

LAMPOON



Galerie Philia at Giardino Corsini with Future Relics – New Expressions of the Medici Legacy

Contemporary designers explore Florentine Renaissance archives, reinterpreting Medici symbols and techniques to create “relics” intended for the future – *Future Relics*

Future Relics at Giardino Corsini al Prato, Florence, until November 21, 2024

The Giardino Corsini al Prato is a *locus amoenus* in the heart of Florence. Designed as an escape from the urban context, it offers a space of peace and privacy within a palace dating back to the late 16th century, created by Bernardo Buontalenti and expanded throughout the 17th century. Like every Italian garden, its geometric flower beds, symmetrical pathways, and statues introduce a sense of order and control over nature. Amidst the centuries-old trees and plants are citrus groves, which are housed in the Limonaia during the winter months.

Enclosed by walls and structured with geometric precision, the garden recalls the medieval tradition of the *hortus conclusus*—a place for retreat, meditation, and purity. A chest that protects its inner beauties, like a reliquary. It is no coincidence that Galerie Philia chose Palazzo Corsini al Prato to present the *Future Relics* exhibition, curated by Ygaël Attali (curator & co-founder of Philia) and Jemma Elliot-Israelson, on display until November 21.

The Limonaia of Palazzo Corsini, with its wooden beams and large windows that theatrically filter light, provides a setting for the works of six international designers invited to create pieces inspired by Florence’s Medici cultural heritage. In collaboration with Shifting Vision and researchers specializing in Medici treasures, the designers have explored Renaissance Florence’s archives to examine the concept of the “future relic.”

The Definition of a Relic – and the Oxymoron of the “Future Relic”

A relic is an object preserved and revered for its connection to the past, often associated with religious figures. Physical remains of saints or items linked to them, such as bones, garments, or personal effects, are considered sacred and imbued with spiritual power. Beyond religious significance, a relic can be any object or artifact that represents and preserves the symbolic value and memory of an era, place, or culture. An object bearing the weight of the past, a tangible link to traditions, practices, or knowledge that might otherwise be lost.

Future Relics is an oxymoron that explores the possibility of creating “relics” for a time yet to come. Each designer, drawing from diverse techniques and inspirations, has created pieces that reinterpret the Medici legacy, blending art and function to form a unique category of collectible design. The project invites us to imagine how today’s objects might resonate as “relics” of the future, combining the functional and the artistic in ways that could be appreciated for generations. These are not mere works of art; they are collectible projects with a purpose, designed to be admired and used, potentially becoming tomorrow’s treasured artifacts.



LEMON HOUSE AT GIARDINO CORSINI, PHOTO CREDIT STUDIO BRINTH – COURTESY OF GALERIE PHILIA

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The Six Designers Selected by Galerie Philia: Andrés Monnier, Elsa Foulon, Kar Studio, Laura Pasquino, Morghen Studio, and Pierre de Valck

Blending traditional craftsmanship with an experimental approach, Morghen Studio (a Milanese duo formed by Rodolfo Viola and Roberto Tarter, specializing in lighting) presents a modern interpretation of the self-supporting column, a key element adopted by Florentine Renaissance from classical antiquity. The installation references Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise, Michelangelo's Pietà (both finished and unfinished), and the Doni Tondo, reflecting the Medici's passion for hardstone mosaics.



MORGHEN STUDIO – PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO BRINTH. COURTESY OF GALERIE PHILIA

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Kar Studio, from China, has conceived a chair inspired by Cosimo de' Medici's throne. Using hand-kneaded clay modeling and fiberglass, the chair features four Chinese jade stones at the corners of the base, evoking the four classical elements—Earth, Water, Air, and Fire—present both in Renaissance iconography and Chinese philosophy, which also includes metal as a fifth element.



KAR STUDIO – PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO BRINTH. COURTESY OF GALERIE PHILIA

Amsterdam-based ceramist Laura Pasquino has proposed a series of sculptural works influenced by the formula of Medici porcelain, traced in the archives documenting the ceramic workshop of Francesco I de' Medici in the 1560s, designed to imitate Chinese porcelain.



LAURA PASQUINO – PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO BRINTH. COURTESY OF GALERIE PHILIA

Pierre de Valck drew inspiration from a Medici chest discovered at the Palazzo Pitti to create a patinated bronze bridal chest with a meteorite lock. This piece recalls the gifts exchanged during significant social occasions in the Medici period, highlighting how such objects reinforced the social bonds and intercultural alliances of the time.

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PIERRE DE VALCK – PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO BRINTH. COURTESY OF GALERIE PHILIA

French ceramist Elsa Foulon presents “Future Relic,” a sculptural lacquered cabinet made with wood and ceramic doors inlaid with pyrite nuggets, inspired by Italian Renaissance reliquaries. This piece explores the concept of relics and contemporary perspectives on what we choose to preserve today.



ELSA FOULON – PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO BRINTH. COURTESY OF GALERIE PHILIA

What Were the Medici's "Relics"? The Grand Duke's Treasury

The breadth and diversity of the Medici legacy can be understood by visiting the Grand Duke's Treasury, located on the ground floor and mezzanine of Palazzo Pitti. Here, in the spaces of the de' Medici family's Summer Apartment, frescoed to celebrate the marriage between Ferdinando II de' Medici and Vittoria della Rovere, visitors can admire jewels, vases, plates, and other ornamental items in gold, silver, precious stones, hard stones, ivory, and amber.

