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Bronzino's *Pygmalion and Galatea: l' antica bella maniera*

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For Craig H. Smyth, *in memoriam*

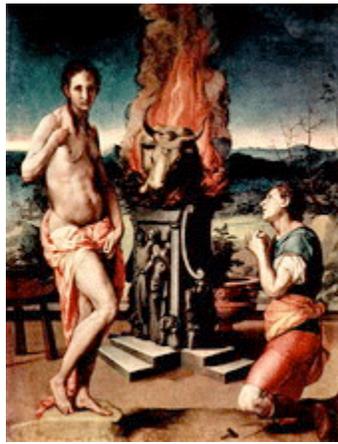


Figure 1

This essay examines the complex history and symbolism of Agnolo Bronzino's *Pygmalion and Galatea* of 1530, now in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (Fig. 1). In the *Vita* of Pontormo, Vasari recalls how Pontormo, at the time of the siege of Florence, executed a portrait of Francesco Guardi in the costume of a soldier, which was a very beautiful work; and afterwards on the cover of this picture, [how his pupil, Agnolo di Cosimo di Mariano, nicknamed] Bronzino [because of his dark complexion] painted *Pygmalion praying to Venus that his statue, receiving breath, might spring to life and become, as it did—according to the fables of the poets—flesh and blood.*<sup>[1]</sup>

From Vasari's writing two significant statements are to be considered: (1) the interconnection between two images painted by two different artists—Pontormo's portrait of a soldier and Bronzino's mythological tale; (2) the mythological scene was painted after the portrait in order to cover its image.

The purpose of a portrait cover, like painted reverse sides, is to provide a moral allegory to the image. Because of the physical

changes in the size of the paintings, it is not possible to figure out how these two paintings were connected; perhaps they were placed next to each other in the form of a diptych as in Ridolfo Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of a Woman* of 1510 at the Uffizi with the cover with an enigmatic motto from Seneca, "*Sua Cuique Persona.*"<sup>[2]</sup> Or Bronzino's paintings were superimposed on each other as one panel sliding into another with hinges to hide or reveal the portrait.

Bronzino's *Pygmalion and Galatea* of 1530 is painted with oil on panel and covered Pontormo's *Portrait of Francesco Guardi*, also called the *Halberdier*, of 1529, also an oil painting on panel, but now transferred to canvas, presently located at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles (Fig. 2).



Figure 2

The survival history of these two paintings is intriguing. First, they were part of the Medici collection at the Uffizi. In 1612, they were still in Florence since they are recorded in the Riccaridi's family inventory. In 1644, the paintings were listed in the inventory of the Barberini collection in Rome. But during World War II, they were confiscated by Hitler and moved to Linz to be housed in the new Führer Museum. During 1984-1988, the Siviero's Recuperation Program found them, and in 1988 the painting of Bronzino's *Pygmalion and Galatea* was returned to the State of Florence. But the whereabouts of Pontormo's *Portrait of Francesco Guardi* were not known until 1989 when it was purchased by the Getty Museum at a Christie's sale in London. For Pontormo's

painting, the Getty Museum paid more than thirty-two million dollars.

A drawing at the Uffizi (6701 F.r.) reveals the compositional changes undertaken by Pontormo in the final painting. The turning of the body creates a 3/4-view portrait and the background depicts the city wall or bastion colored in dark green. At the age of sixteen, the young Guardi, as his name indicates, “guards” the city and his lands at the La Piazzuola, near San Miniato, during the Florentine siege, when heavy artillery threatened the walls of San Miniato. Guardi is depicted elegantly dressed as a soldier, holding a long lance, with short hair and wearing a red “*berrette*.”<sup>[3]</sup> The medallion in the *berrette* depicts Hercules and Antenus alluding to the triumph of Florence as Hercules, symbol of Florence, raises Antenus, symbol of vice, from the ground, defeating him. Pontormo is inspired by Pollaiuolo’s *Hercules and Antenus* of 1490, now in the Frick collection, in New York City.

According to Alessandro Cecci, Francesco Guardi was born on April 29 in 1514 in the Borgo La Croce. During his lifetime, he received numerous civil appointments, including membership in the Council of the Dugento. Through his family’s patrimony, Guardi owned several acres, such as il “Palagietto” in via Ghibellina, l’Orto alla “Matonaia,” and “La Piazzuola” near San Miniato (later on converted to Piazzale Michelangelo by Michelangelo). With the sack of Rome in 1527, the Medici family was cast out from Florence and a republic was established. In 1530, the imperial Germanic troops of Charles V besieged Florence, nullified the republic and established a duchy with the return of the Medici. In 1556, recalling this ordeal, Vasari depicts a panoramic view of the Florentine blockade in the Palazzo Vecchio.

