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Re-framing the Doni Tondo: Patronage, Politics and Family in Michelangelo's Florence

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Department of Art History and Archaeology

RE-FRAMING THE DONI TONDO

PATRONAGE, POLITICS AND FAMILY IN MICHELANGELO’S FLORENCE

by

Eric Ralph Hupe

A thesis presented to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Washington University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Saint Louis, Missouri
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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ................................................................. ii

List of Figures and Appendix .................................................. v

Epigraph ..................................................................................... 1

Introduction .............................................................................. 2

A State of the Field and Problems of Dating ................................. 7

Familial Relations: Michelangelo and the Strozzi ......................... 14

Political Consequences: Michelangelo and the Fuorusciti .............. 20

The Painting in Context .............................................................. 27

Re-contextualizing the Tondo ...................................................... 30

Conclusion .................................................................................. 38

Bibliography ............................................................................... 43

Illustrations and Appendix ........................................................ 51
LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1  Michelangelo, *Doni Tondo*, c. 1504
Fig. 2  Raphael, *Portrait of Maddalena Strozzi*, c. 1505
Fig. 3  Raphael, *Portrait of Agnolo Doni*, c. 1505
Fig. 4  Michelangelo and Francesco del Tasso, *Doni Tondo Frame*, c. 1504
Fig. 5.1  Michelangelo, *Drawing of Grotesques* (British Museum), c. 1504
Fig. 5.2  Michelangelo, *Drawing of Grotesques and Figures* (Uffizi), c. 1504
Fig. 6  Del Tasso Workshop, *Carved and water gilded Mirror Frame*, c. 1510
Fig. 7.1  (detail) *Doni Tondo frame*
Fig. 7.2  (detail) *V&A frame*
Fig. 8  Alessio Baldovinetti, *Portrait of a Lady in Yellow*, c. 1465
Fig. 9  Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503
Fig. 10  Filippino Lippi, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1485
Fig. 11  1503 Anonymous, *Border with Strozzi Emblems*, 16th-17th century
Fig. 12  (detail) Palazzo Strozzi, c. 1501(?)
Fig. 13  (detail) Virgin’s Breastpin, *Doni Tondo*, c. 1504
Fig. 14  (detail) *Pisces*, Aratea Scientific Miscellany, c. 1040

APPENDIX

Table 1  Genealogy Chart of Strozzi-Doni
Table 2  Genealogy Chart of Palla Strozzi Family
Table 3  Genealogy Chart of Buonarroti Family
Table 4  Genealogy Chart of Filippo Strozzi Family
Table 5  Timeline of Michelangelo’s Whereabouts
Caro m’è ‘l sonno, e più l’esser di sasso,
Mentre che ‘l danno e la vergogna dura:
Non veder, non sentir, m’è gran ventura:
Però non mi destar, deh! parla basso.

~GIOVANNI STROZZI
“Sopra la notte del Buonarrot: Risposta del Buonarroti”
INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the Cinquecento, the Florentine artist Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1539) found himself overburdened as he attempted to fulfill the multitude of commissions resulting from his burgeoning popularity. Between the years 1504 and 1508, a period bookended by the completion of the David and the commencement of painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Michelangelo simultaneously worked on a host of other commissions.¹ Between these years, Michelangelo, a young and un-established artist, solidified his bonds with the influential families who were vital in launching his international career. Because of his relative anonymity at this point, the period remains an understudied area of scholarship. Few contracts or letters are extant, forcing scholars to rely on the works of later authors, such as Giorgio Vasari’s (1511-1574) Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects (1550), as a principal source of documentation for this period.

Much of Italian Renaissance art history finds its roots within Vasari’s influential text. Long regarded as the “father” of art history, Vasari compiled biographies that form the foundation upon which scholars have built many arguments concerning the period. His words continue to influence the ideas, and to a great extent the perceived “facts,” about the objects created by the Renaissance’s most prolific artists, including Michelangelo. Scholars have only recently begun to reevaluate Vasari’s text and analyze it under a new lens, attempting to filter out the author’s biases and extract the kernels of truth that rest at the heart of any good story.²

One work completed during these assiduous years of Michelangelo’s life is the 
Doni Tondo, a panel painting now in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (Fig. 1). This 
painting of the Holy family received its popular appellation from the purported patron of 
the work, a friend of the artist, Agnolo Doni (1474-1539). Vasari relates a story in which 
Doni attempted to pay less than the asking price for the painting but, in the end, paid 
double because he could not live without such an exceptional object.3 This anecdote 
provides one of the few contemporary references to this work and, as a result, previous 
scholars have accepted the story at face value. Yet, present scholars consider Doni paying 
double the asking price to be a fabrication.4

Indeed, many facts about the Tondo remain uncertain, leading scholars to question 
the reason for its commission, the function of the work, its meaning, and for whom it was 
intended. Many hypotheses derive from analyses of the painting’s iconography coupled 
with what cursory information can be gleaned from the sparse contemporary 
documentation. However, no scholar has contested the identity of the patron who 
commissioned the work. Nevertheless, certain telling features of the painting and most 
importantly the culture in which it was created suggest that Agnolo Doni did not 
commission the Doni Tondo. Instead, I suggest members of the Strozzi family

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commissioned the work upon Agnolo Doni’s marriage to Maddalena Strozzi (Figs. 2, 3) [See Appendix I, *Strozzi-Doni*].

In the beginning of his *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Michael Baxandall writes: “A fifteenth-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship.” That opening sentence revolutionized the methods by which art historians analyzed Renaissance artworks, calling for a restoration of an object’s original and larger social and cultural contexts. Therefore, it is surprising that Michelangelo’s *Doni Tondo* has remained immune to such analysis. Even in the most recent publications of the painting, scholars remain fixated on identifying the principal figures in the work and determining their iconographic significance. This has led to countless studies attempting to resolve related issues, such as the identity of the nude figures in the painting’s background, or the date the painting was completed.6

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I want to move the discourse away from discussions of iconography and style, and focus instead on reconstructing the painting’s original cultural framework. This thesis, therefore, has two intended aims. The first and more specific goal is to provide an alternative narrative of the Doni Tondo’s patronage, ultimately removing it from the hands of Agnolo Doni and returning it rightfully to the Strozzi family. The second goal, which is certainly larger than the confines of this paper, attempts to realign our understanding of Michelangelo’s patronage history, correcting the biases that have emerged in historiography. In order to correct these biases, many of which were first established in the writings of Giorgio Vasari, I develop a prosopographic analysis of Michelangelo and his contemporaries to shed light on the suppressed history of Michelangelo’s patronage. This examination ultimately illuminates the fact that the Strozzi were as important as the Medici to Michelangelo’s patronage. The Doni Tondo, therefore, serves as the deposit from which to reconstruct the complex web of social interactions that ultimately reveal Michelangelo’s true patronage ties.

Vasari first published Lives of the Artists in March 1550, nearly half a century after the period that concerns us. Therefore, a sharp divide exists in the chronology of the Tondo’s history. To this end, I see the Doni Tondo as having multiple histories: one occurs in the moments in which the artist created it and delivered it to his patron, the other, in Vasari’s writings nearly fifty years later. This thesis demonstrates that the Doni Tondo was one of several works whose history Vasari distorted when he wrote his great narrative.

Yet, Vasari is not wholly to blame for these errors. What united the Buonarroti and the Strozzi above all else was their allegiance to the Florentine Republic and a shared
commitment to its preservation. As the Republic crumbled in the 1530s during the ascendency of the Medici, around the same time Vasari was writing his Lives, many members of the Strozzi family went into exile and the ruling Medici family persecuted opponents of the new government. Michelangelo, who had been extensively patronized by the Medici family and even lived in the Palazzo Medici in his youth, found himself in a precarious situation. Politically cautious and desperate to conceal his ties to the exiles, Michelangelo manipulated Vasari’s biography to deflect attention from his affiliations with the Strozzi while not appearing completely untruthful. He embellished certain facts and remained surprisingly quiet on others.

