

# The Identity of Sofonisba Anguissola's Young Man

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The young man in the Sofonisba Anguissola portrait in The Walters Art Gallery (fig. 1) might be most popularly known by the sobriquet *Medici Boy* of Joseph Cornell's box constructions, although his actual identity seems to have eluded scholarly enquiry.<sup>1</sup> But the existence of at least four other versions of the painting<sup>2</sup> would lead one to suspect that the subject was relatively well known in his time; the reasonable assumption is that the youth was of noble birth, an idea underscored by his general comportment and dress as well as by his sword. Whereas a less appealing image might comfortably remain "Portrait of a Young Man," the present work has elicited a variety of tentative identifications. The boy has indeed been thought of as a member of the Medici family, either Francesco or Pietro, both sons of Cosimo I, but the physiognomic disparities between the documented portraits of those figures and the Walters youth seem considerable.<sup>3</sup> Other proposals, all ultimately without substantiation, have included Victor Amadeus of Savoy, the artist's younger brother Asdrubale, her (evidently non-existent) son, a member of the Gaddi family of Florence, a prince of the Este family, or Philip Prospero, Prince of Asturias.<sup>4</sup>

Recent treatment of the picture by Sian Jones of The Walters Art Gallery's Department of Conservation and Technical Research has provided an important clue towards discovering the identity of the young noble. When the old lining of the picture was removed, an inscription became discernible on the reverse of the original canvas (fig. 2). When viewed with infra-red video reflectography the lettering acquired strength and definition and the inscription became legible, if not immediately comprehensible (fig. 3):

MAX.STA.MAR.SON.III  
AET. AN. VIIIH  
1557

The lettering is typical of the mid-sixteenth century and there is no reason to doubt that the inscription was written on the painting at the time of completion, most likely by the artist herself; several of Sofonisba's paintings bear extended inscriptions, often in similar Roman capitals (fig. 4).<sup>5</sup> However, unlike those other inscriptions, that on the Walters portrait is quite cryptic. What can be immediately understood is the "1557" inscribed on the final line; there can be little doubt that it represents the year of execution of the painting—a date that reasonably accords with most scholars' placement of the picture at 1559–1560.<sup>6</sup> The middle line is comprehensible following established conventions of portrait inscriptions. "AET. AN. VIIIH," an abbreviated form of "Aetatis Anni VIIIH" indicates that the subject was nine years of age when the portrait was painted.

The first line of the inscription is where one would expect the subject to be named and identified by title. A roughly contemporary *Portrait of Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan* in The Walters Art Gallery (fig. 5)<sup>7</sup> demonstrates the usual form such a legend takes: the name latinized and abbreviated, followed by the title and domain. Our inscription is similarly conceived, but the extreme contractions used and the obscurity of the sitter have made the identification less than immediate, though recoverable. The third term, "MAR," in the place where one would expect the title, suggests that the young boy was a *marchese*, or marquis, of a territory beginning with the three letters of the fourth term, "SON." His family name would begin with "STA" and his given name (in Latin) with "MAX." The "III" following "SON" would be a Roman numeral three, indicating that Max . . . Sta . . . was the third *marchese* of Son. . . . There is one figure for whom these abbreviations prove sensible—Massimiliano II (in Latin, Maximillion) Stampa, who was in fact the third *marchese* of the north Italian city of Soncino.



Fig. 1. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Portrait of a Young Man*, Oil on Canvas, Baltimore, The Walters Art Gallery, no. 37.1016.

