

THE  TIMES

2 ARTS

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**Politics and greed, frescoes
and fighting (and a lot of sex)**

**Rachel Campbell-Johnston separates the fact
from the fiction in the TV drama Medici**

Passion and power in the Renaissance: what's true and what's not in Medici

With great art and gorgeous scenery, Netflix's beards'n'britches drama is the next best thing to a trip to Florence, says Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Are you longing to catch up with a load of high culture... dreaming maybe of an Italian jaunt? Fantiasing about Florence and the marvels of the Uffizi? Imagine strolling along the banks of the Arno, drifting at random through medieval street listening to church bells chiming from the campanile while you order a negroni at a pavement restaurant. It's a world away from that saggy old sitting-room sofa in which, far too often, you now find yourself slumped. Or is it?

No need to abandon the dream... or the cushions. Today Netflix has launched the third and final season of its historical saga *Medici*, a rumbustious romp through high Renaissance culture in the company of the Medici, the de facto rulers of 15th-century Florence.

The story of this family is nothing if not dramatic. The Medici were the forerunners of the modern-day mafia. Through a blend of dauntless ambition, ruthless business acumen and cunning financial maneuvering, from humble wool traders to become Europe's wealthiest bankers. For close to 300 years they presided over the republic of Florence as power brokers and warlords, lovers and grand dukes. They produced four popes as well as three queens of France. And, on top of that, they were arguably the most important cultural patrons in art history. Masaccio, Brunelleschi, Donatello and Leonardo, Botticelli, Michelangelo and Raphael, as well as a few of the most famous of their many proteges. Love them or hate them — and they can be seen as heroes or villains pretty equally — the Medici were stars who did more for the arts and culture than any other family before or since.

Normally, if I were wanting an audience with this mob—or indeed with their rivals—I would be pacing my way down the Hall of the Dynasties in the Uffizi. I would be gazing at portraits by Pontormo, Bronzino or Titian. And perhaps it's worth mentioning here that, if you have a headset at home, you can now, for the first time, take a high-tech trip to this gallery. Last week the Uffizi launched a cutting-edge virtual reality tour of ten rooms. You can even at one point,



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a friend tells me, press your nose against a window and enjoy a digital panorama of Florence unfurling in bright summer light.

Sadly, I don't have the right goggles for that. Instead, slobbering about on my bed, watching back-to-back episodes on Netflix and calling it work, I have been spending my time in the company of a red-robed Dustin Hoffman. He plays the bank's founder, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici. And, for all that his accent remains bemusingly transatlantic, he does at least possess an approximation to the prominent Medici nose — which is more than can be said of Richard Madden (Robb Stark in *Game of Thrones*), who

Stark in *Game of Thrones*), who plays his son Cosimo; or Daniel Sharman, who stars as his great-grandson Lorenzo the Magnificent. Lorenzo, in particular, was famously far from attractive: short and stocky, apparently, with jutting jaw and lumpy brow.

But central casting was obviously having none of that. Both these Medici boys — not to mention their brothers — are played by beautiful actors who often also,

actors who often also, incidentally, sport beards, even though men in that era were mostly clean shaven. Maybe for me that's lucky, given that I have spent so large a part of this week in bed with them.

I am certainly feeling rather familiar with this family. I have been following their plans, their plots and their squabbles — not to mention their boisterous sex lives — through three generations. I admit it: I'm hooked. I'm beginning to feel as though I'm one of their friends: sitting in on their endless debates in the Signoria; worrying madly about the withdrawal of a loan; watching the cupola of the Duomo slowly rising; sending chickens dashing from the path of my galloping horse; visiting Volterra in the wake of its uprising; even seeing the execution and the importance of alium. As for the notorious Pazzi conspiracy, I can almost distrust Sean Bean — another *Game of Thrones* alumnus, now playing the head of a rival banking family — as much as the Medici did.

The truth is that I am rather loving this drama. The question is, how much of this drama is actually *truth*? How much is history and how much Hollywood? We know an awful lot about the Medici family. Their history is well documented in the archives of Florence. Their armorial bearings — five balls on a gold shield — can be found carved on palazzos, churches and monuments all over Tuscany. One outraged contemporary apparently once ranted that Cosimo, in the church of the Medici, had “embellished the monks’ privies with his balls.” Contemporary writers — Machiavelli and Vasari prominent among them — recorded Medici history. A collection of close to three million of their family letters are preserved in state archives. Careless academics have subsequently added to their research.