Michelangelo’s intentional disassociation from the Strozzi in the 1550s has had great effect on our understanding of his Tondo. However, by illuminating the Strozzi family’s extensive connections with Michelangelo and his family, especially compared to his relatively weak ties to the Doni, we recognize the Strozzi’s central role in commissioning the work. The picture of an artist who was ever mindful of how he curated his image emerges from this new narrative. Thus, the Doni Tondo becomes an artwork caught in the crossfire of patrons, politics, and family.
A STATE OF THE FIELD AND PROBLEMS OF DATING

Before attempting to “re-frame” the *Doni Tondo*, we must begin with the painting itself and identify how scholars have discussed the work and its history. The fact that Michelangelo never identified himself as a painter makes his accomplishments in the medium even more impressive. The *Doni Tondo*, the earliest surviving painting by the artist and the only panel painting that we definitively know to be by his hand, displays a *tour de force* of the artist’s multi-faceted abilities.

Set within the circular confines of its carved frame, member of the Holy Family crouche on the ground, emphasizing their humanity and humility. Nestled between the legs of her husband, Joseph, the Virgin Mary raises her arms across her body. She is caught in an ambiguous pose of either passing back or receiving the Christ child. Receding into the painting’s background, the landscape transforms from a lush ground on which the holy figures rest to a barren craggy landscape. A stone wall, in back of which the young St. John the Baptist stares admiringly at the Christ child, separates the background from the foreground. Within a quarry-like setting, five male nudes huddle together in what appears to be a friendly tug of war. Beyond these youths, the landscape transforms once again, into a primordial world where water and land meet, void of figures and any evidence of human intervention.

Michelangelo renders the colors of the figures’ garments and the landscape with an intensity that prefigures his palette for the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the hues seemingly glowing from within. Most impressive of all is the painting’s surface, which the artist brought to the highest degree of finish. As opposed to Leonardo da Vinci’s characteristic *sfumato*, where edges tend to blur, Michelangelo rendered his figures with a chiseled hard
edge, likening them more to sculpture than painting. The work appears to be a physical manifestation of the contemporary paragone debate, which pitted painters against sculptors as they attempted to demonstrate the superiority of their craft. Even while Michelangelo sacrificed his chisel for the brush, he is able to declare the supremacy of sculpture over painting.

Encircling the painted image, a gold gilt frame punctuated with five protruding heads, reminiscent of Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise, forms a holy halo around the fictive scene. Contained between bands of bead and reel and egg and dart molding, the figural heads protrude from a profusion of decorative filigree, grotesques, and other imagined flora and fauna forms. Secured to the overgrown tendrils, three abutting crescent moons, the heraldic device of the Strozzi family, are positioned in the upper left quadrant of the frame (Fig. 4). Scholars also have attempted to identify lions in the frame, the heraldic device of the Doni family (Fig. X). While certain elements of the grotesques may appear lion-like, none are as defined and isolated as the Strozzi moons. Michelangelo gives the Strozzi coat of arms clear prominence, an inexplicable iconographic feature if Agnolo Doni had commissioned the picture.

In the Renaissance, frames were luxurious commodities, usually costing far more than the paintings they enclosed. Great expense and care were invested in their creation, combining precious materials with designs by leading artists. Though changed throughout the life of a painting, frames were often conceived as an integral part of the picture itself. There can be no clear separation between the painter of the image and the

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designer of its frame. Some of the Renaissance’s leading artists, such as Filippo Lippi and Girolamo da Carpi, designed frames for their works.⁸

Speculation surrounds the authorship of the *Doni Tondo* frame. Recent studies have argued that while Michelangelo himself did not carve the frame, he certainly had a hand in its design.⁹ Drawings by the artist now held in the Gabinetto disegni e stampe degli Uffizi and the British Museum show similar grotesque figures and vegetal ornamentation as those present on the tondo’s frame (Fig. 5.1, 5.2). Similarly, the inclusion of five protruding heads reminiscent of Ghiberti’s bronze doors is strikingly Michelangelesque—not surprising given the artist’s admiration of that earlier masterpiece.

While Michelangelo was likely the designer of the frame, he was not responsible for its actual carving. Instead, this endeavor was the work of Marco and Francesco del Tasso. Scholars made this attribution as early as 1938, citing stylistic similarities with their other works.¹⁰ The del Tasso brothers were among the most prolific woodcarvers in Florence, and the city’s most prominent citizens vied for their services.¹¹ The Victoria and Albert Collection in London houses a del Tasso frame similar to Michelangelo’s tondo (Fig. 6).¹² The two frames bear an obvious stylistic resemblance to one another.

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¹⁰ Most recently Alessandro Cecchi has cited a similarity in the ornamentation of the del Tasso brother’s work on the Choir of the Badia in Florence with the carving of the Doni Tondo; see Cecchi, “Agnolo e Maddalena,” 435.

¹¹ Caneva, “Cornice del Tondo Doni,” 50.

Both are decorated with a similar vegetal pattern and profusion of animalia including nearly identical lion-like creatures to those found on the Uffizi frame (Fig. 7.1, 7.2). The presence of similar iconographic features calls into question previous scholars’ attempts to identify the lion-like creatures as Doni heraldic symbols. The employment of similar ornamentation on both commissions is indicative of the larger stylistic repertoire of the Del Tasso brothers, as evidenced by their other works including the V&A frame, and were not added for symbolic meaning. Moreover, the peculiar presence of the Strozzi moons on just one of these frames signals ownership through its prominence as a heraldic device. Supporting this argument further, the V&A frame, while dated later than the Doni Tondo, is said to have come from the Casa Strozzi in Florence. This palazzo is the very one in which Marcello Strozzi, Maddalena’s father, lived during his childhood. The Strozzi’s possession of other works by both Michelangelo and del Tasso reveals the family’s intimate relationship with the artist and craftsmen of the Doni Tondo.

**HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Despite the painting’s familiarity, many questions remain unanswered. The foremost among these questions remains the reason for the painting’s commission. Attempts to attach it to a particular event in Agnolo Doni’s life have proved elusive. Scholars’ attempts to date the work have produced a large body of literature that nonetheless has failed to establish a definitive date, or the reason for its commission. Giovanni Poggi was the first to propose that the painting was commissioned in 1504 for the marriage of Agnolo Doni to Maddalena Strozzi. Poggi based this proposal on the three crescent moons surrounded by four dubious lion heads in the frame, the *imprese* of

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the Strozzi and Doni respectively, thus symbolizing the unity of the two families through the couple’s nuptials. Charles de Tolnay most notably reaffirmed this date, though never insisted on linking the work to Doni’s marriage.\footnote{de Tolnay, \textit{Michelangelo}, 1:163-168.}

More recently, scholars have associated the tondo with a later date, aligning it with the birth of Maddalena and Agnolo’s first child, Maria, in 1507. Antonio Natali has been the most adamant proponent of a later date, citing various stylistic and iconographic features in the image that suggest the painting was completed between 1506 and 1507.\footnote{Natali, “\textit{L’antico, le Scritture e l’occassione},” 21-28.} Such a shift in date moves the painting closer to Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling (1508) thus explaining the coloristic and stylistic similarities between the two works. Most recently, Lucia Aquino published a document from Lodovico de Nobili dated 3 January 1506 that makes reference to Francesco del Tasso’s woodcarving in the house of Agnolo Doni.\footnote{Lucia Aquino, “La Camera di Lodovico de Nobili opera de Francesco del Tasso e qualche precisazione sulla cornice del Tondo Doni,” \textit{Paragone} 59 (2005): 86-101.} Aquino argues the work Lodovico references in this letter is the tondo’s frame, presumably executed by the del Tasso brothers at the behest of Michelangelo’s design. Therefore, Aquino suggests a later date than 1504, but certainly before the date of Nobili’s letter.

Aside from the modern treatments of the \textit{Doni Tondo}, several references were made to the painting during the Renaissance. The earliest mention appeared in the anonymous \textit{Codice Magliabechiano} (c. 1537-1547) in which the work is attributed to Michelangelo and described: “Nella pittura [. . .] tondo di Nostra Donna in casa Agnolo
Several years later the *Tondo* appears again in a 1549 letter from Agnolo Doni’s more famous cousin, Anton Francesco Doni. Writing from Venice to his friend Alberto Lollio who was visiting Florence and desirous, as an informed traveler, of what he should see, Anton Francesco closes: “Above all else is a Tondo of our Lady displayed in the house of Agnolo Doni, and all that I can say is that it is by the hand of the master of masters.” Neither of these early accounts directly names the work’s patron or the reason behind its commission. Other than locating the painting in the Doni household as late as 1549, they provide little substantive information about the *Tondo*.