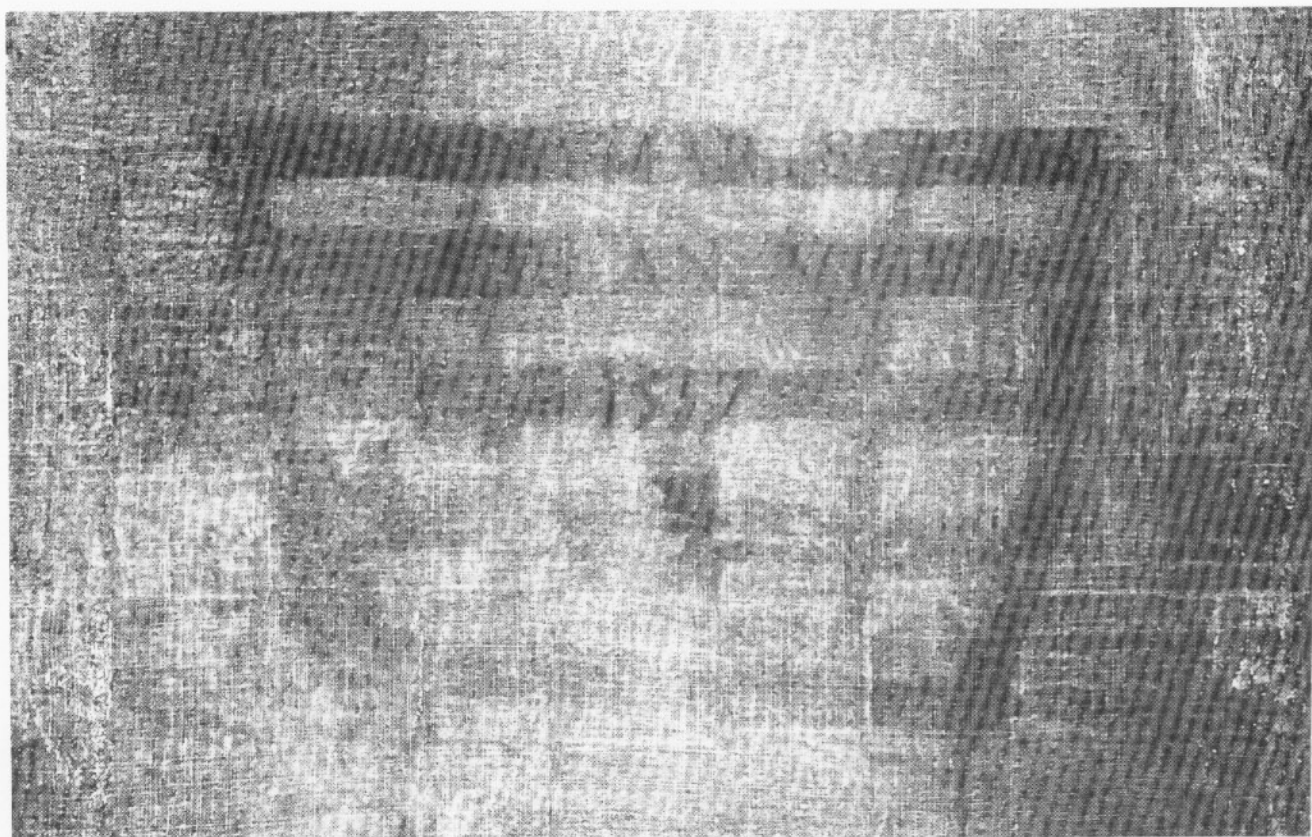


Fig. 2. Detail of Figure 1, reverse.