In Pontormo’s painting, Guardi is placed in front the walls of San Miniato, thus protecting his family lands during the Florentine siege and defending the Republic. The elegant and beautiful portrayal of this figure alludes to two aspects of guarding: one is civic, denoted by the soldier’s attire; and the other is angelic, revealed by the expression and beauty of the figure.<sup>[4]</sup> After the fall of the Republic, this type of portrait alluding to the “*bella gioventù* ready to die to defend the liberty of the city,”<sup>[5]</sup> was compromising, thus concealing it with a cover would be simpler and safer for the patron rather than destroying the painting. As Vasari notes, Bronzino painted the portrait cover after the siege of 1530.

However, Bronzino translates Pontormo's visual civic sentiment in the cover painting, *Pygmalion and Galatea*, by rendering in the background a gloomy landscape with icy and blue tonalities attesting to the Germanic devastation in Florence. Thus in view of the civic connection between the painting and its cover, or the portrait and its mythological curtain, it is intriguing to understand its signification as well as the covered moral intention or other didactic message revealed in the painting.

In *Metamorphoses*, X 238-297, Ovid describes Pygmalion's love story as an imaginative impulse to mold a love object to one's own desire. The sculptor Pygmalion, disgusted by the wanton behavior of the women of Cyprus, had sworn never to marry. He pours his longing for a purer beauty into carving an ivory statue of a woman. Pygmalion's creation assumes a form so lovely and lifelike that he promptly falls in love with her (*ars adeo latet arte sua*). On the feast of Venus, the Goddess of Love, he clothes the statue; lays her on feather pillows; brings her gifts of shells, pebbles, birds, flowers and amber; and caresses her with such passion that he is afraid to bruise her limbs. Venus hears his prayers and takes pity on him. The ivory softened and grew warm, veins throbbed at his kiss and the statue's eyes opened.

The Pygmalion legend also fits neatly into Bronzino's understanding of artistic creativity as dependent on past art, since this saga is associated with a long tradition of images. The legend, originally based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is elaborated in the Middle Ages in *The Roman de la Rose* and subsequently in *Ovid moralise*, works which were frequently illustrated with woodcuts and miniatures, such as *Pygmalion and Galatea*, a miniature of 1370 at the Pierpont Morgan Library, and Christine de Pizan's *Pygmalion and Galatea* in *Cent hystories de troyes* of 1480, a woodcut in the Bibliotheque National, Paris.<sup>[6]</sup> Unlike Pizan, and like the artist of the *Roman de la Rose*, Bronzino focuses on Pygmalion as supplicant and sculptor, as tools of the trades are found all around the foreground of the painting. Perhaps Bronzino is paralleling the instruments of art used by Pygmalion as the instruments of war utilized by Pontormo's soldier whose portrait is being covered. The simple attire of the sculptor, in particular the boots of the sculptor, recalls Raphael's portrait of Michelangelo as Heraclitus of 1510 in the *School of Athens* of the Stanza della Segnatura. Bronzino also borrows the supplicant pose of

Pygmalion from his teacher Pontormo's *San Francis of the Pala Pucci* of 1518 in San Michael Visdomini, Florence. For the figure and stance of Galatea's *figura serpentinata*, Bronzino is also indebted to Pontormo, as seen in a Pontormo's sepia drawing of *Venus and Cupid* of 1515 in the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, compositionally derivative in turn of Michelangelo's *David* of 1501-04 at the Accademia.

By using elongated figures, *figura serpentinata*, sinuous rhythms and unreal color schemes, forms evolve from reality but are transformed into fantasy.<sup>[7]</sup> The translation into an unreal space with no perspectival structure enhanced the ambiguity of that reality. Bronzino's *Pygmalion and Galatea* clearly embodies the Mannerist aesthetic ideals expounded by Benedetto Varchi in the *Due Lezzioni* or *Paragone* of 1547.

