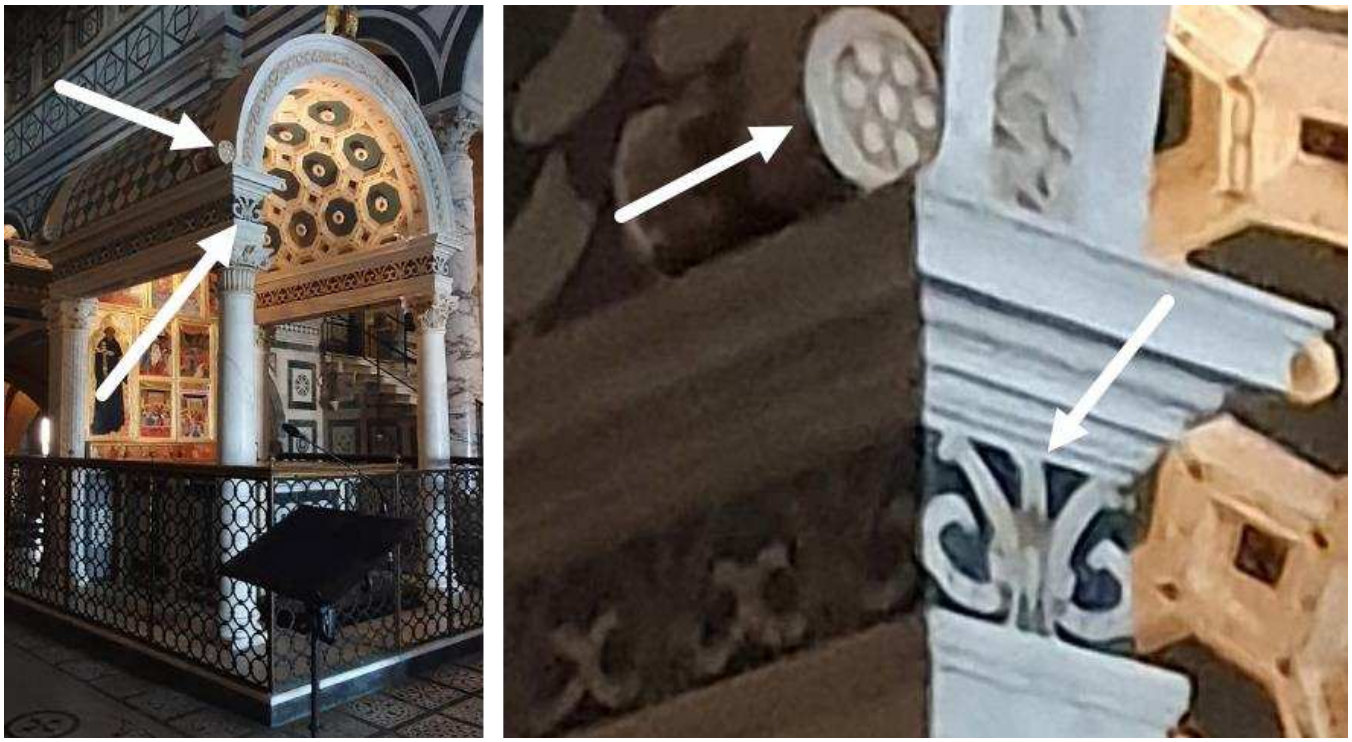


Figure 4

An variation of this personal emblem occurred just a couple of months later, in January 1449, with the birth of Lorenzo de' Medici, which would be used throughout the next several decades. On Lorenzo's 'birth tray' presented to his mother Lucrezia, the same emblem reappeared, now fully colorized in the distinctive Medici palette of red, white, and green (Figure 5).[1] This first colorized instance of feathers marked a turning point, as the colors became inextricably linked with Medici succession. It is highly suggestive that Lorenzo's birth played a key role in solidifying this association. From then on, red, white, and green were featured often in Medici commissions—most notably among some of Piero's grandest artistic projects, the Magi Chapel and Cosimo's tomb (Figure 6). In those sacred spaces, especially the Magi chapel, these colors were not only embedded into the very stone of the architecture but were also worn by the three Magi depicted in the frescoes, symbolically representing Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo as Medicean 'reign' at different stages of governance, with the middle Magi (Piero), wearing a headdress of white and green feathers (Figure 7). What began as a personal emblem, marking the long-awaited heir, soon evolved, even after the birth of Lorenzo, into a broader dynastic symbol that immortalized Piero's vision for Medici power in both sacred and civic spheres (Figure 8).



