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Medici Portraits

Introduction

Pontormo, Alessandro de' Medici, and the Palazzo Pazzi

Bronzino's Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus

Discoveries Made During the Treatment of Bronzino's Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus Joseph J. Rishel Curator of European Painting Before 1900 and the John G. Johnson Collection

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Cover: Detail of Bronzino's Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus, c. 1538–40 The *Bulletin* is published quarterly and is provided as a benefit to Museum Members. Single number \$3.00 Annual subscription \$12.00

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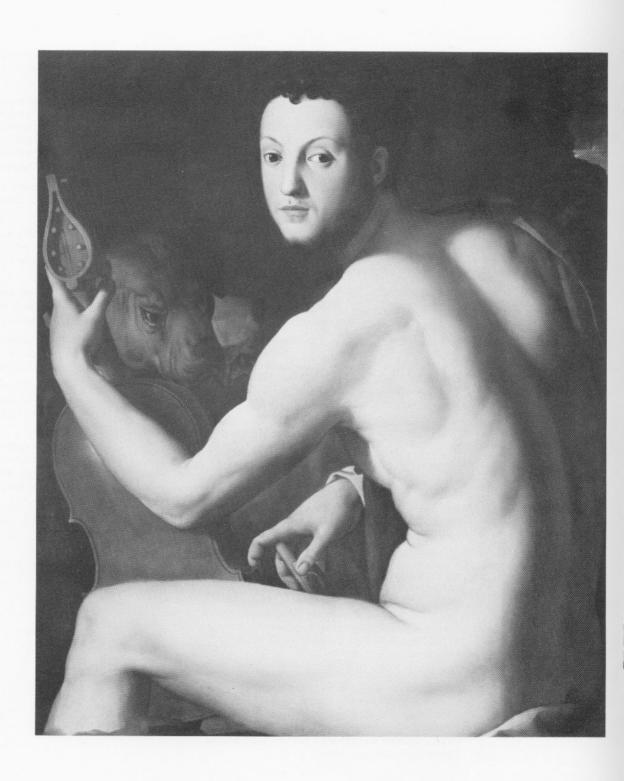


FIG. 12 Agnolo Bronzino (Italian, Florence, 1503-1572), Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus, c. 1538-40, oil on panel, 36% x 301/16" (93.7 x 76.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. John Wintersteen

Some historical figures have by fortune or circumstance become so indelibly associated with particular artists' portrayal of them that we often cannot imagine them apart from their established iconography. It is hard to envision George Washington except as we know him through Gilbert Stuart's portraits, just as Van Dyck and Charles I, Velázquez and Pope Innocent X, or Titian and Charles V seem retrospectively inseparable. Similarly, our conception of the Florentine Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574) is inextricably united with the painted portraits of him by Agnolo Bronzinothis despite a variety of noted sculptures of Cosimo by Cellini, Giambologna, and Baccio Bandinelli.1

Bronzino's portrait of Cosimo I (fig. 12) has achieved this pictorial primacy for three principal reasons. The first would seem to have been the duke's own restrictions on official portraiture, for despite his extensive patronage of many artists, only Bronzino appears to have received commissions for painted portraits while Cosimo was duke (1537-74).2 Related to this was the duke's desire to disseminate his image by giving copies of these portraits, ostensibly as tokens of friendship, to princes, popes, and other politically important contemporaries; over one hundred such Cosimos-some painted by Bronzino, but most of them replicas and variants by other artists—are now distributed throughout the world, attesting to the duke's contemporary and subsequent success in pictorial diplomacy. The most important reason for the permanence of the image, however, seems due to Bronzino himself, whose portraits are such memorable and trenchant images (fig. 13) that even when reproduced by lesser hands, they retain much of the power and effect of their source.

Nonetheless, Bronzino's earliest known portrait for and of Cosimo has for many years remained little known, its subject misidentified and its authorship questioned. Such circumstance is in part understandable, as the picture, which has been in the Philadelphia Museum of Art since 1950,3 is very much an oddity in the careers both of Bronzino as painter and Cosimo as subject. Furthermore, the portrait is known only from this single version; unlike other porbeen identified.4