Among the objects that tell the story of the Medici court are the vases of Lorenzo the Magnificent and the Mannerist creations of the late 16th century. There are also 16th-century jewels belonging to Anna Maria Luisa, the last heir of the Medici, ancient and Renaissance cameos, and the famous "Treasure of Salzburg," brought to Florence in 1815 by Ferdinand III of Lorraine.

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The museum's collection includes jewelry made from the 17th to the 20th centuries by European and Italian artisans. Among the exhibited pieces, there is an array of Oriental porcelain and European majolica, all influenced by Asian models, which are part of the celebrated collection of Chinese and Japanese porcelain begun by the Medici in the 15th century.

The Wealth of the Medici

In 1469, upon his father's death, Lorenzo de' Medici inherited an estate valued at 237,988 florins. At that time, a worker earned between 10 and 20 florins annually, while a well-to-do family lived comfortably on about 150-200 florins a year. This wealth positioned the Medici among Europe's most influential families.

Cosimo spent lavishly building palaces, villas, churches, and monasteries. Piero focused on collecting manuscripts, gems, jewelry, and precious items, recording each piece with its appraisal in an inventory compiled in 1465. Lorenzo continued the family tradition, pursuing various interests and investing substantial sums in building projects.

All the Medici, from Cosimo to Lorenzo, hired painters, sculptors, masons, architects, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, and copyists while gifting items like horses, jewelry, and other luxury goods to powerful figures such as the King of Naples and the Duke of Milan. Each family member, men and women, young and old, offered their support, whether through acts of charity or small stipends, to those in need, clients, followers, and admirers.

The Medici Bank Organizational Model

The family's prosperity was primarily derived from the bank founded in 1397 by Giovanni di Bicci, which quickly expanded throughout Europe, becoming one of the continent's leading financial institutions. The strategic skills of Giovanni and his son Cosimo, including the careful selection of collaborators and the forging of influential relationships, particularly with the Roman Curia, were crucial to the bank's success. Under Cosimo's management, the bank generated enormous profits, mainly through services provided to the Papacy, which constituted up to 63% of its revenue.

Each branch operated as an independent entity, limiting financial risks. This structure granted the bank flexibility and resilience, setting it apart from competing organizations like the Bardi and Peruzzi families, who failed due to the insolvency of a single client. With offices scattered across Europe, the Medici extended their activities beyond credit into the trade of goods like wool, spices, and alum.

After Cosimo's death in 1464, the bank began showing signs of difficulty, particularly due to unpaid loans from English nobles and management issues in the London and Bruges branches. The situation worsened under Lorenzo's direction, leading to the gradual decline of what had been one of the Renaissance's most powerful financial institutions.

The Global Influence of the Medici

The Medici's power extended far beyond the political and financial control of Florence, reaching an international scale largely thanks to strategic marriages, economic collaborations, and cultural patronage that spanned multiple countries. Through carefully arranged marriages, the Medici cemented alliances with some of Europe's most powerful dynasties.

Caterina de' Medici married the future king of France, Henry II. This union not only made Caterina the Queen of France but also reinforced the Florentine influence at the French court. Her position allowed her to introduce elements of Italian culture into France, from new culinary recipes to innovations in fashion, shaping the tastes and customs of the Parisian court. As queen and later as regent, Caterina used her Medici heritage to promote patronage and secure political support in the face of France's internal conflicts.

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Maria de' Medici later married Henry IV of France, further consolidating the Medici influence in France. Her presence created a welcoming environment for Italian artists and architects at the French court. Maria brought with her a refined lifestyle and a spirit of patronage that strengthened cultural ties between the two nations.

Beyond marriage alliances, the Medici cultivated diplomatic relationships through generous gifts that bolstered their international reputation. Cosimo I de' Medici sent lavish gifts to the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire—carpets, fine fabrics, and artworks—in an effort to maintain favorable trade relations with the Islamic world. These gifts were not merely gestures of goodwill; they were strategic tools to secure free access for Florentine ships to Eastern Mediterranean ports, essential for Florence's trade and economic prosperity.

Similarly valuable cultural and artistic gifts were sent to the Papal court and other Italian and European dynasties. Artworks, books, and collections of exotic objects were part of a subtle strategy by which the Medici presented themselves as enlightened patrons of the arts and knowledge, thus solidifying their status as a wealthy and sophisticated family in the eyes of other European powers.

Philia: the Intersections of Contemporary Design and Modern Art

Since its founding in 2015, Philia has developed a distinctive position within contemporary design and modern art, showcasing a generation of designers and artists from various backgrounds. Established by two brothers with interests in art, literature, and philosophy, the gallery emphasizes a multi-faceted approach, combining influences across traditions to create a varied and cross-cultural selection of work.

The gallery's curation avoids trend-focused choices, instead prioritizing pieces that convey craftsmanship and aesthetic integrity. Each work, whether a minimalist chair or an organic sculpture, is selected not as a decorative object but as a piece with lasting value, reflecting the evolving dialogue between tradition and innovation.

With spaces in Geneva, New York, Singapore, and Mexico City, Philia extends its reach globally. In addition to its permanent galleries, it hosts temporary exhibitions that bring together diverse artistic voices, contributing to a wider conversation within the contemporary art and design communities.

Matteo Mammoli