

A MEDICI BUST AT THE WALTERS?

by Michael Riddick



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An anonymous 16th century Florentine bronze bust, tentatively considered an *all'antica* representation of a Roman emperor, at the Walters Art Museum (Baltimore, MD), might instead represent the portrait of a Medici family member.

The bust is presently cataloged as an imitation of the antique and thought to possibly represent a youthful portrait of Marcus Aurelius.¹ However, the bust superficially shares a visual consonance with the youthful and young adult portraits of the Florentine Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (Fig. 01) or a kinship with a portrait of an anonymous sitter, sometimes thought to be one of the elder sons of Cosimo.^{2,3}

Following the unexpected assassination of Duke Alessandro de' Medici on 6 January 1537, Cosimo was called upon to fill the power vacuum, officiated as the second Duke of Florence only two days later. To the chagrin of those who had placed Cosimo in power, presuming to manipulate him, Cosimo proved himself an independent, capable ruler with superb acumen.⁴

Cosimo's appreciation for the arts, desire to edify his new station and an interest in signaling a new era of prosperity for Florence, resulted in the immediate sponsorship of commissions, notably those depicting his likeness.⁵ While an art historical awareness surrounds the various sculpted portrait busts of Cosimo in marble and

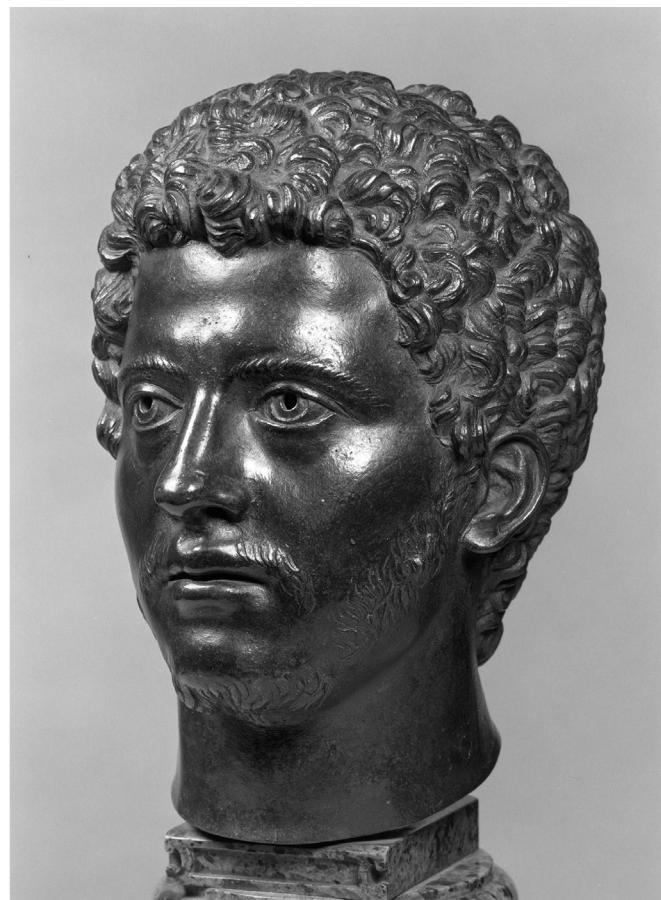
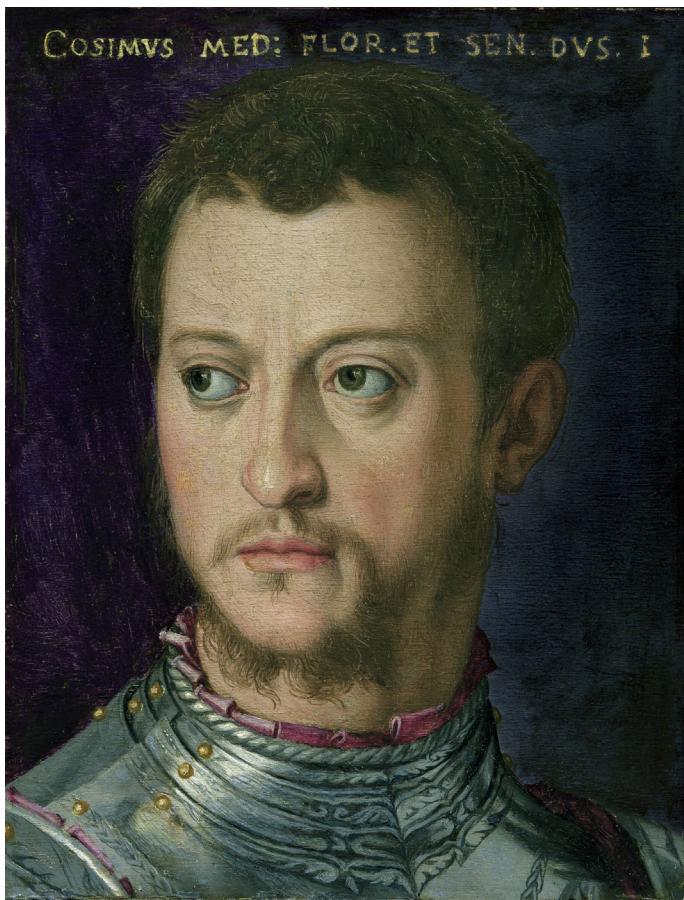