The first few moments of screen time. (Not worry, he keeps returning in flashbacks.) And therefore explains the cause of (and murder becomes) all our characters' great pain and emotional tension. But actually, for all that poisoning does not seem remotely improbable in this Medici world of virulent violence and rampant corruption, the reasoning to suggest that Giovanni did not die of natural causes in his giddy old age.

Frank Spotnitz, the creator of this series, loved that it was short on plot and long on character. It was the greatest joys of making it, he tells me when we speak on the phone. It is one of the greatest joys of watching it too.

The aura of the Italian Renaissance is so strong, so seductive, that plenty of Tuscan villages. But plenty of idyllic liberties have also been taken with the facts, not least when it comes to the women who would be so much more than the bareback into the Signoria to argue the cause of a husband, or set about

Besides, even the academics are frequently unsure. The scriptwriters, for example, of *Il Romanzo*, make much of the love affair between Lorenzo the Magnificent and his married mistress, Lucrezia Donati. Is this authentic? Lucrezia certainly was, as he said in the play. But will find her in Verrocchio's marble portrait bust of the *Dama Col Mazonino*, in Botticelli's *Fortitude*, painted for the hall in the first place? Or is she a figure of public would meet. Some touchingly personal love lyrics written by a youthful Lorenzo — they feature fairly prominently in the series — are certainly hers. But they were also inspired by Lucrezia. But no one knows whether their affair was merely platonic or actually consummated, let alone as raucously and as mad as many of the play's "sexpert." Spotnitz says, "and they will tell you one thing: ask another and they will

totally disagree" And of course, he admits, given that the driving interest is to crank up emotional tension and create a dramatic story line, trade-offs are constantly being made with the truth.

This is certainly true of the art history. Of course you will find all sorts of iconic creations by Florentine masters in the museum, but they are mostly hand-fed replicas. Have fun spotting Ghiberti's baptist doors; Giambologna's bronze horse; Gozzoli's *Procession of the Magi*. It is comical to find a reproduction of the youngest of the kings in a portrait of Lorenzo. And, charmed by this, the scriptwriters incorporate it into their story — one of many small incidents that are introduced, only to find that you may be surprised to discover are grounded in truth.

The famous construction of a gravity-defying cupola by the gruffly iconic Brunelleschi is also treated largely, for instance. Viewers get a lesson in his ingenious architectural

**cover story**

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(Netflix)
Long dumped by the BBC, the 9th-century saga of English invasion and the kingdom of Wessex continues on Netflix, where series four has just arrived. It's based on Bernard Cornwell's novels, but with a great budget comes great gore, so this is more a Saxon *Game of Thrones*.

Britannia
(Sky Box Sets/Now TV)
It only just qualifies as real historical drama, but you may find Jez Butterworth's imagining of Romans lording over a pagan Britain oddly mesmerising once you dial into its trippy madness. It's hard to resist David Morrissey, dialling the acting up to 11, as Roman general Aulus Plautius, fighting "tooth and bollock" to stay in the country.

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(BBC iPlayer)
More a dramatised documentary, and with an oddly anachronistic soundtrack at times, but this three-parter — broadcast in 2014 — pitches you right into British engagements in the First World War. It has a veracity that comes from being



drawn directly from accounts of British fusiliers. With handheld camerawork, it's like a gloomier, muddier *Saving Private Ryan* (and for more of that there is *Band of Brothers* on Sky Box Sets/Now TV).

Catherine the Great
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(BBC iPlayer)
If you still haven't seen the 2015 adaptation of Hilary Mantel's novels, what are you waiting for?

Arguably the finest BBC drama of the past ten years, it is a feast for the intellect more than the senses: Mark Rylance's darting eyes as Cromwell, Damian Lewis's menacing Henry, Claire Foy's supercilious Anne Boleyn... Scheming has never been so compelling.

