

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Those familiar with the works of Agnolo Bronzino generally think either of his austere portraits or the famous *Allegory of Venus* (see Fig. 18), paintings that have long captivated viewers. A haunting passage from Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) beautifully captures the fascination of Bronzino's paintings. In the novel James's heroine, Milly Theale, looks at Bronzino's *Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi* (Fig. 1). Milly, an American heiress, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Lucrezia, tearfully gazes long at this "mysterious," "strange," "fair," and "wonderful" image. Milly sees:

the face of a young woman, all magnificently drawn, down to the hands, and magnificently dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michelangesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage – only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead.¹

Like the allusions to other works of art in James's fiction, this description provides more than an ornamental backdrop.² The painting functions in many ways. It prompts a meditation that accompanies Milly's guileless conquest of English society at a great country house. Little about Milly aside from superficial particulars – her prodigious fortune, beauty, and charm – is known at this point, and her response to the painting serves to augur many truths. On the most immediate level, the

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet
Deborah Parker
Excerpt
[More information](#)

BRONZINO



1. Bronzino, *Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi*, c. 1540, Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

stunning portrait mirrors Milly's own brilliant surface. The passage also portends, through the incantatory repetition of "dead, dead, dead," what has yet to be revealed, namely, Milly's awareness of her own mortality. Finally, her profound reaction to this portrait of a "very

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

great personage,” who is at once “sad” and “magnificent,” hints at unexpected depths in Milly’s character.

James’s richly nuanced description of Lucrezia Panciatichi’s noble features and elaborate dress coincided with a renewed appreciation of Bronzino’s art at the turn of the century.³ James also hints at subtleties in Bronzino’s art left unnoticed by earlier critics. He detects a tension in the portrait: while he admires the gorgeous surface – the subject’s magnificent dress, jewels, and beautifully coifed hair – he also registers her deathly pallor and sad expression. This disparity between a ravishing outward splendor and an unknowable inner sorrow makes for a decided ambiguity. It is perhaps Bronzino’s uncanny ability to render such elusive figures that entrances modern viewers. James’s observation of a certain tension in the portrait also coincides well with post-Freudian sensibilities attuned to the working of the unconscious – to that which resists knowledge and is perhaps unknowable.

Subsequent characterizations of Bronzino’s art echo some of James’s observations. Numerous art historians, for example, have praised the elegance of Bronzino’s figures and his painstaking rendering of surface details. Others have commented on the sculptural forms of his figures. Scholars also emphasize qualities not mentioned by James; they concentrate more on the effect of the portraits. Many critics find the paintings harsh and astringent. Expressions such as “cold,” “hard,” “inaccessible,” “severe,” “contained,” “glacial,” “melancholy reserve,” “marmoreal surfaces,” “impossibly remote,” “inexpressibly chilling,” and “frozen statuesque poses” pepper descriptions of Bronzino’s art. Notwithstanding their different objectives, both scholars and writers find the subjects’ expressions largely indecipherable. Bronzino’s most well-known works are famously resistant to interpretation. As many art historians have observed, his tautly set figures resemble still lives; their faces have the impenetrability of masks.⁴

Characterizations of two other major Renaissance portraitists, Titian and Raphael, differ substantially. Art historians typically praise Titian’s abilities to capture the quintessence of a figure, noting, for example, that each of his portraits constitutes a “unique experience.” In his discussion of Titian’s *Pietro Aretino* (Fig. 2), one distinguished art historian observes that the painting is perhaps “too truthful” in its frank representation of the writer’s considerable girth, pugnaciousness, alert