Fig. 01: *Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici in Armor* by Agnolo Bronzino and workshop, ca. 1543 (Uffizi, Florence) (left); Bronze bust, possibly Cosimo I de' Medici, possibly by Bartolomeo Ammannati (?), ca. 1537-38 (?) (Walters Art Museum) (right)

bronze by Baccio Bandinelli, Benvenuto Cellini, Giovanni Bandini and Vincenzo Danti, the present bust appears to have been overlooked on account of its possible misidentification. The busts of Cosimo by the aforenoted artists portray him at later stages of his life whereas the Walters bust could be early, showing a youthful countenance and lacking Cosimo's receding hairline and other features characteristic of his later age.

The Walters bust compares most favorably with Agnolo Bronzino's painted portrait of *Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus*, ca. 1537-39, realized just after his elevation to power and likely commissioned

as a private gift for his future spouse, Eleanor of Toledo (Fig. 02, left).⁶ His robust head-of-hair and the onset of the facial hair he began-to-grow after his election is alike.⁷ A similar countenance is preserved in a marble relief portrait of Cosimo attributed to Baccio Bandinelli, ca. 1540, at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello (Fig. 02, right), which faithfully follows the *disegno* of a sketch model taken by Jacopo Pontormo only months after his election.⁸

Cosimo's early portraiture was commissioned with the idea in-mind to edify his leadership to the citizens of Florence, seeking to gain their trust

