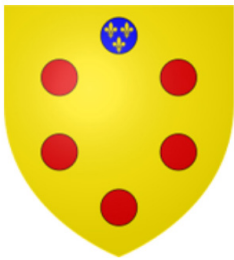


Bronzino and Cosimo I de' Medici. The Power of an Image

María Eugenia Alonso



Coat-of-arms
of the Medici family

“But let the Medici rest in peace in their marble and porphyry tombs; no one did more for the glory of the world, neither before nor after them, not princes, kings or emperors.”

Alexander Dumas, *The Medici*

Cosimo I de' Medici, the first Grand Duke of Tuscany, was born in Florence on 12 June 1519. His father, Giovanni dalle Bande Nere, had been a celebrated condottiere, while his mother, Maria Salviati, was responsible for his education. Cosimo spent his childhood in Mugello, a small town to the north of Florence. He belonged to a lesser branch of the family and there was nothing to indicate that he would become one of the most important figures in that city's history. He was, in fact, destined to restore the Medici dynasty, which would govern the city until the early 18th century.

Events prior to his assumption of the title of Duke of Florence took place rapidly. Alessandro de' Medici, then in power, was assassinated on the orders of Lorenzo de' Medici, a distant cousin, who wished to assume the government of Florence. Cosimo de' Medici, however, entered the city from Mugello with the support of a few followers and took control at the age of only seventeen. He soon assumed absolute power and governed until 1564 when he abdicated in favour of one of his sons, Francesco de' Medici.

Cosimo I was made Duke of Florence by the Emperor Charles V following his first military victory at the Battle of Montemurlo in which he defeated members of the Strozzi dynasty, who had formed an alliance with the French and had entered Tuscany with the aim of seizing power. Over the course of his period of rule, Cosimo undertook numerous politico-military initiatives and achieved ever greater independence from the Holy Roman Empire.

In parallel to his political activities, the Grand Duke was an important patron of the arts. This interest led him to embellish and improve the city of Florence to a significant degree. He created the Uffizi complex with the primary aim of establishing a seat of government that would also in due course become a museum. Having lived first in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, then the Palazzo Vecchio, he moved his residence to the Palazzo Pitti and encouraged the creation of the fine Boboli gardens. The Duke's new residence was connected to the Palazzo Vecchio through the creation of a passageway known as the Vasari Corridor.

Cosimo's patronage of the arts was not confined to architecture and he also supported some of the leading painters of the day. In the late 1530s Cosimo summoned Bronzino to enter his service as official painter. The Grand Duke intended to commission portraits of his family from the artist. Bronzino had trained with Pontormo, who had also been official painter to the Medici, and had worked with him on various important



Fig. 1
Bronzino
*Portrait of Leonor de Toledo
and her Son, Giovanni*, ca. 1545-1546
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo
Museale Fiorentino



Fig. 2
Bronzino
Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus,
ca. 1537-1539
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia
Gift of Mrs. John Wintersteen, 1950

Fig. 3
Belvedere Torso, mediados del siglo I a.C.
Vatican Museums, Ciudad del Vaticano

artistic projects. Bronzino executed religious and mythological paintings but was principally celebrated as a great portraitist. Within the context of the prevailing Mannerist style, his portraits are restrained and distant with a marked focus on a description of the objects that accompany the sitter. Particularly outstanding is the artist's ability to convey the textures of cloth, metals and brocades. Bronzino painted numerous members of the Florentine elite but his finest achievements were the official portraits of the ruling family: Cosimo I, his wife and children.

In 1539 Cosimo married Leonor of Toledo, descended from one of the noblest families of Spain. This act further consolidated his power within the context of European politics.

Bronzino depicted Leonor on numerous occasions, both alone and accompanied by her one or more of her eleven children. The most outstanding example is the portrait now in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (fig. 1), considered a masterpiece due to its technical quality and exquisite artistic merit.