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRONZINO



2. Titian, *Portrait of Pietro Aretino*, c. 1545, Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Photo: Courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

eyes, and caustic mouth.⁵ Titian's *Portrait of a Bearded Man* (Fig. 3), sometimes considered a portrait of Ludovico Ariosto, elicits similar comments. As a critic declares, the painting presents "a face of the utmost composure and dignity, fully capable of holding its own against the blinding beauty of the sleeve."⁶ The painting provides a stunning emanation of the subject's inner nature. In a similar vein, critics single out for praise the manner in which Raphael, in a way no less extraordinary than Titian, conveys the essence of his subjects. Raphael's *Baldassare Castiglione* (Fig. 4) incarnates the "cool composure" and "inner calm" of the ideal courtier, just as his *Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi* (Fig. 5) provides a "searching analysis" of the corpulent, luxury-loving Medici pope seated at a table bearing precious objects.⁷ Looking at such expressive portraits as these, one readily accedes to the claims of contemporary poets who praise Titian's and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION



3. Titian, *Portrait of a Bearded Man*, c. 1510–1515, National Gallery, London. Photo: Courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

Raphael's abilities to render both the physical and the psychological identities of their subjects.

The austerity of Bronzino's portraits, in contrast, permits no such penetration into a sitter's inner being. Indeed one might go so far as to observe that Bronzino places himself against this tradition of revelation, preferring to present viewers with visual conundrums – seemingly petrified figures with detached, evacuated expressions that betray nothing about themselves. Of course, some figures are less knowable than others. Some of Bronzino's subjects are true mysteries: we simply do not know the identities of the figures in works such as the *Portrait of a Young Man* (see Fig. 28) or the *Youth with a Lute* in Florence's Uffizi Gallery. Ignorant of the biographical particulars that might accord these individuals meaning, we cannot "read"

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRONZINO



4. Raphael, *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*, c. 1515, The Louvre, Paris. Photo: Courtesy Giraudon /Art Resource, New York.

such subjects, and our observations concerning these works must be confined largely to comments on what the subjects' dress or pose, or the objects surrounding the figures, might connote. Yet even those figures whose identities are known do not lend themselves easily to interpretation. Perhaps no painting more encapsulates the inaccessibility of Bronzino's portraits than does the famous *Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo with Her Son Giovanni* (Fig. 6). Like many of Bronzino's portraits, this work presents us with a full disclosure of the sitters' outer realities but no hint of their inner qualities. Whereas the duchess's dress is rendered with an almost photographic realism, her impassive face reveals nothing beyond her exterior countenance. The dress, almost phantasmagorical in its effects due to the extravagant arabesque pattern, dominates the picture. We are encouraged to read the garment itself as Eleonora, as an ostentatious symbol of her power and station.⁸ Bronzino's art is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION



5. Raphael, *Pope Leo X with Cardinals Giulio de' Medici and Luigi de' Rossi*, c. 1517. Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

unusually impersonal, his figures exceptionally reserved. Both the artist and his work are elusive.

Much of Bronzino's elusiveness as an artist derives from the sketchiness of his biography. There is a certain impenetrability to his life. The few facts we possess about the painter's life derive from Vasari's brief *Life* of Bronzino, from letters, and from archival documents dealing with artistic commissions. Born on 17 November 1503 to Cosimo di Mariano of Monticelli, a suburb near Florence's gate of San Frediano, Agnolo di Cosimo showed an early aptitude for drawing. After learning the rudiments of painting from an unknown painter, Bronzino was apprenticed to Raffaellino del Garbo (1466–1524) before moving, around the age of fifteen, into the studio of Jacopo Pontormo (1494–1556), one the greatest masters of Mannerism. It is not known

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRONZINO



6. Bronzino, *Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo with Her Son Giovanni*, c. 1546, Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Courtesy Alinari/Art Resource, New York.

when the painter assumed the name by which he is known today, Bronzino. The relationship between Bronzino and Pontormo was a close one, not unlike that between a father and son.

