

The Chronicle of Le Murate

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Introduction

The Other Voice

Santissima Annunziata delle Murate (commonly referred to as Le Murate) is arguably the best-known convent of the Florentine Renaissance. Beginning with its establishment in 1390, the community developed from a small group of devout women, living together in a house situated on the Rubaconte bridge without supervision from church authorities, into the city's largest and most prominent female religious institution, occupying a vast site on via Ghibellina. It attracted boarders, nuns, and patrons from Italy's elite families including the Medici of Florence, the Orsini of Rome, the Sforza of Milan, and the Este of Ferrara. Indeed, the Benedictine convent became so famous that it was not uncommon for diplomats visiting Florence to include a tour of its grounds on their itineraries. Since the Renaissance, the convent has attracted the attention of historians who have been keen to gain insight into life behind the convent's monumental enclosing walls.

The Florentine State Archive's cache of documentary evidence for Renaissance convents is vast in comparison with other Italian cities' records. Nevertheless, many if not most Florentine convents experienced disasters, suppressions, or negligence, leaving significant lacunae in their archives. Le Murate's archive contains fewer account books, contracts, censuses, and registers of obligations than other institutions because a fire in 1472 and a flood in 1557 destroyed, damaged, or dispersed these records.¹ Whereas better-documented houses offer historians the opportunity to interpret and synthesize various sorts of data, such efforts are frustrated by limited surviving records for Le Murate. However, Le Murate produced and preserved something few other Italian convents did: a chronicle that presents its own

1. Examples of houses with more complete archives include Benedictine institutions, such as San Pier Maggiore, Sant'Ambrogio, and Sant'Apollonia, and Dominican communities such as San Jacopo di Ripoli and San Domenico nel Maglio.

2 Introduction

interpretation and synthesis of historical events.² When combined with extant records, the chronicle provides an uncommonly rich source for understanding the community's history from its foundation until January 1598. Relying on this unique combination of materials, scores of historians have re-presented the convent's history in piecemeal fashion in secondary publications while the nuns have been denied the opportunity to speak for themselves.

The 179-folio Murate chronicle was dictated to convent scribe Sister Maria Benigna Cavalcanti by Sister Giustina Niccolini and completed in 1598. The manuscript reveals and constructs the convent's religious identity, describes the complex ways in which the nuns interacted with the world outside their enclosure, and provides a detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the commission and function of dozens of works of art and architecture. Publication of the translated and annotated convent chronicle allows scholars of Renaissance religion, politics, society, art, and architecture to consider the nuns' version of their history alongside the sources that have, until now, dominated their narrative.

Although the Murate chronicle is not a unique example of a convent history authored by a nun, it is a rare document of day-to-day life within the enclosure. It not only presents a detailed account of the nuns' many corporate and individual religious obligations and devotions, which were formalized by the Benedictine rule, convent constitutions, the Council of Trent, papal bulls, and countless testaments; it also reports on the more mundane activities that ordered the convent's days, such as cooking, caring for the sick, and doing needlework to produce revenue. In a community that at one time included as many as 211 women, interpersonal relationships were bound to be complex. Sister Giustina describes a bureaucracy and hierarchy of appointed offices that ensured stability, efficiency, and accountability. Friendships, alliances, mentorships, and conflicts developed outside this official structure of assigned duties. Thus, although the chronicle

2. One other convent chronicle is known to exist in Florence, that of Sister Fiammetta Frescobaldi from the Dominican convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli. Regarding this text, see Elissa Weaver, "Fiammetta Frescobaldi," *An Encyclopedia of Continental Women Writers*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (New York: Garland, 1991), 1: 426–27. See also Enrica Viviani della Robbia, *Nei monasteri fiorentini* (Florence: Sansoni, 1946), 196.