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Daniel Sharman
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methods as well as his now all but legendary use of an egg in brief challenges to show a model for his students. In the *Discorsi*, he proposed, proposing instead that whoever could make an egg stand upright on a slip of paper would be the one to build the cupola. None of the many competing masters managed. But he did. He then took the egg, broke it in half and set the dome of the half-shell down. When his rivals protested that the dome would fall down, he replied, laughing, that they also could have raised the cupola if they had seen his model or his design. But even so, he was not without anachronisms, inaccuracies and downright inventions to be found. He was not a mathematician, frequently. You will recognise it by its famous marble cladding. But actually his dome was made of brick in the 9th century. In one of the relatively few scenes to be lost inside an actual building, he is shown with a portrait of the boy who would become Lorenzo the Magnificent. But he would not even have been conceived when the boy was born.

The life and work of Botticelli provides an artistic focal point for the history of the Renaissance. In speaking, the outlines of his story are fundamentally correct. Botticelli did enjoy the patronage of Lorenzo the young prince, Lorenzo. He did paint

the hanged Pazzi plotters for him on a city wall. The renowned beauty, Simona Vespucci did supposedly marry a man named Giovanni, but not including (as in the Netflix series) his twins and Marz, for which, it is often pointed out, she was never paid. And these two models were indeed potentially, even probably, amorously involved. But the plot was not quite so deeply or desperately as this series would have us believe. But then the series does not care. It's all about Botticelli's finished *Venus and Mars* panel is consigned to the flames, given the circumstances, it's not as if it was out of the original Gallery curators to find that picture torn away from that the picture that was the most precious and the most treasured possessions has just gone up in smoke.

Don't trust the details, just enjoy the images. There are a few things that in many ways a wonderful model of how banking and building, and the Renaissance in general, were intertwined. Painting, fires and fighting are all poured into the improbable mix. And, at the very points where it seems it all is going to come crashing down, the series actually is echoing the atmosphere of its era most closely. So, crawl back to the Renaissance, and if you're not in it, and in for a doublet-ripping romp through the dramas of the high

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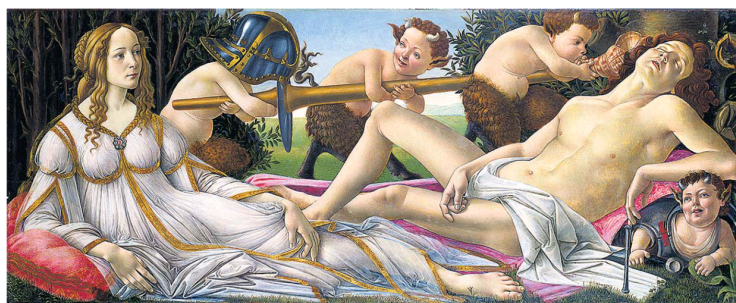
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Normally, if I were wanting an audience with this mob — or indeed with their rivals — I would be pacing my way down the Hall of the Dynasties in the Uffizi. I would be gazing at portraits by Pontormo, Bronzino or Titian. And perhaps it's worth mentioning here that, if you have a headset at home, you can now, for the first time, take a high-tech trip to this gallery. Last week the Uffizi launched a cutting-edge virtual reality tour of ten rooms. You can even at one point,



Venus and Mars by Sandro Botticelli, 1483. Below: Portrait of Lorenzo de Medici, Agnolo Bronzino's workshop, 1565-69

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a friend tells me, press your nose against a window and enjoy a digital panorama of Florence unfurling in bright summer light.

Sadly I don't have the right goggles for that. Instead, slobbering about on my bed, watching back-to-back episodes on Netflix and calling it work, I have been spending my time in the company of a red-robed Dustin Hoffman. He plays the bank's founder, Giovanni di Bicci de Medici. And, for all that his accent remains bemusingly transatlantic, he does at least possess an approximation to the prominent Medici nose — which is more than can be said of Richard Madden (Robb Stark in *Game of Thrones*), who

plays his son Cosimo; or Daniel Sharman, who stars as his great-grandson Lorenzo the Magnificent. Lorenzo, in particular, was famously far from attractive; short and stocky, apparently, with jutting jaw and lumpy brow.

But central casting was obviously having none of that. Both these Medici boys — not to mention their brothers — are played by beauteous actors who often also, incidentally, sport beards, even though men in that era were mostly clean shaven. Maybe for me that's lucky, given that I have spent so large a part of this week in bed with them.

