

The Medici: Portraits and Politics, 1512–1570

Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York
26th June–11th October

by ROBERT B. SIMON

This is a greatly ambitious exhibition, one setting out to illustrate the evolution, if not revolution, in portraiture that occurred in sixteenth-century Florence. That this advancement of the genre was as significant as the one that heralded the advent of the Renaissance portrait a century before is convincingly demonstrated through over ninety works, many of them properly considered masterpieces of their kind.

The exhibition is divided into six interrelated sections, two chronologically determined, the others more thematically organised. The first two consider the period between 1512 and 1537, from the restoration of the Medici, through the short-lived Florentine Republic, to the establishment of a duchy with Alessandro de' Medici as its first duke. High Renaissance paragons, in the form of Raphael's *Lorenzo de'*

Medici, Duke of Urbino (1518; private collection; cat. no.12) and Sebastiano del Piombo's *Clement VII* (c.1525–26; Museo di Capodimonte, Naples; no.13), are contrasted with portraits by Jacopo da Pontormo, which introduce psychological and introspective elements into the subjects' projected personae. These include the republic-period *Halberdier* (c.1528–30; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; no.8) and the ducal *Alessandro de' Medici* (1534–35; Philadelphia Museum of Art; no.14), two of the six extraordinary portraits by the artist in the exhibition. At the same moment the visitor turns to the first of twenty-four portraits by Bronzino, *Portrait of a woman with a lapdog* (c.1532–33; Städel Museum, Frankfurt; no.9), and is confronted with a figure whose countenance seems to conceal as much as it reveals, in which clothing acts as a form of colourful armour and in which the only genuine communication seems to be between the dog and the viewer, barred from further approach by the chair that is positioned across the picture plane.

The third gallery is the one that most closely adheres to the exhibition's title. Cosimo I de' Medici became

8. Installation view of *The Medici: Portraits and Politics, 1512–1570* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2021, showing, left, *Portrait of a man* and, right, *Ludovico Capponi*, both by Bronzino (photograph Hyla Skopitz).

the second Duke of Florence in 1537, and images of him, his wife, Eleonora di Toledo, their children and his parents are featured here. Bronzino's *Cosimo I de' Medici in armour* (c.1545; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; no.20), conceived as both a dynastic declaration and a state portrait, became the model for numerous replicas, employed both for official display and diplomatic gifts. Two Bronzino portraits of Eleonora, a crystalline half-length depiction of her shortly after her marriage (c.1539–40; Národní Galerie, Prague; no.26), and a later three-quarter length portrait with her son Francesco (c.1550; Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Reale, Pisa; no.28), further illustrate the disparate private and public intentions for these images.

However, the focus of the exhibition does not concern the depiction of Medici sitters. In fact, fewer than a third of the painted portraits depict family members. Rather it is 'A Poetics of Portraiture', as one gallery is titled, that forms the underlying key to the modes of representation explored in these paintings, irrespective of the profession or lineage of the sitter. In portraits by Bronzino, Pontormo and Francesco Salviati, we enter a period, roughly from 1530 to 1560, in which artists and their subjects seem to have conspired to create highly self-conscious representations that introduced intellectual, religious, sexual and literary concerns into this established format. A series of allegorical portraits that grace one wall are overt examples. Among them are Bronzino's provocative nudes of *Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus* (1537–39; Philadelphia Museum of Art; no.64) and of his son, the future Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, as John the Baptist (1560–61; Galleria Borghese, Rome; no.67). But others are more coded in their meaning and intent, and although their visual and aesthetic appeal is always evident, knowledge of the contexts in which they were created – the literary, civic and social politics and politics of the day – creates a more profound understanding of just how remarkable these works are. In that, the exhibition's catalogue serves as an invaluable vade mecum (if a heavy



Exhibitions

one).¹ In its entries and accompanying essays readers are introduced into the highly literate, interdependent society in which artists, patrons and what would today be called ‘influencers’ dwelled, their intellectual and linguistic allegiances and the modes in which these were expressed in the visual arts. One of the exhibition’s highlights is Bronzino’s portrait of Laura Battiferri (no.50; Fig.9), in which so many of these issues are manifest and are crucial for its meaning, but which cannot fail to astonish even if one were unaware of them.