cle consistently conjures up an ambience of piety in which the nuns strove for spiritual perfection, it is not a completely sanitized depiction of life at Le Murate. The effort required to carry water from the well across the complex to the laundry room, the stench and filth that remained for years after a devastating flood, and the distraction of an ungrateful and disruptive boarder are examples of practical challenges the nuns had to overcome. Interspersed with demonstrations of piety, sanctity, and miracles is evidence of the joys, trials, and labors, great and small, that punctuated the long days. The text also describes how events outside the enclosure, such as plagues, wars, famines, and shifts in civic government, directly affected convent life. What emerges is a precise portrait of how creative and resourceful the convent's abbesses and nuns could be as they maneuvered for advantages and support from powerful men, women and institutions. The messy vitality of this account is an important pendant to the more formal and predictable convent chronicles that dominate the genre.³

*Historical Contexts:
The Role of Convents in Women's Experiences
in Renaissance Florence*

Sister Giustina provides a framework for understanding the convent's role in the lives of Renaissance women. During the period treated here, the options available to women from elite families were limited to the roles of wife and mother, or nun. Regardless of whether a girl was destined for marriage or the convent, however, a monastic institution could serve and support her at various points in her life. Families regularly sent their girls to board and be educated at a convent; while reading and writing might have been part of the curriculum, the principal aim was usually to impart moral and behavioral standards

3. For chronicles from Venetian and Roman convents, see Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni, *Life and Death in a Venetian Convent: The Chronicle and Necrology of Corpus Domini*, ed. Daniel Bornstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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in preparation for performing the role of virtuous wife and mother.⁴ Although Sister Giustina does not offer details about the content of girls' education at Le Murate, she does describe the community's custodial role while its charges awaited a marriage match.⁵ Once married, these alumnae sometimes stayed connected to the convent through exchanges of correspondence and favors, occasionally returning to their girlhood refuge after or between marriages. Widows occasionally elected to retire to the convent permanently, either professing solemn vows and becoming full members of the religious community or simply becoming boarders. Thus, the convent was far more than a sanctuary for professed nuns; it served a social and religious purpose for lay women. The bonds forged through these relationships produced a ready and extended support network for the convent, whose fate was susceptible to economic downturns and political conflicts.

The chronicle tells us much more about women who professed solemn vows than about the girls and women who lived temporarily at the convent. Predictably, the text is dominated by portraits of women who entered the convent of their own volition, happily devoting their lives to perfecting their spiritual discipline and rendering religious service. Sister Giustina even describes cases in which women were married against their will, longing instead to take the veil and become brides of Christ. Others entered the convent when no marriage match could be made for them. In the latter case, their presence within the paternal home was often viewed as a burden on the patrimony and even a possible threat to the family's reputation. The convent presented a dignified and safe alternative.

A dramatic increase in the number of women who entered religious communities during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries coincided with a troubled marriage market characterized by demographic stresses that contributed to rising dowries. During the quattrocento, depopulation made marriage and reproduction more important than

4. Sharon Strocchia, "Learning the Virtues: Convent Schools and Female Education in Renaissance Florence," in *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History, 1500–1800*, ed. Barbara J. Whitehead (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3–46.

5. One of several examples is that of Hippolita de' Rossi, who lived at Le Murate for a time before her marriage to Alberto Pio of Mendola. See Chronicle, chap. 53. Another is Lucrezia Cibo, who married Count Ercole Sfondrato (Chronicle, chaps. 58 and 64).

ever: at least eight plague epidemics during the fifteenth century devastated Florence's population.⁶ Whereas the city had between 90,000 and 120,000 inhabitants in the mid-1330s, by 1427 only about 37,000 people lived there.⁷ At that time, men outnumbered women, but the tendency among Florentine men to postpone marriage or avoid it altogether contributed to fierce competition for grooms, a situation exacerbated by age discrepancies between spouses.⁸ The average age of girls at first marriage was around eighteen. Because it was important for them to marry when they were believed to be at the peak of their childbearing years, roughly between the ages of fifteen and twenty-six, the time period during which they could make marriage matches was comparatively limited. Perceptions of honor also played a role in the marriage of girls at younger ages, when exposure to scandals and misadventures could be prevented more easily and purity could be guaranteed more credibly.⁹ Meanwhile, the average age of men at first marriage was around thirty. Their window of opportunity to marry was much wider, possibly extending even to their fiftieth birthday, but their relatively low life expectancy meant that many men died bachelors. The practice of endogamy meant that both sides of the arrangement considered status when contracting a marriage alliance, further limiting the choice of grooms, whose families had an undeniable advantage in marriage negotiations. Thus, marriage was far from assured for all those who wished to wed.