Certainly, the image is unusual for a portrait of a duke: A seated nude young man is seen from the side and back with his head twisted about to face the viewer. His left hand holds the neck of a viol while his right lightly grasps the end of a bow. A hellish glow appears in the right distance, at some remove from the dark, enclosed landscape in which he is seen. Behind the musical instrument appear the heads of two mastiff-like dogs, both demonstrably docile. From the characteristic facial features it is clear that Cosimo I de' Medici is portrayed, but all else in the painting indicates the subject as the legendary musician of antiquity, Orpheus. The picture would thus seem to be an allegorical portrait, a type of image in which the sitter represents not only himself but also another figure (most often mythological) associated with his profession, interests, or spiritual and political involvements. Bronzino's allegorical Portrait of Andrea Doria (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan), for example, appropriately outfits, if scantily, the great Venetian naval captain as Neptune, the god of the sea. Why Cosimo, who is not recorded as having had any special musical interests or talents, should have chosen to be depicted in the unusual role of

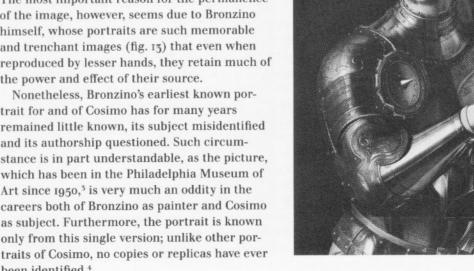


FIG. 13 Agnolo Bronzino, Cosimo I de' Medici in Armor, c. 1544, oil on panel, 33% x 26%" (86 x 67 cm). **Private Collection**

Orpheus is an issue that has never been satisfactorily explored.

The myth of Orpheus exists in several variant tellings and has been subject to numerous interpretations.5 In its most frequent form, Orpheus was the mortal son of Apollo and the epic muse Calliope. He is credited with talent, wisdom, and magical abilities, but it is as a musician that his fame was greatest. He accompanied himself on the lyre, and his songs were so moving that wild animals would be charmed into quiescence, mountains would move, trees would gather round him, stones would soften, and rivers stand still in awe. He fell in love with Eurydice, who in most tellings died of snakebite soon after their marriage. Orpheus sang disconsolately of his loss to all on earth before descending into the underworld to plead to Pluto and Proserpina for the return of his beloved. So sad and passionate was his song that he won his wife's return to the living, the only condition being that he not look back at her as he ascended to daylight. But so overwhelming was his love that he could not resist looking and, in most versions of the story, Eurydice fell back to the underworld, never again to emerge. Orpheus was denied reentry to save her and withdrew to bemoan his existence and contemn all female attentions. Finally, a group of devotees of Bacchus, frenzied by his rejection of their advances, tore him limb from limb and threw his head, still singing, into the river Hebrus. "When by the rout that made the hideous roar/His gory visage down the stream was sent,/Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore."6

In subsequent interpretations of the myth, Orpheus acquired widely disparate characteristics. He can be a magician or an artist, a type for Christ or the first homosexual, a substitute Apollo or a philosopher-theologian.7 One tradition current in Renaissance Florence assigned to Orpheus the role of peacemaker, in which posture, it has been suggested, Cosimo sought to be viewed metaphorically as a "prince of peaceful intentions."8 The typology, it is argued, would have been a revival of that employed by Bandinelli in his large marble statue of Orpheus for the Palazzo Medici in Florence (fig. 14). That work, commissioned by Pope Leo X around 1519, alluded to a restoration of the Medicean Golden Age under the aegis of Leo-an association deriving not only from Orpheus's legendary ability to charm wild beasts with his music but also

from the symbolic connotations of peace associated with the lyre. The related connections of the figure of Orpheus with eloquence, wisdom, concord, and the entire concept of the Golden Age—aspects treated in part by the Florentine Neo-Platonists—would have deepened the meaning of Bandinelli's statue for its contemporary audience.

FIG. 14 Baccio Bandinelli (Italian, Florence, 1495–1560), Orpheus, c. 1516/17, marble. Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, Florence



FIG. 15 Attributed to Moderno (Italian, active late fifteenth to early sixteenth century), Orpheus Redeeming Eurydice, c. 1500, bronze, diameter 4½" (10.5 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Samuel H. Kress Collection



FIG. 16 Marcantonio Raimondi (Italian, c. 1480–c. 1534), Orpheus and Eurydice, engraving, 7 x 5^3 /16" (17.8 x 13.2 cm). Bartsch 14-223-295



However pertinent the subject was for Leo X, it seems mistaken to consider Bronzino's picture a repetition or updating of Bandinelli's image: The two works of art are in kind manifestly different. The sculpture was intended for an important public location (the courtyard of the Medici palace, formerly the site of Donatello's David),10 whereas Bronzino's portrait seems to have been an essentially private image—as indicated not only by the intimate nature of the subject, but also by the complete lack of contemporary mention of or subsequent reproduction after the picture. Moreover, Bandinelli's Orpheus, as an abstract representation of a classical figure, seems fully dressed in his expected nudity. Bronzino's subject, a recognizable image of Cosimo, seems by contrast arrestingly naked. Both the expanse of his white unprotected flesh and the directness of his gaze seem antipathetic to public propagandistic art and suggest a more personal and private purpose for the painting. A different conception of Orpheus seems to be intended here, one that derives from lyric rather than philosophical or civic interpretations of the myth.

