

The Guadagni family holds a prominent place as one of Florence's most celebrated families. For more than half a millennium the Guadagni were among a privileged elite of families at the pinnacle of Florentine society, an aristocracy distinguished by their antiquity, substantial wealth, and domineering presence in public life.

Twelfth-century immigrants from the countryside around Fiesole, the family attained affluence and status in Florence as international merchants and bankers, and played a leading role in the civic affairs of the Florentine Republic during the first century-and-a-half of its existence. Though the ascendancy of the Medici after 1434 brought an end to their influence for many decades, and came close to destroying the family altogether, the Guadagni not only survived this long crisis but, through a remarkable resurgence, rose again in the sixteenth century to command extraordinary riches and social prestige. Throughout the Medicean principate from 1532 to 1737, and beyond into the nineteenth century during the reign of the Hapsburg-Lorraines, the Guadagni ranked among the city's most eminent aristocratic families as members of the grand ducal court, part of the titled and fief-holding nobility from the seventeenth century, owners of great palaces, villas, and landed estates, and important patrons of the arts and letters. They are one of a handful of ancient Florentine patrician families who can lay claim to a continuity of tradition that has persisted unbroken for at least nine hundred years up to the present day.

The Guadagni had their origins in the countryside. They came from Lubaco, in the upper valley of the Sieci River beyond Fiesole, where they are first reliably documented in the year 1080. Little is known about the early Guadagni at Lubaco, but the most likely hypothesis is that they were medium-sized property holders. In the second half of the twelfth century, they joined the growing number of prosperous country dwellers who were beginning to

stream into Florence and other towns to take advantage of new economic opportunities. Within just a few generations of their arrival, the Guadagni rose to preeminence as one of the leading families of the city.

The rise of the Guadagni coincided with the rise of Florence. It changed dramatically in this period. In 1100 Florence was little more than a modest cathedral town and administrative center of the imperial marquis of Tuscany, and it was still largely confined within its original Roman boundaries on the north side of the Arno River. By 1300 it had become one of Europe's largest and wealthiest cities, a self-governing republic, and one of the greatest commercial, industrial, and financial centers of the medieval world.

Over the years the family continued to expand their commercial activities until in the last decade of the thirteenth century, if not earlier, the Guadagni had become prominent and wealthy merchant-bankers in their own right. In the 1290s the family partnership formed by the brothers Migliore, Pierotto, and Zato Guadagni had a great international financial company registered with the bankers' guild (Cambio), with known branch operations in Paris and Genoa, as well as a commercial company registered with the merchants' guild (Calimala). By the first half of the thirteenth century, the Guadagni's economic success had established them as one of the more affluent and eminent families of Florence.

Another telling indication of the "arrival" of the Guadagni in the highest echelons of Florentine society is the fact that by the end of the thirteenth century, despite their origins as "commoners" they were contracting marriage alliances with some of the city's most ancient and powerful magnate clans. Members of the generation that achieved distinction in the years before 1300 married men or women of such illustrious noble lineages as the Tornaquinci, Adimari, Visdomini, and Pulci, while the marriages of their children would

establish ties with, among others, the Bardi, Cerchi, Donati, Cappiardi, Arrigucci, and Frescobaldi families

By the mid-thirteenth century the Guadagni had achieved such stature, moreover, that they became embroiled in the ferocious factional struggle that divided the leading Florentine families, both noble and great popolani, between the supporters of German imperial policy in Italy, the Ghibellines, and the champions of papal influence, the Guelfs. The Guadagni staked their allegiance with the Guelf cause, which tended to attract the ascendant banking and commercial families.

The Guadagni played a leading role in Florentine politics and society from the earliest stages of the popular republic in the late thirteenth century until 1434, when the ascendancy of the Medici led to their downfall. Not only were they part of the broad patriciate that dominated the economy and civic life, represented by some three to four hundred mainly old and wealthy families, but also throughout this period they held a position at the peak of the social and political hierarchy. The antiquity of their family heritage, their great wealth and substantial properties, their influential marriage ties, their impeccable Guelf credentials, and their early prominence in the public affairs of the Republic, all located them within a restricted elite of eminent families with similar backgrounds.

The history of the guadagni family is tightly linked with the Medici's. From 1434, the year that Cosimo dei Medici returned to Florence, until the Medici family disappeared forever from the World stage in 1737, the fortunes of the Guadagni rose and fell according to the whims of the Medici.

In the 1420's a match race developed between the Albizzi family and the Medici, who rose to prominence in the early fifteenth century, on the strength of the brilliant economic success of Giovanni di Bicci's banking company. By

1429, when Giovanni de' Medici died and the leadership of the family and its financial empire passed to his son Cosimo, the Medici "party" was poised to challenge the old oligarchy's hegemony over the civic life of the Republic, and a decisive confrontation became inevitable. The Guadagni family had ties on both sides. Although they had some family ties to the Medici their marriage alliances, business dealings, class heritage, and political ideology bound them more closely to the aristocratic faction loosely grouped around the Albizzi. A choice had to be made and unfortunately for the family they chose the wrong horse.