6. Outbreaks occurred in 1400, 1417, 1437–38, 1449–50, 1457, 1564, 1468, and 1478. Anthony Molho, *Marriage Alliances in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 7.

7. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 56.

8. *Ibid.*, 222–23. The ratio of men to women in Florence in 1427 was about 119:100, whereas in 1480 it was about 117:100. However, about 12 percent of Florentine men reached the age of fifty without marrying. Molho, *Marriage Alliances*, 216. Regarding the age of men at the time of marriage, see Herlihy and Klapisch Zuber, *Tuscans and Their Families*, 215.

9. Regarding the desire to marry younger girls, see David Herlihy, *Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978–1991* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 66 and 183. Molho explains: “Younger girls were easier to place; they were considered morally and physically superior to their older sisters and cousins.” Youth and physical health were considered important factors for avoiding difficulties in childbearing. Molho, *Marriage Alliances*, 132 and 138.

The cost of the dowry responded to these pressures. The average dowry increased about 42 percent during the fifteenth century and rose another 30 percent by 1530 when the norm was about 1,852 florins.¹⁰ Marriage strategies reflected this situation. Because convent dowries were often as low as half a marriage dowry, sometimes even lower, some elite families that had difficulty dowering all their daughters economized by sending some daughters to the convent so that others could offer a respectable marriage dowry.¹¹ The marriage market was a matter of both social and civic concern.

The rising cost of dowries reached a crisis state in the late fifteenth century and worsened into the sixteenth century.¹² The city government recognized that the situation had far-reaching economic and social implications. In 1425, it established the dowry fund, or Monte delle Doti, allowing families to make deposits that would mature into a substantial portion of a respectable dowry, but by 1478 the fund was declared insolvent. In 1511 and 1519, the city government responded to rising dowries by establishing a maximum value, first at 1,600 florins and then at 2,000, imposing a 7 percent tax on the portion of a dowry that exceeded the limit.¹³ The rule was challenged with regularity, however, causing Florentine legislators to abolish the limit and instead impose a 14 percent tax on all dowries, beginning in 1525.¹⁴

Finances were not the only obstacles to making a marriage match. In Renaissance Italy, a person's outward appearance was un-

10. Molho, *Marriage Alliances*, 132 and 138.

11. On the relatively small cost of a monastic dowry in comparison with marriage portions and trousseaux, see Carole C. Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes, and Fine Clothing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), and Sharon Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 29–31.

12. Klapisch-Zuber points out that Florentines complained about the increasing value of dowries as early as the fourteenth century. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 215. Strocchia notes that marriage dowries had not risen significantly until the mid- to late fifteenth century. *Nuns and Nunneries*, 12.

13. Anthony Molho, "'Tamquam vere mortua.' Le professioni religiose femminili nella Firenze del tardo medioevo," *Società e storia* 43 (January–March 1989): 29.

14. *Ibid.*

derstood as a projection of her general state of health, personality, and virtue, all qualities that determined the fitness of a potential wife and mother. Given the competitive nature of the marriage market, looks counted. In his 1424 Lenten sermons, San Bernardino of Siena observed that both excessive dowries and concerns about a prospective bride's appearance influenced marriage strategies:

many parents, since they can't afford to expend such immense dowries on their daughters, keep them sterile (and not on God's account) at home—and would that they were modest and virginal! And what is even more cruel, if they have three or four daughters and are unable to dower them all as they might wish, they lead one or two of the prettier ones to the altar with the largest dowries possible; and the others, especially if they are crippled, lame, blind or in some other way deformed, they close in a convent like the world's spit and vomit.¹⁵

Sister Giustina shares stories of girls who came to the convent with a physical deformity, a weak constitution, or a bad temperament and learned to bear their respective crosses to become models of piety.