The first and most detailed account of Michelangelo’s painting appears in Giorgio Vasari’s 1550 edition of the *Lives of the Artists*, which begins: “Agnolo Doni, a Florentine citizen and friend of Michelangelo, as a man who took great delight in owning beautiful objects… decided that he wanted something done by Michelangelo; hence, Michelangelo began painting a tondo for him.” Sounding like the critic he was, Vasari describes the work at length while simultaneously praising the artist’s ingenuity and grace. Vasari appended to his description of the painting’s aesthetic qualities an anecdote about the dispute over the payment for the work. Michelangelo reportedly sent the painting to Doni’s house with a request for seventy ducats remuneration. In response, Doni offered forty. Incensed, Michelangelo demanded that Doni return the painting or pay the now inflated price of one hundred ducats. Unwilling to part with such a

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19 Vasari-Barocchi, 4:13 (1550) 4:22 (1568); trans. Vasari-Bondanella, 429.
wonderful artwork, Doni conceded to the original price. Michelangelo, still unsatisfied, forced Doni to pay double the initial asking price, totaling one hundred and forty ducats.\textsuperscript{20}

Printed shortly after Vasari’s 1550 edition, and perhaps best understood in dialogue with Vasari’s biography, is Ascanio Condivi’s \textit{Vita di Michelangnolo Buonarroti raccolta per Ascanio Condivi}, published as an independent biography of the artist in 1553. Condivi was an intimate of Michelangelo while the latter lived in Rome. Many scholars in effect equate Condivi’s biography of the artist to an autobiography, thus trusting that his words are from the master himself. Interestingly, unlike Vasari’s extended narrative, Condivi condenses the entire episode into a single sentence: “And in order not to abandon painting altogether, he [Michelangelo] did a \textit{Madonna} on a round panel for Agnolo Doni, a Florentine citizen, for which he received seventy ducats.”\textsuperscript{21} This account lacks any reference to how the artist knew Doni, any specific reason for its commission, or any mention of a dispute over the price. As a result, basing a date or reason for the painting’s completion upon these accounts becomes highly problematic, because they do not help illuminate any of our proposed motivations for the \textit{Tondo}’s commission.

Most striking, however, and seldom discussed in modern treatments, is the chronological distance of the sources from the \textit{Tondo}. All the Renaissance sources that mention the \textit{Tondo} were written some forty years or more after the artist finished the painting. Until now, scholars have taken these stories at face value. It is necessary

\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{20} Vasari-Barocchi, 4:22-23 (1568).}
\end{footnote}

\end{footnote}
therefore, to contextualize Vasari and Condivi’s texts, emphasizing the times in which they were created.

FAMILIAL RELATIONS: MICHELANGELO AND THE STROZZI

Familial relations were the glue that held together Florentine society. Alliances forged through marriages and patronage created a closely-knit social fabric that fostered support among allies and severe enmity between rivals. There was no greater rivalry than that between Florence’s two wealthiest families, the Medici and Strozzi. The individuals who garnered support from either of these houses gained prestige, security, and, at times, great wealth. As the capricious winds of power vacillated, however, those who supported a rival were often persecuted. The high risk, high reward nature of maintaining a relationship with either of these families became even more complex when an individual received considerable support from both sides, a position in which Michelangelo often found himself.

Despite this delicate tightrope on which Michelangelo found himself balancing, the historical account betrays far less nuance. History is told from the point of view of the victor. As a result, the narrative that historians have constructed around Michelangelo’s patron history has stressed the artist’s affiliation with the Medici. This account has often marginalized if not completely ignored his relations with the less well known but equally powerful and influential Strozzi, a family that not only supported the artist throughout his entire career but also accumulated a number of the artist’s works.

Sparse documentation precludes knowing a precise date for when Michelangelo’s relationship with the Strozzi began. While the first occurred when the artist began using
the Strozzi and Salviati banks of Florence and Rome for his investments in 1496, it is likely that the Buonarroti family’s connection with the Strozzi was established well before this date. In a letter dated 22 February 1552, Michelangelo suggested that his affiliation with the family extended as far back as his childhood. Writing to his nephew Lionardo, Michelangelo recalled: “I knew Giovanni Strozzi [1517-1570] when I was a child; he was a man of honor . . . I also knew Carlo [Strozzi]” [See Appendix II, Palla Strozzi Genealogy]. Indeed the Buonarroti’s familial ties to the Strozzi can be traced as far back as the 1420s during the anti-Medici conflicts involving Palla Strozzi and Michelangelo’s great-uncle, Simone di Buonarotto Buonarroti. Even more importantly, the family of Michelangelo’s grandmother, Bonda Rucellai, repeatedly intermarried with the Strozzi, forming deep bonds between the two clans [See Appendix III, Buonarroti Genealogy]. Because of the families’ entwined histories, Michelangelo’s own relationship with the Strozzi almost certainly developed out of pre-existing familial ties. Thus, as Michelangelo’s early career unfolded, the Strozzi were natural targets as potential patrons.

With the death of Lorenzo de’ Medici in 1492, Michelangelo lost his greatest patron and the Medici lost the cornerstone of their family. Anxiety over what would happen next entered the heart of every Florentine. Much to Michelangelo’s dismay, Lorenzo’s ill-advised son Piero de’ Medici, later dubbed Piero the Unfortunate, took the

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24 Luigi Passerini, *Genealogia e storia della famiglia Rucellai* (Firenze: Tipi di M. Cellini, 1861), Tav. IV.
reins of the family dynasty and fashioned himself Gran Maestro of the city. Harboring
disdain for Piero and wary of the Medici’s future, Michelangelo escaped from the
escalating political tension in Florence. Vasari comments: “It happened that the Medici
were driven out of Florence, and that, a few weeks before, Michelangelo had already left
for Bologna and then to Venice, because, having seen the insolent actions and bad
government of Piero de’ Medici, he feared some sinister accident might befall him as a
friend of the family.”

Michelangelo remained in Bologna for nearly a year, carving some small figures
for the tomb of San Domenico while he allowed the political waters of Florence to calm.
Returning to his native city in 1494 after his voluntary exile, the artist entered a
completely different world. Lacking the patronage and protection of Lorenzo de’ Medici,
Michelangelo sought new opportunities. To rebuild his patronage network he turned to
the Strozzi family with whom he had a close and already well established alliance.

Several sources from the period report that on Lorenzo’s death, Michelangelo
purchased a block of marble and sculpted a large marble Hercules four braccia high.

Scholars have disputed the patron of the work and date of execution. A letter from
Lorenzo Strozzi to Michelangelo’s brother, Buonarrotto, dated 20 June 1506, makes

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25 Vasari-Barocchi, 4:13 (1568).

26 It is likely that Michelangelo also set sights on remaining members of the Medici family. Shortly after the
Medici expulsion, Michelangelo returned to Florence and was taken in by Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de
Medici. Lorenzo, who was of a younger branch of the Medici family, was a sympathizer of the anti-Medici
faction that deposed the insolent Piero, lending him the nickname, Il Popolano. While under Lorenzo’s
protection the artist sculpted a now lost marble statue of St. John the Baptist, and was encouraged to send
an antique marble Eros to Rome either intentionally to deceive potential buyers or more likely attract the
attention of potential patrons in Rome. It is thus with Lorenzo’s letters of introduction that the young artist
was first introduced to members of the papal court such as Cardinal Riario, who would provide his first
commission in the city. It has yet to be demonstrated, but I would suggest that Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco
also served as a bridge to the Strozzi family since both shared anti-Medici sentiments and were
responsible for the family’s expulsion. For Lorenzo’s letter of introduction, see Letter of 2 July 1496
(Carteggio, 1:1).
reference to a sculpture that was moved into the newly constructed Palazzo Strozzi.

Scholars generally believe that the “figura” referenced in the letter is Michelangelo’s lost *Hercules.* Recently, Michael Hirst, Caroline Elam, and Francesco Caglioti have argued that the work was originally a Medici commission and only entered the Strozzi house in 1494 following the expulsion of the Medici and confiscation of Piero’s property. Regardless of the original date and patron of the Hercules, one significant fact about the sculpture remains: the Strozzi certainly once owned this work. The marble sculpture is one link in a long chain of gifts and favors that were exchanged between the artist and the family and bespeak their increasingly close relations.

