

BRONZINO'S  
LODOVICO CAPPONI



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# MEAN BOYS

## Bronzino's Portrait of Lodovico Capponi

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### 1. Etymology

It took fifteen centuries for the Latin word *solus* (alone) to become the English word *sullen*.

First, at some unknowable moment late in antiquity, *solus*—a fairly straightforward adjective—gave birth to a moody derivative, *solanus* (solitary). Then, long after every Roman citizen who'd ever complained (or dreamed) of being *solanus* was ashes and dust, that word, eroded over five centuries on the tips of a hundred thousand tongues, arrived in Old French as *solain*. From there, it was but a short step to the Middle English *soleyn* (solitary, averse to company), which, in 1400 or so, at the beginning of the Renaissance, began to assume its current meaning, “bad-tempered, surly, sulky, pouting, sour, morose.” Once its sense was crystallized, all that was left was for *soleyn* to achieve its modern spelling, which it did around 1550, just around the time when the Italian painter Bronzino was completing his portrait of the Florentine aristocrat Lodovico Capponi.

### 2. “Emotion”

Few portrait sitters are as solitary, as utterly alone, in their rectangles of canvas or wood as those of Bronzino.

People who know about Bronzino like to talk about the lack of emotion in his work. They focus, rather, on the impressively self-conscious formal elegance of both his style and his sitters, singling it out for either praise or blame,



BRONZINO  
Portrait of  
Luca Martini

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*We can no longer accept that the identity of a man can be adequately established by preserving and fixing what he looks like from a single viewpoint in one place.*

—John Berger, 1969

When Henry Clay Frick acquired Bronzino's *Lodovico Capponi* for his new Fifth Avenue mansion in 1915, the portrait's self-assured sitter had neither the name he bears today nor the distinctive accessory that emerges from his black jerkin. An early photograph of the portrait records the overpainting that made his codpiece disappear (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Having evolved from a practical flap of fabric between pant legs, the sartorial expression of male virility became a popular accessory in European men's clothing in the sixteenth century—one that appears in other portraits by Bronzino and his contemporaries (fig. 2)—before falling out of fashion around 1600. In nineteenth-century England, where *Lodovico Capponi* circulated on the market, Bronzino's paintings came to be associated with a kind of “sexual panic”—a discomfort around their erotic potential and the responses they inspired—and a restorer modified the Capponi portrait sometime before the earliest known photograph was published in 1863.<sup>2</sup> Though no other portrait by Bronzino is known to have had a codpiece covered up, in 1860 Bronzino's *Allegory* was also censored (on account of a tongue and a nipple, adding to previous additions of a leafy plant and a garment covering Cupid's bottom and Venus's genitals, respectively) before it entered the collection of London's National Gallery (figs. 3, 4).<sup>3</sup> Suppressing signals of sexuality aligns with Victorian culture, but such actions had already been taking place in Bronzino's time, most famously with

Fig. 5  
Bronzino  
*Cosimo I de' Medici in Armor*,  
ca. 1545  
Oil on panel  
33 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 25 $\frac{5}{16}$  in. (86 × 66.8 cm)  
Art Gallery of New South  
Wales, Sydney; Art Gallery of  
New South Wales Foundation  
Purchase, 1996

Fig. 6  
Bronzino  
*Eleonora di Toledo with Her Son  
Giovanni*, ca. 1545  
Oil on panel  
45 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 37 $\frac{13}{16}$  in. (115 × 96 cm)  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence



Daniele da Volterra's assignment in 1565 to paint over all the genitals in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (only partially removed in the late twentieth century). Frick was known for his somewhat conservative taste in art and never saw his Bronzino in its unedited state. One can only speculate as to whether he would have acquired it if he had. Conservation treatment revealed the codpiece in 1949, thirty years after Frick's death.<sup>4</sup>

Lodovico Capponi's name must have been divorced from the portrait sometime between 1806—when it was listed as a likeness of Lodovico in an





Fig. 12  
Bronzino  
*Laura Battiferri*, ca. 1560  
Oil on panel, 34½ × 27⅞ in. (87.5 × 70 cm)  
Museo di Palazzo Vecchio, Florence; Donazione Loeser

Fig. 13  
Bronzino  
*Luca Martini*, 1554–56  
Oil on canvas, 39¼ × 31¼ in. (101.4 × 79.2 cm)  
Galleria Palatina e Appartamenti Reali, Florence





Figs. 22, 23  
Details of *Lodovico Capponi*  
(frontispiece)

either cuff.<sup>55</sup> Considering Bronzino's ability to capture the details of his sitters' adornments, perhaps best exemplified in his portrait of Eleonora and her son Giovanni (see fig. 6), it is unclear how this minor difference was meant to be seen, if it was an unintended oversight by him or an assistant. It is difficult to reconcile such an idea with the attention to detail demonstrated elsewhere in the composition. If the viewer is meant to look so closely as to be able to read the word *SORTE* on the medal—admittedly a focal point but adjacent to a cuff—the looped edging and its absent counterpart are hard to miss.

