Carl B. Strehlke, ed. Pontormo, Bronzino, and the Medici: The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence
Pontormo, Bronzino, and the Medici: The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence by Carl B. Strehlke
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Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Renaissance Society of America
Accessed: 26/01/2015 12:49

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The publication under review is a catalogue for a focused exhibition of the same name held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art on the occasion of the completion of the restoration of Jacopo Pontormo’s portrait of Alessandro de’ Medici. Organized by Carl Brandon Strehlke, Adjunct Curator of the John G. Johnson Collection, the exhibition examines the development of the painted portrait in early sixteenth-century Florence, with Pontormo’s portrait and another choice object from the permanent collections, Agnolo Bronzino’s allegorical portrait of Cosimo de’ Medici, serving as the centerpiece. This provocative pairing of Medici dukes, together with some fifty works of painting, drawing, coins, medals, books, and prints by Pontormo, his pupil Bronzino, and their contemporaries, from collections in six countries, allows for a rare and intimate look at the close relationship between these two artists as well as a new understanding of the ways in which they transformed the portrait during this particularly turbulent time in Florence’s history. Though modest in scale, this is an impressive show, and the accompanying catalogue makes an equally important contribution to our understanding of Renaissance portraiture.

In his thoughtful introductory essay, “Pontormo and Bronzino, For and Against the Medici,” Strehlke offers up a new perspective on Medici portraiture, productively questioning who and/or what established the norm for court painting at this time, and suggestively musing on the self-portrayal of the artists Pontormo and Bronzino. In a much-appreciated gesture, he does not provide another dynastic account of the Medici family, purposefully avoiding powerful, official images to reveal instead a more private, informal picture of the Medici dukes. His emphasis on the anomalous portrait — specifically, a pensive Alessandro shown
sketching the head of a woman in his private chamber and an erotically nude Cosimo posed as Orpheus — underscores the thread of immediacy running throughout the show. That exposure can be read, at times, as a vulnerability: a side of the Medici (and of the Renaissance artist) rarely exhibited, and an invaluable contribution to our understanding of men and masculinities in early sixteenth-century Florence. Indeed, setting the tone for the catalogue entries that follow, Strehlke offers insight into the ways in which Pontormo and Bronzino, as well as Alessandro and Cosimo, “played at being what they are not” (xii).

This notion of doubleness or disguise is further unveiled in Elizabeth Cropper’s lead essay, “Pontormo and Bronzino in Philadelphia: A Double Portrait,” which brings us face to face with these two artists, their artistic collaborations, and social negotiations. In so doing, Cropper draws out several other complex relationships: those between artist and sitter, painting and sculpture, drawing and writing (or poetry), painting and viewer. Let me suggest yet another fruitful exchange: the relationship between catalogue and reader. Cropper’s distinguished account of these unconventional sixteenth-century portraits — especially her close attention to those that contain text, from Pontormo’s Two Men with a Passage from Cicero’s “On Friendship” to Bronzino’s Lorenzo Lenzi — provides a timely interpretive context for the twenty-first-century viewer.

Another collaboration, the two-year joint technical and curatorial examination of Pontormo’s portrait of Alessandro de’ Medici, deserves special mention and, indeed, receives proper recognition in the next essay, “Technique and Pontormo’s Portrait of Alessandro de’ Medici,” by Mark S. Tucker, Irma Passeri, Ken Sutherland, and Beth A. Price. This book is subtitled The Transformation of the Renaissance Portrait in Florence, an apt choice of words considering the painstaking, though successful, conservation program that the cover image and focal point of this exhibition has undergone. Detailed accounts of the support and ground, underdrawing, and paint layers are provided, including analytical and instrumental appendices. This effort, combined with a close examination of the preparatory study for the Philadelphia portrait, now in The Art Institute of Chicago, reveals the working methods of Pontormo and even sheds light on those of Bronzino, especially the former’s traditional reliance upon, and the latter’s relative refusal of (or unconstrained use of), foundational and preparatory drawing.

This is a handsome book, well organized and beautifully illustrated; the addition of a glossary, genealogy of the Medici family, and bibliography complements the solid and important scholarship contained within. Admirable and engaging like the exhibition itself, this catalogue paints a provocative, intimate portrait of two early sixteenth-century painters and their subjects. Raising new concerns about court portraiture, private portrayals, and self-representation, this study is a welcome addition to the field of Renaissance portraiture.

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