The Buonarroti’s and Strozzi’s intertwined relationship concerned more than just the artist’s works. Beginning as early as 1502, Michelangelo’s brother, Buonarrotto Buonarroto (1477-1528), entered the service of Selvaggia Gianfigliazzi, the widow of Filippo Strozzi the Elder (d. 1491) and mother of Lorenzo (1482-1549) and Filippo the Younger (1489-1538) [See Appendix IV, *Filippo Strozzi Genealogy*]. From this moment, Buonarrotto developed long-lasting business relations with both brothers and as early as 1504 began working in their wool shop in Via Porta Rossa. Buonarrotto reaped not only

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29 After Buonarrotto entered the service of Selvaggia he ventured into business with Lorenzo and Filippo Strozzi. From January 1504 to April 1508 he worked as a ‘garzone’ in the brothers’ wool company located
economic advantage from this relationship, but also social advancement: the Strozzi eventually invited him to live within the family palace and may have facilitated his marriage.

A further cementing of the patronal relationship came when Michelangelo gave a bronze dagger to Filippo Strozzi. This was clearly done in appreciation of Filippo’s support of Buonarrotto.\(^{30}\) The dagger, which Michelangelo designed and had forged while living in Bologna, was originally commissioned by the wealthy Florentine Piero Aldrobrandini but was ultimately rejected by the patron. Learning of Piero’s dissatisfaction with the work, Michelangelo wrote to his brother:

I am delighted that he didn’t want it and that he wasn’t pleased with it; perhaps because it was not its fate to be worn at his belt, and particularly because I hear that if he doesn’t want it, someone else does—namely Filippo Strozzi.\(^{31}\)

With Filippo’s expressed interest, Michelangelo instructed Buonarrotto to “make him a present of [the dagger], as from [himself], and not [to] say anything to him about the cost.”\(^{32}\) Despite the seeming unimportance of the blade, Michelangelo understood the work as an appropriate gift for Buonarrotto to give to Filippo, who was instrumental in furthering Buonarrotto’s business career and eventually his social standing. Filippo and Lorenzo continued to patronize Buonarrotto throughout his career, supporting his election

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\(^{32}\) *Carteggio*, I, 35; trans. Ramsden, I, 30.
to several governmental offices and, most importantly, helping to secure his advantageous marriage to Bartolomea di Ghezzo della Casa in 1516.\footnote{The Strozzi were instrumental in Buonarroti’s election to the office of the Dodici Buonuomini in 1513 as well as his appointment as Prior in the Signoria in 1515. Further discussion of the dynamics of Buonarroti’s relationship with the Strozzi family can be found in, \textit{Carteggio indiretto}, I, xxxiii-xxxvii.}

The only surviving evidence of the dagger is found in the letters exchanged between Buonarroti and Michelangelo. There is no mention of the object in Vasari’s or Condivi’s accounts, probably because the bronze blade was unknown to either writer. On the other hand, this is yet another instance of Strozzi-Buonarroti history that Michelangelo chose not to share with his biographers. The bronze dagger, like the marble Hercules, is part of the multiple ties shared by the Buonarroti and Strozzi families.

Most importantly, the bronze dagger brought Filippo Strozzi within Michelangelo’s circle of patrons. Despite the fact that Filippo did not directly commission the blade from Michelangelo, his expressed interest in the work demonstrates that by 1507 Filippo was a person of importance to Michelangelo. Further, the incident marks the advent of Filippo Strozzi the Younger into the Florentine art world. The bronze dagger Michelangelo crafted was an appropriate gift for the eighteen-year-old patrician—acknowledging both his adulthood and social prominence. This fact will become particularly significant when considering the \textit{Doni Tondo}.

These early examples of patronage between the Strozzi and Buonarroti reveal that their relationship was not only long lasting but also multifaceted. Michelangelo’s relationship with the Strozzi permeated many aspects of his life, from the professional to the personal. Michelangelo relied on the Strozzi for financial backing, social advancement, and political security. Throughout the entirety of his life, not once did the Strozzi formally commission the artist to complete a work of art. Rather, each of the
three—though this paper will argue for a fourth—known Michelangelo works that entered Strozzi collections were gifted by the artist in gratitude for all that the family had done to assist the Buonarroti. The question remains, however, as to why this relationship with the Strozzi has been suppressed in the history of the artist.

**POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES: MICHELANGELO AND THE FUORUSCITI**

In a letter dated 22 October 1547, the same year Vasari completed the first draft of his *Lives of the Artists*, an aging Michelangelo wrote to his nephew Lionardo: “I’m glad you informed me about the decree, because if up till now I’ve been on my guard about talking to the exiles and associating with them, I’ll be much more on my guard in the future.” In a previous letter, Lionardo reported that rumors were circulating in Florence concerning a *bando* issued by Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici. Implemented a month later, the *bando* ordered the imprisonment, confiscation of property, and even execution of any individual that assisted the Florentine *fuorusciti*. Chief among the republican loyalists who opposed the newly instated Medici duchy were the Strozzi, led by Filippo Strozzi the Younger. A close friend of many of the Strozzi exiles and himself a republican at heart, Michelangelo had reason to be frightened. Even though he was marginally safe living in Rome, the Medici threatened to persecute the extended family.

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34 It is reported that on 8 July 1547 Vasari had completed a draft of his *Lives*; see Vasari-Bondanella, xxii.

35 *Carteggio*, IV, 279; trans. Ramsden, II, 82.

members of fuorusciti supporters. This was a direct threat to everything for which Michelangelo and his family had worked.

Historians have long characterized Michelangelo as a life-long republican. Both Giorgio Spini and Charles de’ Tolnay make this abundantly clear in their discussions of the artist’s political identity. Michelangelo, however, was no different than other politically and socially sensitive Florentines, who understood that survival required political flexibility. And Michelangelo was certainly not the only republican who switched political loyalties. As the political and economic winds shifted from one faction to the other, it was advantageous to move with them, currying favor from a former enemy in the hope of maintaining one’s fortune and social standing. Nonetheless, with the siege of Florence in 1529-1530, Michelangelo’s actions became overtly political. Committing to the protection of his native city, he was appointed Superintendent and Protector


General over the city’s fortifications. For nearly two years, as the papal and imperial armies of Clement VII and Charles V threatened Florence’s independence, Michelangelo labored to protect his native city from attack.

The Florentines were desperate for external help. Characteristically, the Republic turned to its longtime ally, King Francis I of France, with the hope that the king would provide the much needed troops to fend off the enemy’s advances. Along with the number of diplomats sent to persuade the King, artistic gifts were used as diplomatic tools. Thus, in early March 1529, in an effort to curry the King’s support, Filippo Strozzi convinced his son Piero to gift one of the family’s most prized possessions: Michelangelo’s marble Hercules. For Michelangelo, the Hercules was no ordinary sculpture by his hand. It was the very work that initiated his lifelong relationship with the family. One can assume that Filippo took this action in a desperate measure to bolster the patriotic effort. Thus, Michelangelo’s art became a diplomatic tool, accruing a political dimension through its use. To no avail: the much-needed assistance never materialized, and on 12 August 1530, the last Florentine Republic capitulated to the papal and imperial armies.

Immediately following Florence’s surrender to the Medici, the reinstated Pope Clement VII (1478-1534) set out on a witch-hunt of unprecedented scale in an attempt to

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42 It should be recognized that only six months after the Hercules was sent to France, Michelangelo created a painting of Leda and the Swan for Alfonso d’Este in order to garner the support for the Republic. William Wallace has argued that the painting was clearly created as a diplomatic tool; see, William Wallace, “Michelangelo’s Leda: The Diplomatic Context,” *Renaissance Studies* 15, no. 4 (2001): 473-499; Janet Cox-Rearick, *The Collection of Francis I: Royal Treasures* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996): 237-241.
punish rebels and silence dissent.⁴³ Many of Michelangelo’s closest allies suffered from Clement’s wrath. The artist’s dear friend and Strozzi associate, Battista della Palla, was imprisoned and poisoned. Even Michelangelo’s fame and fortune failed to keep him immune from Pope Clement’s fury and he was driven into temporary hiding. As tempers calmed, Michelangelo only narrowly escaped persecution and ultimately returned to the folds of Clement’s patronage, being “impelled more by fear than by love.”⁴⁴

For the next three decades, the Medici continued to threaten and persecute adversaries in an effort to wipe out the final vestiges of republican sentiment. This is the stage upon which both Michelangelo and Giorgio Vasari crafted their narratives. Michelangelo had reason to panic. For the past fifty years the artist had labored to improve his family’s status. After earning great sums of money, Michelangelo reinvested his wealth into markers of prestige, buying property in the contado, acquiring a house in the city, and ensuring his heirs married into wealthy families by providing their dowries.⁴⁵

Now, as the Medici secured their grip on the city, all that Michelangelo had worked tirelessly to achieve was threatened. When reading both his letters and biographies, therefore, one must be aware of an artist acting out of self interest and familial preservation as he attempted to conceal all associations that would prove detrimental, or worse, dangerous. Most jeopardizing of these associations was Michelangelo’s lifelong affiliation with the influential Strozzi family.