I am certainly feeling rather familiar with this family. I have been following their plans, their plots and their squabbles — not to mention their boisterous sex lives — through three generations. I admit it: I'm hooked. I'm beginning to feel as though I'm one of their friends: sitting in on their endless debates in the Signoria; worrying madly about the withdrawal of a loan; watching the cupola of the Duomo slowly rising; sending chickens dashing from the path of my galloping horse; visiting Volterra in the wake of its uprising. I even now understand the importance of alum. As for the notorious Pazzi conspiracy, I can almost distrust Sean Bean — another *Game of Thrones* alumnus, now playing the head of a rival banking family — as much as the Medicis did.

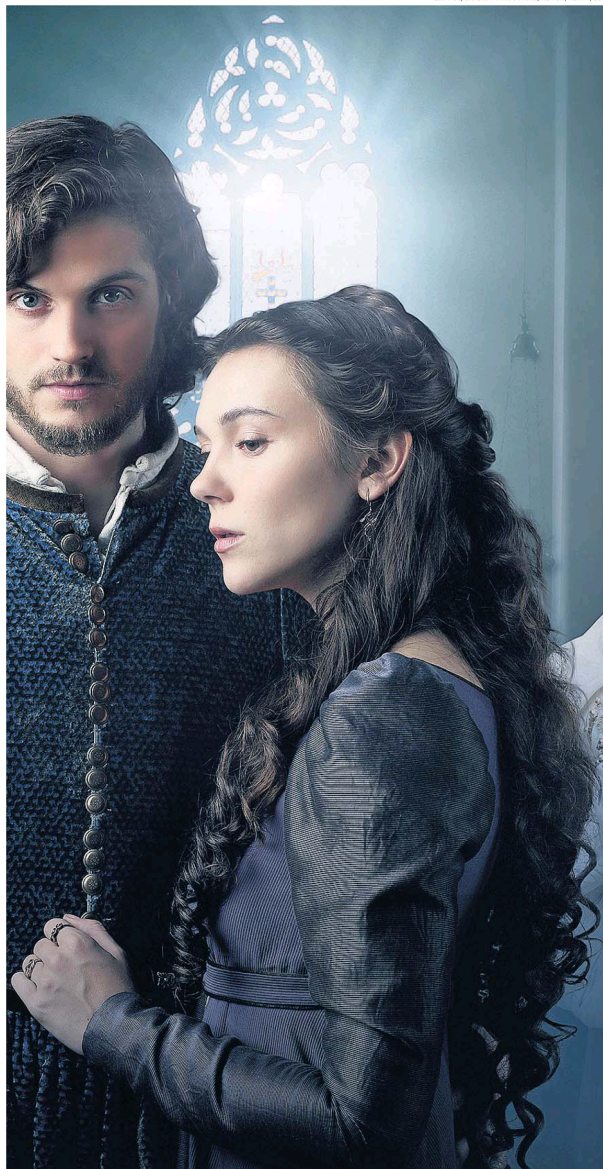
The truth is that I am rather loving this drama. The question is, how much of this drama is actually truth? How much is history and how much Hollywood? We know an awful lot about the Medici family. Their history is ingrained in the very fabric of Florence. Their armorial bearings — five balls on a gold shield — can be found carved on palazzos, churches and monuments all over Tuscany. One outraged contemporary apparently once ranted that Cosimo, in the church of San Marco, “had even emblazoned the monks' privies with his balls”. Contemporary writers — Machiavelli and Vasari prominent among them — recorded Medici history. A collection of close to three million of their family letters are preserved in state archives. Countless academics have subsequently added their research.

But that doesn't mean that a mini-series can't get a whole load of stuff wrong. That fact is established right from the start. The story opens with an outright whopper. Hoffman dribbles poisoned grapes and dies in

the first few moments of screen time. (Don't worry, he keeps returning in flashbacks.) His murder becomes the cause of (and therefore explains) all sorts of subsequent plot twists and emotional tensions. But actually, for all that poisoning does not seem remotely improbable in this Medici world of rivalrous violence and nefarious plotting, there is nothing to suggest that Giovanni did not die of natural causes in his gouty old age.