Figure 5

[1] Because of corrosion the outer feather has turned from green to 'orange'.



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Soon after Lorenzo's birth, the three-feather motif made another appearance, this time in a work by Filippo Lippi—the celebrated Annunciation lunette painted for the Medici palace around 1449–1450 (Figure 9). The choice of the Annunciation as subject matter was significant: it commemorates the miraculous conception of the Son of God by the Holy Spirit, and thus paralleled Piero's own experience of anticipating the birth of his long-awaited son to carry on Medici kingship. By placing the Medici emblem within this sacred narrative, Piero reinforced the notion that Lorenzo's birth was not simply a dynastic event but one imbued with divine favor.

In Lippi's composition, the emblem is rendered as a marble relief 'boundary' that separates the archangel Gabriel's heavenly garden from the Virgin Mary's earthly porch. This is not coincidental—the very threshold where Gabriel's voice crosses to announce to Mary the conception of the Son of God also marks the moment of divine incarnation on March 25th in Christian tradition. Positioned at this critical juncture, the diamond ring emblem with three feathers takes on a profound symbolic role. It suggests that Piero viewed Lorenzo's birth as a fulfillment of prayer and as a continuation of Medici lineage, mirroring the divine promise fulfilled in Christ's incarnation. In this way, the emblem transforms into an elevated metaphor for generational promise, framing Lorenzo's arrival as both a personal triumph and a cosmic event.



Figure 9

The repeated appearance of the three-feather motif—first at San Miniato in 1448, then on Lorenzo's birth tray in early 1449, and finally in Lippi's Annunciation shortly thereafter—strongly suggests that Piero deliberately adopted this emblem to commemorate his son's conception and birth, and that it stuck around long after his death. Whether or not the colors red, white, and green were initially intended as part of his design, their first appearance on Lorenzo's birth tray marks the moment when Piero's colored feathers became explicitly associated with Medici succession. Over the ensuing years, as these feathers and colors became deeply tied to Piero's identity, the emblem evolved from a personal mark into a dynastic symbol, cementing his vision for Medici continuity in both political and theological terms.

The Bear and the Lion

Piero's own life, however, was cut short. He died in December 1469 in Florence at the age of 53, likely from complications related to gout and a lung ailment, conditions that had plagued him for years. His death came just five years after he had officially assumed control of Florence following Cosimo's passing in August 1464. Despite his relatively brief rule, Piero ensured that the Medici legacy would not only endure but expand, positioning the family for even greater influence in both Florence and Rome.

Recognizing the importance of securing Medici power beyond Florence, Piero de' Medici carefully orchestrated a marriage alliance that would tie his family to one of the most powerful noble houses in Rome. Before his death, he arranged the union of his son, Lorenzo de' Medici, to Clarice Orsini, a member of the prestigious Orsini family. This was a calculated and masterful political move, for the Orsini were deeply entrenched within the political and ecclesiastical structures of Rome, wielding immense influence in both the Papal States and the Church hierarchy.

The Orsini lineage carried immense symbolic and historical weight, their name derived from the Latin *Ursa* or *Orsa*, meaning bear—a symbol of strength, resilience, and noble legacy. Known as the "Sons of the Bear", the Orsini family had long been one of the most powerful noble houses in Rome, deeply embedded in Papal politics and the broader structure of the Church hierarchy. By

integrating Orsini blood into the Medici lineage, Piero de' Medici ensured that his descendants would hold influence not only in Florence, where they were symbolized by the Marzocco, the heraldic lion, but also in Rome, where the Orsini bear signified their presence in the corridors of Papal power. This strategic union elevated the Medici beyond their traditional role as bankers and civic leaders, marking them instead as a noble house with strong Roman ties, reinforcing their political legitimacy on an international stage.

The Florence-Rome connection forged by Piero would prove invaluable in the years to come, particularly as Lorenzo and later Medici generations sought to expand their influence within the Church and navigate the intricate web of Papal politics. The ultimate fruit of this alliance came in 1513, when Lorenzo's son, Giovanni de' Medici, ascended to the Papacy as Pope Leo X. In Giovanni, the Lion mingled with Bear—a direct manifestation of Piero's foresight, as the Florentine Medici and the Roman Orsini converged at the pinnacle of Church power. With Orsini blood coursing through the veins of future Medici popes and rulers, Piero's dynastic vision ensured that the family would not only maintain but amplify their power, securing them a firm place in the broader political landscape of Italy, where control over both civic governance and religious authority was essential for long-term dominance.