Problematic attributions are happily absent from the exhibition, but two reappraisals of authorship are noteworthy and help provide a germ of stylistic consistency to the often-confused oeuvre of Salviati, nine portraits by whom are exhibited. The compelling portrait of Bindo Altoviti painted on marble (c.1545; private collection; no.90), which has been variously attributed over the years, is here convincingly given to Salviati, whereas *Portrait of a man* (c.1545–48; J. Paul Getty Museum; no.77) is taken from him and returned to Bronzino. The latter is hung adjacent to the normally housebound portrait of Ludovico Capponi by Bronzino (c.1550–52; Frick Collection, New York; no.80). The pairing of these works, which have analogous green curtains as backgrounds, provides one of the most provoking comparisons of the exhibition (Fig.8).

These comments have focused on the painted portraits, but the exhibition includes several works that provide rich contextual associations: a crimson dress thought to be Eleonora’s (c.1560; Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Reale, Pisa; no.29), arms (a halberd, of course), gems, medals, books and manuscripts – including two autograph volumes of Bronzino’s poetry, written in an elegant chancery script much like that seen in his portraits (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence; nos.52 and 53).

Several drawings – clearly taken from life – provide insight into the process of the portraits’ creation and the refinements implicit in their development. Sculpture is well represented, but the nature of

9. *Laura Battiferri*, by Bronzino. c.1560. Oil on panel, 87.5 by 70 cm. (Museo di Palazzo Vecchio, Florence; exh. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

official patronage and traditional formats limits much of the inventive explorations undertaken by the painters. Portrait busts of Cosimo by the gruff Baccio Bandinelli (c.1544–45; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; no.19) and the bland Giovanni Bandini (c.1575; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; no.56) are contrasted with works by the suave Pierino da Vinci – including his masterpiece, the relief *Cosimo I de’ Medici as patron of Pisa* (1550–52; Musei Vaticani; no.61). Giambologna’s whimsical bronze of the court dwarf, *Morgante on a sea monster* (1582–83; Museo Nazionale del

Bargello, Florence, no.54), is a welcome diversion, but the sculptural highlights are without a doubt the two bronze portrait busts by Benvenuto Cellini. The first, which opens the exhibition, is the monumental *Cosimo I de’ Medici* (no.21; Fig.10) – a work in which the figure of the duke seems to vibrate with uncontainable energy, barely restrained by the *all’antica* armour in which he is caparisoned. Recent conservation has revealed that his eyes are silvered, which underscores an expression of intense, almost terrifying resolve. The portrait of Bindo Altoviti (1459–50; Isabella Stewart Gardner

