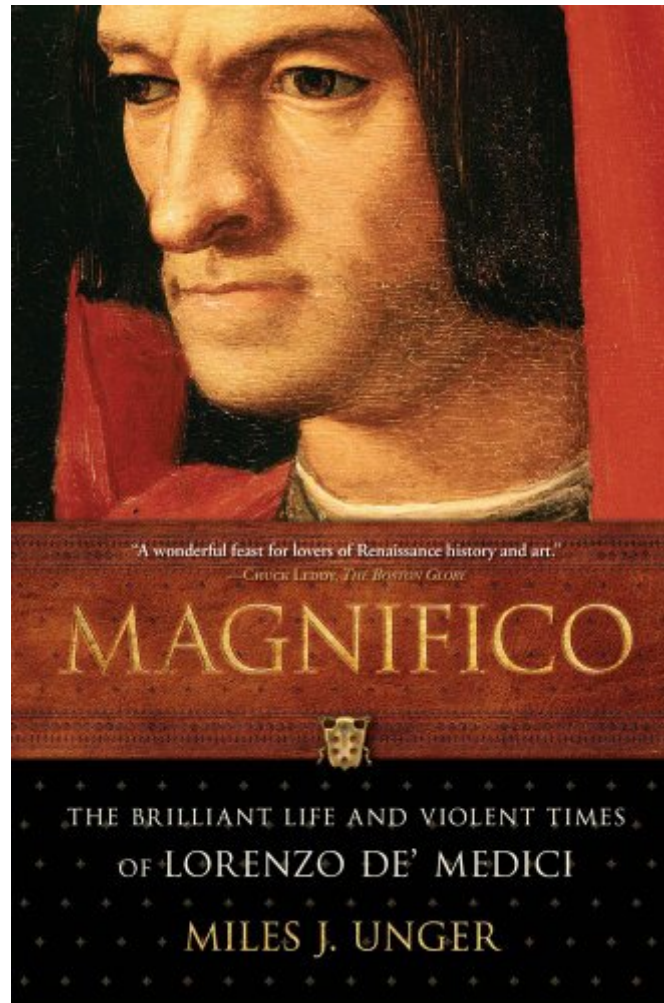


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Magnifico: The Brilliant Life And Violent Times Of Lorenzo De' Medici



Synopsis

Magnifico is a vividly colorful portrait of Lorenzo de' Medici, the uncrowned ruler of Florence during its golden age. A true "Renaissance man," Lorenzo dazzled contemporaries with his prodigious talents and magnetic personality. Known to history as Il Magnifico (the Magnificent), Lorenzo was not only the foremost patron of his day but also a renowned poet, equally adept at composing philosophical verses and obscene rhymes to be sung at Carnival. He befriended the greatest artists and writers of the time -- Leonardo, Botticelli, Poliziano, and, especially, Michelangelo, whom he discovered as a young boy and invited to live at his palace -- turning Florence into the cultural capital of Europe. He was the leading statesman of the age, the fulcrum of Italy, but also a cunning and ruthless political operative. Miles Unger's biography of this complex figure draws on primary research in Italian sources and on his intimate knowledge of Florence, where he lived for several years. Lorenzo's grandfather Cosimo had converted the vast wealth of the family bank into political power, but from his earliest days Lorenzo's position was precarious. Bitter rivalries among the leading Florentine families and competition among the squabbling Italian states meant that Lorenzo's life was under constant threat. Those who plotted his death included a pope, a king, and a duke, but Lorenzo used his legendary charm and diplomatic skill -- as well as occasional acts of violence -- to navigate the murderous labyrinth of Italian politics. Against all odds he managed not only to survive but to preside over one of the great moments in the history of civilization. Florence in the age of Lorenzo was a city of contrasts, of unparalleled artistic brilliance and unimaginable squalor in the city's crowded tenements; of both pagan excess and the fire-and-brimstone sermons of the Dominican preacher Savonarola. Florence gave birth to both the otherworldly perfection of Botticelli's Primavera and the gritty realism of Machiavelli's The Prince. Nowhere was this world of contrasts more perfectly embodied than in the life and character of the man who ruled this most fascinating city.

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Customer Reviews

Sometimes, it seems to me that it would take a committee to produce an adequate biography of Lorenzo de' Medici. He was a many-sided jewel of a man, flashing his facets in so many directions that no single author could be the master of all of them. He was a sportsman, diplomat, political boss, essayist, poet, musician and connoisseur of all the arts. On the personal level he was a dutiful husband and loving father of a large family; he also had a reputation as man with a voracious appetite for extra-marital sex. Some 2,000 of his letters survive, along with more than 20,000 addressed to him by people from all over Europe: ambassadors, popes, princes, dukes, kings and their consorts, as well as friends and ordinary people from all walks of life. The sheer volume of material by and about Lorenzo is overwhelming. Although Unger doesn't devote a lot of space to Lorenzo's personal life, he suggests/speculates that several of Il Magnifico's lovers were male, which could be true, but this is impossible to prove or disprove, and the author doesn't really make a case for his claim. One of the possible male lovers he mentions is the poet Luigi Pulci, who was many years older than Lorenzo, which in the sexual "etiquette" of that era would have made him the dominant partner. But given that he was a Medici client and Lorenzo's social inferior, it seems unlikely he could have played that role with Lorenzo. As for Lorenzo's friend Braccio Martelli-- he seems to have been vigorously heterosexual, and nothing Unger notes by or about him suggests a sexual interest in men, but who knows? Poet-scholar Angelo Poliziano is a definite maybe: he never married; there is some evidence he preferred men to women, and he was deeply, almost slavishly, devoted to Lorenzo.

No one volume life of Lorenzo can ever be comprehensive because he is a significant figure in too many areas. He is a major figure in Florentine, Italian and European political, diplomatic and cultural

history. In the history of art, indeed, he may be said to be of global importance. He was himself a poet of skill, eminent in the literature of his time. Yet his cultural significance is his legacy to posterity. To the people of his city and time, however, his main importance was political and diplomatic; and that is the role most completely explored in this book. This is not an unreasonable choice since his political role consumed most of Lorenzo's time. He worked endlessly to buttress and expand his family's de facto control of Florence, modifying the voting and political systems at least twice to do so (always to concentrate more power in his hands while careful to observe the old republican forms). He was equally active in trying to expand Florence's influence in Italy and beyond. These efforts were strenuous and stressful, especially in the early years of Lorenzo's primacy, for there were many who sought to challenge his ambitions and those of Florence. Indeed, his first decade or so of power was fraught with a seemingly endless series of revolts and conspiracies, internal and external, culminating in the murderous Pazzi conspiracy that resulted in Lorenzo's wounding and the death of his beloved brother. There were also wars, especially after the Pazzi plot, with great danger for the regime and for Lorenzo personally. He not only survived all of this, he increased both his power and prestige because of the brilliant political and diplomatic outcome that he personally brought about.

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