

Famous Portraits Series

Catherine de' Medici

Queen and Regent of France (1547–1559–1589)

Born: 13 April 1519 Died: 5 January 1589 (Aged 69)

Issue 16



Catherine orphaned at the age of 1 month was brought up by her uncle Pope Clement VII (aged 3)



Catherine at the time of her marriage to Henry of Valois, the future King Henry II of France (aged 13)



Catherine as Queen-Consort of France in 1550, Uffizzi Gallery, Florence (aged 30)



Catherine as Queen of France before the accidental death of her husband King Henry II in 1559 (aged 40)



From 1559 Catherine wore the black cap and veil of a widow. Portrait at the time of the St Bartholomew's Massacre (1572) (aged 53)



Catherine as Regent of France for her three sons: Francis II (left), Charles IX (centre) and Henry III (right) All three died childless.

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Image credits:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGHfRzRMOM>
2. <https://unrulyfigures.substack.com/p/episode-22-catherine-de-medici-part>
3. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d3/KatharinavonMedici.jpg>
4. https://www.gogmsite.net/the_late_farthingale_era_fr/the_middle_1500s_-_1550_to_/minialbum_catherine_de_medi/catherine_de_medicis_reine_.html
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_de%27_Medici#/media/File:Catherine_de_M%C3%A9dicis_-_entourage_de_Fran%C3%A7ois_Clouet.jpg
6. <https://www.worldhistory.org/uploads/images/16072.jpg?v=1655890032>

Catherine Maria de' Medici was an Italian noblewoman who became Queen of France through her marriage to King Henry II of France. She was born in Florence, Italy, into the powerful Medici family as the daughter of Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino and the French noblewoman Madeleine de La Tour D'Auvergne. But within a month of her birth, her mother died of plague and her father died of syphilis. She became one of the most powerful women in France during the 16th century. With the sudden early death of her husband in 1559, she became regent for her sons, who followed each other as Kings of France - Francis II, Charles IX and Henry III.

Catherine was very smart, ruthless and manipulative in her attempt to keep France under her control. She was known as 'the Black Queen' for her fascination with mysticism and astrology. She was in fact an admirer of the astrologer Nostradamus. She is also remembered for her involvement in the French Wars of Religion (1562–1598), a civil war fought between French Catholics and Protestants known as Huguenots. These culminated in the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day in 1572. Since she was a staunch Catholic, she believed it was her mission to suppress the Protestant movement in France.

The St Bartholomew's Day Massacre has stained Catherine's reputation ever since. There is reason to believe that she was party to King Charles IX's order to 'Kill them all! Kill them all!' Historians have suggested that Catherine and her advisers were expecting a great Huguenot uprising, so they chose to strike first and wipe out the Huguenot leaders while they were still in Paris after the wedding of one of their leaders Henry Duke of Bourbon celebrated two days before.

The slaughter in Paris lasted for almost a week. It spread to many parts of France, where it persisted into the autumn. In the words of historian Jules Michelet, 'St Bartholomew was not a day, but a season' Huguenot writers branded Catherine as a scheming tyrant who had acted on Machiavelli's principles to kill all enemies in one blow.

Despite her significant influence, Catherine was often unpopular with the French people, who saw her as a foreigner and blamed her for the country's problems. She died a few months before the accession to the French throne of her arch enemy the Huguenot Henry of Bourbon as King Henry IV. With Henry as King, the French Wars of Religion ended with a religious compromise - Henry's Edict of Nantes in 1598 gave freedom of worship and conscience to the Huguenots.

Catherine was also known for her patronage of the arts and a promoter of the French Renaissance. Her greatest love among the arts was architecture. 'As the daughter of the Medici', suggests one French art historian, 'she was driven by a passion to build and a desire to leave great achievements behind her when she died.' Her legacy includes the construction of the Tuileries Palace and the Hôtel de La Reine and the creation of the Académie Française, which served as a model for the modern French Academy of Sciences.

Further reading:

https://kids.kiddle.co/Catherine_de%27_Medici

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGHfRzRMOM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6MsJHIVM9M>

Questions

1. Why did her family background make her a well-known person during her lifetime both in France and abroad?
2. How did Catherine de' Medici become first Queen and then Regent of France?
3. Briefly describe the religious situation in France when Catherine was in power.
4. What happened during the Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day and how was she involved in it?
5. How did Catherine's religious convictions influence her political decisions?
6. How is Catherine remembered in French history?
7. Why was Catherine a great patron of the Renaissance in France?
8. Choose TWO adjectives which describe Catherine's character and personality and explain your answer.