In Bronzino's painting Cosimo-Orpheus appears at a moment of rest between musical recitations. He has guieted the wild hell-hound Cerberus (two of whose three heads are visible) and appears to be about to renew his song. He rests against his knee a contemporary lira da braccio in lieu of an ancient lyre and holds a bow in his right hand.11 His gaze is direct and inquiring, as if the viewer were the intended listener. Orpheus used his art in the service of love to restore Eurydice to the living, and it is out of this devotion that he became identified in early Renaissance retellings of the myth as the most faithful and ardent of lovers.12 In these versions. the tragic loss of Eurydice as Orpheus looks back (as well as his subsequent bloody death) is frequently omitted or amended with a happy ending.15 In some illustrations to Ovid and other mythographic sources, Eurydice's dramatic return to the underworld is replaced by a scene representing Orpheus playing his lyre by the gates of hell, out of which his wife emerges and is restored to earth.14 A bronze plaque attributed to Moderno (fig. 15) shows the devil returning Eurydice to Orpheus, who appears standing nude and playing a lira da braccio.15 Marcantonio Raimondi's roughly contemporary

FIG. 17 Agostino de' Musi, called Agostino Veneziano (Italian, active 1509–36), *Orpheus*, engraving, 3½ x 2¾" (8.9 x 6 cm). Bartsch 14-208-259



FIG. 18 Agnolo Bronzino, Eleonora di Toledo, c. 1543, oil on panel, 23¼ x 18½" (59 x 46 cm). Národní Galerie, Prague



engraving (fig. 16) similarly portrays Orpheus playing his lira while Eurydice demurely covers her nakedness as she steps from the cave of darkness into the daylight. Such representations, which stress the minstrel quality of the legend, grew out of the late medieval identification of Orpheus and Eurydice as model court lovers. Flemish illustrations of the restoration of Eurydice show the couple in the most elegant attire. Even the performer dressed as Orpheus who appeared in the elaborate procession of the Genealogy of the Gods that celebrated the marriage of Francesco I de' Medici (Cosimo's son) in 1565 seems to have been more modish courtier than tragic lover.

It is from this tradition that the Orpheus story, notably without its woeful conclusion, was adopted by Ottavio Rinuccini as the libretto for the earliest extant operas. Peri's Euridice and Caccini's Euridice (both of 1600) ended with the joyful return of Eurydice from the underworld.19 Monteverdi's Favola d'Orfeo of 1607, like most of the Orpheus operas that followed, also spared listeners the tragic aspects of the tale. That Peri's Euridice was written for and performed at the Florentine proxy marriage of Maria de' Medici and Henry IV of France affords a striking indication of the extent to which the myth had been transformed: In its ancient telling by Ovid or Virgil, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice would have been among the least appropriate and most tasteless subjects for a wedding celebration.

In the portrait *Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus*, Bronzino seems to have drawn on this late medieval strain of the myth rather than other classical or humanist interpretations. The informal, erotic nature of the painting further indicates that Cosimo is not cast here as the great peacemaker but as the great lover Orpheus. ²⁰ The picture seems personal rather than political in intent, its message amorous rather than conciliatory. Certainly there is no suggestion of political content or sentiment in the duke's pose or expression; his direct gaze, subtle smile, and raised eyebrows suggest an air of

FIG. 19 Belvedere Torso, Greek (Athenian), mid-first century B.C., marble, height 62%" (159 cm). Musei Vaticani, Rome

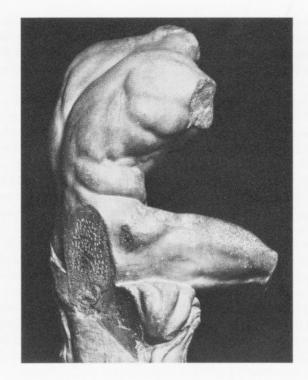


FIG. 20 Angelica Kauffmann (Anglo-Swiss, 1741–1807), Allegory of Design, c. 1779, oil on canvas, 52 x 59½" (132 x 151 cm). Royal Academy of Arts, London



erotic questioning, of quiet sensuality. The inquiring expression and intense eyes create an interplay with the viewer, who, as recipient and respondent, is placed in the role of Eurydice; the picture becomes an appeal for love.

