COLNAGHI



Cristofano Allori

Portrait of a boy looking down (possibly Cosimo Bonsi) ca. 1595 – 1600

CRISTOFANO ALLORI
(Florence 1577 – 1621)

PORTRAIT OF A BOY LOOKING DOWN (POSSIBLY COSIMO BONSI),
ca. 1595 – 1600

Oil on paper, laid down on canvas
36.5 x 26 cm; 14 3/8 x 10 1/4 in.

Provenance

Private Collection

Literature

Unpublished


254

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This remarkable portrait in oil on paper, distinguished by unusual psychological concentration and a particularly sensitive observation of youth, is proposed here as a significant addition to the portrait oeuvre of Cristofano Allori. Its economy of execution is central to its effect: the sitter's face is brought to a high degree of resolution, while the surrounding passages remain markedly abbreviated. The result retains the immediacy of close observation without assuming the fully resolved appearance of a formal portrait.

The son and pupil of Alessandro Allori, Cristofano was trained within the Florentine tradition inherited from Bronzino, but progressively moved away from his father's late Mannerist language towards a more direct engagement with natural appearance. Portraiture formed a substantial part of this development and of his activity in the Medici environment, and was given particular attention in the fundamental reconstruction of his career.[1]

Young and adolescent faces recur frequently in Allori's graphic work. Particularly relevant are the *Head of a Young Man Turned to the Left and Looking Up* in the Louvre, in black and red chalk (inv. 12302, recto);[2] the red-chalk study of a youth in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest (inv. K.67.148); and the refined *Study of the Head of a Youth with Visor Cap* in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt (inv. 17179 Z), dated to about 1600.[3] The same interest is evident in painting. The early double *Portrait of Francesco and Caterina de' Medici*, now in the deposits at Poggio Imperiale (inv. 505), already shows the directness with which Allori could observe young sitters within the conventions of court portraiture.[4] The *Portrait of a Boy* in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow (inv. Zh-261), traditionally attributed to Cristofano and dated to 1590–1600, provides a further comparison, as does a related youthful head in the Hermitage (inv. GE 4083).

The closest comparison to the work considered here, however, is the small *Portrait of Cosimo Bonsi*, formerly in an English private collection and whose present whereabouts are unknown (fig. 1). Painted on metal and measuring 27.5 × 21 cm, it represents a boy in a black doublet and white ruff beside a table, holding a letter. The sitter is identified by the inscription on the letter and by the Bonsi arms; on the reverse, a near-contemporary inscription records the work as the "Ritratto del Magnifico Sig. Cosimo Bonsi di mano di Cristofano Allori". Chappell placed the

1 Pizzorusso 1982; Chappell 1984.

2 Monbeig Goguel 2005, no. 6.

3 Thiem 1973, pp. 131-137.

4 Chappell 1984, p. 32, cat. 2.

painting among Cristofano's early portraits, noting in its smooth handling and stylization the still perceptible inheritance of Alessandro Allori.[5]

The physiognomic resemblance between Cosimo Bonsi and the sitter in the present oil on paper is close enough to raise the possibility that the two works represent the same individual. The identification cannot presently be demonstrated: the Bonsi portrait is known only through an archival photograph and no independent evidence links the present sheet with the family. Nevertheless, the correspondence of age, facial structure, eyes, nose, and mouth makes Cosimo Bonsi a plausible, if necessarily provisional, identification. If that hypothesis is correct, the relationship between the two works may also clarify the function of the present sheet. The small portrait on metal is a highly finished object suited to private possession, whereas the oil on paper has the immediacy of a first study from the sitter. It may therefore have preceded the finished likeness, recording physiognomy and expression before their translation into a formal portrait. It is also possible that the metal version itself depended upon a larger portrait, now lost or unidentified.

No documentary evidence presently permits such a sequence to be reconstructed, but it is consistent with Allori's demonstrably flexible use of portrait formats and supports.

Oil on paper is securely documented in Allori's practice. Chappell reconstructed a group of rapidly painted *bozzetti* associated with his working process, including examples executed on paper, and recalled Baldinucci's account of the artist continuing to paint with specially adapted equipment even when confined to bed.[6] Allori's portrait practice was equally flexible in scale and support, encompassing canvas, copper and other metal supports, drawings in black and red chalk, and small-format likenesses. Particularly instructive is the miniature *Portrait of a Woman (Francesca Caccini?)* in the Uffizi (inv. 1890 no. 8812; fig. 2), which offers a close technical comparison with the present work.[7] Painted in oil on a small oval copper support, it similarly contrasts a highly finished face with deliberately unresolved clothing, where the grey preparatory layer remains exposed.

[5] Chappell 1984, p. 32.

[6] Chappell 1984, p. 95, cat. 31.1.

[7] Meloni Trkulja 1976, p. 32, cat. 19. Lisa Goldenberg Stoppato has proposed, explicitly as a working hypothesis, that this miniature may represent the composer and singer Francesca Caccini (Goldenberg Stoppato 2018, pp. 47-49). Allori is documented as having painted Caccini: the portrait was celebrated by Gabriello Chiabrera and, more decisively, is recorded after the painter's death in a letter of 15 December 1622, when it remained "molto simile, se bene imperfetto" in the possession of Cristina di Lorena (Florence, Archivio di Stato, Mediceo del Principato 6106, c. 642).



Fig. 1. Cristofano Allori, *Portrait of Cosimo Bonsi*, c. 1595–1600, oil on metal, 27.5 x 21 cm, formerly English private collection, present whereabouts unkown.



Fig. 2. Cristofano Allori, *Portrait of a Woman (Francesca Caccini?)*, 1610–1620, oil on copper, 7.1 x 5.3 cm, Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, inv. 1890 no. 8812

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