Gabrielle Langdon. *Medici Women: Portraits of Power, Love, and Betrayal*
Medici Women: Portraits of Power, Love, and Betrayal by Gabrielle Langdon
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This is a study of Medici women, especially their portraits, read in and against the mythologies of court culture. Gabrielle Langdon reads female portraiture as a pictorial strategy inseparable from other propagandistic programs of the sixteenth-century Florentine court of Duke Cosimo I and his wife, Eleonora di Toledo. Langdon recognizes an intricate and extensive effort to celebrate the legitimacy of Medici rule and to perpetuate the power of the dynasty, asking from the start, “Where, exactly, did women’s portraiture fit in the wider scheme of Medici ambitions and what forms did it take?” (4). Focusing on a selection of portraits painted primarily by Jacopo Pontormo, Agnolo Bronzino, and Alessandro Allori, she suggests that “women’s portraits were ideal vehicles to promote notions of semi-deification or absolutism” (9). Imitating the great European courts, Cosimo consciously created a collection of court portraits in order to underscore his sociopolitical agenda. But this self-promotion was not limited to official portraits of the duke himself: he also understood the very powerful role of Medici women at court as well as their potentially powerful representations. Thus, he commissioned an unusually high number of portraits of girls, and of nubile and widowed women — some official, others private. These include portraits of his mother, Maria Salviati, his wife, Eleonora di Toledo, his daughters, Bia, Maria, Lucrezia, and Isabella, and his two wards, Giulia d’Alessandro de’ Medici and Eleonora “Diana” di Toledo. Cosimo’s clever manipulation of female portraiture seems to have served him well, but, as Langdon keenly argues, his exploitation of the women of the Medici court has failed subsequent generations of viewers. In other words, these are particularly-fashioned portraits that have been informed by personal and political ambitions and biases: this, combined with cultural stereotypes and myths, has often clouded our knowledge of these women. Langdon is committed to exploring the relationship between personality and portrait, rediscovering identities that have long been obscured. By carefully weaving biography and art history, she illuminates the lives of these women, often presenting a picture quite different from that of the court.
The book is divided into seven chapters, each focusing on a different Medici woman, with one chapter devoted entirely to girls: “Bloodlines: Portraits of Maria Salviati de’ Medici by Bronzino and Pontormo,” “Declarations of Dynasty: The State Portrait of Eleonora di Toledo,” “‘These tender and well-born plants’: Young Daughters and Wards of Cosimo and Eleonora,” “A ‘Medici’ Papacy and a Counter-Reformation in Portraiture: Allori’s Giulia d’Alessandro de’ Medici,” “The New Medicean Cosmos: Lucrezia de’ Medici, Duchess of Ferrara,” “Damnatio Memoriae: Isabella de’ Medici Orsini, ‘La stella di casa Medici,’” and “Up Close and Personal: Patronage and the Miniature Eleonora (‘Dianora’) di Toledo de’ Medici.” An introduction offers an overview of the people and politics of Cosimo’s court as well as the codes and canons of sixteenth-century court portraiture, setting the stage for the detailed analyses of personalities and pictures that follow. The suggestive epilogue considers how and why myths and masks continue to inform some of these court portraits. Langdon draws heavily upon archival sources, including letters, diaries, chronicles, and secret ambassadorial briefs, while treatises on artistic practice, and on social relationships and behavior, balance her art historical investigations. Three appendices — a genealogical table of the Medici family, samples of Bronzino’s sonnets, and poetry written by Bernardino Antinori to Eleonora “Dianora” di Pietro de’ Medici — and an extensive bibliography complete the text. The book is well-illustrated, containing sixty-five black-and-white, and sixteen color, plates. In sum, Langdon’s story makes an important contribution to the study of female portraiture. Determined to see through the exploitations of Cosimo’s court, she presents a new picture of Medici women, reminding the reader-viewer of the many faces of court portraiture.

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