The consequences of backing the wrong horse were catastrophic to the Guadagni family. Not only did the family suffer politically but also was very nearly destroyed altogether. The exile of most of their men folk dispersed the once compact family unit; two of the family's three households disappeared from Florence; the lineage lost most of its property, which was either confiscated by the government or turned over to creditors. The Guadagni were even forced to give up the patronage rights over their ancestral burial chapel in Santissima Annunziata.<sup>54</sup> The few remaining members in Florence struggled through decades of humiliating dislocation and financial hardship before finally emerging, battered but intact, from the greatest crisis in their family's history.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the fortunes of the Guadagni had undergone a remarkable transformation, due above all to the stunning commercial success of Simone di Vieri's son Tommaso, first in Lyon and eventually in Florence as well. Economic recovery was followed by the family's gradual return to public life in their native city. Their political restoration was in part the fruit of their increasingly solid financial position, but it was also made possible by the fall and exile of their old foes, the Medici, in 1494, and by the

subsequent reinstatement of all those families that had suffered reprisals at their hands in 1434.

The brief fall of the Medici's opened the door for the Guadagni's to regain their former glory. Although they played an active role in the short lived republic and some of them held important posts in government, they did not oppose or resist the rebirth of the Medici clan. In short, this time they put their money on the right horse. They did not join the die-hard republican ex-patriots and exiles, whose last hopes of thwarting the new rulers of Florence were dashed by their defeat at the hands of Medici and Spanish troops in the battle of Montemurlo in 1537. Nor are they known to have taken part in the several failed plots against Cosmo. After their forebears' bitter experience of exile, the youngest generation of the Guadagni may have considered that adaptation to the changed circumstances was the safest and most rewarding route. Their loyalty to the new regime and their reacquired social prestige were acknowledged in 1561 when Cosimo appointed Jacopo to the Senate, the most representative institution of the early modern Florentine elite

The transformation of Florence into a principality not only had political consequences, but implicated broader social and cultural changes for the patriciate as well. During the second half of the sixteenth century, the city's elites began to define themselves in an increasingly self-conscious way as nobility. As a republic founded on commerce, finance, and industry, and explicitly anti-noble in origin, Florence possessed virtually no native aristocracy, in the sense in which this term was understood in the still largely feudal society of Europe. Most local patrician families had gained their wealth and social position through what the landed hereditary aristocracy considered "vile" and "base" occupations, as money-lenders and traders, shop-keepers and even artisans. Despite their riches and cultural sophistication they could never quite

shake off the stigma of their mercantile origins. Even the sixteenth century Medici had problems of image in the dazzling courts of Europe due to their ignoble pedigree and the dishonorable source of their wealth. After Catherine de' Medici, great-granddaughter of Lorenzo the Magnificent and relative of the pope, was married in 1531 to Henry II, future king of France, the duchess of Guise wrote disdainfully that she came from a family of "tradesmen who are not fit to call themselves our servants." Later French wits cruelly mocked Maria, the daughter of Francesco I, second grand duke of Florence, and wife from 1600 of king Henry IV, as a "fat she-banker."

It was in part to overcome such discrimination and to smooth their paths in aristocratic society that the patrician elite of Florence and their ideologues sought to "invent" a noble status for themselves. The Guadagni, having by now regained the apex of the social hierarchy, were among the narrow group of privileged families who were directly involved in this process of ennoblement. Like a number of other families who had international connections and business dealings, one impetus for proving their noble status beyond any doubt came from aristocratic circles abroad, against which they were forced to measure themselves. In 1595 young Guglielmo Guadagni (VIII,12; 1575-1615), son of Tommaso III of the French branch, joined a growing number of elite supplicants who requested a certificate from the grand ducal government attesting their family's "nobility." In his case he needed the patent in order to be appointed to the Knights of the Holy Spirit by the king of France. After the documentation had been assembled, a review was conducted by the Magistrato Supremo, which found that the Guglielmo, and the Guadagni family, indeed met the conditions for nobility.

By the end of the sixteenth century, then, the Guadagni had secured their place among the nobility, still not defined de jure but a definite social

reality. Whether because of the official patent in 1595, or perhaps simply due to their acknowledged status, by 1600 members of the family were being referred to in public records with the honorific title "Magnifico," or explicitly as "Florentine nobles," thus distinguishing them from common "Florentine citizens."

The Guadagni's position within the aristocracy assumed even greater luster in the early seventeenth century when they began to obtain roles at the grand ducal court and eventually were granted a hereditary fief and the title of marquis. Their prestige was reinforced further and their place at court consolidated when in 1645 Ferdinando II bestowed on Ortensia the marquisate of San Leolino del Conte, later extending the right of succession in the title and fief to the descendants of her brother Tommaso, then a senator, in 1652.