Representations of Orpheus quieting Cerberus are rare, the more popular subject depicting Orpheus with animals, usually a lively assortment of untamed creatures. A few precedents in Renaissance art do exist, of which Mantegna's spandrel fresco in the Camera degli Sposi in Mantua (1472-74) is the most prominent.21 There, as in Agostino Veneziano's engraving of the subject of 1528 (fig. 17), Orpheus plays a classical lyre in his efforts to tame the beast.22 The mood, though, is quite different in Bronzino's painting, in which the grotesqueness of Cerberus is tempered by a tranquility indicative of Orpheus's effective powers. In his turn from Cerberus to the viewer, a message seems to be implied: Just as I have charmed Cerberus, so will I charm you.

The circumstances of the commission of Cosimo as Orpheus are not known, but the unique iconography and the apparent age of the duke—the presence of a beard places the work after 1537—suggest a specific context, the marriage of Cosimo to Eleonora di Toledo (fig. 18). 23 How suitable and subtle a gift for his bride this painting would have been—whether before or at the time (1539) of the wedding. In the language of courtly love, Cosimo, seen in the guise of the most faithful of husbands, seems to encourage and entreat his beloved, who was quite likely the recipient of the picture. A paired portrait of Eurydice would hardly be expected with this Orpheus: The intended viewer herself forms the pendant.

An intriguing aspect of *Cosimo as Orpheus* that has escaped notice is the source for the pose of Cosimo's body. Bronzino has here incorporated the Belvedere Torso, then as now exhibited in the Vatican (fig. 19).²⁴ Like the female artist in Angelica Kauffmann's *Allegory of Design* (fig. 20), Bronzino had closely studied the torso, and like his spiritual master Michelangelo, whose *ignudi* (nudes) on the Sistine Chapel ceiling are each in varying degrees painted completions of the marble fragment, he effected a pictorial restoration of the piece.²⁵ The celebrated antique sculpture appears quite accurately reversed (as it also is in Kauffmann's painting); most likely, a

counter-proofed or reverse-traced drawing after the torso served as an intermediary source. The expressive modeling of the marble is carried over to the painting and given prominence by the essentially dorsal view of the subject. While the juncture of Cosimo's head with the body might today seem a bit strained, the success of the integration of this contemporary portrait with a celebrated monument of antiquity can be measured by the length of time that the union, "marriage," went unnoticed.

The use of this famous classical model suggests an iconographic significance as well. Throughout the Renaissance the Belvedere Torso was thought to represent Hercules, who as a figure long identified with the Republic of Florence was adopted emblematically by Cosimo on his accession in 1537.26 One of the first portrait medals of the duke featured a representation of Hercules and Antaeus on the reverse (fig. 21), while the duke's official seal, made at about the same time, was essentially a reworking of the republican image of Hercules carrying a club and a lion skin.27 Perhaps the most overt example of the typology is found in Nicolò della Casa's portrait print (after Bandinelli) of 1544; the duke there appears in armor extravagantly ornamented with scenes of the Labors of Hercules, while behind him appear Herculean trophies and a lion skin on which Cosimo's name is inscribed.28

The allusion to Hercules in a picture clearly portraying Orpheus may appear surprising, but its employment is unlikely to have been arbitrary. The Belvedere Torso did serve to furnish Cosimo with a body undoubtedly more heroic than his own, but Bronzino's use of the model would seem to suggest that more than a kind of antiquarian version of a carnival cut-out portrait was intended. For along with its physical form, the associative meaning of the torso was incorporated into *Cosimo as Orpheus*. In a broad sense Cosimo has undergone an alteration of allegorical sympathy, from the publicly recognizable

type of Hercules to the (for him) new role of Orpheus. Perhaps a specific allusion is intended to the last labor of Hercules, the capture of Cerberus: Where Hercules strangled the beast, Orpheus charmed him into submission with music. If *Cosimo as Orpheus* served as a gift to an intended bride, the subtle incorporation of the duke's established allegorical image perhaps signified that the subject possessed the heroic and physical qualities of Hercules, but that, for the recipient alone, he would summon only the power of his song to win her love.