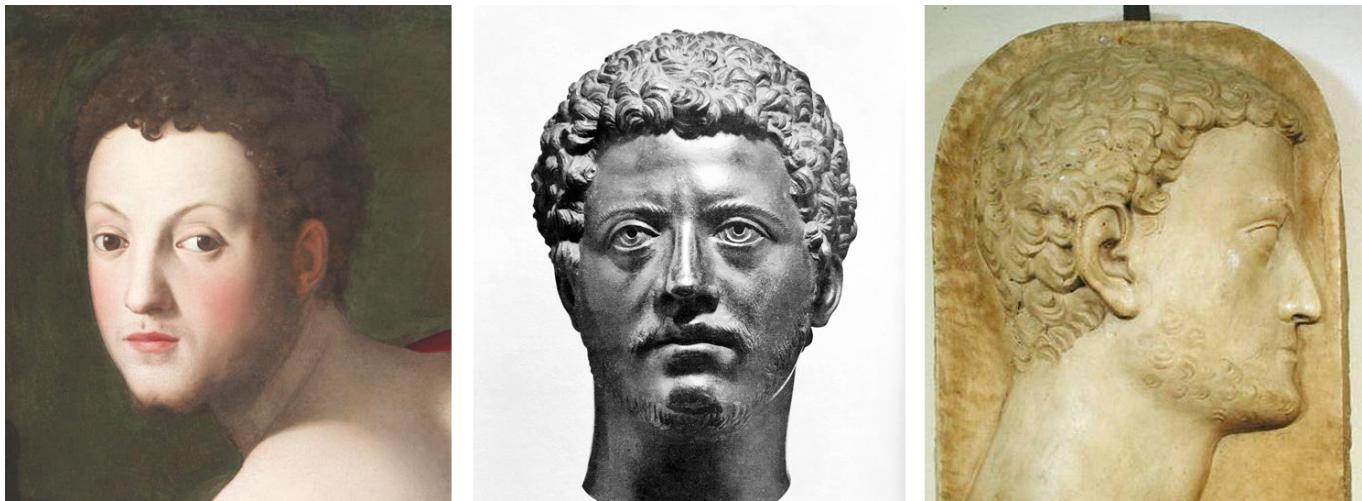


Fig. 02: *Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus* by Agnolo Bronzino, ca. 1537 (Philadelphia Museum of Art) (left); Bronze bust, possibly Cosimo I de' Medici, possibly by Bartolomeo Ammannati (?), ca. 1537-38 (?) (Walters Art Museum) (center); Marble relief portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici, attributed to Baccio Bandinelli, ca. 1540 (Museo Nazionale del Bargello) (right)

and confidence as a capable ruler. Particularly, Cosimo desired to be perceived as a new Augustus, ushering in a Golden Age of prosperity and peace in Florence. This theme was especially emphasized in the sculptural program of Cosimo as Duke of Florence.⁹

The *all'antica* style of the Walter's bust relates to Cosimo's aforesaid visual theme. Sculptors given access to the Medici collection of antiquities provided ample ground to extract the motifs and ideas necessary to portray the Duke in light of Italy's ancient past.¹⁰ Particularly, the Walter's bust may have borrowed from a favorite youthful effigy of Augustus Caesar once owned by Cosimo, now untraced.¹¹ However, an idea of this bust's likeness might relate to an antique bust of Augustus, known in the Bevilacqua Palace in Verona since 1589, which displays a similar temperament and gesture (Fig. 03). It is to be wondered if the Walter's bust may have once been mounted to a classicized torso, carved in marble, and providing

a complete effigy of the ruler in the Classical mediums of both marble and bronze.

Presently, the earliest known portrait bust of Cosimo is a marble example attributed to Bandinelli at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 04).¹² The bust is classicized and exaggerated in an unconventional manner that distinctly anticipates Bandinelli's marble *Adam*. The sharply turned head and overstated features distinguish it stylistically from the Walter's bust although its kinship with Cosimo's program to portray himself *all'antica* is commensurate.

Cosimo's employ of sculptors was less decisive than that of the painters he commissioned for his private and public portraits. However, his early preference for Agnolo Bronzino, above Pontormo, demonstrates his willingness to adopt pupils, over-their-masters, dependent upon circumstance and taste.



Fig. 03: Marble bust of Emperor Augustus with the civic crown, Augustan Age (Glyptothek Munich)

As such, a potential candidate for the Walter's bust might be one of Bandinelli's former pupils like Bartolomeo Ammannati. Ammannati is thought to have trained in Bandinelli's 'academy' between 1523/25-27.¹³ Following a period of activity in Venice, in which Ammannati trained under Andrea Sansovino, and after a brief period in Urbino, Ammannati returned to Florence just prior to Duke Alessandro's death,¹⁴ documented there in the summer of 1536 where he shared a household with fellow artists Battista Franco and

