
Painted Soldiers: An Examination of Armor in 16th Century Portraiture

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The craft of the blacksmith is traditionally beyond the scope of art history; however, armor is an integral component of Western European artistic and social culture. Armor bears witness to the physical attributes of the men who wore it. Its depiction in portraits expressed the sitter's tastes, military prowess, and he wished to be perceived that way. Portraits also provide important information for the study of armor. Many pieces in museum collections are composite suits and some have had extensive reconstruction. Portraits can inform us of the armor's original appearance, about the men who commissioned it and the changing role of armor during the 16th century.



Dosso and Battista Dossi,
Portrait of Alfonso I D'Este, ca. 1530.
Galleria Estense, Modena

The armor in the *Portrait of Alfonso I d'Este* by Dosso and Battista Dossi at the Galleria Estense was likely Italian in origin. The portrait suggests the armor was for use in combat or possibly in tournament. This was indicated by the depiction of large protective plates for the shoulder (generally termed "guardbraces"), and the lance rest – a prong attached to the breastplate that helped to absorb recoil and maintain momentum. Gilded roped edges embellished the plates protecting the shoulders and elbows. Overall it is a subdued level of decoration. For gentlemen of

Alfonso's rank, less decorated suits were associated with competition rather than pageantry.

The *Portrait of Alfonso I d'Este* is a commemorative representation of Alfonso I d'Este. From 1526 to 1527 Alfonso participated in the expedition of Emperor Charles V against Pope Clement VII. In 1530, the same year as Charles V's coronation as Emperor, the Pope recognized Alfonso d'Este as possessor of the Duchies Modena and Reggio. Clearly the armor was completed before the portrait, most likely sometime after the end of hostilities in 1527 and before the establishment of the gallery in 1529. Dated to circa 1530 the portrait was likely commissioned for Alfonso's private gallery. Alfonso's armor and the symbolic mace in his right hand indicate his regained authority and generalship.



Titian, Portrait of Alfonso d'Avalos, Marchese del Vasto, 1533. Getty Center

The armor depicted in the *Portrait of Alfonso d'Avalos* is in the elaborate strapwork pattern of decoration popular in the mid-to late 16th century. In armor, the etched and gilded decoration consisted of alternating vertical bands of strapwork enclosing cartouches. These in turn contained allegorical figures, classical warriors, and trophies. The pattern radiated from the waist and continued throughout the suit and helmet. The style was produced, with substantial variation, in both Northern and Southern European armor centers. This suit was likely produced in Milan, possibly by Pompeo della Cesa who favored the style.

This portrait with a plain background was indicative of Titian's earlier portraits. Titian's portraits of military men are widely considered expressions of authority and military prowess rather than giving insight into personality. The portrait indicates little of Avalos' reputation for being arrogant, greedy, and cruel. Titian infused a certain sternness to many of his portraits of

military figures. This is equally apparent in Titian's later *Portrait of Francesco Maria I della Rovere* at the Galleria degli Uffizi.



Titian, *Francisco Maria I della Rovere*, 1536-1538. Galleria degli Uffizi

Machiavelli noted Francesco Maria I della Rovere for his military prowess and praised him for his success in recapturing Urbino in 1517. Immortalized in the *School of Athens* by Raphael of 1509 to 1510 and nephew to Pope Julius II, Francesco Maria della Rovere was well positioned in Italian politics. The armor in the *Portrait of Francesco Maria I della Rovere* could be either parade or light cavalry. The portrait, dated between 1536 and 1538, lends evidentiary support to dating the armor depicted therein to between 1529 and 1535. The portrait also serves in establishing the provenance of several armor elements in collections throughout Europe. The prominent oak leaf-clusters-and-acorn motif that appear in the portrait firmly identify the armor as belonging to a member of the della Rovere family.

