

# In Florence, a landmark exhibition of Bronzino paintings

*An artistic genius, Agnolo di Cosimo's portraits raised the genre to a new height*

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**F**LORENCE – An extraordinary exhibit devoted to the paintings of Agnolo di Cosimo, better known as Bronzino, is currently on show in Florence's Palazzo Strozzi. This is the most appropriate venue, since Bronzino (1503-1572) was born near the city and spent most of his life there. Moreover Florence houses some of his greatest masterpieces.

Interestingly enough, this is the first retrospective on Bronzino's paintings that has ever been mounted. Last year, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosted a major exhibition devoted to Bronzino's drawings which created enormous interest. That show, as well as the current exhibition, has thrown new light on this great artist.

Who was Bronzino? The painter, architect, writer and historian Giorgio Vasari, who was a contemporary of Bronzino, concluded in his *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* that Bronzino was one of the most important painters of the Italian Renaissance, especially famous for his incredible life-like portraits. He painted in the Mannerist style, an art movement in vogue between the High Renaissance and the Baroque. This style represented art as idealized rather than natural beauty and was often associated with exaggeration of human proportions.

This comprehensive exhibition presents more than 60 of Bronzino's documented works, several attributed to him and his workshop and some paintings by his mentor Pontormo. The retrospective concludes with a number of works by Bronzino's favorite pupil, Alessandro Allori.

In addition to the 29 paintings from the Uffizi Gallery, there are loans from more than 43 important international museums and private collections. According to James Bradburne, director of the Palazzo Strozzi, "Every significant Bronzino that could actually be taken off its wall was moved here." There was however one notable exception: London's National Gallery declined to loan Bronzino's *Allegory of Venus and Cupid*.

The exhibit is curated by Carlo Falciani, a recognized Bronzino scholar, and Antonio Natali, director of the Uffizi, and they also edited the accompanying comprehensive catalog. The exhibition is laid out chronologically as well as thematically. The wall texts are in large type and succinctly explain all relevant details pertaining to each painting. In addition, there is a well presented, clear and concise audio guide. Children are most welcome and there are special wall texts and a guide for them.

IT IS not easy to differentiate paintings early in Bronzino's career from those of Pontormo. This is particularly evident in the four large tondi of the evangelists Luke, Matthew, John and Mark which open the exhibition. The former two are attributed to Bronzino, the third to Pontormo but the final one remains inconclusive. These paintings were removed from the Capone Chapel in Florence's Church of Santa Felicità for restoration prior to the exhibition. It is a real privilege to view these exceptional works at close range, without the need to strain one's neck looking at them high up in the cupola of the chapel.

Bronzino spent three of his formative years at the Della Rovere court in Pesaro. One of his finest earliest portraits is that of Guidobaldo II della Rovere, duke of Urbino. This life-like portrait must surely have impressed Cosimo I de' Medici, duke of Florence, who was eventually appointed grand duke of Tuscany. Indeed, shortly after Bronzino's return to Florence, he became Cosimo's favorite court painter.

It was in the unique artistic and intellectual milieu of Cosimo's Florence that Bronzino painted some of his greatest works. A room dedicated to the Medici family displays the stunning portraits of Cosimo, his wife Eleonora di Toledo and their children. Particularly arresting is the portrait of Eleonora with their second son Giovanni. The spectacular and minute attention to the detail of the fabric of her dress is mind boggling. Indeed her apparel takes up more space on the canvas than either of the two sitters. Another dazzling eye catching portrait is that of Bia, the illegitimate daughter of Cosimo I.

Besides the Medici family, there are portraits of other figures in Cosimo's court, including those of the Lutheran sympathizer Bartolomeo Panciatichi and his wife Lucrezia. Other bewitching and beguiling portraits from Bronzino's youth to his full maturity are displayed and include *Portrait of a Young Man with a Book* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, *Lady with a Small Dog* from the Stadel Museum in Frankfurt. *Portrait of a Man* from the National Gallery in Ottawa hangs for the first time alongside *Portrait of a Woman* from the Galleria Sabauda in Turin. Recent scholarship has determined that they are thought to be husband and wife.

All of these portraits are among Bronzino's best known works and reveal an extraordinary grasp of naturalism combined with accuracy of execution. His sitters are so real to life, yet at the same time they are somewhat distant. These portraits were a major influence on subsequent generations of artists.

Included in the exhibit are sumptuous tapestries illustrating the biblical story of Joseph. Together with Raphael's tapestries from the Sistine Chapel, these two cycles are arguably the most famous 16th-century examples of this oeuvre. Bronzino designed 16 of the 20 tapestries. They were woven in Florence

by the Flemish weavers Jan Rost and Nicolas Karcher. The cycle originally adorned the Salone dei Duecento in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio.