The experiences of the Guadagni from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century illustrate, in microcosm, a number of characteristics and trends common to the Florentine and European nobility. During this period wealth and power were increasingly concentrated in the hands of small groups of elites, and the cleavage between the privileged few and other social classes widened enormously. Those at the top enjoyed the most unabashedly opulent period in the history of the European aristocracy.

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw great changes take place in the Guadagni family. They moved away from commerce and business and joined the landed gentry. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the Guadagni stopped investing altogether in commerce and industry. Whatever the exact circumstances, their divestment from commercial and industrial enterprises was also symptomatic of the increasing penetration of aristocratic cultural attitudes, in which business was disdained and land holding was seen as the true sign of a gentleman's honor.

In early modern Europe, the honor and social] prestige of aristocratic families depended not so much on the preservation of wealth as on its ostentation, on their "liberal" and conspicuous spending more than on their thrift. This was especially true for those families like the Guadagni who were associated with the glittering Medici court. Social conventions and notions of the nobleman's honor required that they maintain a high public profile and an opulent style of living. Even though the productive capacity of Florence and the entrepreneurial activity of its patricians were in constant decline in these years, a sumptuous "prestige" economy flourished among the wealthiest noble families. Enormous outlays of money were spent on lavish palaces and country villas, luxurious clothing, jewelry, art, entertainments, and other forms of conspicuous consumption, which they considered necessary to display the tone of life consonant with the family's exalted status.

During this period both branches of the Goding accumulated fine large collections of art. On the basis of the information presently available, however, it is difficult to document their contents and growth in detail or to assess their importance within the broader tradition of Florentine art collecting. Their acquisitions of paintings, sculptures and other items for their private use originated with the generations around 1600, at about the time the Guadagni were becoming ennobled.

The family's statues and paintings were likely given a dignified exposition only around the mid-seventeenth century, in their magnificent new palace, complete with sculpture garden, behind the *Annunziata*. Yet even here the works were apparently not set off in a separate "gallery," but were rather disseminated throughout numerous rooms both in the main house and in the secondary residence annexed to it.<sup>174</sup> Tommaso's sons had the palace adorned with frescoes, and continued to expand the collection by buying older works and



commissioning new ones, mainly from local artists. With some they had a continuous and privileged patronage relationship, such as the important painters Salvator Rosa and Baldassare Franceschini (known as "il Volterrano"), both of who executed numerous works for them.

One indication of the quality of the Guadagni art collections and of the esteem in which they were held in the early eighteenth century is the fact that the families publicly exhibited many of their works in the art shows organized periodically by the Accademia del Disegno. Founded by Cosimo I in 1563 as a training school for artists, by the later seventeenth century the famous Academy had become more of an aristocratic social club for connoisseurs and collectors of art.

Of all the Guadagni collections, however, it was the one possessed by the marquis of San Leolino in the palace in piazza Santo Spirito that would eventually become the most celebrated. By the middle of the nineteenth century the collection had grown substantially, perhaps in part through inheritances when the other two branches of the family died out in the early 1800s. The "New Guide the City and Surroundings of Florence" by F. Fantozzi, published in Italian in 1842, briefly describes the Gallery in the Guadagni palace. The picture gallery, consisting of four rooms, was said to hold approximately two hundred paintings, although only little more than a tenth are summarily identified. There was also a fifth room adjoining the gallery that contained a "museum rich with cameos, numerous and rare medallions, ancient marble heads and busts, and very many Etruscan, Roman, and Greek idols, utensils, and other objects in bronze. When the last Guadagni occupant of the palace, marquis Neri's only child Ottavia Dufour-Berte, died in the 1860s, the inventory of her personal belongings left to her heirs lists a grand total of 489 art objects, mostly paintings.

Unfortunately this great collection, like those of many other Florentine aristocratic families, was apparently dismembered, sold off, and almost completely dispersed in the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century<sup>180</sup> With it went the last remnants of a once glorious tradition, the last vestiges of a magnificent style of aristocratic life that had, in fact, long since become anachronistic.

The dismantling of the renowned Guadagni libraries and art collections between the late 1700s and the late 1800s is emblematic of the slow but inexorable decline of the Florentine nobility in a society that was undergoing vast changes. The death of the last Medici grand duke in 1737 and the arrival of the Hapsburgs, the enlightened reforms of the economy and bureaucracy that the latter initiated, the rise of a wealthy bourgeoisie, the French Revolution of 1789, the growth of democratic political movements, and the unification of Italy in the 1860s, all contributed to weaken the influence and whittle away at the privileges of the old aristocracy. Though many of the city's aristocratic families maintained a remnant of their wealth and symbolic prestige, and some adjusted successfully to the new society emerging, on the whole the foundations of their dominant social position were being eroded and their authority gradually deteriorated.