Like many political figures of his day, Cosimo I made use of Bronzino's skills as a portraitist, deploying them for the purposes of personal propaganda. The numerous surviving portraits of the Duke by the artist clearly reveal the former's interest in presenting himself before the citizens of Florence and before the other European powers as a solemn figure of authority and one whose rule was fully consolidated. Cosimo was painted by Bronzino at different moments throughout his political life, and these portraits can be categorised as corresponding to two official models: the first, dated to around 1545, in which the Duke is depicted as young and wearing armour; and a second type from the 1560s in which he does not wear armour and is shown as older. These series, executed by Bronzino and his studio, reflect the necessity for the creation of an official image that the Duke himself had called for. However, the first portrait by the artist of his patron, executed immediately after his assumption of power, is remarkable for its conception and iconography. In *Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus* (Philadelphia Museum of Art) (fig. 2), the Duke is presented as Orpheus, a figure from Greek mythology celebrated for his great musical and poetic talents. Cosimo is depicted naked and looking at the viewer, at the moment when, in his personification as Orpheus, he has just calmed Cerberus, the dog-like guardian of Hades. We find no further examples of this type of allegorical portrait over the forthcoming years and this one may have been commissioned by the Duke for his private use. The subject reflects his taste for classical culture, reflected both in his passion for Greco-Roman art, of which he assembled a major collection, and his support of literature and culture through the Accademia Fiorentina, of which Bronzino was also a member as a poet. The present portrait was probably executed on the occasion of the marriage of the Duke to Leonor de Toledo,



Fig. 4
Bronzino
*Cosimo I de' Medici in
Armour*, ca. 1545
Museo Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid
[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 5
Bronzino
Cosimo I in Armour,
ca. 1545
Galleria degli Uffizi,
Firencia
Soprintendenza
Speciale per il Polo
Museale Fiorentino



Fig. 6
Bronzino
*Cosimo I de' Medici
in Armour*, ca. 1545
Art Gallery of New
South Wales Foundation
Purchase 1996, Sidney
Photograph © AGNSW

although little documentation survives.¹ In addition, numerous scholars agree that Bronzino, who also greatly appreciated classical art, looked to the *Belvedere Torso* (Vatican Museums) for his depiction of the Duke's body (fig. 3).

Around 1543, by which date Cosimo had consolidated his authority in Florence, the need arose for the creation of his official image. In response, Bronzino executed a first portrait of the Duke in armour which would function as a tool of political propaganda both within his own territories and abroad, and from which numerous later versions were produced. This diversity of types of portrait of the Duke has provoked a heated debate among specialists in two regards: firstly, concerning which was the prototype that acted as the model for all the subsequent versions; and secondly, concerning which of the replicas are by Bronzino himself and which by his studio. In the case of most of these images, Cosimo is depicted three-quarter or half-length, while all use the same compositional format of the body turned to the right and the head to the left, with the gaze following the direction of the head and losing itself in the background drapery, thus creating a sense of distance between sitter and viewer, between whom there is no communication of any type.

These portraits conform to a type of image that was being developed in Florence at that period. The Medici presided over a refined, sophisticated court and the visual image that was created of its leading figure was a correspondingly elegant and imposing one. In addition, and conforming to the prevailing Mannerist style of this date, sitters were depicted in artificial poses and in carefully devised settings. The expression of the face, the pose and the setting reflect this quest for sophistication.

The portrait in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza (fig. 4) is a version of the same composition in the Galleria degli Uffizi (fig. 5), considered by numerous experts to be the prototype or first version on which all the copies or replicas were based, whether executed by Bronzino himself or by his studio. The version in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, which was previously in the Gonzaga Collection, has been considered an autograph replica by Mina Gregori.²

The *Portrait of Cosimo I in Armour* in the Uffizi, identified by Gamba as the first work in this series of official portraits, was very probably painted in the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano around 1545 and is thought to be the work described by Vasari:

“Il signor duca, veduta in queste ed altre opere l'eccellenza di questo pittore, e particolarmente che era suo proprio ritrarre dal naturale quanto con più diligenza si può imaginare, fece ritrarre sè, che allora era giovane, armato tutto d'arme bianche e con una mano sopra l'elmo”.³



Fig. 7
Studio of Bronzino
Cosimo I de' Medici
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
New York

