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Medici reimaged for the 21st century – and beyond

The Future Relics project invites six designers to respond to the Renaissance collection and create future treasures



Courtesy Laura Pasquino's elegant porcelain vessels, inspired by objects from the Medici manufactory © Sacha Verbeek and Janne Wellens

**Francesca Perry**

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In 16th-century Tuscany, the ruling Medici family sometimes received diplomatic gifts of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain vases, and marvelled at the translucent, delicate material. Porcelain was not made in Europe at the time: its potters had not mastered the recipe and technique. Grand duke Francesco I de' Medici consequently established a workshop in 1575 dedicated to reproducing the elusive material: the Medici Porcelain Manufactory. "They tried to reverse-engineer the ready-made vases," says Dutch ceramicist Laura Pasquino. "For a decade they could not figure out how it was done — but in the process, they accidentally invented a new type of porcelain."

What the Medici craftsmen attempted to recreate was hard-paste porcelain — "perfectly white without any imperfections," says Pasquino — but, failing to achieve the kiln temperatures necessary, they created the soft-paste equivalent: more susceptible to cracking but with its own tactile appeal. The manufactory, which closed in 1587, produced a limited but diverse array of decorative vessels

in the material, which Pasquino has used as inspiration for a new body of work.



Laura Pasquino: 'For a decade the Medici's could not figure out how it was done' © Sacha Verbeek and Janne Wellens



A small ewer from the Medici Porcelain Manufactory © Metropolitan Museum of Art

Her elegant and minimalist porcelain vessels, made using the same technique and shaped in reference to objects from the Medici manufactory, form part of the Future Relics project. Organised by the contemporary design and art gallery Philia, in collaboration with the cultural organisation Shifting Vision and the Medici Archive Project research institute, Future Relics brings together six contemporary designers to respond to the Medici collections. Focusing on how this powerful Florentine family patronised the creative output of the Italian Renaissance, the project culminates in an exhibition at Florence's Palazzo Corsini al Prato, opening in November.

The designers visited museums, palaces and chapels in Florence for inspiration. They were then invited to create new designs that might be treasured, passed down generations and admired as historic artefacts centuries from now. "What we wanted is to be in-between the cultural renaissance in Medici Florence and the future — to think about how this history can help us conceptualise and realise new works," says Philia founder Ygaël Attali.



For Italian lighting studio Morghen, the Chapel of the Relics in Florence's Pitti Palace captured the imagination. Built by Cosimo I de' Medici in the 16th century, it housed the Medici collection of elaborately decorative reliquaries. "The level of craftsmanship was incredible," says Roberto Tarter, one half of Morghen along with Rodolfo Viola. Inspired by the reliquaries — as well as architecture, sculpture and decorative stone marquetry produced in Renaissance Florence — Morghen created a lighting piece conceived as a "column" with decorative references to Renaissance craft, in various materials.

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Ygaël Attali, founder of Philia

At the base of the work, titled "Past Forward", fragments of Carrara marble nod to the materiality of Michelangelo's sculptures. From this, vertical lines of brass rise, some of which support elements including candle holders, a glowing alabaster lamp resembling a sceptre's finial, and a decorative floral

array in stained glass. "We wanted to include a lot of references and use different materials to honour the Medici tradition, and also to experiment," says Viola.

For the Italian designers, engaging with Medici history was not new, but the "Future Relics" project made it more of a conscious activity. "We were born here, we breathe the past Italy has," says Viola. "It's part of our heritage, but it's not something that you can really see in what we do every day."





Morghen's 'Past Forward' light is conceived as a column © Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Philia



The Chapel of the Relics in the Pitti Palace © Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy

Across the Future Relics designers, the references to Medici inspiration vary from literal to conceptual. A series of works from Belgium-based designer Pierre De Valck speaks to the gift-giving culture of the period, drawing on historic research into how families such as these expressed and strengthened social ties, alliances and influence. It includes a sleek bronze “wedding chest” with a handle made from lapis lazuli — a semi-precious stone used to create the intense blue pigment in Renaissance painting.

Guangzhou-based design studio Kar conceived of a throne-like chair symbolising the seat of power occupied by Cosimo I de' Medici and the grand dukes who came after him. Mexican designer Andrés Monnier has created an altar aiming to represent the Medicis' cultural legacy, and drawing on Florentine stone marquetry. Meanwhile, French ceramicist Elsa Foulon designed a sculptural cabinet inlaid with nuggets of pyrite, inspired by Italian Renaissance reliquaries.

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Brought together at Palazzo Corsini al Prato — a baroque palace that once belonged to the Medicis — these works don't aim to make a new point about the family's legacy, but instead dwell upon what it means to create a treasured object, endowed with aesthetic, symbolic, or material value.

The project also provides an opportunity to compare the craft and design practices of the present with the past. “The world

was different back then,” says Morghen's Viola. “These days, to do what they did is almost impossible — not because we don't have the knowledge or techniques, but because we don't have the time.”

The 'Future Relics' exhibition is at Palazzo Corsini al Prato, Florence from November 1–22

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