In the *Due Lezzioni* of 1547, Benedetto Varchi defined the intention of artistic creation of Mannerist artists as "an artificial imitation of nature."<sup>[8]</sup> The Mannerist painter strove to create an image of beauty by surpassing nature, arousing a spiritual emotion, thus creating an aesthetic ideal. With Neoplatonic doctrine in mind—"beauty consists of a certain charm" as something spiritual that transcends sensual experience and that makes us long for the origin of what we perceive—the Mannerist painters, such as Pontormo and Bronzino, emphasize the ideal beauty in the mind of the artist rather than the reproduction of beauty discovered in nature.<sup>[9]</sup>

The Mannerist moral quest for aesthetic gave great importance to invention. Michelangelo's conception of love and beauty is reflected in his Rime 41: "Love seizes me and beauty keeps me bound."<sup>[10]</sup> The sixteenth century sculptor finds that love is the wish to find the origin of its source—the essence of beauty—because the image is in the artist's mind, which will be eventually carved in marble—as observed in Bronzino's *Pygmalion and Galatea*. Also Vasari made beauty one of the critical components of art in the Preface of *The Lives of the Artists* (1550-1568).<sup>[11]</sup>

The eclecticism of Bronzino's style is further revealed when comparing the *Pygmalion and Galatea*'s foreground composition with Andrea del Sarto's *Annunciation* of 1512 at the Galleria Palatina in Florence. For example, in an open courtyard, two figures frame an altar. In Sarto's painting, it is Mary and the Angel who surround the tabernacle; in Bronzino's imagery, it is Galatea

and Pygmalion who frame the ancient sacrificial altar. However, he might also have considered the genre scene of Lucas van Leyden's copper engraving of the *Milkmaid* of 1510, at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, for the compositional arrangement of representing male and female framing a bull in a landscape. In sum, Bronzino fuses religious and pagan compositions to depict his tale. Although there might be a certain understanding about the stylistic and historical connections of the depiction of Bronzino's painting, still there is a lack of clarity in its symbolism.

Clarity might be found if one addresses the parallelism of transformation and appropriation of the ancient philosophical sources such as Horace's *ut pictura poesis* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in Bronzino's *Pygmalion and Galatea* as well as in his related literary expression. For example, the parallelism of transformation is observed between Venus' creation and divine intervention in making the ideal (Beauty) into the real (Galatea) as the sculptor Pygmalion transforms and creates from a mass of stone a sculptural figure. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are paralleled with the representation of a material form although an idealized image into the expression of a spiritual sentiment—love. The transmutation is from physical matter to form; creation of form to ideal; expression of the ideal to sentiment and sentiment of love into the aesthetic of beauty.

Furthermore, Bronzino utilizes the amorous tale of Pygmalion and Galatea to focus on the theme of artistic creativity, and perhaps more characteristically, to reveal the very anxiety associated with artistic inspiration, that *furor poeticus* which informs the creative act. The poetic imagination of his creation and the manner in which he embodies them in his visual imagery created a work of art which contained beauty of form and color as well as "a powerful and overwhelming originality, and an unequal grace and delicacy of fancy"<sup>[12]</sup>—a Mannerist conceit. In his writings, Vasari relates the concept of *furor poeticus* to the creation of visual arts and says: "Many painters...achieve in the first design of their work, as though guided by a sort of inspirational fire, something of the good and a certain measure of boldness, but afterwards, in finishing it, the boldness vanishes."<sup>[13]</sup>

In a symbolic level, Pontormo's portrait alludes to the art of war through the depiction of a soldier in arms, guarding the city walls. The red coloration of his *berrette* and codpiece reflects the

violent struggle of Hercules and Antenus in the *berrette's* medallion, or the passion for freedom, civic patriotism and the youth's furor. Francesco Guardi was, after all, only 16 years old when he became a soldier. Pontormo's symbolic "external fire" is internalized in Bronzino's portrait cover, for example, in the depiction of a love tale between Pygmalion and Galatea and Mars and Venus (relief in the altar's base) as well as the sacrificial fire of the bull Apis.

In the sixteenth century, the importance of the study of human nature extended to the study of the elements, such as fire, water, air and earth, in association to cosmological implications or astrological signs. Treatises on alchemy emphasized the interaction and transformation of natural elements, for example, in *Aura consurgens*, an early 16th century text:

the fire gives form and makes everything perfect, as it is written: "He blows into his face the real of life... the fire makes subtle all earthly things that serve matter... Nothing that is heavy can be made light without help of the lighting thing. And the light things cannot be pressed down without the presence of the having thing. [Then,] make the body spiritual and what is fixed makes volatile."<sup>[14]</sup>

Furthermore, astrological texts connected human behavior with the zodiac signs and constellations: for example, an individual born in the Spring under the sign of Mars rules Aries and the element of fire, providing a person with passion, vitality and intense energy. The attributes of Mars are the lance and instruments of warfare.<sup>[15]</sup> Perhaps Pontormo envisions Francesco Guardi as an image of Mars, the God of War, while Bronzino's painting relates to Venus, the Goddess of Love, an antidote to Mars and war. The planet Venus rules the house of Taurus whose attribute is the bull, a symbol of earth and fertility, providing a person with vigor, strength and natural energy or rebirth.<sup>[16]</sup> The connection between Mars and Venus is depicted in the altar's relief, alluding to parallel connections and transformation, such as Venus transforming the fury of Mars into love, and Pygmalion transforming the amorphous stone into a figure, Galatea. In Bronzino's painting, the relief depicts Mars embracing Venus while she gazes at the held apple of discord, recalling the Judgment of Paris. The inscription on the altar "*Heu Vicit Venus*" affirms Venus' victory. The desolated and icy landscape, as well, will be

transformed into a fertile area as plants begin to show signs of springtime and the horizon suggests the sunset of the vernal season.