Girolamo Genga.¹⁵ By October 1538, Ammannati briefly left Florence for the Marches where he assisted Genga on several projects for the della Rovere court, returning again to Florence to begin work on his first monumental commission for the tomb of Mario Nari at the Church of the Santissima Annunziata, a project he accomplished between 1540-42, and ill-fated to be disassembled and dispersed by 1565 on account of the moral limitations tested in interring a man in the church who had been slain in a duel.¹⁶

The Nari tomb was Ammannati's first major independent project, presumed commissioned by Nari's Roman family who had ties to Florence. Cosimo's role in the commission remains indistinct although the tomb's presence along the south wall of the S. Niccoló Chapel near the Annunciation altar suggests his involvement given the control he exercised over the church and its activities.¹⁷

In consideration of Cosimo's ambiguous role in the tomb's commission, there should be impetus for such a large program to be given to a sculptor yet-to-establish himself, particularly considering tombs of such scale were still a novelty in Florence at-that-time and would have been a significant contract. It is perhaps in the small hypothetical bronze bust of Cosimo that we have evidence of a growing repertoire between Ammannati and the Duke which precludes or coincides with the commission of Nari's tomb. Such a project could have been realized in the period of Ammannati's Florentine presence following Duke Alessandro's

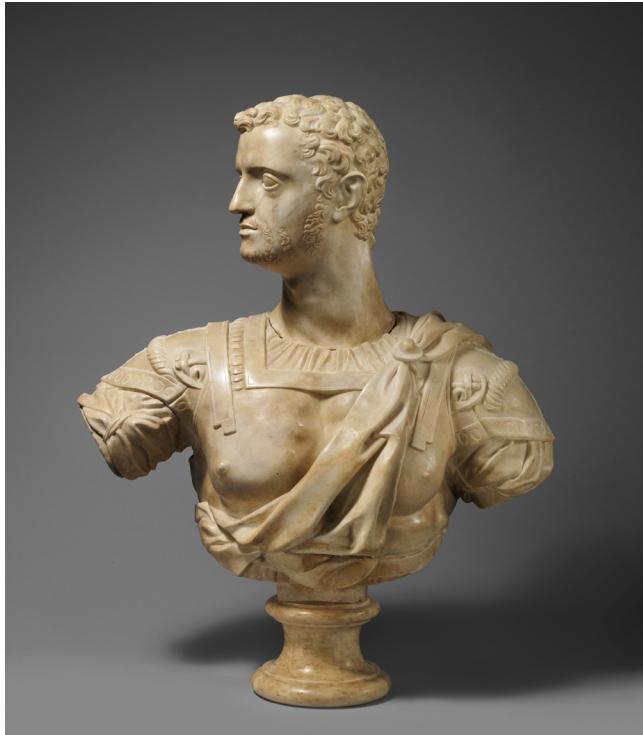


Fig. 04: Portrait bust of Cosimo I de' Medici, attributed to Baccio Bandinelli, ca. 1539-40 (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

assassination up until his brief departure for the Marches, between January 1537 and October 1538; or alternatively upon his return from the Marches to begin work on the Nari tomb sometime after Nari's death in October 1539 until January 1543 where he departs again for Venice.

That the bust corresponds to Cosimo's visage in Bronzino's *Orpheus* painting, ca. 1537-39, could indicate it was conceived in the former period, ca. 1537-38. This earlier dating seems more probable when comparing the bust against Bronzino's slightly later *Portrait of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici in Armor*, of about 1543, in which the Duke's hairline has begun to recede (Fig. 01 left).

It is thought that Ammannati learned his skills in bronze casting while serving a more prominent role in Sansovino's workshop after completing the Nari monument. As mentioned, Ammannati returned to Venice in 1543, there serving Sansovino again until 1545, before relocating, for a time, to Padua. In Venice, Sansovino was occupied with the large bronzes for the Loggetta of San Marco, thus being a probable environs in which Ammannati is thought to have learned or honed his skills with bronze.¹⁸ However, there remains the possibility Ammannati could have earlier acquired a knowledge of bronze work under his tutelage with Bandinelli or his previous activity with Sansovino, or at minimum, a knowledge for preparing models to be cast in bronze.¹⁹ In fact, it may have been earlier successes like the hypothetical Walters bust of the young Cosimo that could have entailed his entitlement to assist Sansovino in such efforts at San Marco.