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⁴⁴ Condini, Life of Michelangelo, 67.

Thus, Michelangelo firmly denied all associations with the family. In replying to Lionardo in October 1547, Michelangelo emphatically corrected his nephew: “As regards to my being ill, in the Strozzi’s house, I do not consider that I stayed in their house, but in the apartment of Messer Luigi del Riccio.”

Michelangelo did not mention was that Luigi del Riccio’s apartment was located in Roberto Strozzi’s Roman palace. This is one of the clearest examples of Michelangelo purposefully deflecting attention from his association to the politically compromised Strozzi family. By averting to Luigi, Michelangelo was masking the strong bonds he had formed with Roberto Strozzi and his circle of Florentine exiles. Michelangelo sent several letters in the decade between 1547 and 1557 filled with similar attempts to obscure his affiliation with the fuorusciti. His loyalty to the Republic and its allies drove the aging artist into what he claimed to be self-imposed isolation: “go[ing] about very little and talk[ing] to no-one, least of all the Florentines.”

So did Michelangelo deny all ties to the exiles.

The prospect of being declared a rebel, as he briefly was in September 1529, was a significant danger to any Florentine citizen. His potential punishment as a political exile and the resulting confiscation of property threatened all for which he had worked and would have devastated the Buonarroti family. Unlike Ottimati families, the

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46 Carteggio, IV, 279; trans. Ramsden, II, 82.

47 I have discovered an other letter, which shares Michelangelo’s cautious tone. In the letter dated 8 February 1553, Michelangelo writes to his nephew Lionardo: “I have no information about any of the families in Florence and here I have no truck with any of the Florentines;” see Ramsden, II, 140. This letter is not reprinted in the Carteggio.

48 Carteggio, IV, 279; trans. Ramsden, II, 82.

49 On 30 September 1529 the Republican Signoria declared Michelangelo a rebel of the state because he had left Florence during the Siege of Florence. Upon his return two months later, all charges were dropped and none of his property suffered confiscation. ASF: Signori e Colletti, Deliberazione d’ordinaria autorita 132, fol. 30r (23 November 1529); ASF: Otto di Guardia 206, fol. 28r-28v (30 September 1529). I would like to thank Professor Wallace for sharing these documents with me.
Buonarroti lacked the capital to protect them from persecution. Furthermore, the family had no secondary residence in Venice or France available to them. Indeed, this very real threat in 1547 could have amounted to total social and financial ruin for the family.

Complicating his situation even more was the fact that in 1546, when Roberto Strozzi returned to Rome, Michelangelo gifted two marble slaves as a token of his appreciation for letting the artist recuperate in his palazzo. Four years later, in 1550, Roberto shipped the marble sculptures to France, seemingly as a diplomatic gift to curry French support. Maria Ruvoldt argues that Roberto was not alone in these hopes, and that Michelangelo gifted the works to Roberto with the intention that they ultimately travel to France. At approximately the same time in 1544, Michelangelo offered his services to Francis I—promising to cast an equestrian statue of the King in the Piazza Signoria should he preserve “Florentine liberty.” Thus, one again a work by Michelangelo became entangled in politics. Furthermore, like the marble Hercules and the bronze dagger before, the marble Slaves are the third instance of Michelangelo using his art to reaffirm his relationship with the Strozzi.

50 Many of Florence’s wealthiest families were able to stave off the threat of exile because of their enormous capital. To send one of these families into exile meant to lose their wealth in the city. For this reason, family’s like the Altoviti managed to prevent persecution for many years. Ultimately however, even the Altoviti were persecuted in 1554 after they lent support to the Sienese during the war with Florence; see, Simoncelli, “Florentine fuorusciti,” 285-328.


52 Maria Ruvoldt, “Michelangelo’s Slaves and the Gift of Liberty,” unpublished manuscript. I would like to thank Professor Ruvoldt for sharing this manuscript and conversations relating to it.

53 Letter dated 21 July 1544 from Luigi del Riccio to Roberto Strozzi in Lyons “ . . . s’e’ rimetteva Firenze in liberta, che li voleva fare una statua di bronzo a cavallo in su la piazza de’ Signoria a sua spesa etc (Carteggio, IV, 184).

54 Aside from the artworks that were directly gifted to the Strozzi family, one must also consider the host of secondary commissions that Michelangelo received from Strozzi affiliates, Michelangelo’s altar design for Salvatore di Bartolomeo di Antonio Billi, for example, who managed the Naples branch of the Strozzi
By the 1550s, Michelangelo’s relationship with the Strozzi had evolved and matured—extending beyond those normally found between artists and patrons. Not only were the two linked economically and to some degree socially, but now, more than ever, they were also united politically. Evidence of this is most clearly found in the artworks Michelangelo gifted to the family. With these offerings and allegiances in mind, Michelangelo’s letter of February 1552 reveals a more nuanced message. Indeed, Michelangelo wanted to clarify his familiarity with the Strozzi when he wrote to his nephew Lionardo: “I knew Giovanni Strozzi when I was a child; he was a man of honor.” And, at the same time he was cautious to suppress those same relations, declaring: “That’s all I can tell you about it.”55 But surely this is not all that Michelangelo could say on the topic. As already discussed, the Buonarroti’s connection with the Strozzi was cemented well before the birth of Michelangelo and by 1552 ran deeper than mere acquaintances. This terse and quixotic statement can best be interpreted, however, when read in conjunction with the scribbled message in an unknown hand on the page’s verso: “Deliver safely, because it is from Messer Michelangelo.” The message to the postal carrier reveals the artist’s concern that his letters might be intercepted, especially given that such an instruction is rare on Michelangelo’s letters. Yet, when read together with the letter’s content, Michelangelo’s terseness provides a clear example of his dissimulation regarding his associations with the Strozzi.

bank, and a close associate of the family. During the climax of his success he set out to decorate a lavish chapel in Santissima Annunziata. An extant drawing, now held in the British Museum, demonstrates Michelangelo’s involvement in the project’s design. It is highly likely that this commission resulted because of Michelangelo’s relationship with the Strozzi family. I would like to thank Professor Wallace for bringing this object to my attention and sharing his unpublished discussion of the work. His treatment of the project will appear in forthcoming volume, Florence published by Cambridge University Press.

Michelangelo’s determined silence and continuous dissimulation became his primary tools for minimizing his republican sympathies. This has had a lasting effect on the way we approach the artist while reading Vasari. The account of Michelangelo’s *Doni Tondo* in Vasari’s *Lives* has proven the greatest detriment to a proper understanding of the object. Yet, perhaps the impediments posed by Vasari’s text are also a testament to Michelangelo’s greatest success. The stories Michelangelo retold Vasari have proven to be his greatest instrument in disguising his relationship with the highly politicized and influential Strozzi family, a relationship that lasted the entirety of the artist’s life. This social and historical context provides a framework for understanding the *Doni Tondo*, enabling us to reinsert the object into its cultural context and remove the obscuring veil that Vasari’s text has cast upon this painting.

**The Painting in Context**

Previous scholars have attempted to associate Michelangelo’s painting with one of two possible events in Agnolo Doni and Maddalena Strozzi’s life together—either their marriage in January 1504 or the birth of their first child in 1507. The overwhelming lack of evidentiary material from the period has made it difficult to accept fully either of these possibilities, and neither argument has completely satisfied the scholarly community. In the many monographs and articles that mention the work, there appears an even divide over whether the object is linked with the marriage or with a parturition ritual. Compelling arguments have been made for both sides, yet none of these arguments has taken into consideration the contested patron of the work or the object’s history. The previous arguments that have been put forth to date the *Tondo* have suffered from a
myopic reading of the sources, the painting, and Michelangelo’s patronage history. When viewed within its historical, political, and cultural contexts, the evidence strongly supports one reading—that the Strozzi family commissioned the painting for Maddalena’s marriage to Agnolo.