The armor as depicted is beguiling for its restrained decoration. The primary means of decoration was the gold leaf used on the oak leaf rosettes on the small round plates protecting the area between the arm and the upper chest (generally termed a "besagew"). Della Rovere did not sit, or in this case stand, for the portrait. Rather, the armor was sent to Titian in Venice for its depiction. In this case, the portrayal of armor seems more important than that of the individual.



Atelier of Francois Clouet, *Henry II on Horseback*, ca. 1547. Bearsted Collections, Upton House

A similar concern for the portrayal of armor is the *Henry II on Horseback* by the Atelier of Francois Clouet (b. 1536 – d. 1572), of ca. 1547 at Upton House. The armor in the portrait is one of the few armors with certain provenance to Henry II of France. The armor is Milanese in origin. The sculptural form of the scrollwork suggests the work of Giovan Paolo Negroli. Interestingly, the armor is devoid of any royal insignia. Yet the provenance of the armor was established by several portraits in which Henry II wore the armor. The portrait provides a contemporary illustration of the armor's original appearance. Recorded is the original gorget, now missing. The portrait also portrays the original waist plate, embossed with a downward-pointing row of gilt leaves. The breastplate was evidently originally longer, with more metal below the mask at its base. The etched band of foliage around the neck includes a grotesque figure in the center, whereas on the present truncated breastplate, the head is now missing.

The date of the portrait has direct bearing on the dating of the armor. Henry's appearance with short hair and a close-cropped beard correspond to other portraits dated to 1547. The armor would thus seem to date to Henry's last years as dauphin, before 1547. The lack of royal insignia on the armor supports an early date of ca. 1545.



Titian, *Charles V at the Battle of Mühlberg*, 1547. Museo del Prado

Although an equestrian portrait, the image of Henry in armor is a display of wealth and artistic refinement, indicating little of any military ability. However, in the *Portrait of Emperor Charles V at the Battle of Mühlberg* by Titian at the Prado, the depiction of a military leader was paramount. Completed in 1548, the painting

itself commemorated Charles' victory at the battle of Mühlberg in 1547, ending the Schmalkaldic War.

Titian seems to have intentionally referenced Germany's medieval past for the Holy Roman Emperor. For instance, by the sixteenth-century mail as a protective element was antiquated. Furthermore, the presentation bears similarities to established Saint George imagery. The image of Charles V in armor, mounted and holding a long spear, seems based upon the conventional depiction of Saint George, for instance *Saint George and the Dragon* by Raphael of ca. 1506 at the National Gallery of Art.



Raphael, *Saint George and the Dragon*, ca. 1506.
National Gallery of Art

The popularity of Saint George, patron saint of arms and chivalry, is generally dated to the time of the Germanic kingdoms in the early medieval period. Saint George was presented as a warrior saint with whom the Germanic rulers could associate and was highly popular throughout the territories Charles would later control.

The Kingdom of Aragon was placed under the patronage of Saint George in gratitude for his supposed assistance during the reign of King Pedro II. From this the Order of Saint George of Alfama was established in 1201. The order was succeeded by the Confraternity of Saint George founded under Emperor Maximilian I, with the approval of Pope Alexander VI, in 1494 – though the Order disappeared during the disturbances of the sixteenth century.

During Charles V's reign, the saint was the patron saint of several towns, including Antwerp, where the church of Saint George was closely associated with Saint George's Militia. The militia was the preeminent military organization in the city and a crucial factor in the city's civic identity (Meadow 4). It was the force

that ensured the rights and privileges garnered and protected by the Antwerp administration at each investiture of a new ruler – including that of Charles V (Meadow 4). The emperor’s depiction in the manner of Saint George may have served as a statement of his sovereignty over such cities. This was a significant message in the years between 1547 and before Philip II’s inheritance of much of Charles V’s territorial possessions including Antwerp in 1555.

The armor in the portrait is widely believed to be the last armor worn by Charles V in battle. The portrait lent the name “Mühlberg” to the armor. However, the suit was likely commissioned four years prior possibly to commemorate the favorable Treaty of Crépy of September 18, 1544, the latest in a series of truces during the prolonged Hapsburg-Valois War.