Theoretically, the Walters bust could anticipate Ammannati's larger monumental projects in bronze and the bust itself may have won young Cosimo's admiration in such a way as to award or influence the commission of the Nari tomb to him.

Although speculative, certain characteristics of the bust are relatable to Ammannati's style as observed on his earlier marble *Saint Nazarius* for the tomb of Jacopo Sannazaro in Naples, made ca. 1537-42, or the figure of the prisoner at Victory's feet on the Nari tomb, completed by August of 1542 (Fig. 05).²⁰

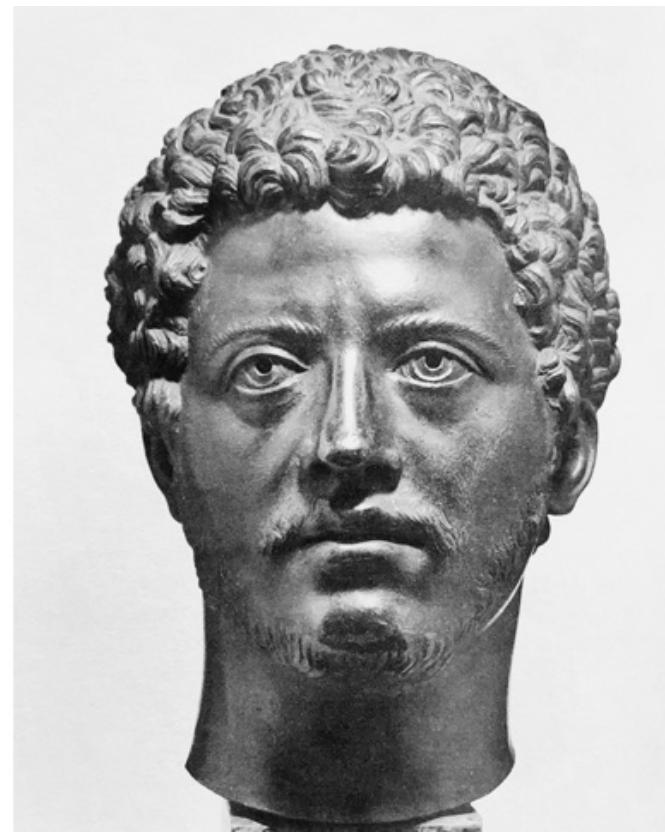


Fig. 05: Detail of a prisoner, Tomb for Mario Nari by Bartolomeo Ammannati, 1540-42 (Museo Nazionale del Bargello) (left); Bronze bust, possibly Cosimo I de' Medici, possibly by Bartolomeo Ammannati (?), ca. 1537-38 (?) (Walters Art Museum) (right)

In particular, there is a consonance with the modeling of Cosimo's hair that figures into Ammannati's later works, like his bronze *Hercules and Antaeus*, whose locks are similarly densely packed, arrayed with elevating and flattening curls-and-coils, although markedly less patterned and voluminous on the Cosimo bust.

If correct, the bronze portrait bust of Cosimo would not only be the earliest known sculptural depiction of Cosimo in-the-round, but also the earliest known bronze by Ammannati.

Ammannati would later create numerous bronzes for Cosimo during the 1550s and beyond. However, there are other artists who may have been equally inclined to produce such a bust, but of whom we know little, like the Florentine Zanobi Lastricati, lauded for his work in bronze and close friend of Cosimo's perfumer, Ciano Compagni, for example.