While the earliest scholarly writings on the painting ascribe it to the years surrounding the Doni-Strozzi marriage, recent scholarly attention argues for a later date. This shift has been motivated by belief that the work belongs chronologically closer to the painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling because of the many stylistic similarities the two works share. A later date would also associate the work with the birth of the couple’s first child, thereby connecting the painting’s iconographical program to a specific event. Andrée Hayum was the first to articulate that the painting’s iconography in relation to issues of procreation, birth, and baptism.\(^{56}\) For Hayum, it was more plausible to associate the painting with a birth rather than the wedding, noting of course that the primary goal of any marriage was procreation and the continuation of the family lineage.

While Hayum relies on an iconological reading of the painting to posit a later date, Antonio Natali argues for a later date based on stylistic and formal features.\(^{57}\) Natali attempts to relate several of the painting’s figures to antique sculpture, particularly the Laocoön, which was unearthed in Rome in January 1506. For Natali, 1506 serves as a *terminus post quem* for the tondo. Anna Tempesti notes similarities in the pose of the Virgin with the kneeling figure of Raphael’s *Deposition*—painted in 1507 for Atalanta Baglioni.\(^{58}\) Tempesti proposes that this is an example of the young Raphael borrowing

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\(^{56}\) Hayum, “Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo,” 209-51.

from Michelangelo’s earlier work—thus forming a *terminus ante quem* for the *Tondo*. Natali believes, however, that both Raphael and Michelangelo used a similar antique model for their figures. If this were the case, Michelangelo could have worked on the panel until his departure for Rome to begin the Sistina.

When this chronology is mapped over the events of Michelangelo’s life, however, certain improbabilities arise [See Appendix V, *Timeline*]. For one, given that Maria was baptized in September 1507, it is likely that Maddalena conceived her daughter around December 1506. Michelangelo, however, was in Bologna from November 1506 to February 1508. Shortly after his return to Florence, Maddalena conceived her second child, Francesco, who was born on 21 November 1508. It is improbable that Michelangelo painted the *Doni Tondo* in either Rome or Bologna; therefore, he would have had to execute the work between February and late March 1508 when he departed Florence for Rome. Another possibility is that Michelangelo executed the work prior to Maddalena’s pregnancy with Maria, during the artist’s short stay in Florence from April to November 1506. Frederick Hartt attempts to argue such a date, citing a series of miscarriages and failed births the couple was thought to have suffered. In such a case, the tondo would have been created as a form of sympathetic imagery, thought to increase the couple’s chances of a successful conception. The sources of Hartt’s information are unclear, however, and the dates for when the couple endured these misfortunes are unknown.

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58 Tempesti, “Raffaello e il Tondo Doni,” 144-145.


In either case, the time frame for painting the *tondo* was no more than a few months. This timeline is complicated even more when the painting’s frame is added to the equation. The frame would have taken several months to create—the wood needing sufficient time to cure. If Michelangelo were indeed the designer of the frame, he would have been engaged with the project much longer than the four months he was living in Florence. Based solely on the artist’s whereabouts in 1506 and 1507, it is highly improbable that he would have had the time to design and execute the painting and its frame during the period. The weight of the chronological evidence therefore, strongly suggests that the work was associated with the Doni-Strozzi marriage. Michelangelo’s employment of the tondo form and its unique association with marriage further strengthens this conclusion.

RE-CONTEXTUALIZING THE TONDO

Central to any interpretation of Michelangelo’s *Doni Tondo* is the object’s distinctive shape. Tondi—the name itself referring to the object’s circular form—were particularly common in Renaissance Tuscany, appearing early in the fifteenth century and lasting well into the sixteenth. While the type appears elsewhere, its greatest innovations and developments occurred in Florence, where nearly every major artist from Leonardo to Raphael created works with a circular shape. The studies by Roberta Olson, Kent Lydecker, and Jacqueline Musacchio have begun to demonstrate the tondo’s highly specialized and complex function within the Renaissance household.\(^6\) Yet, the events that inspired a tondo’s creation remain difficult to identify definitively.

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Tondi were hybrid objects of secular and devotional significance intended to decorate the domestic interior. As their iconography evolved, they tended to focus on the family unit, expressing the relationship between Christ and his mother, or the entire Holy Family—precisely the focus of Michelangelo’s composition. In this respect, tondi were more than commemorative paintings, and were meant to assist in religious devotion. As secular objects, they adorned interior spaces, ornamenting and enhancing the couple’s private camera as sacred objects that interceded on the beholder’s behalf, guiding their prayers. Renaissance palazzi were often redecorated at the time of marriage, as the husband was expected to provide an appropriate new home for his bride, and the bride’s trousseau helped to furnish these domestic spaces. Many of the objects exchanged at weddings were decorative items that also held a utilitarian function in the house. It is part of this exchange in the marriage ritual that tondi are most often associated.

Marriage in the Renaissance was almost never based on romantic love, especially among the aristocracy. Instead, it was viewed as a vital social institution that allowed families to strengthen their bonds with other influential families. To this end, the process of arranging marriages and the events leading up to the exchange of vows developed into a highly structured negotiation between wedding parties that was both courteous and manipulative. No aspect of this transaction was more important than the dowry, the “cornerstone” of Renaissance marriage practice.62

By the later Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance, the practice of dowry exchange had not only gained prominence in much of Europe, but it had also transformed into a highly intricate system. The bride’s family was left with the task of raising enough

funds to entice an appropriate husband.63 Aside from attracting prospective grooms, the dowry was intended to provide funds for the bridegroom to care for his bride and provide her with financial security should her husband predecease her. Husbands used dowries not only to secure the well being of their brides but also for investments to start businesses or buy property. In a letter to her son Filippo Strozzi the Elder, Alessandra writes regarding the marriage of her daughter Caterina, “Chi to’ donna, vuol danari” (He who takes a bride, wants cash).64 Indeed, the dowry became a way for men not only to increase their personal wealth but also secure their social station. Wealthier families saw marriage as a means to strengthen ties with other prominent or rising families. Affluent parents with numerous daughters found it difficult to provide suitable dowries, and often placed second and third female children in convents.65 As dowry prices rose throughout the fifteenth century, the government ultimately intervened and placed caps on the escalating amounts.66 With a negotiated dowry price of 1,400 scudi, a sizeable sum for the period where the average was only a few hundred, Agnolo Doni stood to augment his fortune and social station significantly.67


65 Florence had a number of nunneries some more exclusive than others. Roughly around the same time, we see an increase in foundling hospitals to deal with the overflow of female infants; see John Najemy, *A History of Florence 1200-1575* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 238-244; Gavitt, *Charity and Children*.


Though little information can be gleaned from the primary sources, it is apparent that Doni was a successful merchant.\textsuperscript{68} The family made its wealth in the textile business, like the Strozzi, opening several \textit{botteghe} for cloth dying. Their business was successful enough to afford them a family palazzo on Via Tintori in the Santa Croce district, which Agnolo remodeled after his marriage to Maddalena. Agnolo’s success as a businessman afforded him the ability to marry into a lesser branch of the Strozzi family.

Agnolo’s greatest reward from his marriage to Maddalena was not monetary, but an inestimable increase in social prestige. For one, Agnolo apparently never took possession of his promised dowry or, at the very least, its delivery was severely delayed. Court records report that in 1536, Agnolo had still not received his money and was attempting to collect it from Maddalena’s brother, Strozzo Strozzi.\textsuperscript{69} In the interim years, however, Agnolo still managed to prosper and further managed to spend lavishly on the arts. Agnolo managed to assemble a fairly significant art collection, one commented upon by Vasari, although these objects only entered his collection after his marriage to Maddalena.\textsuperscript{70} It appears that his art collecting was stimulated by his newfound position in society—having married well by capturing a Strozzi daughter.\textsuperscript{71} In comparison to the illustrious Strozzi, the Doni were \textit{nouveau riche} merchants who lacked ancestral and

\textsuperscript{68} Cecchi, “Agnolo e Maddalena Doni,” 430, for archival documentation refer to notes 3-4.

\textsuperscript{69} Cecchi, “Agnolo e Maddalena Doni,” 432, note 12 (ASF, Archivio Strozzi-Uguccioni 196, fol. 89).

\textsuperscript{70} Vasari-Bondanella, 310-311.