With this immensely important marriage foundation laid, Piero's passing triggered a carefully managed succession, allowing his elder son, Lorenzo, then just 20 years old, to seamlessly assume leadership. Although still young, Lorenzo had been well-prepared for rule, supported by his mother, Lucrezia Tornabuoni, and a loyal network of Medici (and now Orsini) allies. Thus, Piero's death became more than just a personal loss—it marked a critical transition in Medici rule, one that would elevate the family's influence to unprecedented heights. One of Lorenzo's first major projects as Florence's new leader was the commissioning of a tomb for his father, a work that would echo the artistic traditions established by Cosimo's tomb and further immortalize the Medici legacy, now reinforced by dynastic ties to both Florence and Rome.

Piero's Tomb

The tomb, commissioned as a dual monument to honor both his father Piero and his uncle Giovanni de' Medici, was initiated and financed primarily by Lorenzo, who, alongside his brother Giuliano, oversaw the undertaking. The tomb's Latin inscription, dated to 1472, explicitly credits Lorenzo and Giuliano with erecting the monument, emphasizing both filial piety and the unity of the Medici lineage. By interring the remains of Piero and Giovanni together, the family reinforced the notion of continuity—a critical message at a time when Medici hegemony over Florence's political and cultural future was being challenged.

A striking aspect of the tombs of both Cosimo (ca 1466) and Piero (ca 1472) is their use of similar luxurious materials, which correlate with the Medici's broader architectural projects, especially that of the Magi chapel. Both tombs prominently feature significant bronze work alongside the signature Medici palette: red and green porphyry set in combination with white marble (Figure 10). This choice of materials is not incidental. It strongly echoes the stonework of the family's chapel, where the same stone and colors are embedded in the architecture and even in the garments of the three Magi—each representing Cosimo, Piero, and Lorenzo as we saw above. The deliberate use of these precious materials was intended to signal power and continuity, reinforcing a unified Medici identity in Florence's sacred and public monuments.



Figure 10

At the heart of these projects was Andrea del Verrocchio, one of Florence's most distinguished sculptors and a favored artist of the Medici court. Though little is known about Verrocchio's early years, his career became firmly linked to the Medici when he was engaged at San Lorenzo in 1465, marking the beginning of a fruitful collaboration. By 1466, he had already been entrusted with the design and execution of Cosimo de' Medici's floor tomb, securing his reputation as a master of both bronze and stonework. His role only expanded from there, with Piero de' Medici's tomb serving as one of his most intricate commissions.

For Piero's tomb, Verrocchio's workshop was responsible for meticulous bronze and stone detailing, elements that were not merely decorative but deeply symbolic. His craftsmanship included an intricate lattice arching above the tomb, as well as bronze castings featuring acanthus motifs, cornucopias, lion's paw footings, and even small bronze tortoises, discreetly placed as hidden pedestals. However, perhaps the most striking and intentional detail is found in the footings of the tomb: lion's paws that morph into acanthus leaves (Figure 11). The significance of this transformation goes beyond artistic flourish—it is a deliberate allegory of Piero's dynastic strategy, ensuring that his lineage would extend beyond Florence through his careful orchestration of Lorenzo's marriage to Clarice Orsini.



Figure 11

The symbolism of this detail becomes even more apparent when considering that acanthus, in common vernacular, is called “Bear’s Breech” or “Bear’s Arm” (*Branca Ursina* in Latin). Verrocchio’s design thus allows us to see a bear’s arm seamlessly transforming into a lion’s paw, a clear reference to Piero’s strategic union of the Medici and Orsini families—the Florentine Lion joined with the Bear in Rome. This Lion-Bear appendage, placed at each corner of Piero’s tomb, serves not only as structural support but as a symbolic foundation for the future of the Medici dynasty. Just as Piero’s legacy is "carried on" and supported by Lorenzo’s marriage to the Orsini, so too is Piero’s tomb physically "carried" and "supported" by the four Lion-Bear appendages at each corner, completing Lorenzo’s brilliant analogy and design. In ensuring that his father’s dynastic vision was preserved in both marriage and monument, Lorenzo not only honored Piero’s strategic foresight but also immortalized it in stone and bronze, a testament to the enduring power of Medici rule, both in Florence and in Rome.