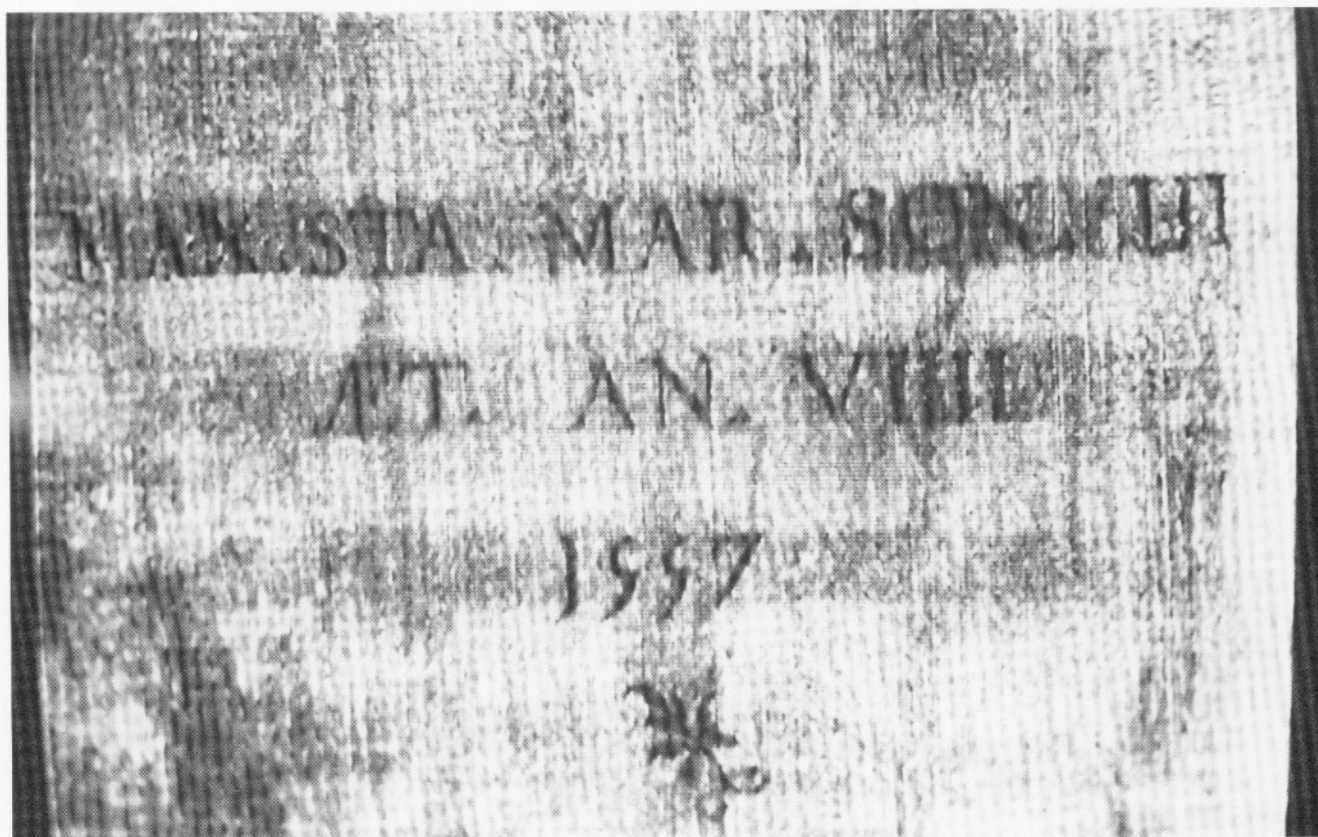


Fig. 3. Detail of Figure 1, infra-red reflectogram of reverse.



Fig. 4. Sofonisba Anguissola, *Self-Portrait*, Oil on Canvas, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

The Stampa were an old Milanese family who traced their origins to a French *condottiere* who came to Italy with Charlemagne.<sup>8</sup> Massimiliano I (1494–1552), the most prominent member of the family in the Cinquecento, was the governor of the fortresses of Milan at the time of the death of the Milanese duke Francesco II Sforza (fig. 5) in 1535. Stampa's voluntary capitulation to Charles V in that year earned him the favor of the emperor, as well as the enmity of the many compatriots who felt he had betrayed Milan. Among the rewards bestowed by Charles V on Stampa was, in 1536, the newly created title of *Marchese* of Soncino, a small but strategic town in the province of Cremona.

Massimiliano appears to have spent little time in his domain, preferring to maintain residence in the elegant towered palazzo he constructed in Milan.<sup>9</sup> Although the citizens of Soncino protested his (and his successors') feudal rule, the Stampa maintained control of the territory until the seventeenth century. With no son to succeed him Massimiliano ceded his rights as *marchese* to his brother Ermete (Hermes) in 1546.<sup>10</sup> Papal dispensation was necessary for this transfer, as Ermete was required to renounce the clerical vows he had taken.<sup>11</sup> He then married Isabella Rangoni of Modena and fathered a son, Massimiliano, named after his uncle. At Ermete's death in 1557 he was succeeded by Massimiliano, who thus became the third *marchese* of Soncino.



Fig. 5. School of Lombardy, *Portrait of Francesco II Sforza, Duke of Milan*, Oil on Canvas, Baltimore, The Walters Art Gallery, no. 37.1102.