This challenge of dowering kinswomen had a direct impact on convent populations, suggesting that many women entered the convent as a last resort when marriages could not be contracted for them. Archiepiscopal visitation records show that in 1422 the average convent size was around 8.8 nuns, demonstrating that the steady rise in marriage dowries did not affect the population of women religious until decades later.¹⁶ The real surge occurred midcentury. By 1478, the average number of sisters per convent had risen to 32.8.¹⁷ Sharon

15. Roberto Rusconi, "St. Bernardino of Siena, the Wife, and Possessions," in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, trans. Margery J. Schneider (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 187.

16. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 12.

17. Strocchia adds nuance to this characterization by pointing out that some exclusive houses resisted growth. For her analysis of the religious and political factors that contributed to the rise in convent populations and foundations, see *ibid.*, 19–38. The average number of

Strocchia notes an increase in the number of nuns in Florentine convents from around 1,200 in 1478 to 2,000 in 1500, reaching 2,500 in 1515.¹⁸ This pattern of development led to both new convent foundations and expansion projects at existing houses, giving convents a significant urban presence, albeit one defined by massive and unrelieved walls.¹⁹

The growth in Le Murate's population preceded that of its peers. In 1424, thirteen women lived at the convent; by 1461, 150 did.²⁰ While its initial growth spurt might be attributed to the convent's willingness to accept women from different social strata, it is noteworthy that the greatest surge in population coincided with the abbacy of Scolastica Rondinelli (a. 1439–75), the convent's first abbess of elite status.²¹ No known documentation links this influential woman directly to a strategy of active recruitment, but her extensive social connections might have helped bring the convent to the attention of elite families seeking to monachize their daughters. The community's mid-quattrocento expansion was only the beginning. Florentine convent populations continued to rise through the mid-sixteenth century, and Le Murate was consistent with this trend.²² By 1494 its popula-

nuns cited here represents an increase of 61 percent from the number estimated for 1428 when the dowry fund was still sound. Richard Trexler, "The Nuns of Florence," in *Power and Dependence in Renaissance Florence*, vol. 2 of *The Women of Renaissance Florence* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1993), 12.

18. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 29.

19. Sandra Weddle, "Identity and Alliance: Urban Presence, Spatial Privilege and Florentine Renaissance Convents," in *Renaissance Florence: A Social History*, ed. Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 394–414.

20. Chronicle, chaps. 3 and 12. See also Gene Brucker, "Monasteries, Friaries, and Nunneries in Quattrocento Florence," in *Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento*, ed. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 48; K. J. P. Lowe, "Female Strategies for Success in a Male-Ordered World: The Benedictine Convent of Le Murate in Florence in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," *Studies in Church History* 27 (1990): 211–12. For additional counts of nuns at Le Murate based on a variety of sources, see Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 152–53.

21. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 20.

22. Trexler, "Nuns of Florence," 15–16 and 21. Note that some scholars dispute whether an increase in convent populations correlated to the rise in dowries. See Julius Kirshner, "Pursuing Honor while Avoiding Sin: The Monte delle Doti of Florence," *Quaderni di Studi Senesi* 41 (1978): 1–82.

tion reached 200, peaking in 1551 at 211.²³ By 1574, the number had fallen to 181; after 1567, the convent accepted fewer women to offset deaths in order to conform to the Council of Trent's limits on convent population.²⁴

While the convent dowry was a mere fraction of the typical cost of a marriage dowry, a family's financial obligations to its monachized girls did not end when they entered the convent.²⁵ Most convents required their new members to pay a monastic dowry upon admission to the community. Richard Trexler reported that the standard monastic dowry in fifteenth-century Florence was 100 florins.²⁶ The experience of Andrea Minerbetti's daughters indicates that this was beginning to change by the early sixteenth century. Four Minerbetti girls entered convents between 1502 and 1518. All but one paid 100 florins.²⁷ The fourth, Bartolommea, came to Le Murate and paid 200 florins.²⁸ Her experience is consistent with what Strocchia sees as a clear increase in monastic dowries coincident with the Medici family's cinquecento return to Florence and consolidation of power, ushering in a period marked by more conspicuous consumption and display: the average fee doubled to 150 to 200 ducats, placing Bartolommea at the high end of this range.²⁹

It seems that the average dowry paid to Le Murate was between 130 and 200 florins. In 1478, Francesco Benci made arrangements in his testament for a donation of 200 florins "to make a habit

23. For 1494, Judith Brown, "Monache a Firenze all'inizio dell'età moderna. Un'analisi demografica," *Quaderni storici* 85 (April 1994): 121, counts 170 nuns and 21 *converse* (lay sisters who served the convent); for 1551, ASE, *Manoscritti* 179, 195, counts 190 nuns and 21 *converse*.