Cosimo's nakedness is all the more remarkable when contrasted with the well-protected duke of the portrait *Cosimo I de' Medici in Armor* (fig. 13). In that official image the figure is almost concealed by his formidable combative uniform. In *Cosimo as Orpheus* the body is shocking in the expanse of unprotected white skin, coldly erotic in the vivification of the marble torso into flesh no less marmoreal. As in Bronzino's *Allegory* (National Gallery, London), this icy sensuality is

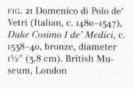






FIG. 22 Anonymous, after Agnolo Bronzino, Cosimo I de' Medici and His Wife, Eleonora di Toledo, 1546, oil on slate, 12 x 9½" (50.5 x 24 conn. Private Collection, Kent, Conn.

brought out by a brilliant surface, articulated by precise, undulating contours and brisk, vibrant modeling. The eroticism of the painting is underscored by Bronzino's witty, but nearly licentious, arrangement of the musical instrument that Cosimo holds. Not only do the shapes of the bow and pegbox of the lira da braccio suggest male and female sexual organs, but also their alignment and Cosimo's sexually suggestive grasp of the bow make visually overt the painting's subtle, unspoken message.

Whether Cosimo as Orpheus was specifically addressed to Eleonora di Toledo must remain speculation for the present. An appreciation of the extent of the duke's private life—as much as one may be said to have existed-is difficult to apply to artistic commissions such as this. But if the portrait was given to Eleonora as an invitation to love, the success of the gift cannot be doubted. By all accounts the marriage of Cosimo and Eleonora (fig. 22) was close and felicitous, unusual for an age that valued political expedience over personal emotion. While her activity as a mother necessarily dominated much of her married life (she gave birth to eleven children in fourteen years), her mark on the Florentine court was considerable. She patronized artists in her own right-Bronzino's frescoed chapel for the duchess remains one of the treasures of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence—and though opinionated and independent, she was celebrated for her elegance and charm. Contemporary records indicate that her death from malaria in 1562 (at age forty-three) was a severe loss for Cosimo, which largely prompted his premature abdication in 1564 and his subsequent withdrawal from all life at court.

Although we may be unsure of the recipient of this most evocative portrait, apparently the painting was not intended for the same audience, the same public display, as that of subsequent portraits. If the distinction can be made, it is Cosimo as Orpheus rather than the duke as Orpheus that is portrayed—the body natural, not the body politic. It is this difference that gives today's viewers a sense that they are



listening to a song never intended to be heard by more than one.

Some years after Bronzino painted *Cosimo as Orpheus*, he again incorporated the Belvedere Torso in one of his works. In the lower right corner of the tapestry *The Discovery of the Cup of Joseph in the Sack of Benjamin* (fig. 23) appears a brother of Joseph whose body is manifestly based upon the torso. Bronzino seems to have reused the Orpheus figure with only minor changes. Not only are the arms and legs attached to the torso just a bit differently, but also Orpheus's right hand (that holding the bow) is repeated in the tapestry, though in a new position, over the left shoulder. The major difference between the two figures (besides the identity of Orpheus) lies in one being partially

FIG. 23 The Discovery of the Cup of Joseph in the Sack of Benjamin, 1549–55, tapestry designed by Agnolo Bronzino and woven by Nicholas Karcher, 18½ x 17′ (5.6 x 5.2 m). Palazzo Reale del Quirinale, Rome



15. Examples are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and in the Samuel H. Kress Collection at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; see John Pope-Hennessy, *Renaissance Bronzes from the Samuel H. Kress Collection* (London, 1965), no. 172, fig. 197. Cf. Peter Vischer the Younger's *Orpheus and Eurydice* in Pope-Hennessy, *Renaissance Bronzes*, no. 435, fig. 441 (R. Bear, New York, brought this work to the author's attention).

16. Adam Bartsch, *Le Peintre graveur*, vol. 14 (Leipzig, 1854–70), no. 295. The design has been credited to both Peruzzi and Sodoma with a date of c. 1507/8; cf. Scavizzi, "Myth of Orpheus," n. 46. For another Marcantonio print of the subject, see Bartsch, *Le Peintre graveur*, vol. 14, no. 282.