This is the Massimiliano who is the subject of our picture and by its date of 1557 it may now be supposed that the portrait was painted at about the time of his succession to the marquisate.<sup>12</sup> With this information a few of the details of the picture may be better understood. Many years ago de Tolnay suggested that the curled up sleeping dog was derived from Dürer's famous engraving *Melancholia I* (fig. 6).<sup>13</sup> As Panofsky noted, the dog was "traditionally associated with melancholy . . . because he, more than other animals, is subject to spells of dejection and even to madness, and because he looks the more woebegone the more intelligent he is."<sup>14</sup> This emblem of melancholy, supported by the melancholic expression of the face, may then appropriately allude to the recent death of Massimiliano's father, Ermete. Such an interpretation would be underscored by the heraldic arms of the Stampa, which features a dog, either sitting or standing, tied to a tree.<sup>15</sup> Similarly the tentatively held sword and gloves, the wonted appurtenances of an adult noble, perhaps refer to the boy's newly acquired title. They further suggest that the portrait may have been commissioned to celebrate Massimiliano's investiture as *marchese*, recorded as having taken place on 22 July 1557.<sup>16</sup>

The life of Massimiliano II Stampa "post Sofonisba" is of some interest. Raised by his widowed mother, who rather than the subject presumably commissioned the portrait, Massimiliano grew to be an able ruler, holding the

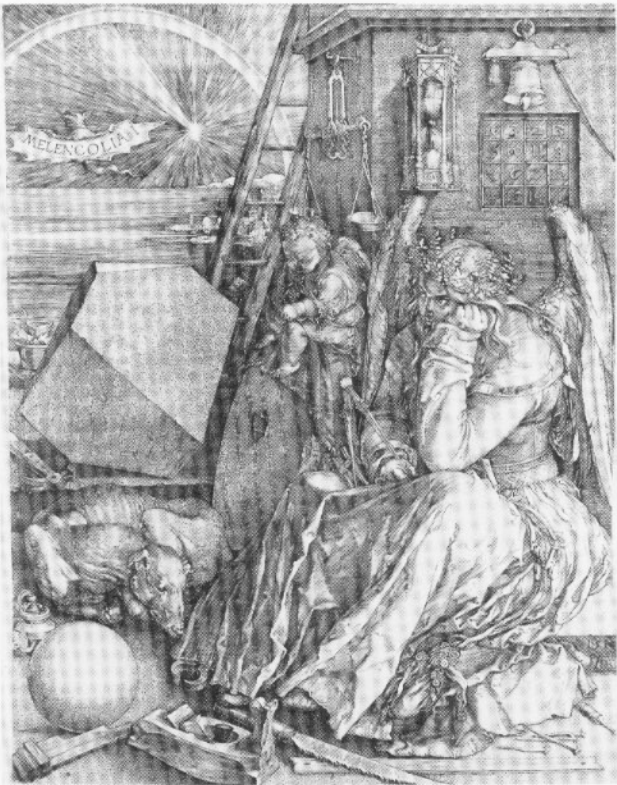


Fig. 6. Albrecht Dürer, *Melancolia I*, 1514, Engraving, Milwaukee, Marquette University, Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art.

titles of senator, Knight of St. James, Count of Montecastello and Rivolta, Baron of Trumello, and *Marchese* of Soncino with the special title of *Illustre* (illustrious). He married Marianna De Leyva, princess of Ascoli, and had ten children.<sup>17</sup> On his wife's death he turned from political to spiritual occupations and is recorded as having made pilgrimages to Santiago de Campostella and Jerusalem before deciding to take vows himself and become a monk. He ceded his titles and worldly rights and possessions to his children and entered the Capuchin order, taking the name of Fra Ambrogio da Soncino.