24. ASE, CRSGF, 81n100, 21v. For the Council of Trent's population limits, see Chronicle, chap. 41.

25. For a comparison of a bride's trousseau with that of a nun, see Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 233–39.

26. Trexler, "Nuns of Florence," 18.

27. Biblioteca Laurenziana, *Acquisti e doni* 229n2, 64v, 77v, and 104v. Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 134–35.

28. Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, 134–35.

29. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 30–31. Note that the *scudo* replaced the florin in the early sixteenth century following a brief period when the ducat was the main gold coin used in Florence. The equivalence of these currencies was fixed by law.

for some nun,” and when Leonora Cibo came to the convent in 1563 she gave 200 florins “in the same way the others give.”³⁰ The sum most commonly mentioned in the late cinquecento, however, is 400 florins. Sometimes nuns brought both alms and dowries, combined in one sum, as was the case of Caterina Cibo (Sister Angela Caterina), who brought 3,000 *scudi di moneta*.³¹ By the end of the century, Le Murate also requested a superdowry, or *sopradote*, a supplement to the monastic dowry required of women who wished to be admitted when the convent reached its limit of 181 nuns; new members whose families paid the superdowry could enter the community as novices, but they could not take the veil until one of the 181 sisters died.³²

Investment in the kinswoman and the convent did not end with the dowry. Sometimes new members brought property to the convent. Typical gifts included barrels of wine, bushels of flour, and wax for candles, but a girl was likely to bring personal effects for her own use as well. Novices commonly brought bed linens, cutlery, dishes, fabric, and shoes and socks to their new homes.³³ Furthermore, in an apparent contradiction to the imperative to keep all property in common, families generally paid modest annual stipends known as *vitalizi* to support their kinswomen. These funds could be used for food, clothing, medical care, books, and devotional objects.³⁴ In the sixteenth century, Archbishop Antonio Altoviti required families to pay 10 *scudi* annually for this purpose, but professed nuns at Le Murate sometimes received more. In March 1575 the archbishop censured Le Murate for permitting a nun to receive an annual provision of 25 *scudi*, which he considered to be excessive.³⁵ Even so, some nuns received far more. After her consecration in 1581, Sister Maria Vittoria Pia Rossa received a yearly allowance of 100 *scudi*, and Caterina Cibo received 200 *scudi* annually for her “comforts and services”

30. Chronicle, chaps. 12 and 39. There are also three mentions of dowries of 400 *scudi*. Chronicle, chaps. 22, 53, and 58.

31. Chronicle, chap. 58.

32. Chronicle, chap. 54.

33. Biblioteca Laurenziana, *Acquisti e doni* 229n2, 77r and 126r.

34. Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 84–91.

35. ASE, CRSGF 81n100, 31v.

following her profession in 1586.³⁶ These funds could help a convent balance its budget or be appropriated for the good of the whole community. In the sixteenth century, Le Murate's abbess regularly called on office holders to cover expenses associated with their duties, and it was likely that these women appealed to their families for the funds.³⁷ This raises the possibility that offices were assigned based not only on a woman's merits but also on her ability to offer financial support to the convent.