Frank Spotnitz, the creator of this series, loved that it was shot on location in Italy. It was one of the greatest joys of making it, he tells me when we speak on the phone. It is one of the greatest joys of watching it too. The aura of the Italian Renaissance still seems to linger in some of those tiny unspoiled Tuscan villages. But plenty of ludicrous liberties have also been taken with the facts, not least when it comes to the women who would certainly not have galloped bareback into the Signoria to argue the cause of a husband, or set about





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Claire Foy and Damian Lewis in *Wolf Hall*. Below: Helen Mirren as Catherine

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healthy sexual desires and her waspish way with words ("there are unscrupulous people in Russia; fortunately, I am one of them"). This four-parter is like an 18th-century *House of Cards*, with Catherine enjoying on-off romping with her beloved General Potemkin.



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Daniel Sharman as Lorenzo and Synnove Karlsen as Clarice in *Medici*

thwacking dagger-wielding ruffians with a handy candlestick.

Besides, even the academics are frequently unsure. The scriptwriters, craving a bit of romantic drama, make much of the love affair between Lorenzo the Magnificent and his married mistress, Lucrezia Donati. Is this authentic? Lucrezia certainly existed. It is said that you can still find her: in Verrocchio's marble portrait bust of the *Dama Col Mazzolino*, in Botticelli's *Fortitude*, painted for the hall in which the governors of the Florentine republic would meet. Some touchingly personal love lyrics written by a youthful Lorenzo — they feature fairly prominently in the series — are commonly believed to have been inspired by Lucrezia. But no one knows whether their affair was merely platonic or actually consummated, let alone as raunchily and amid as many rumpled sheets. "Ask one expert," Spotnitz says, "and they will tell you one thing; ask another and they will

totally disagree." And, of course, he admits, given that the driving interest is to crank up emotional tension and create a dramatic storyline, trade-offs are constantly being made with the truth.

This is certainly true of the art history. Of course you will find all sorts of iconic creations by Florentine masters included in the series, albeit they are mostly ham-fisted replicas. Have fun spotting Ghiberti's baptistry doors; Giambologna's bronze horse; Gozzoli's *Journey of the Magi*. It is commonly believed that, in this last, the youngest of the kings is a portrait of Lorenzo. And, charmed by this, scriptwriters incorporate it into their story — one of many small incidents that, if you check up on them, you may be surprised to discover are grounded in truth.

The famous construction of a gravity-defying cupola by the gruffly intemperate Brunelleschi features largely, for instance. Viewers get a lesson in his ingenious architectural

methods as well as his now all but legendary use of an egg. In brief, challenged to show a model for his radical proposals, Brunelleschi refused, proposing instead that whoever could make an egg stand upright on a slab of marble should be commissioned to build the cupola. None of the many competing masters managed. But Brunelleschi simply smashed the egg in half and set the dome of the half-shell down. When his rivals protested that they could have done the same, he replied, laughing, that they also could have raised the cupola if they had seen his model or his design.

But there are plenty of anachronisms, inaccuracies and downright inventions to be found. The Duomo, for instance, appears frequently. You will recognise it by its famous marble cladding. But actually this feature was only added in the 19th century. In one of the relatively few scenes to be shot inside an actual Medici palace you will spot a fresco portrait of the boy who would become Lorenzo the Magnificent. But he would not even have been conceived at the point in which it is shown.

The life and work of Botticelli provides an artistic focal point for the first two seasons. Factually speaking, the outlines of his story are fundamentally correct. Botticelli did enjoy a particularly close relationship with his patron Lorenzo. He did paint

the hanged Pazzi plotters for him on a city wall. The renowned beauty Simonetta Vespucci did supposedly appear in several of his pictures, including (as in the Netflix series) his *Venus and Mars*, for which, it is often said, Giuliano Medici also modelled. And these two models were indeed potentially, even probably, amorously linked — although perhaps not quite as deeply or desperately as this series would have us believe. But then the screenwriters drop in a flagrant error. Botticelli's finished *Venus and Mars* panel is consigned to the flames, which, given the circumstances, is all very romantic. But our National Gallery curators will be rather dismayed to find that the picture that they count among their most prized possessions has just gone up in smoke.

Don't trust the details, just enjoy the general atmosphere. The Medici story is in many ways a wonderful muddle in which banking and building, scheming and sculpture, politics and painting, frescoes and fighting are all poured into the improbable mix. And, at the very points where it seems at its most outlandishly inventive, it may actually be echoing the atmosphere of its era most closely. So, crawl back to the sofa, fill your goblet of wine and dig in for a doublet-ripping romp through the dramas of the high Renaissance.

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