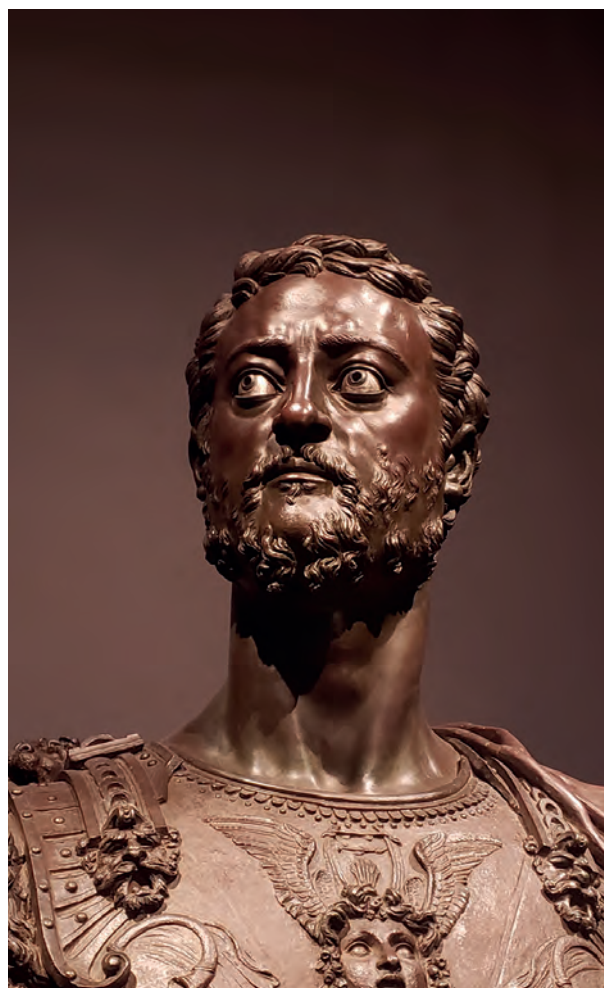


Museum, Boston; no.91), although near-contemporary to the *Cosimo*, closes the exhibition. Here too, vivid contrasts serve to define the subject. The restrained depiction of the sitter's features connotes confidence and wisdom, characteristics mirrored by the noble costume and placid drapery folds below. Separating the two and framing Bindo's face is a beard of serpentine coils that seems both to emerge from his head like rays of the sun while directing the viewer's attention back to the subject. A tight-fitting cap (*scuffioto*) of astonishing refinement figuratively holds the subject's intellect in place.

Nonetheless, the triumphant representatives of the period are the painted portraits, and here the curators, Keith Christiansen and Carlo Falciani, have been able to assemble a most astounding selection. Credit must be given to their profound understanding of the period, together with the power of the institution to secure such significant loans. Advances in the safe transportation of panel paintings make this an exhibition unthinkable until relatively recently. Every object, including the more contextual, has been chosen with care and intelligence; none is superfluous. Several works have been restored for the exhibition, making a few – in particular, Sebastiano's *Clement VII* and Bronzino's *Allegorical portrait of Andrea Doria* (1545–46; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan; no.66) cry out for cleaning.

The Medici: Portraits and Politics was conceived before the pandemic, and although loans were largely agreed to before the lockdowns, the authors of its superb catalogue were invariably distanced from the works about which they wrote, not to mention the libraries on which they rely. Logistics further complicated its execution, causing more than one late arrival and substitution, while health considerations affected its design, although resulting in a gracious and spacious installation that provides a comfortable environment in which both paintings and objects can be studied.

Although its opening was delayed by only a few months, the exhibition has emerged into a



10. Detail of *Cosimo I de' Medici*, by Benvenuto Cellini. 1546–47. Bronze, height 110 cm. (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence; exh. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

world far different from the one in for which it was envisioned. It is in this sense a curatorial time capsule, reflecting the long-established, but now questioned, principle that the art of a historical period can best be understood and appreciated through an awareness of the political, cultural and social contexts in which it was created. Such a belief no longer accords with the prevailing dogma of the moment, which demands contemporary relevancy. Instead of a confident assumption that the past can illuminate the present, many are now insisting that the present be reflected in the past. For this reason, it may be some time before we see an exhibition of this focus and calibre in a major American museum.

1 Catalogue: *The Medici: Portraits and Politics, 1512–1570*. Edited by Keith Christiansen and Carlo Falciani. 328 pp. incl. 212 col. ills. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2021). £50. ISBN 978-1-588-39730-0.

Creating a National Collection: The Partnership between Southampton City Art Gallery and the National Gallery Southampton City Art Gallery 28th May–4th September

by JONATHAN CONLIN

'I was appalled at their grossness, their ignorance and general lack of manners': Frank Rutter's estimate of the town councillors in charge when he was Curator of Leeds City Art Gallery in 1912–17 was low.¹ As Giles Waterfield observed in his history of British civic galleries, Rutter's view of civic leaders was widely shared among the metropolitan art world between 1890 and the Second World War. Little had changed two decades later, when John Rothenstein took his turn at the helm in Leeds in 1932. A Hercules from London, it behove Rothenstein to clear this 'Aegean stable', to change the display 'from popular-academic to one which, so far as existing resources allowed, addressed its appeal to the lover of painting and sculpture and in no way to "the man in the streets"'.²

The story told in *Creating a National Collection* challenges this familiar contrast of sophistication and philistinism.³ It traces how successive directors of the National Gallery, London, shaped the development of Southampton's civic gallery in their capacity as advisors to two discrete acquisitions funds, one bequeathed by a retail chemist, Robert Chipperfield (1817–1911), and the other by a timber merchant, Frederick William Smith (1861–1925). In 1939 the City Art Gallery was officially launched in its present home, part of the city's Civic Centre. The relationship with the National Gallery had begun ten years earlier, when the Chipperfield Bequest Sub-Committee finally got round to implementing the testator's wish that the Director of the National Gallery advise them on acquisitions.

As the first room of the exhibition demonstrates, in 1929 the collection already contained a number of New Forest landscapes by such local artists as F.L. Bridell, many from Chipperfield's own collection.