\textsuperscript{71} A similar parallel can be seen in Lodovico di Nobili’s commissioning of the del Tasso brothers to ornament his \textit{camera nuziale}. Lucia Aquino suggests that Lodovico was unable independently to attract the del Tasso brothers. It is likely instead that his bride, Lisabetta was responsible for bringing the craftsmen to Nobili’s attention because of her family’s reestablished relations with the workshop. It should be noted that Lisabetta’s mother was Margherita di Strozza degli Strozzi, making her Maddalena Strozzi’s second cousin; see Aquino, “La Camera di Lodovico de Nobili,” 90.
political clout. Aside from scattered mentions of his children and grandchildren, by the end of the sixteenth century the Doni family fell into obscurity.\footnote{Anton Francesco Doni, however, reached some level of prominence. A noted poet, Anton Francesco was born in Florence but spent the remainder of his life in exile living in Venice. Though from a different branch of the Doni family than Agnolo, Antron Francesco provided a description of his family’s impresa in his text La Zucca; see Hayum, “Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo,” note 16.}

Along with the negotiated amount set as the official dowry, other goods became associated with a complicated ritual of gift exchange between families.\footnote{Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “The Griselda Complex: Dowry and Marriage Gifts in the Quattrocento” in Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, 213-246 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985).} While gifts were not obligatory, the exchange of gifts became popular in Renaissance Italy as a means for families not only to cement ties, but also to compete and assert their ascendancy. These gifts accompanied the bride on the menare a casa, the day she moved into the husband’s house, and were known as the bride’s donora—similar to the trousseau. As Marcel Mauss and others have noted, the presentation of a donora by the bride’s family frequently motivated the husband to respond with a more lavish counter-donora to balance the scales of exchange.\footnote{Jane F. Bestor, “Marriage Transactions in Renaissance Italy and Mauss’s Essay on the Gift,” Past & Present, no. 164 (1999): 6-46; Marcel Mauss, The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: Norton, 1967).}

It is difficult to make generalizations as to the contents of a donora. Both Musacchio and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber have analyzed the few surviving sources to discover their contents.\footnote{They note that the donora was organized based on objects that were appraised and accounted for and those that were not. The motivation behind this was to allow the bride to retain some possession over the goods, as the husband gained ownership of all the appraised property. Some scholars have been led to think that the un-appraised objects were of lesser value, however there is no evidence to support this claim. See Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “La ‘Zane’ della sposa: La fiorentina e il suo corredo nel Rinascimento,” Memoria XI-XII (1984): 12-23; Musacchio, “The Bride and Her Donora in Renaissance Florence,” in Culture and Change: Attending to Early Modern Women, ed. Margaret Mikesell and Adele Seeff, 177-202 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003).} The donora frequently contained personal items such as linens,
garments, and lingerie as well as combs and mirrors. Yet while the bride’s physical appearance was certainly emphasized, her “inner appearance” was given equal attention. Devotional books of hours, holy dolls, and paternosters were also included to ensure the bride cultivated a healthy soul while learning her appropriate role in society. The mirror, however, stands out among these objects because of its dual function. While its utilitarian purpose is often most stressed, it is also a source for self-reflection and meditation.

One way that we can think of Michelangelo’s tondo is as a large mirror, with its circular shape and exquisitely sharp and polished surface. The reflection found in this metaphoric mirror is not of the actual but the ideal: the image of the model family. The representation of the Holy Family functions as a sympathetic image, believed to have apotropaic, talismanic, and influential powers over the viewer. As Maddalena gazed upon the painting, the image itself was thought to affect her—impressing itself upon her character—helping to fashion her into a proper wife and mother. For this reason it was not uncommon for the bride’s family to commission devotional and pious images for the new household. These painted images were often used to decorate the couple’s bedroom and other interior private spaces where the bride spent most of her time.

Furthermore, by the sixteenth century, tondi replaced devotional tabernacles and small altar forms in domestic devotion, merging both the sacred and secular imagery. Paul Barolsky emphasizes the devotional nature of Michelangelo’s painting by analyzing Vasari’s rhetorical description of the piece. Placed in the household, such a painting

76 Klapisch-Zuber, “La ‘Zane’ della sposa,” 17. Roberta Olson points to many parallels between rosary devotion, mirrors, and the rise of tondi. This could further support the notion that tondi were commissioned in connection with a marriage; see Olson, Florentine Tondo, 95-105.

77 Olson, Florentine Tondo, 29.
held important messages for their female beholders, informing them of their role within
the domestic sphere and their value in ensuring the continuation of the family line. The
tondo, therefore, replaced the standard tabernacle and rectangular style devotional images
commissioned at the time of a couple’s marriage. For this reason I believe tondi were
particularly associated with the marriage ritual. The source material, however, is unclear
as to who typically commissioned the works—whether they were part of the bride’s
donora or the groom’s counter-donora. I would suggest that either party could
commission tondi. However, because many of these paintings became part of the
husband’s possession, we must look to the objects themselves to reveal the patron’s
identity. In the case of Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo, the three crescent moons—insignia
of the Strozzi—on the painting’s frame provide precisely this marker of identification.

On entering the household, the image would have passed from the bride to the
husband. Therefore, it was important for the bride’s family to incorporate heraldic
devices in the object so it retained identity even as it transferred owners. Husbands
commonly inscribed their family’s heraldic device on the objects they commissioned or
the objects that were included in their counter-donora, whether dresses, linens, jewels or
paintings. For example, in Alesso Boldovinetti’s painting of a Lady in Yellow, the woman
dons a yellow dress with prominent vegetal decoration adorning her left sleeve (Fig. 8).
This vegetal motif has been identified as the Scolari coat of arms, the family into which
the woman married. As Musacchio notes, we do not recognize the woman’s identity or
the family from which she was born; instead, emphasis is placed on the family she joins


through marriage. More famously is Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, whose enigmatic smile has often been seen as a play on the sitter’s last name—Giocondo—the family name of her husband Francesco del Giocondo (Fig. 9). The woman’s smile reinforces her husband’s identity while completely masking her own. Closer to Michelangelo’s Tondo is Filippino Lippi’s devotional image of the Madonna and Child, painted for Filippo Strozzi the Elder perhaps to commemorate his marriage to Selvaggia Gianfigliazzi in 1489 (Fig. 10).

Emphasizing Strozzi wealth and prestige, the Strozzi crescent moons appear twice in this work; one set on the escutcheon of the column’s capital and the other in the roundel directly above. In the case of Michelangelo’s tondo, the inclusion of Strozzi moons would be peculiar if Agnolo Doni had commissioned the object for his marriage to Maddalena Strozzi. Following tradition, we would expect to find Agnolo Doni’s coat of arms included on the frame whether alone or in equal prominence to the Strozzi. This is simply not the case. Despite scholars’ attempts to identify Doni lions in the frame, none of the putative figures are given the same emphasis as the Strozzi impresa. The tondo’s frame clearly emphasizes the identity of Maddalena’s family.

CONCLUSION

Previous scholars have always referenced the inclusion of these three crescent moons in passing, but failed to see their idiosyncrasy. The three moons are a clear marker of Strozzi identity and one that could never be confused, especially in Renaissance Florence. While the coat of arms initially led me to identify the Strozzi family as the commissioners of the work, I return to them now to see if this impresa can illuminate

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80 Musacchio, Art, Marriage, & Family, 14-21.
more specifically who in the Strozzi family commissioned Michelangelo to paint the
*Doni Tondo*.

While I can say with confidence that the *Doni Tondo* is a Strozzi object, the task of
identifying a specific patron is open to discussion. I would, however, like to put forward
several pieces of information that possibly identify this work with Filippo Strozzi the
Younger, the same man who in his youth received Michelangelo’s marble *Hercules* and
bronze dagger. As I mentioned earlier, the very fact that Filippo garnered the dagger
suggests that by 1507 he was an important figure to Michelangelo. It also suggests that
Michelangelo perceived Filippo’s rising prominence. Surely Filippo found a good role
model in his father, Filippo the Elder, who commissioned some of the most skilled artists
and artisans of the *quattrocento* and began construction of the family palace. Filippo the
Younger, who was originally born Giambattista, took on his father’s name after the
latter’s death in 1491. With such an act, Filippo symbolically took the reins of the family
dynasty and resumed where his father left off.

