



The Festival of St. John the Baptist in Renaissance Florence

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Introduction

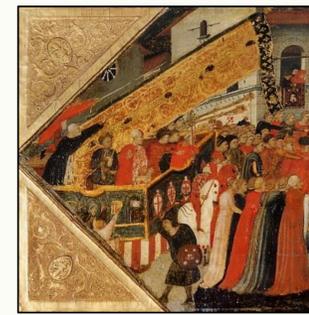
San Giovanni Battista, or Saint John the Baptist, was adopted by the city of Florence, Italy as its patron saint in the thirteenth century. Each year on the saint's day (June 24), festivities & processions are held in St. John's honor.

- Festival once included horse race (*palio*)
- Prize for race was a silk *palio* banner
- Florence is a renowned center for textiles

Race to the Finish

The finish of the St. John *palio* race (**right**) in Florence's Piazza San Pier Maggiore. Jockeys pilot their horses (*barberi*) towards the cart bearing the prize *palio* banner.

Image and detail on right: Giovanni Toscani, *Palio in Florence*, 1418, tempera and panel on wood, Cleveland Museum of Art, ArtStor.



The *palio* banner

The *palio* banner was displayed on a cart bearing city officials at the finish (**left**). The first horse and rider to reach the *palio* was declared the victor.

- Made from gold or red brocade silk and velvet fabric
- Lined with a thousand fur pelts
- Embroidered
- Expensive to produce



Image: Florin Coin with image of St. John the Baptist, 15th c., gold, Museo nazionale del Bargello (Florence, Italy), ArtStor.

On the money

St. John the Baptist, a Christian saint, was celebrated by Florence from the 13th c. onwards during a period of economic growth and prosperity. St. John appeared on the city's currency, the florin, or gold coin.

The Festival as a Display of Wealth

During the late Middle Ages, Florence emerged as a major economic power in Europe in banking as well as production of luxury silk woven textiles. Originating as a religious procession to the Baptistery on the saint's day, the festival of St. John the Baptist became an opulent annual spectacle in which the whole city participated.

- City of Florence spent lavish amounts annually on the *palio* banner
- Officials, guilds, and confraternities constructed floats for the procession
- Culminating event—traditional horse race with winner receiving *palio*
- In 1563, Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici added a Roman-style chariot race in Piazza Santa Maria Novella

The *Palio* Cart

The *palio* banner was transported on a special horse-drawn cart or *carro* (**left**). The banner's luxury fur lining (*fodera*) is visible draped across the cart's edge.

Image on left: Cart of the Palio of St. John the Baptist, fol. 39r in L. Chiari, *Priorista*, c. 1630-1640, Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence (reproduced in Pastori, *La festa di San Giovanni*, 122, fig. 28).



Woven gold

Silk fabric (**left**) was often interwoven with gold thread.

- In 1478, 220 gold florins spent on the *palio* (twice the cost of an altarpiece!)
- Banners recycled to make clothing and altar cloths
- Gold thread embroidery on luxury fabrics (**right**) sometimes commissioned from nuns at area convents

Images (**left & right**): Silk velvet, Italian, 15th c., Victoria & Albert Museum, London, from Stanley, *Palace and Mosque*, 124. *Palio* (Altarpiece), Venetian, 15th c., Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan, from Landini, *Velluti e Moda tra XV e XVII secolo*, 51-52.



Research Sources

Research conducted in 2002-2004 in the following collections:

- Archivio di Stato (State Archives), Florence, Italy
- Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence
- Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence
- Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Images (**left to right**): "Baptistry (San Giovanni), exterior, with the Campanile (Giotto's Tower) at right," Florence, ArtStor; Detail and full image of Rossello di J. Franchi's *Festa di S. Giovanni* (Feast of St. John), 1430, tempera on panel, Museo nazionale del Bargello, Florence, ArtStor; (Detail photographed by Elizabeth Tobey with permission of museum).



Presenting tributes to the Baptistery

This 15th-century painting (**above**) shows citizens presenting *palii* (tribute banners) to the 11th-century Baptistery of San Giovanni (**far left**). The main *palio* banner (awarded to the winner of the horse race) is depicted in front of the façade of the *duomo* (cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore) (**left**).

Conclusions

- Festival of St. John the Baptist was not only a religious observance but a display of civic wealth
- High expenditures recorded for festival art (*palio* banners, floats, and costumes)
- Italian society valued festival art as much as painting, sculpture, architecture

Selected literature cited

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Chretien, Heidi L. *The Festival of San Giovanni: Imagery and Political Power in Renaissance Florence*. American University Studies IX. Vol. 138. New York: Peter Lang, 1994.

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Acknowledgments

Poster template adapted from Colin Purrington blog, <http://colinpurrington.com/tips/academic/posterdesign>.

Images downloaded from ArtStor (<http://library.artstor.org/>) through the University of Maryland Libraries' Research Port unless otherwise noted.

Further information

Created by Elizabeth Tobey (etobey@verizon.net) in January 2015 as an example of poster design for the Maryland Center for Undergraduate Research (MCUR) at the University of Maryland (www.ugresearch.umd.edu). The content is based upon Tobey's doctoral dissertation, "The *Palio* in Italian Renaissance Art, Thought, and Culture" (University of Maryland, 2005).