The Claiming Crown: Politics, Dynasty, and Gender in State Portraits of Medici Women
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A commanding, elegant woman gazes confidently from the canvas. Her rigid, life-size form displays the latest court fashion, executed in the finest fabrics and embellished by an ensemble of stunning jewelry. She stands at a slight angle to the picture plane with one hand relaxed by her side and the other resting on a nearby table covered in a cloth. Sitting near her outstretched hand and providing the powerful political and dynastic context for her image is the distinctive gem-encrusted grand ducal crown of her Medici husband, the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Such a description applies to any one of no less than thirty portraits of Medici Duchesses and Grand Duchesses produced over a concentrated fifty-year period encompassing the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Despite its prevalence and clear importance, the grand ducal portrait type has never been studied as a convention, nor have its standard iconography and meaning been thoroughly investigated. Medici portrait scholar, Karla Langedijk, briefly noted in her seminal work on the subject that an “established ‘pattern’” did appear in the family’s state portraiture of the period in question. Curiously, however, Langedijk made no mention of the grand ducal crown as a characteristic of this pattern (1: 135) and ventured no further observations on the representational mode. The artistic quality, accessibility, and poor state of preservation of several of these later works, as well as the general absence of contemporary scholarly interest in both the subjects and artists, may explain the lack of consideration given these dynastically significant portraits. Yet among the numerous painted images of Medici consorts, the grand ducal portrait is arguably the most iconic, dynastically loaded, and gendered method of representing the Grand Duchess of Tuscany from the last quarter of the sixteenth century to the line’s extinction in 1743.

Conceived in Florence in 1590, the grand ducal portrait type is unique among European portrait conventions of the time. An investigation of the genesis, content, and goals of this prevalent portrait mode indicates that the convention’s appearance shortly after the 1589 state marriage of Grand Duke Ferdinando I and Valois princess, Christine of Lorraine, was not coincidental. At this date the Medici, only in their second generation

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as Grand Dukes of Tuscany, notably lacked the distinguished pedigree of Europe’s elite ruling families. Ferdinando, anxious to improve his family’s rank, was just assuming leadership. Indeed, dynastic aspirations and political circumstances provided the impetus for a portrait type ultimately designed to mark and claim the new Grand Duchess for the Medici family by drawing upon well-established and potent dynastic symbols, in particular the grand ducal crown. Once instituted, this portrait convention routinely performed the same proprietary function in images of Christine’s successors. Within a decade of its inception, the grand ducal portrait and its iconography were firmly established, allowing later Medici images dependent upon this dynastically loaded formula to draw from its authority and meaning while communicating their own messages of power.

Among the preserved portraits adhering to the grand ducal type, twenty-seven were painted during a period of five decades encompassing the rules of Ferdinando I and his son, Cosimo II, as well as the co-regencies of their wives, Christine of Lorraine and Archduchess Maria Maddalena of Austria respectively. These images of Christine and Maria Maddalena are of particular interest because they stand at the beginning of this portrait tradition in Florence. More images of these two consorts in this type are preserved than of any other Medici women. Further, the grand ducal portraits, created both of and, sometimes, for these two Grand Duchesses, testify to the changeable meaning a Renaissance portrait mode could assume, depending upon the dynastic and political context of its production. The selective employment of the grand ducal type to depict two particular Medici princesses during the same period also bears this out.

The orchestrated and propagandistic nature of the grand ducal portrait convention is affirmed by its first appearance in two portraits of Christine of Lorraine, produced in 1590 by Scipione Pulzone (Fig. 1) and Santi di Tito (Fig. 2). Pulzone’s signed and dated version enjoyed the distinction of entering the Serie Aulica of the Uffizi, and exists today in one copy and one variant; Santi’s version was reproduced at least six times. Both of the original paintings, as well as the copies and variants, depict the Grand Duchess opulently dressed, regal, and lavishly bejeweled in dynastically referential diamond and ruby gemstones (Sale Holian, “The Clues” 457-58). In all versions, Christine stands next to a table upon which she rests her right hand, which is always extended toward, but never touches, the grand ducal crown sitting nearby. The diadem indicates her husband, wearer of the crown, and her extended hand not only draws attention to this potent symbol of sovereignty and authority but also underscores the physical connection between herself and Ferdinando, whose line she will perpetuate with heirs of distinguished pedigree.