Unlike most suits during the sixteenth century, it was never blued. The polished steel likely increased the combatants’ awareness of Charles’ presence rather than diminishing it. The strap-work style decoration was restrained but in keeping with the others commissioned by Charles.

The portrait is one of the most important images in art history and often cited for its historical accuracy. Among the elements that appear in the portrait, are the triple-crested comb burgonet, lance, and wheel lock pistol (pistolet numbered K51 in the *Real Armería*). Together these formed an innovative type of armament referred to as “herreruelos,” a term credited to Nuñez de Alba in his *Diálogos del Soldado* that discussed the 1547 campaign (Calvert 100-1). Together these armaments bridged the medieval past and the modern era.

The inclusion of the double-barreled wheel lock pistol in the portrait is interesting. The firearm depicted by Titian was reportedly used by Charles V at the battle. The wheel-lock mechanism was developed in Germany at the beginning of the 16th century. Its complicated and delicate mechanism attracted rich noblemen. Its invention had a profound influence on the social life of the period. For civilians, the pistol became the weapon most commonly used for personal attack or defense. The wheel lock, with its instant ignition, made it attractive for use by the cavalry. Firearms played an important role in the conquest of Granada in 1492 and at the battle of Cerignola in 1503, both under the command of Gonzalo de Córdoba, the “*Gran Capitán*.” Firearms proved their value at the battle of Pavia in 1525. For the military,

the wheel-lock pistol restored some of the cavalry's value in battle, providing a means of defense against the long pike. Among the oldest wheel lock pistols known are those that belonged to Charles V, made in Southern Germany from 1530 to 1550 and now in the Royal Armory in Madrid.

Men were rarely portrayed with firearms during the sixteenth century. Its inclusion here could be interpreted as a reference to Charles' interest in wheel locks but also indicating the changing nature of battle. Gunpowder brought major changes to battlefield tactics, fortification techniques, logistics, and finance. Titian's references to Saint George and the inclusion of the firearm reveals more about Charles V's personality than in previous paintings, but may also represent Charles' reign as bridging the medieval and modern eras. Charles V wanted to be immortalized as a great military leader, indeed one of the last kings to take to the battlefield, and Titian captured that image. The portrait has served to establish the provenance of this armor as well as to date the *Inventario Iluminado*, a contemporary inventory of Charles V's armory.



Mor, *Portrait of Philip II*, ca. 1557. El Escorial

Philip II of Spain, son and heir of Charles V, inherited Charles' taste for fine armor and predilection for symbolism. The portrait *Philip II* by Sir Anthony Mor at the Escorial was commissioned to commemorate the Spanish victory at San Quentin on August 10, 1557. Philip was depicted in the armor he had worn at, or actually nearby, the battle of San Quentin, thus providing a historical basis for the image of a successful military

leader. However, this image is largely false. Philip took no part in the battle led by Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, third Duke of Alba. Philip inherited little of his father's aptitude for military leadership but much of the Hapsburg love of armor.

The armor in this portrait is representative of the increasingly decorative rather than functional nature of armor, enlisting the qualities of jewelry for the status-minded. In this portrait, the armor is used as a symbol of authority. Philip was depicted in an incomplete suit of armor. The only elements of a complete suit pictured are the gorget, breast and backplates, and a portion of armor protecting the lower torso (technically a single fauld with five tassets). Philip was also shown with seemingly all of the symbols of authority: sword, baton, and dagger. These items appear frequently in Philip's portraits after 1556, the year of his coronation, and support the 1557 dating of the portrait. The depiction of pieces of plate armor would become widespread during the following centuries.

The steady decline of the use of armor as a functional element of the battlefield was in proportion to its increased relevance as a symbol of authority and affluence. Though firearms would profoundly alter combat, elements of armor would be used as symbolic devices for centuries to come. The scholarly examination of armor contributes not only to our definition of art, but also to our shared knowledge of Western Europe's social and cultural legacy.

Works Cited

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