Endnotes

- 1 Edgar Peters Bowron (1978): *Renaissance Bronzes in the Walters Art Gallery*, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD, pp. 46-47.
- 2 See the *Portrait of a Young Man* by Agnolo Bronzino, on loan from a private collection at the National Gallery of Art, London, UK.
- 3 The slightly fuller, less elongated character of the bronze bust superficially relates to an early portrait of Cosimo's second son, Cardinal Giovanni di Cosimo I de' Medici by Agnolo Bronzino at the Uffizi or may even be compared with some depictions of Cosimo's father, Lodovico de' Medici (called Giovanni dalle Bande Nere), although no contemporary portrait of him, to the present author's knowledge, is known, and the various later depictions of him differ dramatically. Problematic to these suggestions would be the provision of a context in which such a bust would warrant commission on behalf of these individuals. Regarding the latter, the notion of a bust could be hypothetically linked to Ludovico's failed attempt to set up his own fiefdom at Aulla, in the Lunigiana, while in service to the Sforza. However, Giovanni's perpetual problems with debt may have limited the opportunity to commission such a work.
- 4 Benedetto Varchi (1527-38): *Storia Fiorentina di Benedetto Varchi*. Societa Ed. delle Storie del Nardi e del Varchi, 1841. Firenze, vol. 3, pp. 254-56.
- 5 Kurt Forster (1971): Metaphors of Rule. Political Ideology and History in the Portraits of Cosimo I de' Medici. *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 15. Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Max-Planck Institut, pp. 65-104.
- 6 Philadelphia Museum of Art, Inv. 1950-86-1.
- 7 The progression of Cosimo's grooming style is observed in the timeline of portrait medals executed by Domenico di Pero, beginning in the period in which Cosimo had no facial hair.
- 8 Carl Brandon Strehlke (2004): *Pontormo, Bronzino, and the Medici: The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence*. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University Press.
- 9 Stacie Kitchen (2011): *Preferences of Patronage in the Portraits of Cosimo I de' Medici*. PhD thesis. College of the Arts of Kent State University.
- 10 Janet Cox-Rearick (2002): Art at the Court of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici (1537-1574). *The Medici, Michelangelo and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*. Detroit Institute of Arts, Palazzo Strozzi, Art Institute of Chicago., p. 36.
- 11 K. Forster (1971): *op. cit.* (note 5).
- 12 Metropolitan Museum of Art, Inv. 1987.280.
- 13 Charles Davis (1977): The Tomb of Mario Nari for the SS. Annunziata in Florence: The Sculptor Bartolomeo Ammannati until 1544. *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 21, Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Max-Planck Institut, pp. 69-94.
- 14 Ammannati's contemporary and earliest biographer, Raffaello Borghini, notes Ammannati's return to Florence around the time of Duke Alessandro's death. See Raffaello Borghini (1584): *Il Riposo in cui della pittura, e della scultura si favella, de' piu illustri Pittori, e Scultori, e delle piu famose opere loro si fa mentione; e le cose principali appartenenti a detti arti s'insegnano*, In Fiorenza: Appresso Giorgio Marescotti, M. D. LXXXIII, pp. 590-95.
- 15 C. Davis (1977): *op. cit.* (note 13).
- 16 C. Davis (1977): *op. cit.* (note 13).
- 17 Bernice Ida Maria Iarocci (2015): *The Santissima Annunziata of Florence, Medici Portraits, and the Counter Reformation in Italy*. PhD theis. University of Toronto.
- 18 Francesco Caglioti (2011): *Bartolomeo Ammannati. Il Genio Mediceo. L'Acqua, la Pietra, il Fuoco. Bartolomeo Ammannati scultore* (exh. cat. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, 11 May-18 September 2011), Florence, 2011, pp. 404-7, cat. 14.
- 19 Bandinelli, for example, prepared models for bronzes, preferring apparently to outsource their casting. See Volker Krahm (2014): *I Bronzetti di Bandinelli. Baccio Bandinelli. Scultore e Maestro*. Giunti Editore, Firenze, pp. 324-31.
- 20 C. Davis (1977): *op. cit.* (note 13).