In 1491, the Strozzi family was in full swing constructing their new family palazzo,
the largest and most expensive palazzo Florence had ever seen. After Filippo the Elder’s
death, his son Filippo the Younger continued to carry out the building project and
increasingly became an active member in the family businesses. In this respect we see
Filippo assuming his father’s role in the family and continuing many of the projects he
left unfinished. Aside from his father’s name, Filippo also appropriated his father’s
heraldic device. Typically, the Strozzi coats of arms were displayed as three crescent
moons placed along a band on an escutcheon. Filippo the Elder, however, also developed

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81 Richard Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History*
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Guido Pampaloni, *Palazzo Strozzi* (Rome: Istituto
nazionale delle assicurazioni, 1974), esp. 16.
an impresa consisting of three abutting crescent moons, identical to the format found in Michelangelo’s frame. One can find similar imprese on a host of artworks commissioned by Filippo the Elder, such as Filippino Lippi’s Madonna and Child.

After his father’s death, Filippo the Younger continued to use this device on the objects he commissioned, including a woven banner now held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 11). Arguably Filippo the Younger’s boldest employment of this specific device was his decision to include it repeatedly on the façade of the newly constructed family palace. The presence of this specific impresa on Michelangelo’s frame would have clearly marked the painting as a Strozzi object, and furthermore one commissioned from either Filippo. The impresa would have been immediately recognizable to any Florentine, who would have been familiar with it from looking at the gigantic façade of the family’s home if nowhere else (Fig. 12).

Scholars have noted other markers of Strozzi identity in the painting—further suggesting that the object was meant to promote Strozzi primacy. Located near the center of the composition and seemingly securing the Virgin Mary’s garments, is a jeweled brooch (Fig. 13). On close inspection the halves of two fish can be seen decorating the breastpin, suggesting the astrological sign Pisces (Fig. 14). The Virgin’s astrological symbol, however, is Virgo the Virgin. Alternatively, Maddalena Strozzi was born on February 19, 1489, precisely the date that initiates the Pisces calendar. Could this be a direct reference to Maddalena herself, a way of including her in the painting and

82 Fredrick Hartt argues that: “The curious depression in the earth on whose edge the nude youths sit or lean is a half moon, a motif from the Strozzi arms.” Hartt goes on to cite other Renaissance works which represent family names pictographically in the paintings, such at the Sassetti Chapel, where the abundance of rocks—sassi in Italian—allude to the family name; see Hartt, Italian Renaissance, 418.
projecting the Virgin as her model? As discussed earlier, one of the best ways to understand this work is to think of it as a metaphoric mirror. The inclusion of Maddalena’s astrological sign on the Virgin Mary’s clothing creates a self-reflexive reference for Maddalena, drawing her into the painting and focusing the object’s power on her. I would argue, therefore, that we possibly have multiple Strozzi markers that assert the patron’s identity. The question remains then why Filippo, a distant cousin of Maddalena’s, commissioned such a luxurious object for her wedding.

One must remember that Maddalena and Filippo were exact contemporaries, born in 1489. Their relationship probably started before they were even born, when Maddalena’s father, Giovanni di Marcello Strozzi, lived in the old family palace with Filippo the Elder. Eventually Giovanni moved his family into their own residence only a block away on via de’ Legnaiuoli. Despite their distant blood relations, the proximity of their residences suggests that the two branches were quite intimate. Furthermore, Filippo may have taken some part in the arrangement of Maddalena’s marriage. Because Filippo and his brother owned a number of wool shops throughout Florence, it is highly probable that they formed business relations with Agnolo Doni, who ran a series of shops for dying wool. It is likely that Agnolo’s marriage to Maddalena helped cement business relations between the two families. If this were the case, it would be appropriate for Filippo to commission and gift an expensive object around the time of the couple’s nuptials.

We have witnessed several instances of Michelangelo consciously attempting to divorce himself from the Strozzi family. The first instance occurred with the marble Hercules, which Condivi neglects to identify with the Strozzi. Second was the bronze dagger, gifted to Filippo in 1507, which makes no appearance in either Vasari’s or
Condivi’s biography. Third were the two marble Slaves, gifted to Roberto Strozzi as a token of appreciation and ultimately sent to France as a diplomatic gift. Again there is no mention of the Strozzi connection with these sculptures in Condivi’s account. The last instance cited but not last chronologically is Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo. This work, which while appearing in both biographies, deflects its potent and problematic provenance to Agnolo Doni, a less controversial figure and the rightful owner of the painting.

History is often influenced by the period in which it was written. The passing of time and the unraveling of events often obscure our ability to notice and record objective facts about artifacts. This problem is only magnified when applied to people. Yet, it is people who commission the objects that comprise art history. It becomes impossible, therefore, to rely solely on the artifacts to provide answers to the objects’ past. It is the duty of the art historian to unite the objects with the people who created them in order to understand fully the contexts in which they were created.

Michelangelo’s Doni Tondo and our knowledge about it have suffered from being separated from its creators—we have lost sight of it as a deposit of a social relationship. Analyzing the cultural and historical framework in which the key figures of our story acted provides a framework for understanding the painting. The account of Michelangelo’s tondo provided in Vasari’s Lives has significantly hampered our understanding of the object. Instead, what are revealed are not only Michelangelo’s conscious acts of dissimulation, but also our own credulity in relying on Vasari’s words for the history. Thus, when provided an unadulterated view of the painting, telling features that had previously been overlooked, or undervalued, appear particularly
significant. In the end, the stories Michelangelo told Vasari about his art have proved to be his greatest instrument in deflecting attention from his affiliation with the Strozzi family. His recoloring of the facts belies an aging and increasingly paranoid man, fearing for the future of his family and the security of his friends. The untold story of the Strozzi may well be his greatest act of self-preservation.
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ILLUSTRATIONS AND APPENDIX
Fig. 1, Michelangelo, *Holy Family (Doni Tondo)*, c. 1504, 120cm, oil on panel, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
Fig. 2, Raphael, *Portrait of Agnolo Doni*, c. 1505, oil on panel, Palazzo Pitti, Florence
Fig. 3, Raphael, *Portrait of Maddalena Strozzi*, c. 1505, oil on panel, Palazzo Pitti, Florence
Fig. 4, Michelangelo and Francesco del Tasso, *Doni Tondo Frame*, c. 1504, gilt wood and plaster
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
Fig. 5.1, Michelangelo, *Drawing of Grotesques*, 1895-9-15-496 v., British Museum, London

Fig. 5.2, Michelangelo, *Drawing of Grotesques and Figures*, 233 F, Gabintto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence
Fig. 6, Del Tasso Workshop, *Carved and Water Gilded Mirror Frame*, c. 1510, V&A, London
Fig. 7.1, (detail) Doni Tondo Frame

Fig. 7.2, (detail) V&A Frame
Fig. 8, Alessio Baldovinetti, *Portrait of a Lady in Yellow*, c. 1465, tempera on panel, National Gallery, London

Fig. 9, Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503, oil on panel, Louvre, Paris
Fig. 10, Filippino Lippi, *Madonna and Child*, c. 1485, tempera, oil and gold on panel, MMA, New York
Fig. 11, *Border with Strozzi Emblems*, 16th-17th century, 139 x 19 1/4 in, silk and linen, MMA

Fig. 12, Benedetto da Maiano, *Palazzo Strozzi* (detail), begun 1489, Florence
Fig. 13. Detail of Virgin’s Breastpin depicting Pisces sign, Doni Tondo

Fig. 14. Pisces, Aratea Scientific Miscellany, Cotton MS Tiberius B V, fol. 33v, British Library
**STROZZI-DONI FAMILY GENEALOGY**

PALLA STROZZI GENEALOGY

Palla Novello

Pietra di Giovanni Petribuoni

X

Carlo Strozzi

X

GIOVANNI DI CARLO STROZZI

CARLO DI GIOVANNI STROZZI

Margherita di Lutuzzo Nasi

Giovanni

FRANCESCA

Pierfrancesco di Tommaso Ginori

-Marriage Prospect for Leonardo Buonarroti

Sources: Litta, P. “Strozzi,” Tav. VIII
BUONARROTTI FAMILY GENEALOGY

Sources: Litta, P. “Buonarroti,” Tav. Unica; Passerini, L.
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DONI TONDO TIMELINE IN RELATION TO BIRTHS AND MICHELANGELO’S WHEREABOUTS

- 8 April 1506: Michelangelo flees Rome for Florence
- 28 November 1506: Michelangelo travels to Bologna to submit to Pope
- 17 April 1506: Michelangelo commissions Bronze Statue of Julius II
- 28 November 1506: Madalena conceives Maria
- 1508: Maria is baptized
- 24 November 1508: Francesco is born

Sources: Carteggio di Michelangelo; Ramsden, I, bs-bi.