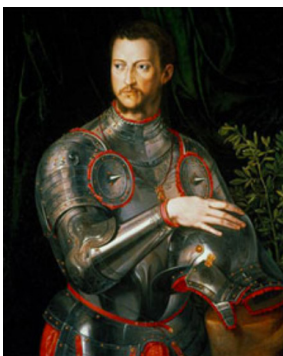


Fig. 8
Bronzino
Cosimo I de' Medici,
ca. 1546
Toledo Museum
of Art, Ohio
Gift of Edward
Drummond Libbey



Fig. 9
Benvenuto Cellini
Bust of Cosimo I
de' Medici, 1545-1548
Museo Nazionale
del Bargello, Florence
Soprintendenza
Speciale per il Polo
Museale Fiorentino

A version in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sidney, (fig. 6) has an identical composition but includes a background of curtain drapery that modifies the tonalities. In the Sidney version Cosimo is wearing armour and rests his hand on his helmet, which stands on a cylindrical support on which we see the inscription "COSMVS MEDICES. DVX FLOR".

The various versions of the portrait of the Duke all show him wearing the same suit of armour and in the same pose. However, these versions are distinguished by the inclusion of different decorative elements. In the portrait now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 7) the Duke's helmet is resting on a cloth, while the background has a different type of drapery for the curtains, this time with a fringe. In the versions in the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, (fig. 8) and in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kassel, there is an olive branch in the middle-ground on the right. This is the *broncone*, which was a symbol of the Medici family.

Italian political leaders showed a preference for having themselves depicted in the manner of the great heroes and warriors of classical antiquity. Their intention was to exalt their authority both through their military and political deeds and through their own image. Armour thus became the most appropriate accessory for glorifying their figures as powerful rulers. Bronzino depicted Cosimo I in armour, resting one of his elegant hands on the helmet that he has taken off, possibly to indicate that his form of government was also a peaceful one. The armour has besagews⁴ on the breastplate just below the gorget,⁵ which may indicate that it is foot armour rather than equestrian armour. Depicting the suit of armour allowed Bronzino to offer a minutely detailed description of its decorative elements and to convey the gleam of the polished surface of the metal that contrasts with the texture of the textiles. This type of *all'antica* portrait is also to be found in a series of bust-length sculptures that Cosimo commissioned from the leading sculptors of the day, of which one of the finest examples is the bust by Benvenuto Cellini now in the Museo del Bargello (fig. 9).

Around 1546, Cosimo I de' Medici was awarded the Order of the Golden Fleece, a chivalrous order founded in 1430 by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. Under the protection of the Virgin and the Apostle Andrew, this order strove to uphold the faith and the concept of knightly fraternity. It was considered an exceptionally important symbol of authority and its members, who were few in number, were associated with the crown of Spain. Having been awarded it, Cosimo incorporated its emblem into his official image and his portraits, wearing the complete collar over his armour, as we see in the versions of his portrait in the Toledo Museum of Art (fig. 8), the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Kassel, and the Palazzo Pitti in Florence.

Despite the limited amount of licence permitted in official depictions, Bronzino was able to move away from the rigidity generally associated with such commissions in order to develop a distinctive idiom which, combined with the elevated technical merits of his painting, made him one of the most outstanding portraitists of his day. His portraits convey a robust, almost sculptural physical presence through their masterly interplay of light and their distinctive chromatic range. The poses are proud and somewhat haughty, and despite the coldness of the almost marmoreal faces, there is an attempt to convey the sitter's psychology. These images undoubtedly influenced the court portrait throughout Europe while simultaneously and convincingly expressing the erudition and tastes of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Above all, however, they are a visual manifestation of his power and authority.

Notes

- 1 See Cropper, Elizabeth: *Pontorno, Bronzino, and The Medici. The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence*. [Exhib. cat. 2004-2005]. Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2004.
- 2 According to a letter of 11 January 1976 in the documentary archive of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Department of Old Master Painting.
- 3 Vasari-Milanesi. *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*. Florence, 1881, vol. VII, pp. 597-98.
- 4 Besagews are circular elements with a spike emerging from the centre. They were located on the armour, one on either side of the breast.
- 5 The gorget is the part of a suit of armour that protects the neck.