Leonardo's Annunciation

During this period, the young Leonardo da Vinci, born in 1452, is believed to have entered Verrocchio's workshop as an apprentice around 1465. While no explicit documentation confirms Leonardo's direct involvement in the construction of Piero de' Medici's tomb, I have identified striking parallels between thematic motifs on the tomb and elements later seen in Leonardo's *Annunciation* (circa 1472). These connections suggest that Leonardo was likely not only an eyewitness to the construction of both Cosimo's and Piero's tombs but also understood the deeper meaning behind Piero's design.

One particularly compelling similarity can be seen in the lectern that separates the Angel and the Virgin in Leonardo's *Annunciation* (Figure 12). This architectural element bears an uncanny resemblance to the ornamental details found on Piero's tomb, specifically the bears breech and lion's paw motif—the very symbolism that reflected Piero's dynastic ambitions and his orchestration of Lorenzo's marriage to the Orsini, or the union of the Lion and the Bear (Figure 13). Coupled with the angel's garment rendered in the Medici colors of red, white, and green, this connection suggests that Leonardo, even in his early career, was already absorbing the artistic and symbolic language of Medici patronage. His time in Verrocchio's workshop would have exposed him not only to technical training but also to the political and iconographic narratives embedded in Medici commissions.



Figure 12



Figure 13

Given this context, it is plausible that Leonardo's Annunciation subtly reflects Piero's tomb both in form and meaning. In this reading, the marble pillar in Filippo Lippi's *Annunciation*—which features Piero's three-feather emblem—likely served as a thematic influence on Leonardo's use of the lectern, now reimagined as Piero's tomb (Figure 14). Just as Piero's tomb stood as a

monument to dynastic continuity, bridging past and future, so too does Leonardo's lectern serve as a boundary separating the angel from the Virgin, heaven from earth, divine from carnal. To those "in the know," the presence of Piero's tomb and Medici colors within Leonardo's composition would have been unmistakable signals of Medici influence—a visual cue reinforcing their enduring presence in Florentine art and politics. This connection becomes even more significant when considering that San Bartolomeo a Monte Oliveto, a Medici patronage site that had just undergone renovations around 1472, was the intended destination for Leonardo's painting. In this context, Leonardo's Annunciation transcends its role as a mere biblical scene; it subtly asserts Medici cultural dominance, linking Leonardo's early artistic development to the legacy of Verrocchio, Lippi, and Medici patronage. The influence of Medici artistic commissions on Leonardo's work is an area that warrants further exploration, particularly in relation to his Virgin of the Rocks, which will be examined in greater detail in my forthcoming study. However, for now, the reader should take note of a compelling visual connection: the garments of the angel in Leonardo's Annunciation share the same colors as those worn by the angel in his Virgin of the Rocks (Figure 15). This parallel suggests a continuity of symbolic meaning and stylistic influence, reinforcing the notion that Leonardo's compositions were shaped—either consciously or subconsciously—by the visual language of Medici patronage.

Thus, the commission for Leonardo's *Annunciation* likely originated in Verrocchio's studio—either directly through Lorenzo or via the Olivetan monks at Monte Oliveto—as a significant decorative element for the church's hallway. The timing suggests that this commission was launched as Piero's tomb was nearing completion, and in the minds of both Leonardo and Lorenzo, the work functioned as a cooperative 'homage' to Piero's legacy. In this light, the divided space in Lippi's *Annunciation*—mirroring the design of the lectern in Leonardo's work—symbolically represents Piero himself, commemorated as the progenitor who, through Lorenzo, brought together the Lion and the Bear.