The nuns of Le Murate emphasized their poverty when visited by ecclesiastical authorities, and the chronicle supports their claims with descriptions of the dire straits the nuns found themselves in after disasters like fires, floods, and the occupation of Florence by the French, Spanish, and imperial armies.³⁸ There can be no doubt that convents were austere settings that lacked many of the comforts lay women enjoyed in Florence's *palazzi*, despite the occasional luxuries represented by banquets and gifts from associates. But convents did offer women a benefit that the majority of lay women would seldom experience: an opportunity to exert influence and make their own decisions. This modicum of independence, usually tempered by ecclesiastical oversight, has inspired some historians to hypothesize that the convent attracted many women as an alternative to the perceived burdens of marriage, repeated pregnancies, and motherhood. In this regard, the example of Le Murate's abbesses, represented in the chronicle as highly effective leaders, suggests that the choice to enter

36. Chronicle, chaps. 53 and 58.

37. See, for example, Chronicle, chaps. 42, 56, 60, 61, and 62.

38. Strocchia cites Archivio Arcivescovile, Firenze, Visite pastorali 2.1, f. 60r; *Nuns and Nunneries*, 86 and 220. This document dates from the episcopal visit of Amerigo Corsini in 1422 and therefore preceded the period during which Le Murate began accepting women of elite status who brought significant dowries and allowances. Strocchia also notes that most convents made no effort to hide these allowances until after the Council of Trent, recording their use for the convent's expenses. *Ibid.*, 85. On this point see Silvia Evangelisti, "Moral Virtues and Personal Goods: The Double Representation of Female Monastic Identity (Florence, 16th and 17th Centuries)," in *Yearbook of the Department of History and Civilization: Women in Religious Life*, ed. Olwen Hufton (Florence: European University Institute, 1996), 48. For a comparison of private wealth in rich and poor houses, see Brucker, "Monasteries, Friaries, and Nunneries," 54–55.

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Political Alliances and Patronage Ties

The Murate chronicle spans the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (1390–1598), coinciding with what is arguably the richest period of Florentine history. The convent’s history is intertwined with the history of Florence and its influential families. Le Murate grew into a stable and elite institution at the same time the Medici were establishing themselves as de facto rulers of the republican city. As early as 1471, Lorenzo de’ Medici distinguished himself among the convent’s important patrons, who included Giovanni and Amerigo Benci and Bartolomeo Lenzi—all three Medici allies. Lorenzo’s patronage at the convent was discreet: he insisted that his arms not be displayed, wishing instead that his support should “remain vivid in the divine mind to ensure that he receive the heavenly prize from that great benefactor.”³⁹ This formalization of Medici ties to the convent corresponded with the abbacy of Scolastica Rondinelli, and this combination of well-connected protagonists helped to solidify Le Murate’s reputation as an institution favored by influential and powerful families for their convent-bound kinswomen.⁴⁰

The convent came to be identified as a pro-Medicean house, and the nuns were occasionally drawn into political conflicts. Religious and political reformer Fra Girolamo Savonarola took every opportunity to connect Florence’s first family with what he perceived to be the city’s decadence. Although they were not addressed directly,

39. Chronicle, chap. 15.

40. F. W. Kent points out that Rondinelli had “close family connections with anti-Medicean citizens,” but she obviously repositioned herself and her convent through her contacts with Lorenzo. *Lorenzo de’ Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 66. Her family, the Rondinelli, was exiled when the Medici returned to Florence in 1434, as was her husband, Piero dell’Antella. While she was abbess, she corresponded with both Piero and Lorenzo de’ Medici to request that her relatives’ political rights be reestablished. F. W. Kent, “Lorenzo de’ Medici, Madonna Scolastica Rondinelli e la politica di mecenatismo architettonico nel convento delle Murate di Firenze,” in *Arte, Committenza ed Economia a Roma e nelle Corte del Rinascimento, 1420–1530*, ed. A. Esch and C. L. Frommel (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 363.

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Medici associations may have fueled Savonarola's public reproaches of Le Murate, issued from the cathedral pulpit in May 1495.⁴¹ The Dominican claimed that the nuns of Le Murate performed their needle and bookwork out of vanity; in their defense, the nuns argued that the funds produced by those arts were their sole source of financial support.⁴² Eventually, Savonarola's opinion changed. He dedicated his treatise on the Ten Commandments to Abbess Caterina Ubaldini (a. 1475–98) and praised her in the book's preface.⁴³ It is noteworthy that Sister Giustina never mentions the convent's tumultuous relationship with Savonarola.