He asked the pope for missionary service and was sent to Africa to preach the Jubilee of 1600 to the inhabitants. He is recorded as having arrived in Algeria on the twentieth of January 1601; there for ten months he sought to convert the locals, while giving solace to enslaved Christians. Jailed but then released, fatigued by the intensity of his work, and ultimately overcome by its difficulties, Fra Ambrogio was suddenly paralyzed as he prepared to sail for Spain with the two hundred Christian slaves he had rescued in Mauretania. He died, it is said, in the arms of a heathen despot who had given him asylum and protection. In 1605 his son Ermete II had his bones brought back to Italy, first to Livorno, then to Genoa and Milan, before placing them in a tomb in the Church of S. Maria delle Grazie in Soncino.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. Inv. no. 37.1016; oil on canvas; 136.8 × 71.5 cm. Provenance: Chantel, Lyons; Trotti, Paris; James Stillman, New York; by descent to C. C. Stillman, New York; his sale, A. A. A. Galleries, New York, 3 February 1927, lot 29 (purchased at the sale). On the painting see, above all, F. Zeri, *Italian Paintings in the Walters Art Gallery* (Baltimore, 1976), II, 427–28, no. 298, hereafter, Zeri, *Italian Paintings*; C. de Tolnay, "Sofonisba Anguissola and Her Relations with Michelangelo," *Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, 4 (1941), 115–118, hereafter, Tolnay, "Sofonisba." Several constructions by Cornell employ black-and-white photostats after a photograph of the Walters painting; these works are variously titled *Medici Boy* (1953, Fort Worth Art Museum, and undated, ex-Alan Stone Gallery, New York), *Medici Prince* (1952, two versions, each private collection, Chicago), and *Medici Slot Machine* (1942, private collection, New York); information from Lynda R. Hartigan, letter of 1976, in museum files; see K. McShine, ed., *Joseph Cornell* (New York, 1980), figs. 117, 119, 121.

2. T. Borenius, *Catalogue of the Paintings at Doughty House, Richmond . . . in the Collection of Sir Frederick Cook* (London, 1913), I, 195, no. 172, cites versions in the collections of Albert Hartshorne in London and A. L. Nicholson in England, in addition to a canvas in the Cook Collection (Richmond, Surrey). Tolnay, "Sofonisba," figs. 2–3, illustrates the Cook picture, as well as a version in the Musée St.-Denis in Reims which is there attributed to Moroni; see *Exposition des Trésors de Reims* (Paris, Musée de l'Orangerie, 1938) (exhibition catalogue), 37, no. 46, and P. Jamot, in *Bulletin des musées de France*, 24 (1914), 28, pl. xi.

3. The identification as Francesco I de' Medici (1541–1587) is rejected by K. Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici: 15th–18th Centuries* (Florence, 1983), II, 906, nos. 42–160. The association with Pietro di Cosimo I de' Medici (1554–1604) was suggested by the similarity of a miniature portrait of him (Florence, Gallerie; ill. in *ibid.*, 1351, nos. 100–103) to the subject of the Walters portrait; see *Art News*, 38:2 (1939), 6.

4. Tolnay, "Sofonisba," 116, first proposed as subject Asdrubale, who is portrayed in profile in Sofonisba's triple portrait of her father Amilcare, her sister Minerva, and her brother, now in the Nivaagaards Malerisamling at Nivaa (Denmark); see E. Sambo, in M. Gregori, ed. *I Campi e la cultura artistica cremonese del Cinquecento* (Milan, 1985), 175–76, no. 1.16.5, hereafter, Gregori, *I Campi*. The identification has recently been revived by E. Tufts, "Sofonisba Anguissola, Renaissance Woman," *Art News*, 71:6 (1972), 50ff. E. Kolb, in a letter of 1955. (Gallery archives), suggested that the boy was Sofonisba's child, on the basis of his similarity to a picture by Sofonisba in the Museum Tel Aviv there called a *Self-portrait with the Artist's Son*. There is, however, no record of the artist's having children; in fact, until the 1560s her signatures proudly include the epithet "virgo" (see fig. 4). The version of the portrait at Reims has passed under the name of Philip Prospero, and the Walters portrait was called an Este prince at the Stillman sale in 1927. I. Kühnel-Kunze, "Zur Bildniskunst der Sofonisba und Lucia Anguissola," *Pantheon*, 20 (1962), 92, believes the youth a member of the Gaddi family on the basis of his admitted resemblance to the boy in the triple portrait (Coll. Lord Methuen) attributed to either Sofonisba or her sister Lucia Anguissola. However, the children in that portrait, which comes from the Gaddi Gallery in Florence, are only traditionally thought to be members of the family (see *Italian Art and Britain*, [London, 1960], 53, no. 114 [exhibition catalogue]). H. Cook, "More Portraits by Sofonisba Anguissola," *Burlington Magazine*, 26 (1915), 228f., rejects the traditional identification of Victor Amadeus for the portrait in the Cook Collection.

