

The Politics of Art in Early Renaissance Florence

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Major monuments of the Florentine renaissance, notably those of a religious nature, were sponsored by groups or individuals whose aims were to a large degree political. Politics are inseparable from economics, so as this course looks at a variety of material asking where political motivation lies, commercial issues constantly come into play. We start with the layout of the city and then focus on conspicuous buildings including the cathedral, major churches and civic structures, particularly the town hall. Next we move inside to look at the subdivision of large spaces, such as the various areas of a grand religious edifice, and their still smaller units which are family chapels and other types of devotional centers. Finally we scrutinize single objects of decor, such as frescoes, altarpieces and tombs, to discover the implicit political messages embedded in the visual forms. Miracles, relics, procession and spectacle, and the cult of saints (local and non), are topics of focus. The course presents architecture, painting and sculpture with emphasis on the latter two media. It privileges the period from right before 1300 through the trecento, when Florence became a world-class city, and then slowly made its way back from devastating plague. It is argued that the well-known evolution of the 15th century city was defined by the patterns established in the earlier period we address.

Class sessions, with few exceptions, are held on site. Students are required to attend all sessions, complete course readings, written and oral assignments, and to take two exams. Some background in renaissance or medieval studies is recommended.

Topics for investigation include:

The Political Layout of Florence
Government, Commerce, and Art
The Politics of Power and of Punishment, and Art
Church Politics, Civic Religion, and Art
The Politics of Mendicant Orders and Art
The Devout Life, the Politics of Cult, and Art
The Politics of Miracles and Art
Gender Politics and Art

Daily schedule and weekly readings to be provided in Florence. Please acquire Alta Macadam, Blue Guide Florence, 9th edition, and use it to familiarize yourself with the city and its monuments prior to arrival. Bring the volume with you.