No specific verses have been firmly associated with Bronzino's portrait of Lodovico Capponi, but, like many of his portraits, it invites poetic interpretation. The green background has been linked to a Petrarchan reference to youth—the “green age” that Varchi also used in his poem about Lorenzo Lenzi.<sup>56</sup> The sitter's simultaneous revealing and concealing of the medal visualizes a passage from his well-known satirical poem, “The Onion of Bronzino the Painter,” about the work of philosophers: “Just as you saw [the onions] / partly revealing and partly concealing themselves, / so did you do the same with your treasure.”<sup>57</sup> Perhaps yet unidentified allusive verses will shed light on Lodovico's mismatched cuffs, which celebrate the painter's finest touch with the illusion of their stitches.

\* \* \*

Three decades later, Poccetti translated Bronzino's painting into a fresco at Palazzo Capponi-Vettori, testifying to the portrait's lasting appeal. It has been suggested that Lodovico, then in his early fifties, preferred an image of himself in his blossoming youth, representing a time in his life richest in meaning and adventures.<sup>58</sup> For rulers like Duke Cosimo and Duchess Eleonora, the practice of reproducing portraits over time, even as the sitter aged, was customary and reinforced an official, iconic appearance, what has been likened by scholars to a “brand” image.<sup>59</sup> Lodovico's doing so suggests the social stature he perceived himself to have or aspired to have.

The direct precedent for Lodovico's project in the Great Hall of Palazzo Capponi-Vettori are the apartments of Leo X in Florence's Palazzo Vecchio, decorated in 1555–62 by Giorgio Vasari and his collaborators to celebrate the Medici family.<sup>60</sup> Rooms dedicated to prominent members of the family feature scenes of important historical events on the ceilings, and on the walls below are ovals with contemporary portraits, just as Lodovico's Great Hall would have

Fig. 31  
 Bronzino  
*Lodovico Capponi*, ca. 1550–55  
 Oil on panel  
 18½ × 14½ in. (46.8 × 36.8 cm)  
 Private collection

Pocetti may have reverted to Bronzino's thirty-year-old portrait of Lodovico in part out of necessity, in the absence of a more recent image of his patron. In fact, Lodovico commissioned another portrait of himself from Bronzino after the Frick painting, but the artist never completed it. Beginning in 1559, less than a year after his marriage to Maddalena, documentary evidence traces the evolution of a portrait that began as a single portrait of Maddalena, perhaps intended as a pendant to Lodovico's.<sup>65</sup> Over time, references to the project—for which Bronzino was retained for more than a decade—evolved to include Lodovico in it, so that the Maddalena portrait became one of the couple. It is unclear why Bronzino failed to complete it. He and Lodovico continued to be associated through the 1560s, and both were members of the Accademia Fiorentina in the latter half of the decade. The painting was sketched in but unfinished at Bronzino's death in 1572. A 1617 document records a portrait of the couple among the belongings of Lodovico's heirs, but when exactly the portrait was completed—presumably by Bronzino's workshop or that of his successor, Alessandro Allori—and when it was delivered are unknown.<sup>66</sup> Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi was the first to identify this double portrait with a painting today in Strasbourg (see fig. 30).<sup>67</sup> While her theory is not unanimously accepted, and the concept of resemblance in historic European portraits is well known to be problematic, the male figure bears generic resemblance to Lodovico as depicted by Bronzino some decades earlier.<sup>68</sup> He wears a gorget, as in Pocetti's replica. The female figure, on the other hand, can hardly be said to compare with the supposed portrait of Maddalena in Pocetti's fresco (fig. 29). As previously discussed, the mystery of Maddalena's actual likeness is a story unto itself.

A partial replica of the Frick portrait has been known to scholars since the 1950s (fig. 31).<sup>69</sup> It was reassessed as an autograph work after recent conservation treatment. It may be identified as the second of the two portraits of Lodovico listed in his 1555 inventory, which does not specify their respective sizes. If the two versions are indeed the portraits noted in the inventory, they raise the question of function. It has been suggested that the smaller version served as a preparatory work for the larger portrait, and indeed the smaller panel's outlines correspond nearly exactly to those of the Frick portrait. The heads are exactly the same size. However, the smaller panel's contours mirror adjustments made to the Frick painting—specifically changes around the hair at the left and right, indicated by *pentimenti*—making it most

