

*Renaissance
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Renaissance Papers

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Bronzino, Castiglione, and A Self-Portrait: Re-evaluating Bronzino's Trip to Pesaro

HEATHER L. SALE HOLIAN

IN late 1530 the Florentine painter, Agnolo Bronzino accepted the invitation of Duke Francesco Maria I della Rovere and Duchess Eleonora da Urbino to attend their court in Pesaro. At the time of his arrival, the northern court was not only recognized as an intellectual center but also revered as both the impetus for, and origin of, Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, the most widely read civility text of the Renaissance.¹ As an exemplar of courtly elegance and manners, the Della Rovere court in 1530 provided a stark contrast to the more spartan court environment of Bronzino's native city, which was then only in its embryonic form, under the newly appointed first Duke of Florence, Alessandro de' Medici.

Bronzino's acceptance of the Duke and Duchess's prestigious invitation exposed the artist, for the first time, to a world of refinement, grace, learning, and courtly pursuits, informed by the ideals of Castiglione's important text. Bronzino's stay in Pesaro of just over a year visibly and permanently impacted his art, and particularly his portraiture.² The changes, which are readily apparent in the portraits he painted immediately following his return, foreshadow the portrait type and style associated with Bronzino's later portraits, and in turn,

¹ For a discussion of the many translations and editions Castiglione's text enjoyed during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, see Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier: The European Reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1996).

² Bronzino probably also spent time in Urbino, since the Della Rovere court typically split the year between the two centers.

Florentine portraiture of the second half of the sixteenth century as a whole.

Despite the significant body of research dealing with the works and career of Bronzino, few art historians have noted the change in Bronzino's portraiture immediately following his period in Pesaro. In 1971, Craig Hugh Smyth published an important analysis of the artist's northern trip, but limited his focus to the artists, works, and stylistic trends Bronzino might have encountered at the Della Rovere court.³ As such, he made no mention of the cultural environment of that center or its potential impact upon Bronzino and his subsequent artistic production. In 2002, Maurice Brock recognized in passing the importance of Bronzino's personal contact with the Della Rovere court, which as Brock put it, "derived directly from the one portrayed by Baldassare Castiglione in his *Book of the Courtier*."⁴ In the same short passage Brock also acknowledged the impact of Bronzino's courtly contact on the artist's portraiture upon his return to Florence, although Brock is unclear about how this influence manifested itself and gives no further analysis of this point. In general, Bronzino scholarship often recognizes *Il Cortegiano's* influence within the artist's body of male portraiture, but the moment, cause, and consequences of its origination remain insufficiently examined.

The current study will seek to demonstrate that Bronzino's trip to Pesaro was a pivotal event in the career of Bronzino and in the larger history of Florentine portraiture. This essay will suggest that Bronzino's first hand exposure to the implementation of *Il Cortegiano's* courtly precepts, *vis-à-vis* his observances of behavior and actions among courtiers at the Della Rovere court, directly impacted the artist's portraiture. The influence of Bronzino's Pesaro experience manifested itself both in the artist's stylistic approach to his sitters and in his interpretation of their personalities, which came to mirror the ideals outlined by Castiglione. The *Portrait of a Young Man*, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (fig. 1), documents these changes and will provide a case study for the present inquiry. The

³ Craig Hugh Smyth, "On Non-Florentine Sources of Bronzino's Portraiture," *Bronzino as a Draughtsman: An Introduction* (Locust Valley, New York: J.J. Augustin, 1971), 80-86.

⁴ Maurice Brock, *Bronzino*, trans. David Poole Radzinowicz and Christine Schultz-Touge (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 42.

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Fig. 1. Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of a Young Man (Self-Portrait)*, 1530-32, oil on wood. Photo credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.16) Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

identity of the mysterious sitter of the New York work, as well as the particular and general function of this portrait and others like it by Bronzino, will also be considered.

According to Giorgio Vasari, Bronzino had already established his reputation as a portraitist by the late 1520s, when Vasari recorded that Bronzino had "painted many portraits of various persons, and other pictures, which gave him a great name."⁵ Clearly Bronzino's reputation was significant enough to reach the Della Rovere in Pesaro, resulting in his important invitation to that illustrious center. Although little of what he painted during his stay survives,⁶ the northern trip must be viewed as important in terms of the opportunity it afforded for Bronzino's initial exposure to a well-established court and its cultural environment. At the time of the artist's arrival the reputation of the Della Rovere court as a center of learning, refinement, and taste was assured, for it was here at the court of Duke Guidobaldo I della Rovere and Elisabetta Gonzaga, that *Il Cortegiano* was conceived.

⁵ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), vol. 2, 869.

⁶ According to Vasari, Bronzino's Pesaro works included a portrait of the daughter of Matteo Sofferoni, a harpsichord cover painted with many unidentified figures, some cartoons and frescoes, including one of Cupid, for the Villa Imperiale, and a portrait of Guidobaldo II della Rovere. Vasari, vol. 2, 361-62, 869. All scholars accept the identification of the portrait of Guidobaldo (fig. 4), located today in the Palazzo Pitti, with that described by Vasari. Historians also generally agree that due to restoration efforts Bronzino's hand is hopelessly indistinguishable within the preserved frescoes of the Villa Imperiale in Pesaro, while the harpsichord cover has been frequently connected with a panel depicting Apollo and Marsyas in the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg. The portrait of the daughter of Matteo Sofferoni was associated with the *Lady in Green* at Hampton Court by Pilliod, who accepted a date of 1530-32 for the work based upon Vasari's account. Elizabeth Pilliod, *Pontormo, Bronzino, Allori: A Genealogy of Florentine Art* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 102-3. Brock, however, favors a completion in Florence rather than Pesaro for the Sofferoni portrait, reasoning that the painting depicted a Florentine and would logically have been painted there instead of the Della Rovere court. Brock therefore excludes the Sofferoni painting from the body of works he ascribes to Bronzino's Pesaro period and, unlike Pilliod, makes no attempt to connect the Sofferoni work with a preserved Bronzino portrait. Brock, 42.