Perhaps the *clavis interpretandi* to Bronzino's painting is the depiction of the bull. According to antiquity, the cult of the bull considered the animal to have two natures because of its fertilizing powers: earthly and celestial. This creates an ambivalent nature of the symbolism of the bull, in its complex symbolism of fertility as a primordial creature—horn, sky, water, lightning and rain. At times, the bull embodies the masculine procreative power, the solar generative force, strength or warriors, royalty and the Sky Gods. But the bull may also represent the earth and the humid and seminal power of rain, so it becomes associated with the lunar Great Mother, the feminine generative force of nature. According to the ancient historians, Herodotus and Plutarch, the bull or Apis is one of the most revered animals in Egypt. Apis as a sacred bull is the result of a virgin birth since a ray of generative light from the moon falling on the cow, his mother, conceived him.<sup>[17]</sup> Conventionally, the bull, as a sacred animal, is often placed standing alone on an altar as depicted by Bronzino. In the painting, Bronzino also portrays a parallel between Apis' magical firing powers and Pygmalion's artistic passion. As the sacrificial offer (the bull) is burning, Pygmalion supplicates for his artistic form (Galatea) to be transformed into a natural figure. While pleading for divine intervention, Pygmalion does not realize the magical process of transformation that is occurring as the bull gazes at the generative power of Galatea infusing her with furor, or animated powers of life, and transforming her from an inanimate object, a statue, into a human form. Thus the divine's creative power converts the artist's creation of a statue into a natural form.

The separation from the natural realm depicted in the background of the painting in the form of a landscape with a sunset is contrasted with the artistic realm of fantasy. Inanimate forms can be metamorphosed into symbolic forms with cultural and didactic meanings as burning desires and passion can be purified. Artistic language can be transformed into paintings or sculptures, where the laws of one or the other can merge as the artist transforms a three-dimensional structure, a statue, into a two-dimensional design, a relief or a painting. The magic of art rests with the viewer whose perception embodies a painting or a

sculpture with enchanting powers. With Pygmalion and Galatea, Bronzino creates more than a portrait cover for the painting of his master; he transforms the art of war depicted in Pontormo's Portrait of Francesco Guardi into the art of love, a tale about magic and fantasy.

### Notes

1. See Vasari 6: 275.
2. See Seneca, *De beneficiis*, II, 17 and Quintilian, *Institutiones*, v, 12, cited in Cecchi 123.
3. See Cropper, "Entry on Pontormo's Portrait of Francesco Guardi," in Cecchi 376.
4. See Costamagna 233-36; Cropper 376, and Berti 152-57.
5. See Brock 54.
6. See Eschenburg 13-54, for a discussion on the history of Pygmalion and art.
7. For a discussion on the Mannerist style, consult Smyth; Shearman; Freedberg, Summer, "Maniera" 209-311; and De Girolami Cheney, *Readings in Mannerism*.
8. See Mendelsohn, 9 and 113. Benedetto Varchi (1503-1565) was a Florentine historian, poet, and philologist. The book of the *Due Lezzioni* is based on Varchi's lectures delivered before the Accademia Fiorentina in 1547 and published in 1549 by the Florentine press Ap. L. Torrentino.
9. See Ficino, *Symposium*, I. 3. in *Opera*. For an understanding of Mannerist art theory, see Summers, *The Judgment of Sense*, *passim*, and for a study on the impact of Marsilio Ficino's Neoplatonism and Renaissance art, see De Girolami Cheney, *Botticelli's Neoplatonic Images*, *passim*.

[10.](#) See Barasch, 190-199, for a discussion of Michelangelo's concept of beauty in relation to Neoplatonism.

[11.](#) See Vasari 4: 5-7.

[12.](#) See Bell 70.

[13.](#) See Vasari 5: 260, and De Girolami Cheney, *Homes* 94 & 97.

[14.](#) Quoted in Roob 363.

[15.](#) See de Mailly Nesle 130-31.

[16.](#) See de Mailly Nesle 134-35.

[17.](#) See Cooper 43.

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