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

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

Research Sources
Research conducted 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

Selected literature cited

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

Acknowledgments
Poster template adapted from Colin Perrington 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
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