17. Friedman, "Orpheus in the Middle Ages," pp. 168ff.

18. The figure of Orpheus appeared on the Chariot of the Sun in the procession. A costume design, inscribed "Orpheo figliuolo di Apollo" and attributed tentatively to Allori as well as Vasari, is in the Uffizi (Gab. Disegni e Stampe, no. 2722F; ill. Winternitz, "Orpheus before Opera," p. 11). For the procession and drawings and records, see Anna Maria Petrioli, ed., Mostra di disegni vasariani; carri trionfali e costume per la genealogia degli dei (1565) (Florence, 1966), pp. 29–30, 84.

19. See Buck, *Der Orpheus-Mythos*, pp. 24–27; and Claude Palisca, "The First Performance of 'Euridice," in *Twenty-fifth Anniversary Festschrift (1937–1962)* (New York, 1964), pp. 1–23; Howard Mayer Brown, "Music—How Opera Began; An Introduction to Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* (1600)," in *The Late Italian Renaissance*, 1525–1630, ed. Eric W. Cochrane (New York, 1970), pp. 401–43; and Timothy J. McGee, "*Orfeo* and *Euridice*, the First Two Operas," in Warden, *Orpheus: Metamorphoses of a Myth*, pp. 163–81.

20. That the duke is seen as Orpheus rather than as Apollo, a deity frequently identified with Cosimo, suggests as well that it was not the art common to both father and son that engendered the allegorical identification, but rather Orpheus's peculiar reputation as a faithful, passionate lover. For Cosimo's association with Apollo, see Richelson, *Personal Imagery of Cosimo I de' Medici*, pp. 25ff.; and Barbara Russano Hanning, "Glorious Apollo: Poetic and Political Themes in the First Opera," *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 4 (Winter 1979), pp. 485–515.

21. Illustrated in Renata Cipriani, *All the Paintings of Mantegna*, trans. Paul Colacicchi (London, 1963), pt. 2, pl. 104.

22. Bartsch, Le Peintre graveur, vol. 14, p. 259.

25. Cosimo's beard first appears on a medal datable in the first year of his reign (1557), although other portraits from that year show him beardless; cf. Langedijk, *Portraits of the Medici*, no. 27,156.

24. For the Belvedere Torso and its influence in the Renaissance, see Hans Henrik Brummer, *The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere* (Stockholm, 1970), pp. 142–52; Arvid Andrén, *Il Torso del Belvedere* (Lund, 1952), vol. 7; and Wendy Stedman Sheard, *Antiquity in the Renaissance* (Northampton, Mass., 1979), nos. 56–58.

25. For use of the Belvedere Torso in the *ignudo* above and to the right of Jeremiah and perhaps the one at the left over the Erythraea (which seems excessively narrow), see Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo, II. The Sistine Ceiling* (1948; reprint, Princeton, N.J., 1969), p. 66. For the more reasonable assumption that "all of the *ignudi* are in a sense ideal restorations of the famous *Belvedere Torso*, which of the surviving antique statues was perhaps the most evocative for Michelangelo's art," see Howard Hibbard, *Michelangelo* (New York, 1974), pp. 122–25.

26. Sheard (Antiquity in the Renaissance, no. 57) has noted that "the torso's identification as a Hercules goes back to a commentary, attributed to Cyriacus of Ancona, dealing with the statue's inscription. All the reconstructions except Marcantonio's (56) present the statue as Hercules." In the cited Marcantonio print, the torso is turned into a figure of Mars. See also Brummer, Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere, pp. 142ff. For the association of Cosimo with Hercules, see Forster, "Metaphors of Rule," pp. 78ff.; Richelson, Personal Imagery of Cosimo I de' Medici, pp. 79ff.; Leopold D. Ettlinger, "Hercules Florentinus," Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, vol. 16 (1972), pp. 139-42; and Hildegard Utz, "The Labors of Hercules and Other Works by Vincenzo de' Rossi," Art Bulletin, vol. 53, no. 3 (September 1971), pp. 344ff.

27. For the Antaeus medal, see Langedijk, *Portraits of the Medici*, no. 27,163. The master die for the seal survives in the Museo degli Argenti in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence. See Richelson, *Personal Imagery of Cosimo I de' Medici*, pp. 83–84; and Martha Ann McCrory, in Paola Barocchi, ed., *Palazzo Vecchio: committenza e collezionismo medicei* (Florence, 1980), no. 280.

28. For the engraving by Nicolò della Casa, see Langedijk, *Portraits of the Medici*, no. 27,76; Forster, "Metaphors of Rule," p. 78; and Richelson, *Personal Imagery of Cosimo I de' Medici*, p. 85.

29. For the tapestry, see Candace Adelson, in Barocchi, *Palazzo Vecchio*, no. 92.