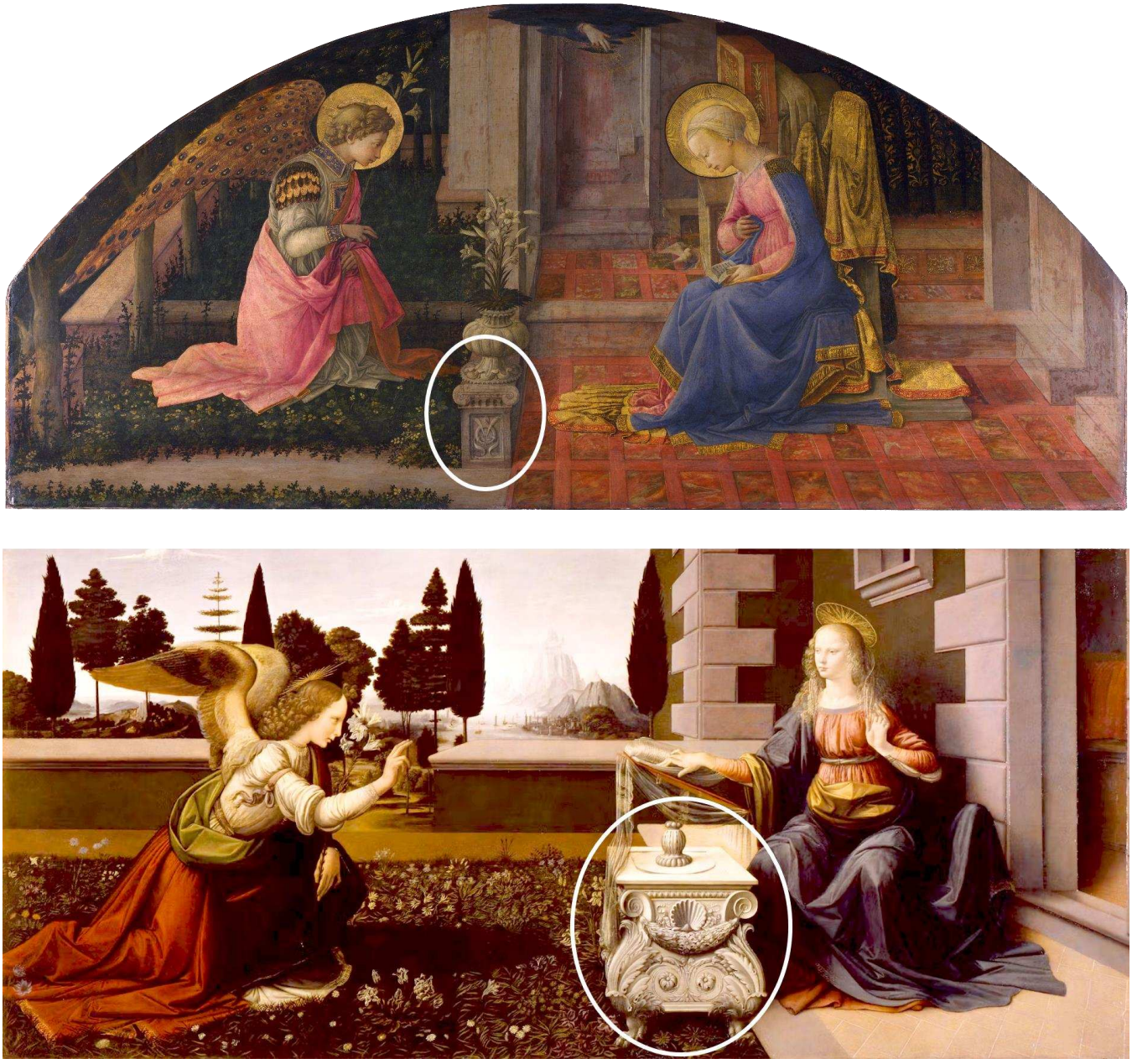


Figure 14



Figure 15

Sources

- Poggi, G. *"La chiesa di San Bartolomeo a Monte Oliveto presso Firenze,"* Miscellanea d'Arte 1 (1903): 57–63.
- Cardini, F. (2001). The Chapel of the Magi in Palazzo Medici. Florence: Mandragora.
- Meloni Trkulja, S., Trotta, G., Morolli, G. (2000). Via di Monteoliveto: chiese e ville di un colle fiorentino. Italy: Edifir.
- Fraser Jenkins, A.D. *"Cosimo de' Medici's Patronage of Architecture and the Theory of Magnificence,"* Journal of Warburg & Courtauld Inst. 33 (1970): 162–170.
- Holmes, M. (1999). Fra Filippo Lippi the Carmelite Painter. United Kingdom: Yale University Press.
- Sigec Web – Chiesa di San Bartolomeo a Monte Oliveto
- Parenti, Daniela – *Uffizi Galleries Catalog*: Entry for Leonardo's "Annunciation." Florence, Uffizi (online catalog, 2020).
- Emotions in Florence Blog, *"La Chiesa dell'Annunciazione di Leonardo,"* 2018
- Laurence Kanter et al., *Leonardo: Discoveries from Verrocchio's Studio* (Yale Univ. Press, 2020), p.18-19