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# “Wax Upon a Time”: The Medici and the Arts of Ceroplastics on View at the Uffizi

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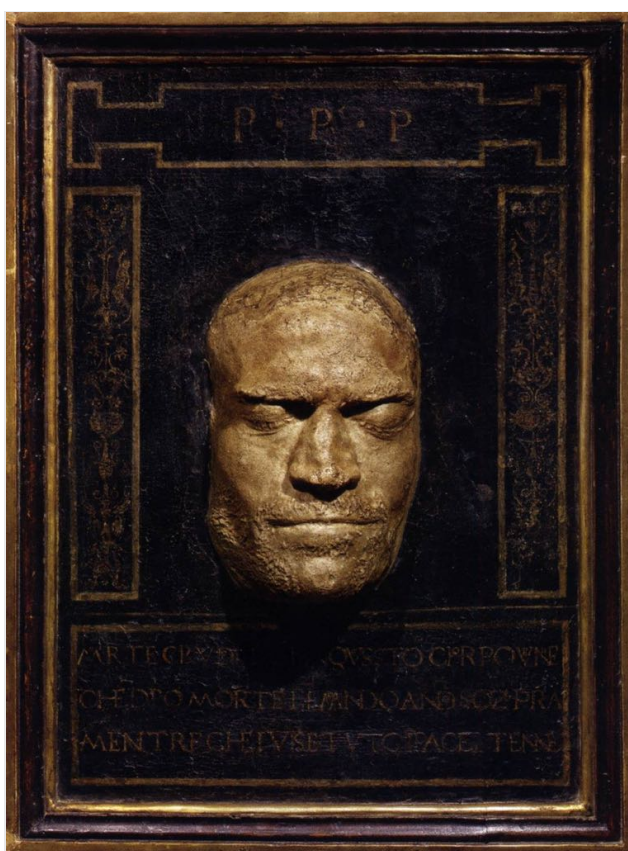
Lucy Gordan



A detail of Saint Mary Magdalene Reading, the logo of the exhibition, collected by Bianca Cappello. All images courtesy of the Uffizi Gallery

On until April 12, in new exhibition spaces on the ground floor, the Uffizi is “resurrecting” the lost art of waxworks in the very first exhibition ever entirely dedicated to Florentine ceroplastics. Its title, *Cera Una Volta* or *Wax Upon a Time*, a play on words in both Italian and English, is enigmatic and mysterious, yet appropriate. In Italian *cera* means wax and *C’era una volta* means once upon a time; in English, *once* has been replaced by *wax*, echoing the opening lines of fairy tales, which are often ghoulish and creepy—much like the exhibition.

Wax sculptures have a 6,000-year history. The ancient Egyptians used wax in funeral rites to create figures for tombs. The Romans developed *imagines*, lifelike wax masks of deceased ancestors displayed in homes and carried in funeral processions. In the Middle Ages, wax was used for religious devotional figures. During the Renaissance, artists used wax for portraits and as a preparatory medium for bronze casting.



Death Mask of Lorenzo de' Medici

### The Medici Legacy and the Fate of the Collection

From the 15th to the late 17th century, the Medici family were avid collectors of wax sculptures, which they exhibited in the Tribune of the Uffizi and in the Palazzo Pitti. After the Medici dynasty died out in the 1740s, their wax collection was no longer displayed. Then, in 1793, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Peter Leopold of Lorraine, auctioned these works, and most of them were lost.

With the exception of wax’s continued use as a crucial tool for medical education, art made of wax was largely

“lost” due to its perishability and because creations in this material were never considered part of the “major arts” like painting and sculpture. The aim of this exhibition, featuring the Medici collection, is to raise awareness of this medium at the height of its splendor. Some ninety works—paintings, sculptures, cameos, and objects decorated with semi-precious stones, many on loan from Italian and European museums—have now returned home for the first time and are displayed in chronological order.

### Inside the Exhibition Rooms

The four rooms of *Wax Upon a Time*, although not for the faint-of-heart because of

their content and their dark spaces connected by narrow, tortuous, labyrinthine, and somewhat claustrophobic corridors, will almost certainly intrigue even children from age six on. In the first room are funeral masks—the earliest (1492) being that of Lorenzo de' Medici by wax worker Orsino Benintendi—and wax portraits, some life-size. The second room is dedicated to the polychrome waxworks of the 16th century, starting with those once on display in the Uffizi's Tribuna. One is the wax portrait of Francesco I de' Medici by Pastorino Pastorini, to whom Vasari attributed the invention of polychrome wax.

### The Favored Themes of the Art

Another theme dear to 16th-century wax sculpture was that of wax beauties, sometimes dressed, sometimes naked, collected by Bianca Cappello, first the mistress and then the wife of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Francesco I de' Medici, exhibited next to a series of small wax portraits of illustrious men. The third room



*The Witchcraft Scene by Gaetano Giulio Zumbo*

investigates a theme very common in early 17th-century wax sculpture: the “Four Last Things”—the final unknowns humans must face: Death, Judgment, Hell, and Heaven.

The fourth and most macabre room is dedicated to the little-known Sicilian-born wax sculptor Gaetano Giulio Zumbo. He worked in Florence from 1690 to 1695 for the Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici. *The Plague*, Zumbo's most famous work, is juxtaposed with a painting, *The Head of Medusa*, at the time believed to be by Leonardo da Vinci. Also on display are Zumbo's *Syphilis* or *The Triumph of Time*, his *Scene of Witchcraft*, and a relief depicting the *Corruption of Bodies*, recently purchased by the Uffizi. Zumbo's waxworks are accompanied by paintings with alchemical and witchcraft subjects, including *The Witch* by Salvator Rosa, another recent Uffizi acquisition.

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*Italian Hours*

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