It is possible that alliances outside the convent did shape alliances inside; church authorities were certainly alert to the risks. The potential for divisiveness caused by factions moved Archbishop Giulio de' Medici in 1517 to limit the number of nuns from a single family to two, but Sister Giustina never mentions this as a consideration when admitting new girls.⁴⁴ Whether it was because there were a number of girls from particular families or because a preponderance of the families represented at the convent were Medici allies, the connection between the convent and the Medici was popularly acknowledged.

The convent's ties to Medici patrons compelled the nuns to demonstrate their loyalty. In 1527, the orphaned Caterina de' Medici was secretly escorted to the convent by a company of magistrates for protection from the plague and, perhaps more threatening, the revolution that raged against her family. Sensitive to their debt to the Medici,

41. See D. di Agresti, *Sviluppi della Riforma Monastica Savonaroliana* (Florence: L. S. Olschki, 1980), 18–19 n. 43, and Viviani della Robbia, *Nei Monasteri Fiorentini*, 17–19. For the text of the sermon, see Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche Italiane ai Fiorentini* (Perugia: La Nuova Italia, 1930), 2:149–58.

42. Savonarola's complaints are cited in Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie istoriche delle chiese fiorentine, divise ne' suoi quartieri* (Florence: P. G. Viviani, 1754–62), 2:89–90. On Le Murate's manufacture of gold thread, see Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 121–22.

43. Girolamo Savonarola, *Operetta molto divota composta da frate Hieronymo da Ferrara dell'ordine de frati predicatori sopra i dieci comandamenti di Dio: diricta alla madonna, ovvero badessa del monasterio delle Murate di Firenze, nella quale si contiene la esamina de' peccati d'ogni & qualunque peccatore, che è utile & perfecta confessione* (Florence: Lorenzo Morgiani and Giovanni di Maganza, 1495).

44. Trexler, "Nuns of Florence," 20.

the nuns took in the girl and her two servants.⁴⁵ Sister Giustina remained silent on the point, but Benedetto Varchi claimed that not everyone at Le Murate felt that the Medici had Florence's best interests at heart.⁴⁶ The girl's presence in the convent reportedly divided the community between those loyal to the Medici and those who favored a republican city government, but the conflict was not open or divisive enough to provoke the nuns to ask for Caterina's removal. Two years after her arrival, the magistrates returned to remove Caterina from the convent, a decision Sister Giustina attributes to the siege of Florence without explaining how, precisely, the siege would have threatened the nuns' charge.⁴⁷ Although Caterina resisted, suspecting "some threat to her life, the Medici not having the Florentines in their power," she was taken forcibly to the convent of Santa Lucia, where she stayed just one month, until the occupation ended.⁴⁸ Even after becoming queen of France, Caterina maintained contact with Le Murate and made a significant donation of real estate to support the nuns.

Coinciding with the Medici consolidation of power as grand dukes of Tuscany throughout the sixteenth century, Le Murate's Medici ties became more complex, reflecting the family's vast network of alliances. During the cinquecento, the significance of patronage shifted. In the quattrocento, patrons endeavored to find a balance between display and ostentation as a way of simultaneously demonstrating their magnificence and modesty and asserting, projecting, or even attempting to attain status, which was comparatively dynamic. In the cinquecento, conspicuous consumption through patronage of art and architecture became an imperative for a relatively fixed cast of elite families who jockeyed for position and for the favor of the ducal

45. Chronicle, chap. 30. On Caterina de' Medici as a boarder at Le Murate, see Sharon Strocchia, "Taken into Custody: Girls and Convent Guardianship in Renaissance Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 17 (2003): 177–200.

46. Benedetto Varchi, *Storia Fiorentina*, ed. L. Arbib and Silvano Razzi (Florence: Società ed. delle storie del Nardi e del Varchi, 1838–44), 3:356.

47. Chronicle, chap. 30. The siege of Florence lasted from October 1529 until August 1530. During that time, the city was occupied by the Spanish and imperial army, and the republic was overthrown. The Spanish installed Alessandro de' Medici as the city's ruler.