5. For example, in the *Self-portrait with Her Two Sisters Playing Chess* (1555; Poznan, Muzeum Narodwe) and the miniature *Self-portrait* (fig.

4) in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. On the signatures of the artist, see M. Haraszti-Takacs, "Nouvelle données relative à la vie et à l'oeuvre de Sofonisba Anguissola," *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts*, 31 (1968), 53-67.

6. Zeri, *Italian Paintings*, 427, notes that the costume suggests a date in the early 1560s. A. M. Romanini, "Sofonisba Anguissola," *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome, 1961), III, 322, considers the Walters portrait as part of a group of pictures to be dated ca. 1559.

7. Inv. no. 37.1102, oil on canvas, 101.7 × 77.1 cm. Zeri, *Italian Paintings*, II, 423-24, no. 295.

8. On the Stampa see, *inter alia*, Pompeo Litta, "Stampa di Milano, in his *Famiglie celebri italiane* (Milan, 1851), 132, hereafter, Litta, *Famiglie*.

9. On the Palazzo Stampa di Soncino (later Palazzo Casati), see G. C. Bascapi and C. Perogalli, eds., *Palazzi privati di Lombardia* (Milan, 1965), 207, no. 15.

10. P. Ceruti, *Biografia Soncinate* (Milan, 1834), 28, hereafter, Ceruti, *Biografia*.

11. Litta, *Famiglie*, pl. III.

12. The fullest account of Massimiliano's life is given in Ceruti, *Biografia*, 28f., which makes ample use of two earlier but briefer accounts: Filippo Argellati, *Biblioteca Scriptorum Mediolanensium* (Milan, 1745), II, 1, cols. 1434-36, hereafter, Argellati, *Biblioteca*, and Francesco Arisi, *Cremona Literata* (Parma, 1706), II, 331. The birth date of Massimiliano II remains unconfirmed. The inscription on the picture implies 1548 (aged nine in 1557), but the biographical sources do not give a birth year. Litta, *Famiglie*, pl. III, states that Massimiliano was born in 1546, but this appears to be based on the chronology found in Ceruti, *Biografia*, 19;

there Massimiliano's birth is erroneously given the date of his father's acquisition of his title from Massimiliano I.

13. Tolnay, "Sofonisba," 115.

14. E. Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton, 1955), 162. See G. de Tervarent, *Attributs et symboles dans l'art profane* (Geneva, 1958), col. 94.

15. I. B. Rietstap, *Armorial général*, 2nd ed. (Gouda, 1887), II, 822, and H. V. Rolland, *Planches de l'armorial général de J-B Rietstap* (The Hague, 1921), V, pl. ccxl. See also Litta, *Famiglie*, pl. I, who illustrates a coat-of-arms and a heraldic bas-relief containing a dog from the Palazzo Soncino in Milan. Litta states that the dog is an allegorical emblem borrowed from the arms of the Sforza.

16. Litta, *Famiglie*, pl. III.

17. Ceruti, *Biografia*, 28, states that he had five male children; Litta, *Famiglie*, pl. III, lists five males and five females.

18. Argellati, *Biblioteca*, col. 1436; transcribes the inscription on his tomb in Soncino: MAXIMILIANO STAMPÆ II. MARCHIONI SONCINI / QVI MARIANNA A LEYVA ASCVLI PRINCIPIS FIL. / VXORE SVA SUMMA EXORNATA VIRTUTE / DEFVNCTA / DIVO FRANCISCO SE IN COELIBATVM MANCIPAVIT IN EIVSQVE FAMILIA CAPVCCINORVM / NOMEN DEDIT / QVI IN EO VITAE GENERE. / AFRICAE ORIS VT EVANGELIVM DISSEMINARET / CAPTIVOS REDIMERET / IVLIAE CAESAREAE OBIIT MDCI / HERMES STAMPÆ II MARCHIO SONCINI / PANENTIS OSSIBVS / IVSSV MAVRITANIAE REGIS SERVATIS / SVAQVE CVRA IN HOC A VITAE DITIONIS TEMPLVM DELATIS / HOC M. P. ANNO MDCX.