Bronzino's literary activities probably began in the 1530s. Throughout his life he remained an active reader and engaged *literato*, often partic-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

icipating in discussions of the arts. On 11 February 1540, Bronzino entered the Accademia Fiorentina (at that time known as the Accademia degli Umidi), along with forty-one other persons, in a mass admission designed to increase support for Duke Cosimo I de' Medici within the institution. On 4 March 1547 reformers within the Academy decided to expel the more carefree and spirited members, which included most of the artists, among them Bronzino. The Academy modified this resolution in 1549 and decreed that those who had been ejected could be reinstated upon the presentation of a poem that passed the approval of the censors. Among the artists only Bronzino took advantage of this opportunity. He won readmission at the age of sixty-two, on 26 May 1566, after the presentation of three *canzoni* honoring the duke. This second application for admission to the Accademia Fiorentina suggests that the artist attached considerable importance to his literary pursuits. While he devoted his days to the completion of paintings for various patrons, Bronzino spent his evenings in reading and writing.

By the early 1530s, Bronzino had come into his own as an artist, especially as a portraitist.⁹ No other artist captured more effectively the somber dignity of prominent Florentines such as Ugolino Martelli and Luca Martini. Among the most distinctive features of Bronzino's art are an extreme refinement, a steely line, the sculptural treatment of figures, and the graceful incorporation of elements appropriated from other works of art. His most productive years as an artist fall between 1537 and 1555, a period that encompasses Cosimo I's marriage to Eleonora di Toledo and the election of Giorgio Vasari as the duke's chief architect. After his marriage Cosimo embarked on an extensive refurbishing campaign to enhance his residences. Bronzino became an important part of this scheme by executing many of the dynastic portraits of the Medici. During these years Bronzino completed the *Allegory of Venus*, the luminous frescoes for Eleonora's private chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio, and various altarpieces, and he produced most of the cartoons for the Story of Joseph tapestries. However, after the appointment of Vasari as principal overseer of the decoration of the Palazzo Vecchio, Bronzino's production declines. Vasari had his own coterie of workers, and he had little interest in furthering the careers of painters whom he perceived to be part of a hostile clique. This group included Pontormo, Bronzino, Tribolo, Giovambattista del

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-78166-4 - Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet

Deborah Parker

Excerpt

[More information](#)

BRONZINO

Tasso, and Francesco Bachiacca, some of whom had excluded Vasari in the 1540s.¹⁰

Bronzino never married, nor did he have any children. Nevertheless, his life had all the domesticity of a traditional family. After the death in 1541 of one of his closest friends, Cristofano Allori, commonly known as Tofano *spadaio*, Bronzino became the principal provider for an extended family that included Tofano's widow and children as well as the painter's own mother and a niece. Cristofano's son, Alessandro Allori (1535–1607), eventually became Bronzino's most famous pupil. Bronzino headed the Allori household until his death on 23 November 1572. Epitaphs composed for his funeral all acknowledge Bronzino's accomplishments as a painter and poet. As Alessandro Allori wrote:

Non muor, chi vive come il Bronzin visse
L'Alma è in ciel, qui son l'osse, è il nome in terra
Illustre ove'ei cantò, dipinse, e scrisse.¹¹

(He does not die, who lives as Bronzino lived. His soul is in heaven; here are his bones, and his illustrious name on earth where he sang, painted, and wrote.)

Bronzino lived at a compelling historical moment, during the Medici *principato*, a time generally associated with the art of the extreme *Maniera*, or refinement. Pontormo, Bronzino, Rosso Fiorentino, and Benvenuto Cellini all worked in Florence in the wake of Michelangelo's achievements in painting, sculpture, and architecture. In their evaluations of the art of the *Maniera*, critics often note the artificiality in the masklike faces of the figures depicted in works from the period. Some critics have suggested that such artifice reflects courtly decorum. Others detect a tension and an unease in the work of *Maniera* artists.¹² While some critics attribute what they characterize as the unstable mood of this generation of artists to the oppressiveness of Counter Reformation social measures such as the Inquisition, these explanations are largely speculative. Little corroborative evidence exists for the putative causes of the sense of tension often detectable in the works of *Maniera* artists.

Bronzino's poetry offers numerous correlatives to this practice of evasive representation. Yet few people today are aware that this distinguished court painter to the Medici had been a poet. During his lifetime, however, Bronzino, who wrote more than three hundred po-