48. Chronicle, chap. 30. The real reason for this move is unclear. Santa Lucia was a Dominican convent with Medici ties. See Natalie Tomas, *The Medici Women: Gender and Power in Renaissance Florence* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 86–89.

family.⁴⁹ As the Medici used the rhetoric of display to their political advantage, those in their orbit invested not only in works of art and architecture but also in clothing, carriages, servants, banquets, and other items that represented their position in the social and political hierarchy. A strong economy fueled their ability and motivation to publicize their status. Since proximity to the Medici determined status, patronage of the arts was more likely to reflect status than promote it.

Patronage at Le Murate during the sixteenth century reflects Medici preeminence. The convent's most important internal patrons came from families that were Medici relatives or allies. Sister Elena Orsini's family had united with the Medici through the marriage of Lorenzo de' Medici to Clarice Orsini in 1469, and again in 1555 when Isabella, daughter of Cosimo I and Eleonora di Toledo, married Paolo Giordano Orsini. Sister Elena spent at least 1,420 *scudi* on building and artistic projects, in addition to receiving credit for donations from her brother-in-law, Pope Paul III, totaling 6,000 *scudi*.⁵⁰ Caterina Sforza, grandmother of Cosimo I, boarded at Le Murate in apartments that she had built for her private use. Outside the convent, the Cibo and Vitelli families were also connected to the Medici through service and to one another by marriage.⁵¹ In a period when external patronage sources were not as numerous or as generous as they once had been, Sister Faustina Vitelli and *commessa* Leonora Cibo helped sustain Le Murate by funding practical and necessary construction projects along with more decorative works.⁵² Of course, the women at Le Murate maintained a variety of personal ties to prominent figures outside the immediate Medici orbit, including princes and pontiffs. In this regard they were atypical: while many Florentine convents could claim some connections to such powerful figures, few if any could boast the range of associations that Le Murate enjoyed. The nuns did not fail

49. See A. D. Fraser Jenkins, "Cosimo de' Medici's Patronage of Architecture and the Theory of Magnificence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33 (1970): 162–70.

50. Sister Elena was born Lelia Orsini and had married Angelo Farnese, Pope Paul III's brother. After her husband's death she became a nun at Le Murate. Chronicle, chap. 22.

51. Leonora Cibo married Giovan Luigi Vitelli in 1548, living at Le Murate before her marriage and after her husband's death.

52. A *commessa* was a lay woman who boarded at the convent, supported by an annuity.

to take advantage of those ties whenever the opportunity presented itself. Furthermore, while recent scholarship has provided many examples of lay women advancing their own social, political, economic and even spiritual agendas, the chronicle offers a rare view of religious women asserting themselves in these ways. As the patronage patterns of the fifteenth-century city republic gave way to the influence of the ducal court, such connections became more important than ever in sustaining the convent.

Religious Reform

Sister Giustina placed her community's history in a complex religious context influenced by a hierarchy of ecclesiastical authorities. Perhaps most significant in this regard are two moments of reform—one generated from within the convent and one imposed from outside. The first occurred about forty years after Le Murate's foundation on the Rubaconte bridge, when Abbess Scolastica Rondinelli issued a series of constitutions designed to enrich and refine the convent's religious observance.⁵³ These rules marked the end of a long period of transition during which the convent evolved from an independent group of pious women to a community of professed nuns whose daily lives were structured and ordered by a rigorous set of religious practices.⁵⁴

Sister Giustina gives little insight into what prompted Abbess Scolastica to initiate these practices. It may be no coincidence that her abbacy overlapped with the pontificate of Eugenius IV, an ardent reformer of convents who had suppressed houses with few inmates or too little funding.⁵⁵ Inspired by the Observant movement, the pope promoted discipline and consistency of observance, issuing privileges and exemptions that rewarded adherence to rules. It was Eugenius who approved the convent's move to via Ghibellina, and, residing in Florence, he was certainly aware of how the nuns of Le Murate lived.

53. The date of these constitutions is unknown; Scolastica's abbacy was 1439–75.

54. Chronicle, chap. 16.

55. On Eugenius's reforms, see Strocchia, *Nuns and Nunneries*, 21–23. Although Abbot Gomez is understood as Eugenius's agent of reform, his influence on Abbess Scolastica must have been by reputation only since he left the Badia Fiorentina in early 1440, just at the beginning of her abbacy.