These tapestries have recently undergone a major restoration process and have not been on view for many years. The restoration has succeeded to a large extent in revealing the original brilliant coloring. Five of these stunning works are on display at the exhibition. The story of Joseph, who was initially honored outside his own country and then reconciled with those who betrayed him, had particular resonance for Cosimo who saw in this narrative an allegory of his dramatic elevation to power.

Of Bronzino's output of religious paintings, the two versions of the *Holy Family with St. John and St. Anne* deserve special mention. One comes from Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum and the other is from the Louvre. They are almost identical, although in the Viennese version, one can make out the title of the book held by the virgin. The word "Isaiah" is seen in faint Hebrew characters. Also on display are the two side panels of St. John the Baptist, patron saint of Florence, and St. Cosmas, one of the patron saints of the Medici family. These originally graced Eleonora di Toledo's chapel in Palazzo Vecchio but were removed at the request of Eleonora and the St. Cosmas was lost. It has only been recently identified.

In addition to his mastery of portraits, Bronzino also excelled in erotic mythological paintings. Perhaps the most famous are the allegories with Venus and Cupid. One from Rome and a second from Budapest feature in the exhibition. In these allegories, Bronzino's skill with the nude is eminently visible. In the Rome version, Venus has wrested the bow and arrow from Cupid. Her pose and facial expression allude to the act of love making. The pure white skin of Venus and Cupid should be contrasted with the darker skin and leering visage of the satyr who appears as a licentious voyeur.

On occasion, Bronzino incorporated mythological elements in his portraits. An excellent example is that of the famous Genoese admiral Andrea Doria, who is portrayed as the sea god Neptune together with a trident. Bronzino succeeded in depicting an almost nude portrait of a famous publicly recognized personality as a mythological figure.

ALSO ON view is the recently restored portrait of the dwarf Morgante, who was part of the court of Cosimo. He is seen nude on both sides of the same canvas. The front view shows Morgante about to go bird hunting with an owl perched on his right hand. The reverse depicts a back view of Morgante on his return from a successful hunt, clutching the prey in his right hand. The owl now rests on his left shoulder.

This work was Bronzino's answer to the question posed by one of his contemporaries as to whether painting was superior to sculpture as an art form. Bronzino's double-sided canvas introduces a fourth dimension, that of time, which goes beyond the three dimensions of a sculpture.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, Bronzino was also a poet and some examples of his work are on display. In style, his sonnets range from those reminiscent of Petrarch to the burlesque.

Great scholarship went into the planning of this exhibition which features three newly attributed works by the artist. These include the St. Cosmas discussed above as well as a previously unknown *Christ Carrying the Cross* and *Crucified Christ* which Bronzino painted for Bartolomeo Panciatichi. As has been noted, several Bronzino paintings were specially restored for this occasion.

There are other paintings and frescoes of Bronzino scattered about Florence and its environs which certainly merit a visit. These include the Cappella di Eleonora at the Palazzo Vecchio. The chapel, entirely decorated by Bronzino, is one of his most important and original works. On the vault are the saints Francis, Jerome, John and Michael. The main alt piece features Bronzino's *Lamentation* and an *Annunciation*. On the Cappella walls are a series of brilliant frescoes depicting the life of Moses. These include the crossing of the Red Sea, the brazen snake, the gathering of manna and Moses drawing water from the rock. Overlooking these events, Bronzino portrays a very pregnant Eleonora, the wife of Cosimo.

Like the Joseph tapestries, the story of Moses leading the Jewish people out of bondage into freedom was a subject dear to Cosimo's heart, since he saw himself as a new Moses, the founder of a free independent nation and also as a lawgiver. His pregnant wife is an allegory of the beginning of a new fertile prosperous age for Florence. Further images of Cosimo and Eleonora by Bronzino can be seen in the vault of their son Francesco I's studiolo, also in Palazzo Vecchio. Finally currently on show in the Palazzo are four additional recently restored tapestries from the Joseph series.

Many other famous works of Bronzino can be seen in churches of Florence. Santa Maria Novella has *Christ Raising the Daughter of Jairus*, painted by Bronzino in collaboration with Alessandro Allori. San Lorenzo boasts a huge fresco of the *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence*, while in Santa Croce there is the *Descent of Christ to Limbo*, which is one of his most important and largest religious works.

*The writer, an emeritus professor of medicine, writes reviews and lectures on medical topics, music, art, history and travel. Some of his articles, reviews and photographs can be seen at [www.irvingspitz.com](http://www.irvingspitz.com).*



PORTRAIT OF Eleonora of Toledo with her son, Giovanni. (Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence)

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TAPESTRY SHOWING the Meeting of Joseph and Jacob in Egypt. Bronzino, with the assistance of Raffaellino del Colle, Alessandro Allori and Nicolas Karcher. (Sala delle Bandiere, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence)