A Merchant-Banker's Ascent by Design: Bartolomeo Bettini’s Cycle of Paintings by Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino for His Florentine Camera

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A Merchant-Banker’s Ascent by Design:
Bartolomeo Bettini’s Cycle of Paintings by Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino for His
Florentine Camera

By
Richard Aste

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the
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Abstract

A Merchant-Banker’s Ascent by Design: Bartolomeo Bettini’s Cycle of Paintings by Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino for His Florentine Camera

By

Richard Aste

Advisor: James M. Saslow

This project examines the early art patronage of a sixteenth-century Florentine merchant-banker, Bartolomeo Bettini, an ambitious anti-Medici Republican with aristocratic pretensions. Bettini was a nobleman, but he aspired to join the city’s elite patrician class, and about 1532 he commissioned Florence’s leading painters to decorate a camera, or private chamber, in his family palazzo. Through his first major commission, a cycle of paintings by Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino, he began his ascent through the city’s slippery social order. Florence’s hierarchy was then being redefined by the newly reinstalled Medici in the wake of the siege of Florence and collapse of its two-hundred-and-fifty year Republic. This study takes Bettini’s decorative program as a starting point for a comprehensive view of conspicuous consumption and domestic display as social strategies for securing status in early ducal Florence. Chapter 1 addresses Bettini, his life, his social network of friends and neighbors, and his politics; chapter 2 his celebrated painters, their careers, their politics, and their interest in love and language (major themes of Bettini’s program); chapter 3 Bettini’s program, the extant paintings and preparatory drawings, and the program’s iconography; and chapter 4 the social role of a private interior—here, either a bedroom or a private study, both of which will be discussed—in elevating the owner’s status in Renaissance Florence.
Current scholarship on Bettini’s cycle of paintings has focused on decoding the program’s complex incomography, particularly the meaning of the Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus and Cupid panel painting, within the rich context of Florentine artistic and literary circles in the mid-sixteenth century. Indeed, debates about the city’s official language (Tuscan versus Latin) and theories of love are at the very heart of Bettini’s program. Yet few scholars have successfully addressed the cycle as a whole, including the poet portraits painted by Bronzino to fill the camera’s lunettes. Designing an erudite program was essential for this ambitious merchant-banker and his social ascent, but Bettini’s patronage also reveals his desire to align himself through the arts with the city’s rulers and leading tastemakers, the Medici, regardless of diverging politics. Bettini serves as a case study in understanding how even at home wealthy Florentine Republicans asserted their power and made their identity in a new ducal society.
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Introduction

Bartolomeo è uomo da bene e servente e d’assai, ma non è nostro pari,

e tu ài la tua sorella in casa e’ Guicciardini.

–Michelangelo Buonarroti

In about 1532 Bartolomeo Bettini (d. 1551/52), a noble Florentine merchant-banker with patrician pretensions, commissioned the city’s leading painters to create what would become one of the most influential decorative programs of the sixteenth century. He carefully selected Michelangelo (1475-1564), Jacopo da Pontormo (1494-1556), and Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572)

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2 Bartolomeo’s birthdate remains undocumented; however, Benedetto Varchi’s identification of him as one of the assembled giovani armed to defend the Florentine Republic in 1530 suggests a birth date between 1494 and 1512. Bettini’s date of death is established in a letter from Sebastiano Uberto in Ravenna to Michelangelo in Rome of 2 January 1552, in which he laments the recent loss of Bettini, his friend and notary. See Buonarroti, *Il carteggio*, vol. 4, 370-71. Throughout this study, I will use the sixteenth-century spelling “Bartolomeo,” rather than the modern Italian “Bartolommeo.”

to execute a cycle of paintings for a *camera*, or private chamber, in his Florentine palazzo. The program was complex and timely, featuring images of Venus, Cupid, and Tuscan poets inspired by *amore* as veiled references to contemporary debates about love and language (see chapter 1). Bronzino painted poet portraits for the room’s lunettes. Those of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio were recorded by Vasari in 1568 (two are untraced; see Fig. 1). Pontormo painted the room’s centerpiece, a large *Venus and Cupid* panel (Fig. 2) based on Michelangelo’s design for his last female nude (untraced; see Fig. 3).

Bettini’s program, however, was never completed, and by 1534 it was abandoned when the tyrannical Duke Alessandro de’ Medici (1511-1537; Fig. 4) took the *Venus and Cupid* from Pontormo’s studio. That year Michelangelo quit Florence for Rome, never to return. Bettini followed and flourished in voluntary exile while maintaining strong ties to Florence under Alessandro’s cousin Cosimo I (1519-1574; Fig. 5). In the Eternal City, Bettini identified with the exiled Dante, whom he had included in one of the lunettes of his Florentine camera displaying Canto 25 of his *Divine Comedy*, in which the bard declared his own desire to return to Florence. Like Dante, Bettini would eventually return to Florence, in 1544, triumphant as the city’s consul in Rome. From the Eternal City he would serve the second Medici duke and support Cosimo’s *letterati*, including the historian and great man of letters Benedetto Varchi (1503-1565).

In 1544 Bettini commissioned Varchi’s treatise on alchemy, which Varchi presented to the Accademia Fiorentina, a literary society established by Cosimo to promote Florentine language, letters, and culture. The following year, Bettini was still residing in Rome when he was admitted to the Accademia Fiorentina after submitting either the translation of a classical text into the Tuscan language or the publication of an original piece of comedy or poetry. That year he officially joined the ranks of Florence’s literary amateurs and his former employees, namely

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Bronzino, Michelangelo, and Varchi. In 1550, Bettini was praised as “the most magnificent and honorable Messer Bartolomeo Bettini, Florentine merchant in Rome”\(^5\) in the publisher’s dedication of Varchi’s *Due Lezioni*, two lectures he delivered on a love sonnet by Michelangelo and the primacy of the arts (painting, sculpture, and poetry) to the Accademia over two Sundays in March 1547. Varchi also lauded Bettini in the following: “And you should not be displeased that not only the present century, but those still to come, will know that your life, intelligence, behavior, and courtesies were such that your name was valued and held dear, not only by the principal merchants and most worthy churchmen, but also by the best scholars and most excellent artists.”\(^6\)

This dissertation will address Bettini’s camera decoration as an extension of the patron and his unstable socio-political climate. At the time of his commission (c. 1532-34), Bettini was Michelangelo’s friend, private banker, and fellow anti-Medici sympathizer, particularly after the collapse of the last Florentine Republic and the installation of Alessandro de’ Medici as the city’s first duke. However, despite their many ties and Bettini’s noble origins, Michelangelo did not regard him as his equal, as revealed in the artist’s letter quoted above. Bettini was acutely aware of his place as a merchant-banker, and though he lacked Michelangelo’s patrician status—in 1520 Michelangelo confirmed his family’s direct descent from the medieval counts of Canossa\(^7\)—Bettini had wealth and material possessions.\(^8\) Indeed,

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\(^5\) Benedetto Varchi, *Due Lezioni di M. Benedetto Varchi, nella prima delle quali si dichiara un Sonetto di M. Michelagnolo Buonarroti. Nella seconda si disputa quale sia più nobile arte la Scultura, o la Pittura, con una lettera d’esso Miche langelo, & più altri Eccellentiss. Pittori, et Scultori, sopra la Quistione sopradetta* (Florence: Torrentino, 1549/1550), 3-4: “AL MOLTO MAG. ET SVO HONO Randiss. M. Bartolomeo Bettini Mercatante Fiorentino. in Roma. Et à Voi non devvrà esser discaro che non tanto il presento secolo, quanto quegli ancora che varrano, sappiano che la vita vostra, l’ingegno, i costume, e le cortesie furono tali che non solamente tra i maggiori mercanti et i più degni preti ma appresso i miglior dottori, et i più eccelenti artefici, fu pregiatò il nome vostro et tenuto caro.”

\(^6\) Ibid.

wealth, along with age of family and political office, defined Florence’s then highly stratified society. And while living under the yoke of ducal Medici rule, which was established in the wake of a demoralizing ten-month siege (1529-30; see Fig. 6), Bettini used luxury goods—a painting cycle in his camera—to leverage his position in the new social order. It is against the background of the autocratic milieu of the nascent Florentine duchy that this commission must be examined.

Bettini’s ascent was made possible by Florence’s fluid social structure, which resulted from a rising merchant class and the city’s long periods of spectacular urban growth and expansion. As early as 1284, Florence expanded five-fold, thanks to a new circuit of city walls that remained in place through Bettini’s commission (see Fig. 7). Social mobility continued through the demographic upheaval caused by the Black Death (1348), which led to the collapse of rural settlements and the establishment of Florence as the socio-political center of a broad network of villages and towns, and the political upheaval of the Ciompi Revolt (1378). In the wake of plagues and rebellions, the region’s rural landed gentry moved to the city and mingled with the mercantile elite, which eventually gained control of the state, or commune. (The Medici, for example, ascended in 1434 through control of government elections.) A palace-building boom followed with legislators and urban elites erecting townhouses, in theory, as signs of virtue and participation in civic life but, in practice, as vehicles for social aggrandizement. F. W. Kent keenly observes in his discussion of Florence in the early Quattrocento how “in a volatile political

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8 Bettini’s camera was a strong index of his financial solvency in 1532. The large scale of the room’s centerpiece alone, Jacopo da Pontormo’s *Venus and Cupid* (1.28 x 1.97 m), attests to the grandeur of his private chamber and overeall palace.

9 On social stratification and mobility in Renaissance Florence, see John F. Padgett, “Open Elite? Social Mobility, Marriage, and Family in Florence, 1282–1494,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 63 no. 2 (Summer 2010): 357-411.

10 On the ties between house building and citizenship in Renaissance Italy, see David Friedman, “Palaces and the Street in Late-Medieval and Renaissance Italy,” in Jeremy W. R. Whitehead and Peter J. Larkman, eds., *Urban Landscapes: International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1992), 70-71.
society, a new palace had much more than private significance.”¹¹ By the middle of the century, by far the city’s grandest and most famous palace was the Palazzo Medici (Fig. 8), a potent political statement made by Cosimo de’ Medici (1389-1464) when he was at the center of Florence’s largest social network.

In Cosimo’s day, the fortunes of the city’s wealthiest citizens were fueled, in large part, by industry (principally textile manufacturing) and banking.¹² Bankers were then called cambiatori, banchieri, or tavolieri after their trade or place of business, and they were organized under the city’s bankers’ guild, the Arte del Cambio. Richard Goldthwaite has noted that “any merchant-banker who opened a banco or tavola was required to become a member of the Arte del Cambio, and in this sense too [international bankers] took their place alongside the strictly local bankers.”¹³ Indeed, by the fifteenth century, large banking families such as the Medici, the Pazzi, and the Strozzi had amassed great wealth at home and abroad, opening branches throughout Europe.¹⁴ Unlike the other banks, however, that of the Medici was not primarily a financial institution but rather a business focused on foreign exchange with international branches operating in foreign trade.

The political upheavals of Florence in the early sixteenth century may have also facilitated Bettini’s social ascent. As Goldthwaite keenly notes, “Political consolidation under a new regime [in Bettini’s day, the Medici duchy] could temporarily set off new currents of social mobility within urban elites, and this happened frequently in the fluid political world of

Renaissance Italy. When the Medici finally took over Florence as hereditary princes in 1537, they did not rely altogether on the older families in the patriciate to staff their government."\(^15\) The Bettini were not patricians but they were staunch Republicans, and yet despite their opposition to a *principato*, Bartolomeo ultimately thrived in Florence under Medici rule.

By the sixteenth century, conspicuous consumption was also linked to elite culture, informing all aspects of Florentine urban life, including the city’s religious, civic, and private sectors.\(^16\) Attitudes about art shifted then as well. As Goldthwaite notes, “The emergence of self-conscious patronage of the arts, in practice and as an ideal, marks one distinctive way consumption habits changed in the Renaissance.”\(^17\) The Medici exemplified the new type of patronage. As Lisa Jardine rightly notes, “In two generations the Medici family rose in Florence from the position of prominent local businessmen to that of ruling princes and, as their social standing grew, so did the family’s investment in representing that status as securely established and of long standing.”\(^18\) Bettini, too, would fashion his own identity, history, and aristocratic lineage through the consumption and patronage of the ultimate luxury commodity, contemporary paintings by Italy’s most sought-after living artists.

Among the outlets for the city’s rising consumer culture were private houses. Florentine citizens (*cittadini*) were required to own property, and with increasing capital and political visibility, the city’s leading merchant-bankers created palaces that helped them visibly


surmount the medieval lines of class distinction that separated the bourgeoisie from the landed nobility. Armed with gifted humanists and architects (often one and the same), wealthy merchant-bankers commissioned massive stony monuments to their material success, which simultaneously legitimized their dynastic footing in a city with little political security. In 1455 Giovanni Rucellai, for example, razed nine contiguous houses and commissioned the patrician architect and theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) to erect his family’s town house. Alberti would later design the façade of Santa Maria Novella for Rucellai. In 1489 the Florentine banker Filippo Strozzi (1489-1538), who incidentally made his fortune in exile in Naples, razed thirteen houses (of family members and social equals) and commissioned Benedetto da Maiano (1442-1497) to erect the Palazzo Strozzi (1489-1507). By 1508 Michelangelo shared Rucellai’s and Strozzi’s social aspirations, purchasing four adjacent town houses on via Ghibellina, followed by a fifth in 1514 (the present-day Casa Buonarroti), “perchè una casa onorevole nella città fa onore assai, perchè si vede più che non fanno le possessioni, e perchè noi sian pure cittadini discesi di nobilissima stirpe.”

Indeed, by the early sixteenth century, ambitious merchants such as the Buonarroti and the Bettini were building and decorating large family palaces in Florence. The strict rules of decorum in Renaissance Italy’s social hierarchy were noted in 1560 by the architect Giacomo Lanteri: “non convenevole cosa sarebbe, che un mercante habitasse in un sontuosissimo palagio, et con magnificenza fabricato, ove un feudatario rico d’entrata, in un picciolo habitasse.”

References:


20 Giacomo Lanteri, Della económica trattato (Venice: Appresso Vincenzo Valgrisi, 1560), 14: “It would not be fitting for a merchant to live in a very sumptuous palace built with great magnificence, while a titled landowner enjoying a rich income lived in a small one.” Quoted in Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, eds., At Home in Renaissance Italy (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2006), 12.
Despite an unprecedented accumulation of wealth, the city’s mercantile elite were sensitive to their humble origins. It was perhaps their desire to legitimize and secure their place in a patrician-privileged society that fueled new urban houses on a scale once reserved for landed gentry.

The decoration of domestic interiors also reflected the rise of conspicuous consumption in Renaissance Italy. In the late fifteenth century, the Neapolitan court humanist Giovanni Pontano (1426–1503) made the distinction between a casa’s public and private displays of wealth: “It is appropriate to join splendor to magnificence, because they both consist of great expense and have a common matter that is money. But magnificence derives its name from the concept of grandeur and concerns building, spectacle and gifts while splendor is primarily concerned with the ornament of the household, the care of the person, and with furnishings and in the display of different things.”

Indeed, the concepts of magnificence and splendor legitimized lavish spending for the home and ultimately secured one’s place in society. But as Christina Olsen notes, a distinction was drawn even then between “crass consumption” and “noble largesse,” the latter being an effective “method of enforcing social hierarchy against the inroads of ‘new money.’”

In Bettini’s day, Italians referred to their household’s people and worldly goods as the casa. And the acquisition of luxury goods for the home, in particular paintings, sculptures, and decorative art objects from, increasingly after 1492, around the world, was a fundamental feature of the Renaissance. As status became more and more tied to wealth and possessions,

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23 See Marta Ajmar-Wollheim and Flora Dennis, At Home in Renaissance Italy, “Introduction,” 12.
24 For the rise of collecting and displaying objects at home in Renaissance Europe, see Jardine, Worldly Goods; Paula Findlen, “Possessing the Past: The Material World of the Italian Renaissance,” The American Historical Review 103 no. 1 (Feb. 1998): 83-114; and Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, “The Material Culture of Family Life in Italy and
enterprising merchant-bankers amassed great private collections. And despite being couched in Neoplatonic teachings that argued for the private contemplation of beautiful things as the first step toward knowledge, truth, and divine love, private collectors in Florence and throughout the peninsula were in fact consciously self-fashioning and identity-making, playing the part of princes. Goldthwaite aptly notes that “Italians worked out and defined values, attitudes, and pleasures in their possessions of goods so that these things [my emphasis] became the active instruments for the creation of culture, not just the embodiment of culture.”

Richard Trexler has described Florence between 1470 and 1530 in particular as undergoing “a revolution in ritual behavior.” He notes “the movement of marginal social groups toward the center of the political stage, the Medicean challenge to traditional social and ritual organization, and the reactive but creative restructuring of ritual in the period after the family was expelled in 1494.” Cristelle Baskins and Anne Barriault note a similar coeval revolution in domestic patronage, terminating in the waning of wedding chest (cassone) and wainscoting panel (spalliera) painting in the 1520s when Florence was then under siege and her Republic was destined to fall before the mighty Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-1558). Luxury goods were often displayed behind closed doors as a Gesamtkunstwerk on a casa’s piano nobile, or upper floor, in increasingly specialized spaces such as the great hall (sala grande), the bedroom (one function of the camera), and the study (studiolo or scrittoio in Florence). These rooms were arranged in an apartment concept, with a sequence of spaces leading to, and protecting, the house’s inner sanctum, in response to a growing desire for privacy (see Fig. 9).

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25 Goldthwaite, Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 5; quoted in Findlen, “Possessing the Past,” 89.
27 Ibid.
In addition to church altarpieces and civic fresco cycles, late-fifteenth-century leading artists in Florence were employed to decorate palace interiors, then the ultimate repository of material culture. Patricians commissioned cassone, day-bed (lettuccio), and spalliera paintings for their semi-private apartments. Pontano praised domestic ornamentation for bringing “prestige to the owner of the house as long as many [were] able to frequent the house and admire them.” As a result of costly expenditures in domestic spheres, private apartments took center stage in social intercourse, and artists discovered a new secular arena in which to demonstrate their talent and attract potential patrons.

As a social strategy for securing the status of landed nobility, conspicuous consumption flourished behind closed doors in the Tuscan home, growing in tandem with the burgeoning of merchant classes. As early as the late Trecento, the wealthy merchant-banker Francesco Datini (1335-1410) selectively extended invitations to his home in Prato, which was considered an honor for one to see. In addition to fine furniture, Datini’s walls and vaulted ceilings were decorated so extravagantly that a local member of the church viewed the home more as a temple than private living quarters. Like Bettini, Datini was of humble origins, something all his purchasing power and influence never eradicated. The son of a tavern keeper, he married the daughter of a Florentine noblewoman, whom he met in Avignon, where he made his fortune selling arms and luxury goods. Despite his newfound wealth, Datini’s wife would remind him of his lower rank within the Renaissance social order: “I have a little of the Gherardini [her mother’s family] blood although I prize it not overmuch; but what your blood is, I know not.”

29 On the social (and material) function of Florentine domestic interiors, see Crum and Paoletti, “…Full of people of every sort”: The Domestic Interior,” in their Renaissance Florence: A Social History, 273-91.
30 Pontano, I libri delle virtù sociali, 270 and 272.
stung by the social condescension of his wife, and presumably many others of her noble class, in 1383 he returned to his native Prato and built the city’s largest private residence, a grand and permanent statement of his aristocratic pretensions.

In the Quattro- and Cinquecento, upper zones of domestic interiors, including lunettes and spandrels, were often decorated with medium-sized paintings arranged as a series in the manner of a continuous mural.34 Upper-zone cycles such as Paolo Uccello’s panel paintings of The Battle of San Romano (c. 1430) and Antonio Pollaiuolo’s canvas paintings of The Labors of Hercules (c. 1460),35 for example, were commissioned by the Medici for the sala grande on the ground floor and piano nobile, respectively, in the family’s Florentine palace (Fig. 8). Earlier in the century in Prato, Datini commissioned Arrigo di Niccolò to paint a series of tranquil landscapes (1409) in the lunettes of his guest room.36 By 1532 Bettini was also decorating the lunettes of his Florentine camera—with portraits of love poets. The curvature of Bronzino’s Dante (Fig. 1) suggests that Bettini’s chamber had the ‘umbrella-shaped’ ceiling and segmental vault featured in certain Renaissance building.37 Bronzino had experience with lunette and ceiling painting. During the two years bracketed by the siege of Florence and Bettini’s decoration, Duke Guidobaldo II della Rovere (Fig. 24) commissioned him to paint “some figures in oils on the spandrels of a vault”38 in the Sala dei Semibusti of his Villa Imperiale at Pesaro.39

37 See Raffaele de Giorgi in Carlo Falciani and Antonio Natali, eds., Bronzino: Artist and Poet at the Court of the Medici (Florence: Mandragora and Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi, 2010), 206.
Leonardo, in his treatise on painting, advised artists to take into account their intended audience’s vantage point:

The painter must always take into consideration, in regard to the wall on which he is to paint his narratives, the height of the place where he wishes to put his figures, and of that which he is portraying from nature in connection with his project. He should make his viewpoint as far beneath the thing that he is portraying as it will itself be above the eye of the spectator when executed. Otherwise the work will be open to criticism.  

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By the time Bettini commissioned Bronzino, Michelangelo, and Pontormo to decorate the walls and lunettes of his camera, chamber decorations were luxury commodities and well-established modes of self-fashioning in Renaissance Florence.  

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The decoration of private apartments—typically a suite of interconnected rooms that included a bedchamber, an antechamber, and a study (see Fig. 9)—in the latest fashion was often a Florentine patrician’s first occasion for art patronage.  

42

Portraits and images of Venus in particular were commissioned by patrons as signs of financial independence and social standing. In his life of the Florentine painter Dello Delli, Vasari noted early Quattrocento bedroom furnishings such as cassoni, lettiere, letucci, spalliere, and friezes (cornici) as the appropriate supports for secular paintings honoring marriage and childbirth.  

43

In the Cinquecento in particular, secular panels like the Venus and

43 See Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 2:148-49: “E che è più, si dipingevano in cotal maniera non solamente i cassoni, ma i lettucci, le spalliere, le cornice che ricignevano intorno; ed altri così fatti ornamenti da camera, che in que’tempi magnificamente si usavano, come infiniti per tutta la città se ne possono vedere.” See also Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); idem, Art, Marriage, and Family; and Krohn in Andrea Bayer, Art and Love, 60-67. For representations of the female nude in Renaissance interiors, see Paola Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation, Identity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 127-32. And for Quattrocento furniture decorations in particular, see John Pope-
Cupid (Fig. 2) grew in scale and were commissioned as lower-zone pictures (as opposed to Bronzino’s upper-zone lunette portraits of poets; see chapter 3) and hung on the wall or inserted into the wall paneling. Bettini’s Michelangelo-Pontormo panel was long and horizontal, reflecting its antecedent, spalliere panels of the Quattrocento.

Conspicuous consumption for the home paved the way to patrician status for ambitious merchant-bankers like Datini and Bettini. And hospitality was highly valued among Renaissance patricians. Quoting Cicero, Rucellai defined the ideal role of the household and its visitors: “Nella casa d’un uomo richo sono da essere ricevuti molti forestieri e debbono essere honorati con largità imperochè altrimenti faccendo l’ampla casa sarebbe a disonore del Signore.” Rucellai also outlined four reasons for commissioning a work of art: “danno grandissimo chontentamento e grandissima dolcezza, perchè raghuardano in p arte all’onore di Dio e all’onore della città e a memoria di me.”

In the case of the palazzo, the primary function was providing living quarters; however, the secondary, and perhaps more important, function was that of an erudite display of luxury goods for visitors—most appropriate in Bettini’s milieu given the unashamed consumer culture of the early Cinquecento. Goldthwaite has defined the Renaissance palace as a private sanctuary for the patron; however, he also notes the function of a private interior as a signifier of status: “Conspicuous consumption was a kind of investment in the noble’s social position that

44 “In the house of a rich man numerous guests should be received and they should be treated in a sumptuous manner; if one did otherwise, the great house would be a dishonor to the owner.” F. W. Kent, Giovanni Rucellai ed il suo Zibaldone, vol. 2: A Florentine Patrician and his Palace (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1981), 84.
45 Alessandro Perosa, ed., Il Zibaldone Quaresimale di Giovanni Rucellai, Vol. 1: “Il zibaldone quaresimale” (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1960) 121: “One, it is important to surround oneself with things of high quality; two, such things should aid in the glorification of God; three, these things will bring honor to Florence; and four, commissions will endure as commemorations of the patron.”
secured service and paid dividends in the universal recognition of his dignity and status.”

Whereas the status of the landed nobility was evident through property, the questionable status of Bettini—a nobleman with patrician pretensions—would be secured, in part, by his ability to host elaborate ceremonies in his palazzo’s reception rooms.

Spurred by the sudden rise of extravagant merchant-class palaces in and around Florence such as the Palazzo Datini, Alberti cautioned citizens “not to build anything too highly finished, for fear of provoking quarrels due to envy of the possessions of others.” Alberti also recommended that of all the houses in a city to be decorated elaborately, “the royal palace, and in a free city, the house of anyone of senatorial rank, should be the first one that you will want to make the most handsome.” In 1532 Bettini was neither of senatorial rank nor, as we will see in chapter 1, a supporter of Florence’s ruling family, the Medici. Indeed, as a staunch Republican living in ducal Florence, he constantly risked exile and confiscation of property for his support of the constitution. Avoiding outward displays of patrician status, Bettini turned inward instead, commissioning paintings by Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino for a private chamber. As we will see, he succeeded in elevating his status to that of the city’s artists and letterati and he gained access to the social practices and refined consumer culture of those he admired most in Florentine society. But Bettini paid a price, encountering the “quarrels due to envy of the possessions of others” that Alberti had so wisely cited in the previous century. For Bettini it was Duke Alessandro who coveted—and seized—his most prized possession, a Venus and Cupid designed by the world’s greatest living artist, Michelangelo.

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47 Goldthwaite, “The Empire of Things,” 158.
49 Ibid., 292.
Bettini was not the only sixteenth-century merchant-banker to ignore Alberti’s warning against building and decorating a home beyond one’s station. Indeed, the almost *de rigueur* opulence of the homes of socially ambitious Renaissance merchant-bankers ushered in by Datini in the fourteenth century reached its acme in Bettini’s day with the Sienese banker Agostino Chigi (1466-1520) and his Roman villa. Like Bettini’s camera, Chigi’s Villa Farnesina, known then as the Villa Suburbana, was designed and partially frescoed by Rome’s leading painters: Baldassare Peruzzi (1481-1536), Raphael (1483-1520), Il Sodoma (1477-1549), and Sebastiano del Piombo (1485/6-1547). Chigi had a taste for extravagant living, but he, again like Bettini, lacked the culture and pedigree that had become a prerequisite of social standing in central Italy. As Ingrid Rowland notes in her study on Chigi and his rise from a merchant in his native Siena to a papal banker in Rome, where he made his fabulous fortune, “[Chigi], like the Medici in Florence or the Fugger in Augsburg, aspired to, and on occasion attained, the status of landed nobility. Typically, these families expressed their social ambitions through their patronage of the arts, shifting the emphasis of their commissions from individual projects to the more comprehensive programs characteristic of the aristocratic courts.”

In an age dictated by court culture, learning helped define one’s social standing, and ambitious merchant-bankers were expected to have at least some exposure to literary studies. “Such was the prestige of letters and of learning in general,” notes Goldthwaite, “that upstart professional military men—the condottieri—grasped at the symbols of books, libraries, and learned courtiers at least as enthusiastically as they toyed with chivalric notions.” So to compensate, Chigi allocated some of his fabulous wealth to the founding of a firm that would publish Rome’s first books written in Greek. Understandably, Bettini, sharing Chigi’s social

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milieu, commissioned and befriended the three most sought-after and learned artists and letterati in post-Republic Florence to adorn his private chamber.

Despite being financially invaluable to Medici Pope Leo X (1475-1521), then Rome’s ultimate tastemaker, Chigi was never admitted as a member of the pontiff’s inner circle, which included the learned Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529) and the writer, collector, and cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470-1547). As Marcia Hall notes, “Chigi was not a leisured gentleman, which made it all the more obligatory for him to spend lavishly and conspicuously.”

In order to compensate for his spotty education, Chigi spent generously indeed and fashioned himself as a patron of humanists Bembo, Paolo Giovio (1483-1552), and Pietro Aretino (1492-1556). Chigi and, as we will see, Bettini carefully selected their équipe of painters and letterati to serve as a reflection and extension of their intellect, their character, and their desired status.

Within the homes of Renaissance Italy’s leading merchant-bankers, camere in particular were effective signifiers of status, serving as backdrops for business meetings as well as propagandistic demonstrations of power and wealth. In addition to social gatherings, Florentine camere were arenas for political discussions and requests for favors by their visitors from the patron. Bettini’s camera must have been a grand space. Given the scale of the room’s central panel of *Venus and Cupid* alone, one can envision the dimensions of the entire room and its capacity to dazzle the spectator. Goldthwaite’s reading of a Florentine home as providing “a

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53 For the patronage of Chigi, see Felix Gilbert, *The Pope, His Banker, and Venice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 65-84; and Rowland, “Render unto Caesar,” 673-730.
sense of privacy men felt about their chambers” conflicts with the social ambitions of Bettini, the ambitious merchant-banker who used his things to promote his status. Brenda Preyer, in her discussion of the Palazzo Medici, notes the specific function of the camera in the political exchanges of the fifteenth century. Seen as far from private, Renaisaissance chambers were the site of political meetings and where legal documents were written up and signed. Commissioning the protégé of Florence’s most acclaimed bottega to insert portraits in the lunettes of one’s chamber à la the Laurentian Library was most decadent at the time. However, given the many functions of the Renaissance camera beyond sleeping quarters (e.g., keeping accounts, notary signings, holding business and political meetings, wakes for the dead), it may have been appropriate.

As we have seen, the camere of important men in sixteenth-century Florence were usually located on the home’s piano nobile and accompanied by antechambers (anticamere) and studies (see Fig. 9). This suite of rooms was thoughtfully arranged within the palace to heighten the theatrical impression on visitors as they made their way up the stairs, through the halls, and into the core rooms for discussion. Florentine patrons such as Giovanni Maria Benintendi decorated even their anticamere with elaborate, finely painted panels in order to impress the visitor just prior to commencing the meeting. There, iconographically complex pictures

55 Goldthwaite, Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 228.
59 For the Benintendi anticamera decoration, see Costamagna, Pontormo, 148-50, no. 32; Claudia Conforti, Francesca Funis, Francesca De Luca et al., Vasari, gli Uffizi e il duca (Florence: Giunti, 2011), 226-27, no. VI.6; and Giovanni
appealed to informed and visually sophisticated audiences who appreciated contemporary art and admired the istorie and invenzione of their host’s painters. In addition to religious scenes, the tales of classical gods—among them Venus and Cupid—had to be learned and absorbed, and patrons took great pride in demonstrating their classical learning to their visitors.

The watchful eyes of the Medici were ever present in Cinquecento Florence, particularly after the fall of the last Republic. Indeed, despite the exclusive environment of private chambers, camere decorations were stages for conspicuous consumption, especially when they featured artworks created by the world’s leading contemporary artists. In the competitive and conspicuous arena of local art patronage, those artists were Medici painters Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino. Indeed, commissions such as that of Bettini were conditioned, if not dictated, by the established mores of the Medici, the city’s most powerful art patrons. According to Caroline Elam, patrons of this period fell into a state of meta-patronage in which men of lesser wealth and influence (like Bettini) followed the trends set forth by well established leaders of patronage such as the Medici.

Bettini appreciated the politics behind artistic commissions in post-Republic Florence, and while he opposed the city’s ruling family politically, he aligned himself with them artistically through his program’s style and subject matter. Bettini’s Venus and Cupid (Fig. 2), for example, was so in keeping with Medici taste that Alessandro de’ Medici became its first admirer.


60 See Randolph Starn, “Seeing Culture in a Room for a Renaissance Prince,” in Lynn Hunt, ed., The New Cultural History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 205-32. Starn suggests how the viewing of a Renaissance room elaborately decorated with iconographically complex images of antique or Christian themes constituted a demanding intellectual exercise, offering patrons an opportunity for the rehearsal of the learning necessary to conceive and appreciate such programs.

(see above). Many admirers would follow, commissioning copies and derivations of the Michelangelo-Pontormo panel throughout the Cinquecento (see Figs. 10 and 33). As a result, Bettini’s commission would become synonymous with Medici taste in the form of one of his century’s most popular and paradigmatic images of ideal beauty.

This dissertation combines the methodologies of patronage studies, iconographic studies, and social history and material culture. They are applied discretely throughout the study in four separate chapters, beginning with patronage studies in chapter 1, “The Life of Bartolomeo Bettini.” By 1512, Bettini established himself as a banker while working as a merchant, ignoring the traditional risks associated with such a lucrative diversification of careers.62 In 1398, for instance, when the Pratese merchant Datini opened a local bank in Florence, he was warned by his associates of the potential liability to his reputation as a merchant because of the inevitable practice of usury.63 Michelangelo’s comment—“[Bettini] non è nostro pari”—conveys Italian Renaissance society’s prejudice against merchants by way of Bettini. Ironically, the Buonarroti, too, were members of Florence’s merchant class, which since the late fourteenth century had helped make the city a rich and important center for the cloth trade and international banking. The city’s merchants expanded commercial arteries from Florence across Europe, and its bankers established the exchange structures required for trade throughout the continent and beyond. Two

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62 Bettini may have first appeared in Michelangelo’s correspondence on 6 March 1512 in a letter from the artist in Rome to his father in Florence. “Baccio Bectoni,” Michelangelo’s banker in the original letter (see Buonarroti, Il carteggio, vol. 1, 128), was later translated to English by E. H. Ramsden as “Baccio Bettini,” Baccio being a common nickname for Bartolomeo in the Cinquecento. For Ramsden’s translation, see Buonarroti, Letters of Michelangelo, vol. 1, 65, no. 68: “When you [father] write to me, do not any longer send my letters through the Altoviti. Send them, as you used to, to Balduccio’s bank, and if you send them through other banks, write on the letter ‘Deliver to the shop of Baccio Bettini’, and it will be delivered to me.”

63 See Goldthwaite, “Local Banking,” 32, who cites the example of Datini.
recent studies have focused on Bettini’s patronage and that of contemporary Florentine merchant-bankers. This chapter is indebted to the work of these scholars.

Bettini’s camera decoration was the merchant-banker’s earliest foray into the artistic circles of his beloved Florence. Chapter 2, “Bettini’s Camera Painters,” examines his artist-friends, their careers, and their own social aspirations. In a way Bettini, like Cosimo de’ Medici in 1434, was recalled from exile in Rome in the 1540s thanks to his friends in Florence. Cosimo himself, in his own account of his return to Florence from Venice in his ricordi, credits his recall to the Medici amici who kept the family well informed and openly defied their opponents in Florence during their one-year exile. This chapter will reveal how Bettini succeeded with the help of his painters in transcending his liminal status as a merchant-banker. Indeed, in commissioning the city’s leading contemporary artists, who by then had served Italian princes and popes, Florentine Republicans, and the top of the city’s social pyramid, the Medici, Bettini would be welcomed into the city’s most rarified circles of artists, humanists, and letterati. Recent studies have focused on the lives and social aspirations of Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino, revealing similar preoccupations with status to those of Bettini.

Chapter 3, “Reconstructing Bettini’s Camera Decoration,” examines the program through an iconographic lens. As much of the literature on Bettini focuses on the iconography of his program and its connection to the merchant-banker’s artistic and literary milieu, this is the longest chapter in the study. In the early Cinquecento, decorative programs such as Bettini’s

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66 See in particular William E. Wallace, Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Falciani and Natali, Bronzino: Artist and Poet; and Falciani and Natali, Pontormo and Rosso.
were conceived to impress the intellectual elite. Indeed, esoteric iconography was a Mannerist conceit. Mythological paintings in particular demonstrated the education of the patron—the more complex the program, the more learned, cultured, and noble the owner—and provided him with an opportunity to dazzle his guests with his erudition. This chapter is indebted to the research of Rebekah Compton, William Keach, Leatrice Mendelsohn, Jonathan Nelson, and Julia Perlman.

Finally, chapter 4, “Bettini’s splendore: The Camera’s Physical and Social Functions,” looks at the chamber decoration for the first time through the paradigm of social history and material culture. Bettini’s celebrated cycle of paintings—the finest of luxury goods in the early sixteenth century when the hand of the artist was more valued than the materials employed—were ultimately private possessions destined for a home filled with wall fountains, fireplaces, beds, desks, chairs, inlaid tables, chests, books, bronzes, cameos, coins, clothing, lamps, mirrors, inkstands, and musical instruments. In his 1498 treatise on the social virtues of splendor and magnificence, Pontano did not distinguish between the fine and decorative arts. A material culture lens is therefore appropriate for this study of iconic paintings commissioned for a camera in early modern Europe.

Bettini’s paintings belonged to a new kind of patronage in the Cinquecento, in which programs destined for domestic interiors were no longer seen simply as a groom’s counter-gift (donatio propter nuptias) to his bride’s dowry—a small sum in Renaissance Florence—but rather as an extension of the patron’s character, virtue, and civic patriotism (campanilismo). By Bettini’s day, linking a house to its owner was a well-established trope of Renaissance


See Goldthwaite, “The Empire of Things,” 170; and Musacchio, Art, Marriage, and Family, 2-61.
architectural theory. In his letter to Andrea Odoni dated 1538, Aretino was certainly influenced by Sebastiano Serlio, who had published the symbolic ties between man and house in his celebrated architectural treatise the previous year: “Whoever wishes to see how clean and candid his mind is should look at his face and his house, look at them, I say, and you will see as much serenity and beauty as one can desire in a house and in a face.” 70

Bettini’s decoration of his Florentine camera functioned very much as a portrait of the merchant-banker and his social aspirations. Throughout Renaissance Italy ambitious merchants like Bettini built and decorated ostentatious family palaces once reserved for titled landowners. Many studies have examined the Florentine Renaissance home as an extension of the owner’s character and ambitions. 71 Given his merchant-banker status and aristocratic pretensions, he is an ideal case for such an approach. This chapter is particularly indebted to the pioneering work of art, architecture, and socio-economic historians who after World War II introduced theories of domestic interiors to Renaissance studies.

Within the broader categories of private and public or secular and devotional commissions, what were the particular prototypes for Bettini’s camera commission? Did the merchant-banker’s program emulate the commissions and styles of princes? How did Bettini’s patronage differ from that of his merchant-banker friends and contemporaries? How did Bettini’s commissions compare with those of other wealthy and influential Florentine citizens, both before

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the Medici reinstallation in 1530, and after, when Medici patronage—political and artistic—often shaped the behavior of their fellow-citizens?

This study will address these questions as well as how Bettini relied on his house, his artists, and his erudite decorative program to legitimize and cement his place in Medici Florence. It will consider Bettini’s role in local politics as well as that of his painters, and the patron’s social agenda for commissioning the city’s three greatest painters for a pictorial celebration of love sung in Tuscan prose. The ultimate function of Bettini’s camera—bedchamber or study—will also be examined on the basis of his paintings’ iconography.

But first we turn to the patron, Bartolomeo Bettini, and the life and milieu that informed this influential body of work.

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Chapter 1: The Life of Bartolomeo Bettini

In Cinquecento Florence, connections were everything. Friends, clients, fellow social group members, and above all family and the family’s ancestral home defined one’s place within the city’s social hierarchy. As Musacchio rightly notes, “Renaissance Florentines understood their family—both the relatives they lived with and their extended clan—as their basic social unit, a buffer between themselves and the larger world around them.” In 1532, Bettini, a Republican merchant-banker, reinforced his family’s footing in a slippery ducal society through a decorative program. By commissioning a cycle of paintings from the city’s leading artists, he made possible a complex interaction between himself, his family, his painters, and his intended audience. But who were the Bettini? Where did they come from? Where did they live? And where was Bartolomeo’s camera?

Bettini’s Family and Neighborhood

The Bettini were a noble Tuscan family from Villanuova, Padule, Vico, Farneto, Montevarchi, and Molezzano. The Molezzano branch had settled in Florence by 1351, and it is from this part of the family that Bartolomeo descended (Fig. 11). As noble merchants, they

73 Musacchio, Art, Marriage, and Family, 9.
74 Formerly Ubaldini, the family name was changed to reflect the family’s relationship with the Castel di Bettona. On the Bettini, see Eugenio Gamurrini, Istoria genealogica delle famiglie nobili Toscani, & Umbre (1668-85; reprint, Bologna: Forni, 1972), 4:15-19. For the Bettini lineage in Florence, see ASF, Ceramelli Papiani, 655; and Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence (hereafter, BNCF), Manoscritti Poligrafo Gargani, 284-85. Bartolomeo produced no heirs but the family line continued under Jacopo Bettini, Bartolomeo’s great uncle, until it was extinguished with the death of Cavaliere Zanobi Bettini on 4 May 1709. Zanobi Bettini joined the order of Santo Stefano in 1667. His heirs were the Narvaez family. On Zanobi and the family’s extinction, see ASF, Ceramelli Papiani, 655. From 1750 to the unification of Italy, Florentine law demanded proof of the noble status of its families, the Bettini not listed among them. Having no heirs by 1750 confirms the lack of documentation needed for the family’s inclusion among the nobilità. I am grateful to Giuseppe Biscione from the ASF for his assistance in determining that our Bettini
ranked between the patriciate and popular orders within the city’s tripartite social hierarchy. The Bettini lived in the quarter (quartiere) San Giovanni, in the ward (gonfalone) Drago, where they built an urban palace as a measure of their material success adjacent to the future site of the Palazzo Medici (Fig. 8), which Michelozzo di Bartolomeo (1396-1472) would begin in 1445. In 1427 the Palazzo Bettini was entered on Borgo San Lorenzo, then the major north-south axis of Florence leading to the Porta San Gallo; yet by 1480, the tax record (catasto) shows the Bettini house “nella via Largha,” today via Cavour. Indeed, depending on the year of the catasto, the Bettini belonged to the parish of either San Lorenzo or San Marco. After 1445, the newly built

(Bartolomeo di Bettino di Bartolomeo Bettini) is not Bartolomeo di Girolamo di Francesco Bettini (1502-1537), for whose lineage see Archivio dell’Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore, Battesime Maschi, 1501-11, fol. 17r. For the lineage of Bartolomeo di Girolamo Bettini, see ASF, Ceramelli Papiani, 654.20; and BNCF, Manoscritti Passerini, 186. For his forced exile from Florence on 17 November 1533, see Modesto Rastrelli, Storia d’Alessandro de’ Medici primo duca di Firenze, scritta e corredata di inediti documenti, 2 vols. (Florence: Benucci, 1781), 1:225, 2: 41; cited by Costamanga in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 186. For a confirmation of his death in 1537, see ASF, Decima Granduciale, 3011 (Arroti di l’anno 1547, Quartiere San Giovanni), no. 295, where Bartolomeo di Girolamo’s inheritance goes to his brother.

After 1343 Florence was divided into four quartiere (Santa Croce, Santa Maria Novella, Santo Spirito, and San Giovanni), sixteen gonfalone (Carro, Bue, Lione Nero, and Ruote in Santa Croce; Vipera, Liorcorno, Lion Rosso, and Lion Bianco in Santa Maria Novella; Scala, Nicchio, Ferza, and Drago in Santa Spirito; and Drago, Lion d’oro, Chiavi, and Vaio in San Giovanni), and numerous parishes. The Drago contained the churches of Santa Maria del Fiore (the Duomo), San Lorenzo, San Marco, Santa Reparata, San Salvatore al Vescovo, and many others. For the origins of the Bettini in San Giovanni Drago, see ASF, Carte Pucci, 593. For the dates of eligibility in the electoral system of the Bettini of San Giovanni Drago, see ASF, Cittadinario, 2, fol. 24v. For the most comprehensive information on the Bettini in San Giovanni Drago, including the most comprehensive genealogical tree, see ASF, Raccolta Sebregondi, 690. Other branches of the Bettini lived in San Giovanni Lion d’Oro (see ASF, Raccolta Sebregondi, 689; and ASF, Cittadinario, 2, fol. 24r), San Giovanni Vaio (see ASF, Raccolta Sebregondi, 688; and ASF, Cittadinario, 2, fol. 24r), and Santo Spirito Nicchio (see ASF, Raccolta Sebregondi, 691). On the history and demographics of Florentine neighborhoods in the early Renaissance, see Samuel Cohn, The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 115-28. For all the churches in the quartiere of San Giovanni, see Alberto Busignani and Raffaello Bencini, San Giovanni, vol. 4, Le chiese di Firenze (Florence: Sansoni and Le Lettere, 1974-93) and Cohn, The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence, 32, Table I.4.

For the Bettini tax records of 1427, see ASF, Catasto, 79, fol. 522r: “Sustanze e incharichi di Michele di Guido Bettini e l figliuolo [possibly Lionardo, Jacopo, or Martello, the latter being Bartolomeo’s great-grandfather] / anno di prestanze fiorini 4.141 a chaxa posta in Borgo Sa(n) Lorenzo [the main north-south axis in Quattrocento Florence leading directly out of the city gate] nel ditto popolo da primo via e secondo Giovann de’ Bicci de’ Medici ½ l’abergho del(’i) ocha ¼ Tomaso di Zanobi di Ser Gillo tiella a figione Meo di Michele ditto Choglia e donne l’anno fiorini XXIII e 1a ocha che a [?] fiestante vole…. “ For the Bettini tax records of 1457/58, see ASF, Catasto, 826, no. 360 (fol.) on Lionardo di Michele di Guido Bettini [Bartolomeo’s great-grandfather’s brother]; and Catasto, 826, no. 400 (fol.) on Jacopo di Martello di Michele di Michele [Bartolomeo’s grandfather’s brother at age 19]. For Bettini tax records of 1480, see ASF, Catasto 1019, fol. 78r: “Jacopo di Martello [Bartolomeo’s great-grandfather] di Michele Bettini abita in detto quartiere San Giovanni ebbi di catasto in mio nome fiorini 0.14.2 denari e di sesto una chaxa posta nella via Largha popolo San Marco come nel catasto 1470, la quale ho per mi abitare…postille 98 gonfalone Drago n. 297 a conto [sold to] Lionardo di Zanobi di C e fratelli per uso…di Martello di Jacopo di Martello…”
Palazzo Medici was entered on via Larga; the decision to shift the entrance of the Bettini house to the grander via Larga (see Fig. 12) sometime between 1427 and 1480 may have been prompted by the desire for social alignment with and physical proximity to the Medici.\textsuperscript{77}

In the Quattrocento the Bettini lived among fifteen of the one hundred wealthiest families in the quartiere San Giovanni, including the Albizzi, the Medici, the Pazzi, the Rinieri, and the Valori. San Giovanni occupied a large portion of the northern region of the city (see Fig. 7), corresponding to the first and fourth sectors of Roman Florentia. It was bordered on two sides by the ancient city walls, on a third by the city’s principal north-south axis, which traversed the Piazza di Mercato Vecchio, and on the fourth by the border with the Roman quarter of the Porta San Pancrazio.

Wealthy patrons often sacrificed comfortable accommodations for houses built in “ancestral neighborhoods,” where noble families had proudly resided for centuries.\textsuperscript{78} These quartieri were, above all, political arenas where noble status was attained and legitimized. Within ancestral neighborhoods the family’s gonfalone was an equally vital source of civic pride. Originally created as defensive organizations, gonfaloni grew into local centers of administration

\textsuperscript{77} I am grateful to Brenda Preyer for this suggestion.

\textsuperscript{78} On the importance of ancestral neighborhoods in Florence, see Brenda Preyer, “Florentine Palaces and Memories of the Past,” in Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin, eds., \textit{Art, Memory and Family in Early Renaissance Florence} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 176-80.
and became the basis of eligibility for political offices—a nominating and sorting process known as the scrutiny (*squittino*).\(^{79}\)

Yet despite the political advantages to living so close to one’s family, ancestral neighborhoods declined at the end of the century.\(^{80}\) This may be in large part due to the mercantile system that continued to flourish in the fifteenth century. Renaissance individualism undermined corporate networks such as kinship and neighborhood ties and emphasized informal contacts such as friendships and patronage. As Jacob Burckhardt keenly notes, circumstances in Republican cities like Florence were “favorable to the growth of individual character…[and] the more frequently the governing party was changed, the more the individual was led to make the utmost of the exercise and enjoyment of power.”\(^{81}\) Burckhardt concluded that “the statesmen and popular leaders, especially in Florentine history, acquired so marked a personal character that we can scarcely find, even exceptionally, a parallel to them in contemporary history.”\(^{82}\)

Renaissance society’s emphasis on the role of the individual may account for the lack of documentation of a Bettini residence in San Giovanni Drago after 1480, when the family house on via Larga was sold to Lionardo da Zanobi.\(^{83}\) Jacopo di Martello, Bettini’s great-grandfather, was the last member of Bettini’s family documented in Drago.\(^{84}\) Thus, by the time Bartolomeo commissioned Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino to decorate his chamber in 1532, his residence and neighborhood were scarcely ancestral. Bettini’s absence in the catasto and census

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\(^{80}\) On the sixteenth-century trend of moving out of ancestral neighborhoods, see Preyer, “Florentine Palaces,” 177.


\(^{82}\) Ibid.

\(^{83}\) See the 1480 tax records (ASF, *Catasto*, 1019, fol. 78r) for Jacopo di Martello di Michele Bettini’s sale of the via Larga house to Lionardo di Zanobi and his brothers. After this date, the Bettini were no longer recorded on the via Larga.

\(^{84}\) See fn. 74.
of 1527 confirms a termination of ties between himself and his family’s quartiere, a trend that his relatives had begun two generations earlier.\(^{85}\)

In his recent study of Renaissance architecture and the social drivers behind it, James Lindow notes that by the Quattrocento “the family palace was closely connected to the specifically Florentine desire to record or appropriate a heritage.”\(^{86}\) Indeed, a Florentine citizen’s residence was a key index of one’s trade, income, and civic pride.\(^{87}\) By the fifteenth century the city was transformed by larger and more impressive houses and civic buildings as a result of a collective taste for private and public architecture.\(^{88}\) As Alberti argued in his discussion of private dwelling decorations, “Ma poi che tutti acconsentiamo di avere a lasciare appresso de’ posteri fama e di savii e di potenti, … Per il che ancora quando che non meno per onorare la patria e la casata nostra, che per dilicatezza adorneremo alcune cose nostre, chi sarà quello che non dica che ella è cosa da uomo da bene?”\(^{89}\) Following Alberti’s advice, prominent members of large families commissioned town houses that were intended to confirm the status and longevity of the family and facilitate social and political contacts in that city.\(^{90}\) The family palazzo, with its coat of arms

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\(^{85}\) Tax records after 1480 show no trace of the Bettini in Drago, and the Florentine census of 1527, taken just five years prior to Bettini’s chamber project, records no Bettini in San Giovanni, or in any other quartiere in Florence. See BNCF, MS Nuovi Acquisti, 987.

\(^{86}\) Lindow, The Renaissance Palace in Florence, 51.


\(^{88}\) See Goldthwaite, The Building of Renaissance Florence, 67-90.

\(^{89}\) Leon Battista Alberti, Della architettura, trans. Cosimo Bartoli, ed. Stefano Ticozzi (Milan: A spese degli editori, 1833), 304. For the English text, see Alberti, On the Art of Building, 292 (bk. 9, 1): “The need to hand down to posterity a reputation for both wisdom and power is universally accepted; equally, we decorate our property as much to distinguish family and country as for any personal display (and who would deny this to be the responsibility of a good citizen?).”

and family motto, was a symbol of past, present, and future endurance as well as political and financial solvency. Bettini, a wealthy nobleman but a relatively minor figure in Florentine society, planned to decorate his palazzo in a grand manner that would perhaps compensate for his nonpatrician standing. Being a merchant-banker with aspirations to enter Florentine patrician and intellectual circles, he may have tried to create the illusion of a more dignified and appropriate past—if not through an ancestral home, at the very least through an elegantly decorated camera in it.91

**Bettini’s Politics**

Bettini was a staunch Republican. Although his camera decoration was not overtly political in subject matter, his patronage was on some level a reflection of himself. His politics informed him and his family for generations, and being a Republican in 1532 Florence, just a few years after the fall of the Republic, meant that he was under the watchful eyes of the city’s ruling family, the Medici. The new absolutism of early ducal Florence was the stage on which Bettini created his identity as an art patron. His politics must therefore be examined.

As a Republican sympathizer, Bettini had a role in the events of 1527-30. After the Sack of Rome, which tore the Eternal City to pieces, and the subsequent Medici loss of power in Florence, the Republic was restored that year under the scrupulous president (*gonfaloniere*) Niccolò Capponi. A Republican constitution was first established in 1282 by the Florentine Signoria (or executive council), and it had been upheld and staunchly defended by its citizens for over two centuries. In the early sixteenth century, local Republicans raised a strong militia under

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91 On the importance of appearing noble through private property in Michelangelo and Bettini’s circle, see Wallace, “Michael Angelvs Bonarotvs Patritivs Florentinvvs,” 60-74; and idem, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times*, 235-36.
the leadership of the Perugian Malatesta Baglioni, then among Italy’s finest generals, and Stefano Colonna. According to Varchi in his *Storia fiorentina*, “Ma non fu di poco consorto e ricreamento, che per buona sorte era in quel medesimo giorno [1529] arrivato di Francia in Firenze il signore Stefano Colonna di Palestrina, uomo di molta e chiara virtù, il quale avevano i Fiorentini per Bartolommeo Cavalcanti mandato a chiedere al Re di Francia; ed egli, che fatta la pace non aveva più animo di volerlo più a’ suoi stipendi tenere, facendosene grado co’ Fiorentini, onoratissimamente lo licenzò, e con esso lui venne un capitanis Guascone con Trecento santi, il quale ed I quale riuscirono non meno fedeli, che coraggiosi.”

Varchi later recounted,

Mentrechè gli oratori erano in Bologna piuttosto uccellati, che uditi, Francesco Re Cristianissimo sollecitato da continui preghi del Papa e dell’Imperadore, mandò a Firenze monsignore di Claramonte in nome per iscusarsi dell’accordo fatto con Cesare senza inchiudervi contra le sue promissioni i Fiorentini, e per consortargli a doversi accordare, offrendosi per mezzano; ma in fatti per comandare al signor Malatesta e al signor Stefano, e protestar loro da parte del Re, come fece, che si partissero di Firenze; ben è vero, che segretamente, e in disparte disse all’uno e all’altro, che ciò s’era fatto per compiacere all’Imperadore e al Papa, non da vero, ma per cirimonia, e perciò che non partissero, ma attendessono a fare l’ufficio loro; e all’ultimo voleva, che i Fiorentini rimettessono le differenze loro col Pontefice nell’Imperadore.

On 6 April 1529, the *Dieci della Guerra* appointed Michelangelo Governor and Procurator General of Florentine Fortifications (*governatore e procuratore generale sopra alla fabbrica e fortificazione delle mura della città di Firenze*). The city’s leaders were then divided among the popular (*popolani*) and aristocratic (*ottimati*) factions, of which the latter included the Strozzi and the Guicciardini. Michelangelo fled Florence in September of that year but returned

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92 Colonna was sent to Florence by King Francis I of France in 1529. On Colonna’s defense of the Florentine Republic, see Benedetto Varchi, *Storia fiorentina di Messer Benedetto Varchi* (Milan: Società tipografica de’ classici italiani, 1803-1804), vol. 3, 143-44.
93 Ibid., 4:18-19.
by 20 November and resumed work on the bastions around San Miniato. However, prior to these efforts, on 29 June 1529, the Treaty of Barcelona was signed between France, England, and Charles V, guaranteeing that the latter would suppress the Florentine Republic and reinstate the Medici. By 2 August 1530 Baglioni, the Republic’s defending general, had betrayed Florence to the forces of Pope Clement VII (Giulio de’ Medici) and the prince of Orange. This act of treason led to the surrender of the city.\[^{94}\]

According to Varchi’s account, during the first week of August 1530, 400 scions from the *primi*, or most noble Republican families, united in the Piazza di Santo Spirito against the emperor’s encroaching forces. Bettini was among them:

> Il giorno seguente si ragunarono in sulla piazza di santo Spirito, sprezzata la religione del sagramento tante volte e in tanti modi fatto da loro, forse quattrocento giovani de’ primi di Firenze, e fecero testa più quivi che altrove, per essere vicini alle case e’ a’ soldati di Malatesta, acciocché bisognando potessero tostamente e soccorrer lui, ed essere da lui soccorsi, non essendo ancor fermi gli animi, e dubitando ognuno d’ ogni cosa. I capi principali furono, Alamanno de’ Pazzi, Piero chiamato Pieraccione, Capponi, il Morticino degli Antinori e alcuni altri; andaronvi ancora Piero e Filippo di Niccolò, e Alessandro di Giuliano Capponi, Daniello degli Alberti, Giannozzo de’ Nerli, Giovanni Lanfredini, Lionardo Ginori, e molti altri, tra’ quail furono, Piero Vettori, Baccio Cavalcanti, Lorenzo Benivieni, Francesco Guidetti, Filippo del Migliore, Pierfilippo di Francesco Pandolfini, Bartolommeo Bettini, il Bravo da Sommaia e Capecchio Niccolini. Tra questi giovani si trovarono alcuni parte attempati, e parte vecchi, come Giuliano e Lodovico Capponi, Giovanfrancesco e Lionardo Ridolfi, Lorenzo Segni e Mainardo Cavalcanti. Egli si può credere, anzi si dee, che la maggior parte di costoro, e forse tutti si movessero a ottimo fine, stimando più di non perdere insieme colla patria, la roba e la vita, che la libertà e ‘l sagramento. E nel vero la città s’era (colpa più d’ altri, che loro) a tale stremità e a tanta strettetza, e si manifesto pericolo condotta, che le bisognava a viva forza, o fare quello, ch’ella fece (cagione in buona parte di costoro)

o essere saccheggiata e distrutta. Nè per questo impareranno le repubbliche a non fidarsi della perfidia e avarizia de’ capitani e de’ soldati forestieri e mercenari, i quail come non furono mai per la maggior parte, così non saranno mai fedeli.95

This nascent militia, established in 1528, recruited men aged fifteen to fifty, but only citizens between ages eighteen and thirty-six, like Bettini, were ever sworn to arms.96 The following week, acting papal commissioner Baccio Valori was greeted by supportive crowds cheering “Palle! Palle!”, signaling Florence’s seamless transition from a Republic to a principato.97 On 12 August 1530, the capitulation was signed at Valori’s quarters, and by February 1531, absolute rule over all branches of the Republic had been granted to Medici Pope Clement VII’s illegitimate twenty-year-old son Alessandro (Fig. 4), along with the title capo e principe di tutto lo stato e governo. And by 1532 Charles V had nominated Alessandro as the city’s first duke, thereby swiftly abolishing the constitution, the Signoria, and the office of the gonfaloniere.98 In addition, the emperor granted Alessandro his own illegitimate daughter, Margaret of Austria, as his wife.

The situation in Florence continued to deteriorate. As J. R. Hale has observed, “Alessandro gave his enemies [among them Bettini] fresh fuel for resentment when he confiscated pikes and guns and forbade the carrying of any weapons other than a sword and dagger within an eight-mile radius of the city, and still more when he enlarged his guard and made an outsider, Alessandro Vitelli, its commander.”99 Within a couple of years of Alessandro’s

95 Varchi, Storia fiorentina, vol. 4, 241-43.
96 See Elizabeth Cropper, Pontormo: Portrait of a Halberdier (Los Angeles: Getty Museum Studies on Art, 1997), 82.
97 See Roth, The Last Florentine Republic, 302-20.
ascension, in 1534, the fate of the Florentine Republic would be sealed with the duke’s commission of the Fortezza da Basso (first called the Fortezza Alessandra; see Fig. 7) by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (1485-1546). Built as an overt symbol of Medici despotic control and absolute power, the Fortezza was intended to protect the duke and his family from internal rather than external unrest. According to the historian Bernardo Segni (1504-1558), the Fortezza was raised in order for the Medici “di mettere in sul collo de’ Fiorentini un aspro, e non mai più sopportato giogo di una Cittadella, onde quei Cittadini perdessero interamente ogni speranzes di mai più poter vivere liberi.” Although met with disapproval by the citizens of Florence, the Fortezza was supported by the emperor as an essential appendage to the duke’s administration. It was precisely then, during the twilight of the Florentine Republic, that Bettini commissioned the Bronzino poet portraits (Fig. 1) and the Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus and Cupid (Fig. 2).

In these challenging times, Florentine families united and invariably shaped the political consciousness and attitudes of their young family members, hoping to ensure the perpetuation of thorough political training and beliefs in future generations. In the case of Bettini, anti-Medicean sentiments in particular were passed down, making the family especially vulnerable during periods of Medici rule. Indeed, because of their politics, the Bettini were often

101 “to place on the necks of the Florentines a yoke of a kind never experienced before: a citadel, whereby the citizens lost all hope of ever living in freedom again.” See Bernardo Segni, Storie fiorentine di Messer Bernardo Segni, gentiluomo fiorentino, dall’anno MDXXVII. al MDLV (Milan: Società tipografica de’ classici italiani, 1805), 2:41: “Papa Clemente allora con più desiderio, che mai di fortificare il Duca nello Stato, prevendeno la ribellione di Filippo [Strozzi] e de’ figliuoli contro alla casa sua, comandò, che si facesse una Fortezza in Firenze. Ma ben fu sollecitata più per quella cagione, perchè egli vedendo, come s’è detto, Filippo ed i suoi figliuoli poco contenti, e dubitando, che I favori e la grandezza loro non si tirassono dietro Baccio Valori, col quale avevano di fresco fatto parentando, dando Filippo la Maddalena sua sorella a Pagolantonio Valori figliuolo di bAccio; e di più molti altri Cittadini della parte Pallese, i quali obbligati a Filippo per danari servitisi del suo, non tenevano meno conto di lui, che della Casa de’ Medici, pensò di mettere in sul collo de’ Fiorentini un aspro, e non mai più sopportato giogo di una Cittadella, onde quei Cittadini perdessero interamente ogni speranzes di mai più poter vivere liberi.”
imprisoned or exiled. Following the execution of Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola in 1498, for example, when many anti-Medici Savonarolan supporters (Piagnoni) suffered the loss of family members, the Bettini, along with the Cambini, Guidotti, and Zati, were among the families to endure such hardships.  

Savonarola was a prophet and spiritual reformer, but for the city’s Republicans he was also the architect of the new Republic, having introduced the governo libero to Florence after the expulsion of Piero de’ Medici in 1494. Loyal Republicans like the Bettini supported the Medici exile and welcomed the Dominican friar’s reforms expounded in his largest and most organized political party, the Frateschi. And whereas some families were divided politically after 1498, the Bettini consistently backed the Piagnoni, and, in turn, opposed the Medici, who fought to dismantle the Savonarola movement in their quest for political consolidation.

In the mercantile society of late Quattrocento Florence after the death of Lorenzo il Magnifico in 1492, displays of luxury goods even in private interiors were viewed as dangerous and immoral, as ostentation would cause others to grow envious. In the mid-1490s in particular, Savonarola single-handedly spread the influence of asceticism to Florentine nobles, including the Bettini. Of all the targets of Savonarola’s wrath, private bedroom decorations received the lion’s share. The Dominican friar particularly criticized the Florentine obsession with paintings of nude figures inspired above all by the ancient Roman poet Ovid. In a sermon based on the psalm Quam bonus, Savonarola spoke of corrupting parents who “have in their home, on the beds and daybeds, dishonest figures of naked girls with men, engaged in dishonest acts and positions that

would be indecent in public places. Aristotle was pagan and prohibited similar figures in the home, so that children did not learn from them."

As we will see, in about 1532 Bartolomeo Bettini will turn his back on the political views of his ancestors and embrace the detested ducal Medici regime and its taste for seductive and literary images such as the *Venus and Cupid* (an ideal candidate for Savonarola’s bonfire of the vanities) for a private chamber.

Bettini’s ingrained Republican beliefs may have contributed to Duke Alessandro’s acquisition of the merchant-banker’s *Venus and Cupid* painting; they certainly led to his self-imposed exile to Rome by 1536. According to Vasari in his life of Pontormo, “certain tuft-hunters in order to do Bettini an injury took it [the *Venus and Cupid*] almost by force from the hands of Jacopo [Pontormo] and gave it to Duke Alessandro, restoring the cartoon to Bettini.”

Years later, in 1537, after hearing of the duke’s assassination by his own cousin Lorenzino, Bettini, then safely established in Rome, rejoiced over the end of Alessandro’s hold over his native city. There, in the via Giulia workshop of fellow Florentine exile Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571), Bettini “came up and began to banter with me [Cellini] in the same way about dukes, calling out: ‘We have dis-duked them, and won’t have any more of them; and you were making them immortal for us!’ with many other tiresome quips of the same kind.” Only then, after having abandoned his home (along with his camera decoration), his family, and his native city, was Bettini finally free to celebrate his Republican beliefs.

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Among Bettini’s fellow Republican merchant-bankers in Rome was Bindo Altoviti (1491-1557). Like Bettini, Altoviti opposed the Medici while living in exile in Rome, where he supported the Florentine Republican community in the city’s Banchi quarter. His home near the Ponte Sant’ Angelo was a meeting place for the Florentine exiles (fuorusciti). In addition, like Bettini, he served as Michelangelo’s banker, transferring the artist’s funds to Florentine relatives from 1511 to 1549. But unlike Bettini, Altoviti was honored by Duke Alessandro with membership in the Council of Two Hundred, established in 1532, the year of the Bettini commission. Altoviti and Bettini would both serve as consuls of the Florentine People in Rome under Alessandro’s successor Cosimo I, who would also make Altoviti a Florentine senator. The Medici beneficence bestowed upon Altoviti was, however, short-lived. As a Republican, his Florentine property was confiscated in 1555, and his son, Antonio, was denied the position of Archbishop of Florence despite receiving the nomination in 1548.

In addition to sharing political views, Altoviti resembled Bettini in his patronage of the arts. As friends of Michelangelo, they each received coveted cartoons by the master; Altoviti received one for the fresco of the Drunkenness of Noah on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The Roman nobleman Tommaso de’ Cavalieri (c. 1509-1587) was also among Michelangelo’s friends who received finished drawings at this time. The significance of obtaining a Michelangelo cartoon then is revealed in a letter by the master’s assistant Antonio Mini, who also included packing instructions for the sheet, rolled and in a lined wooden box:

107 For the life and artistic patronage of Bindo Altoviti, see Charles Avery, “Benvenuto Cellini’s Bronze Bust of Bindo Altoviti,” Connoisseur 198 (May 1978): 62-72; and Chong et al., Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker.
108 According to Vasari, Michelangelo presented Altoviti with the cartoon for the Sistine ceiling Drunkeness of Noah, Cavalieri with his portrait cartoon, and Strozzi with fragments of the Battle of Cascina cartoon. See Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 7:271. Vasari’s life of Michelangelo is the only account of the artist’s gift of the Drunkeness of Noah to Altoviti, and the cartoon does not appear in the 1644 inventory of the Villa Altoviti in Prati di Castello. See Donatella Pegazzano, “A Banker as Patron,” in Chong et al., Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker, 71-72, who argues that Michelangelo gifted the cartoon to Altoviti about 1535, closer in date to the artist’s cartoon execution for Bettini; and Philippe Costamagna in ibid., 395-96.
Michelangelo made a cartoon for the archbishop of Capua, who wanted Jacopo da Pontormo to paint it. And before the said Jacopo was given the cartoon, it was with the condition that, once Jacopo had translated it into a painting, the cartoon was to be mine because it was a gift to me from Michelangelo; and that is what Michelangelo told the said Jacopo. And before I left Florence I had made a deal with Jacopo that I would send for the cartoon when it seemed to be painted.109

Mini was promised the cartoon (now lost) for a Noli me tangere painted by Pontormo and today in a private collection (see Fig. 17).

In addition to the Drunkenness of Noah cartoon, Michelangelo gave Altoviti a drawing of a Venus and Cupid—presumably as a gift, supporting the fact that Bettini’s Venus and Cupid cartoon was also most likely a gift—to be painted by Vasari.110 The Michelangelo cartoon is now lost, but scholars have recently identified the Venus and Cupid in the Royal Collection as Vasari’s picture painted in Rome for Altoviti (Fig. 10).111 Choosing the less-politically charged Vasari (who as we will see in chapter 2 was easily patronized, like Pontormo and Bronzino, by the Medici and Republicans alike) spared Bindo the tension endured by Bettini over Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Alessandro regarding the Venus and Cupid.

110 See Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:294; and Clapp, Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo, 211.
111 See Costamagna, Pontormo, 220, no. 70.7; and Florian Härb in Chong et al., Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker, 415-17, no. 24a. The painting was first recorded in London, in 1734. Three years later, it was seen by William Hogarth in London’s Kensington Palace, where it hangs today. See John Shearman, The Early Italian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty The Queen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 277-78, no. 302, also as Vasari and copied directly from the Michelangelo-Pontormo original on the basis of the colors; and Nelson in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 234, no. 10. This is probably the painting mentioned by Vasari in a letter to Francesco Lioni in Venice, 21 July 1544. See Vasari, Il libro delle ricordanze, 1:131.
Bettini as Banker in Florence and Rome

Bettini’s career as both a merchant and a banker was built on the city’s flourishing mercantile society. As Goldthwaite aptly notes, “With the possibility of transferring credit throughout this vast commercial system, stretching across the Mediterranean and western Europe, the Italians also created a financial infrastructure, becoming Europe’s preeminent international bankers; and they extended this activity into princely finance, including the vast international operations of the papacy.”112 Florence was a major banking and textile-manufacturing center in Europe, thanks in large part to the thriving silk and wool industries, and commercial opportunities were considerable in the Tuscan city. Indeed, Goldthwaite has noted that on the eve of the siege, in 1528, Florence’s Venetian ambassador recorded eighty families with “fortunes over 50,000 florins, which made them all about as wealthy as [the merchant] Palla Strozzi a century earlier; and eight of these were worth at least twice as much.”113

With the election of Medici Pope Leo X in 1513, the advantageous Tuscan market spread to Rome, where Florentine bankers exceeded any other group in importance and influence. A bull of 1515 granted exemptions for these bankers, who became the new directors of the papal mint, along with valuable tax incomes such as the salt monopolies. Even after the death of the second Medici pope, Clement VII, in 1534, Florentine bankers, including Bettini, continued moving to the Eternal City.114 By 19 January 1542 Bettini was established in the Roman bank of Tommaso Cavalcanti and Jacopo Giraldi (both Florentines), through which he is documented as

113 Ibid., 58.
114 In addition to Bettini’s bank, the Florentine banks of Lorenzo and Giovanbatista degli Albizzi, Raniero de’ Bardi, Piero d’Antonio Bandini, Tommaso Cavalcanti, Jacopo Giraldi, Alessandro Deti, Benvenuto Olivieri, Bartolomeo Pucci, Giovanbattista Pucci, Baptista Puccini, and Piero and Niccolò de’ Ugolini all transferred to Rome under Pope Paul III. See Bullard, “‘Mercatores Florentini Romanam Curiam Sequentes’,” 57-59.
transferring Michelangelo’s funds to the artist’s Tuscan contacts. Pope Paul III Farnese (1468-1549) reluctantly honored the debts of his Medici predecessor and would have welcomed, or at least not penalized, Florentine Republican exiles like Bettini. Bettini would remain Michelangelo’s banker in Rome through Paul III’s papacy. After 1550 the artist’s accounts were handled by the Altoviti bank.

Although the political climate in Rome had stabilized under Paul III—Goldthwaite observes how “Rome became a major market for consumer spending in the early sixteenth century partly because the old feudal nobility…transferred its permanent residence into the city, where it supplemented the spending by the growing curial and financial elites in the local luxury market”—Bettini still had to contend with Duke Alessandro (Fig. 4) and his allies. For a brief period, fuorusciti sought safety under former Medici supporter and papal banker Filippo Strozzi. In the early 1530s Strozzi had served as one of Alessandro’s four counselors in Florence; however, after Clement VII’s death in 1534, he questioned the duke’s motives, changed parties to lead and financially back the fuorusciti in Rome, and eventually sympathized with Alessandro’s rival, Cardinal Ippolito de’ Medici (1511-1535). Backed by Strozzi, the fuorusciti were making progress until the sudden death of Cardinal Ippolito in 1535. Having suffered a major blow, the exiles were denied reentry into Florence by Charles V, who then endorsed Duke

115 See Michelangelo’s letter dated 19 January 1542 from Rome to his nephew Lionardo in Florence (Buonarroti, Il carteggio, vol. 4, 124): “E’ decti cinquanta scudi che io ti mando d’oro inn-oro io gli ò mandate stamani, a di diciannove di gennaio, per Urbino che sta meco, a Bartolomeo Bectini [sic], cioè a’ Cavalcanti e Giraldi; e in questa sarà la lectera.” See also Buonarroti, Letters of Michelangelo, vol. 2, no. 211: “The said fifty gold scudi in gold, which I’m sending you, I’ve sent this morning, the nineteenth day of January, by Urbino, my assistant, to Bartolomeo Bettini, that is to say to the Cavalcanti and Giraldi; I’m enclosing the letter of exchange with this.”

116 See Bullard, Filippo Strozzi and the Medici; and idem, in Chong et al., Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker, 26-42.


118 Goldthwaite, Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy, 43.

Alessandro. In January 1537, the duke was assassinated by his cousin Lorenzino; however, in that same year, his successor, Florence’s second duke, Cosimo I (Fig. 5), continued Alessandro’s campaign against the Florentine exiles shortly after his selection.\textsuperscript{120} Strozzi led the rebel faction of the fuorusciti in an unsuccessful attack against Cosimo at Montemurlo; he was then imprisoned in the Fortezza da Basso, which he suggested be built and where, in 1538, he took his own life.\textsuperscript{121}

As a result of Strozzi’s failure and a series of subsequent political upsets, Bettini and other Florentines in Rome obtained a ducal pardon and reestablished ties with Florence under the ambitious Cosimo for economic, political, and social reasons. (By 1569 Cosimo would double the Florentine state and consolidate power under a grand duchy.) In 1544, after living in exile for almost a decade, the former Republican Bettini was appointed by Cosimo as Florentine consul in Rome.\textsuperscript{122} The following year, while maintaining residence in Rome, he joined the duke’s Accademia Fiorentina on 29 September. In addition to Bettini, a number of Republican noblemen reconciled with the Medici, including Francesco Guardi, whom Pontormo had portrayed defending the Florentine Republic at the time of the siege (Fig. 13).\textsuperscript{123} In 1548 Guardi was

\textsuperscript{120} Inspired by Duke Alessandro’s assassination, cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi, with the help of Donato Giannotti, persuaded Michelangelo to sculpt a bust of Brutus, the slayer of the tyrant Caesar. On Michelangelo’s Brutus and its political history, see Donald J. Gordon, “Giannotti, Michelangelo and the Cult of Brutus,” in idem, ed., Fritz Saxl (1890-1948): A Volume of Memorial Essays from his Friends in England (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1957), 281-96.

\textsuperscript{121} On the history, see Giorgio Spini, Cosimo I e l’indipendenza del principato mediceo (Florence: Vallecchi, 1980), 84-90; and Roberto Cantagalli, Cosimo I de’ Medici granduca di Toscana (Milan: Mursia, 1985), 71-78.


elected a captain of the Congregazione di Santa Maria della Croce del Tempio (Compagnia dei Neri), and in 1550 he became a member of the Council of Two Hundred.

**Bettini and Merchant-Banker Patronage During Political Crisis**

As a merchant-banker, Bettini was among the leading art patrons of Cinquecento Florence. Indeed, upon commissioning his chamber decoration in 1532, he joined a very long line of clever merchant-bankers who had successfully exploited the propagandistic value of conspicuous consumption behind closed doors, a tradition that began with the wealthy Pratese merchant-banker Datini (see introduction). Whether at home or abroad, Florentine merchant-bankers such as Tommaso Portinari (1428-1501) commissioned local artists to elevate their status. Portinari had homes in Florence and Bruges, where he spent over forty years serving and later managing a branch of the Medici bank. In both locales he adorned his homes and local family chapels with paintings by Netherlandish masters Hans Memling (1430/40-1494) and Hugo van der Goes (1440-1482), revealing a lifestyle of opulence that rivaled that of his employers, the Medici. By Bettini’s day, in the early sixteenth century, merchant-banker patronage took a most ostentation turn in Leo X’s Rome with the commissions of the Sienese banker Chigi (see introduction). Chigi’s grandiosity paved the way for the next generation of art patrons like Bettini.

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124 For Datini’s art patronage, see fn. 31 and 32.
126 By the sixteenth century, wealthy merchant-bankers throughout Europe were signaling their status at home through newly built urban palaces filled with luxury goods from around the world. For parallels to Bettini in early Cinquecento Venice, see Blake de Maria, *Becoming Venetian: Immigrants and the Arts in Early Modern Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
Elaborate decorative programs for private interiors began to flourish in Florence in the late thirteenth century, when fictive wall paintings simulating textile hangings were first revived from antiquity. In La vita nuova from about 1290, Dante described such wall treatments at a wedding feast he attended in the city: “io poggiai la mia persona simulatamente ad una pintura la quale circundava questa magione.”\(^{127}\) The tradition continued through the fifteenth century, when, thanks to the rise in popularity of portable furniture, cassone and spalliera panels replaced wall paintings. By the sixteenth century, paintings were freed from the constraints of furniture decoration, and as a result they increased in scale. This new domestic format of easel paintings featured historical and mythological scenes that appealed to leading Florentine families in particular, including the Borgherini, Benintendi, and Salviati, who like the Bettini legitimized their roles as the true heirs of ancient Roman virtù through secular paintings of ancient gods.\(^{128}\) As Hall notes, the modes of representation in Florence differed greatly from those of Rome, where pictorial rhetoric prevailed on a grand scale.\(^{129}\) The chronological proximity of the commissions will be discussed below, but the overlap of artists employed—Bronzino; his master, Pontormo; and Pontormo’s master, Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530)—places Bettini’s camera and the tradition of Florentine decorative cycles within Cinquecento Florence’s most conspicuous private commissions.

\(^{127}\) Dante, Vita nuova, trans. Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 70-71: “I rested my body, to disguise my tremor, on a painting that went round the walls of the house.” Cited in Musacchio, Art, Marriage, and Family, 94.

\(^{128}\) See Aste in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 19.

\(^{129}\) Marcia Hall, After Raphael, 57-59.
In Florence, the Borgherini bedroom commission was an important antecedent of the Bettini chamber in a long Renaissance tradition beginning in the late thirteenth century and ending in 1570 with the studiolo of Grand Duke Francesco I de’ Medici (1541-1587) in the Palazzo Vecchio. In 1515, Pierfrancesco Borgherini—then Michelangelo’s friend and banker, a role Bettini would serve by 1532—commemorated his wedding to Margherita Acciaiuoli by commissioning Pontormo, Andrea del Sarto, Francesco Bacchiacca (1494-1557), and Francesco Granacci (1469-1543) to paint religious panels for his Florentine bedchamber. In his discussion of Borgherini’s painters, Sydney Freedberg notes the exchange of influences and ideas between Pontormo and del Sarto in particular, who considered each other’s contributions as they created a unified Gesamtkunstwerk. The architect Baccio d’Agnolo (1462-1543) was hired to design the nuptial bed, as well as the family palazzo in Borgo Santissimi Apostoli; he may have also served as the chamber’s artistic director, recommending the painters to the patron.

Borgherini’s program centered on the Old Testament story of Joseph and his prefiguring of the life of Christ, who was also depicted in a tondo of the Trinity by Granacci installed above Pierfrancesco and Margherita’s bed.

During the siege of Florence, Pierfrancesco, a Medici supporter, moved to Lucca, returning only after the Medici were reinstated in 1530; his paintings, however, stayed together in Florence through 1584, when four pictures were acquired by Grand Duke Francesco. (Fifty years earlier, Alessandro also “acquired” Bettini’s Venus and Cupid for the Medici collection.) Unlike the politically unified Bettini, the Borgherini were divided. Pierfrancesco’s younger brother...

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131 See Capretti in Falciani and Natali, Pontormo and Rosso, 54.
Giovanni, for example, was a staunch Republican. And during the siege, when his brother was living in exile in Lucca, Giovanni’s then ex-wife, Selvaggia Capponi, was married to the city’s gonfaloniere. But like his pro-Medici brother, Giovanni commissioned del Sarto in 1528 to paint a *Holy Family with the Young Saint John the Baptist*, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for his Florentine palazzo. At the time John the Baptist was both the city’s long-time patron saint and a symbol of the Republican government.  

A second Florentine antecedent to Bettini’s camera program was the anticamera decoration of Giovanni Benintendi. Like Borgherini, Benintendi was a Medici sympathizer who commissioned del Sarto, Bacchiacca, and Pontormo to decorate a chamber in his Florentine palace with five panels (see introduction). His program honored his namesake and the patron saint of Florence, John the Baptist, and it was dedicated to the life of the saint and variations on the theme of baptisms.

In 1532, two years after the siege, Bettini would have certainly known of Borgherini’s and Benintendi’s programs, particularly after hiring their former painter Pontormo to complete the *Venus and Cupid* panel. But unlike his predecessors, Bettini was also armed with fellow Republican Michelangelo, who may have been responsible for the room’s program (see chapter 2).  

Having worked for Medici supporters, Pontormo was far less political and equally accepting of Medici and Republican patronage. Iconographically, Bettini and his *équipe* would break from Borgherini’s and Benintendi’s religious programs, turning instead to antiquity for the centerpiece of his chamber. In 1435 Alberti advised Florentine painters to look to humanists for

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secular subject matter, honoring Greek authors as rich sources for the visual arts.\textsuperscript{134} As we will discuss in chapter 3, the writings of the ancient Greek poet Moschus of Syracuse may actually be the source for Bettini’s \textit{Venus and Cupid}.

As we have seen, the Bettini were a noble Tuscan family with roots in Florence by 1351. As was common practice in the Renaissance, the family created their identity, in part, through their quartiere San Giovanni, in the gonfalone Drago. There, they built their home near the future site of the city’s leading tastemakers, the Medici. Unlike this powerful banking family, however, the Bettini were staunch Republicans, a political stance that Bartolomeo would embrace during the siege of Florence and through the establishment of the city’s first duchy under Duke Alessandro. It is under this tense political climate that Bettini commissioned the leading contemporary artists to decorate his camera. He joined a rich Cinquecento tradition of merchant-bankers as art patrons, among them the Borgherini and the Benintendi, who employed one of the same artists, Pontormo, to adorn their private interiors. However, unlike his fellow art patrons, Bettini was also a supporter of the city’s letterati, and it is his relationship with this circle of Florentines that we turn to now.

\textit{“Mercante e Mecenate dei Letterati”:\nBettini, the Accademia Fiorentina, and the \textit{questione della lingua}\n}

In addition to painters, Bettini’s Florentine friends included literary figures. Renaissance patrons, Republicans and Medici sympathizers alike, expressed a strong desire to be, or at least appear to be, learned through the works they commissioned and the artists and

humanists they employed. Bettini was among them, and after his initial foray into the arts with the commission of his chamber decoration, he gained entrée into the world he most desired, that of the city’s letterati. Among Bettini’s first friends with literary ties was Antonfrancesco Grazzini (1503-1584), a founding member of the forerunner to the Accademia Fiorentina, the short-lived Accademia degli Umidi. A celebrated poet and playwright, Grazzini, better known among his friends as Il Lasca, or the “roach fish,” dedicated three poems to Bettini in the 1530s. (All founding members of the Umidi assumed nicknames and designed escutcheons with fanciful coats of arms.135) In one poem written in his characteristically sardonic style, Lasca revealed his affection for the merchant-banker through a facetious description of Bettini’s offensive physical traits, his poor hygiene, and the promise that “syphilis once again has come to you.”136

The Accademia degli Umidi was an independent lay confraternity (compagnia) of eleven men united in 1540 by an appreciation for Tuscan vernacular. It was modeled after Marsilio Ficino’s (1433-1499) Accademia Platonica, which was established under the aegis of Cosimo and Lorenzo de’ Medici. When it was absorbed into the Accademia Fiorentina in 1541, it became an official state institution created to resolve the questione della lingua—a language debate that came to a head in the early sixteenth century in response to an increasingly multilingual peninsula—in favor of the lingua toscana.137 In 1542 Duke Cosimo incorporated the

Accademia Fiorentina into Tuscany’s centralized university system, allowing public lectures to be held in classrooms under the university’s director. The Medici eventually held control over the university’s professors, students, book publications, and curriculum. Cosimo secured his political power in part by linking the Medici to Florence and its cultural institutions. “If family and city were inseparable in the Florentine mind,” notes Michael Sherberg, “then the people could no longer entertain ideas of expelling their leader, for to do so would be an act of civic suicide.”

Following the success of the Accademia Fiorentina as a propagandistic organ of the state, Duke Cosimo and Vasari expanded the duchy’s reach into the fine arts, establishing the Accademia del Disegno—Europe’s first formal art academy—in 1563. Like the Accademia Fiorentina as regards Tuscan language, the Accademia del Disegno was created to spread the primacy of Tuscan disegno throughout Italy.

Bettini joined the Accademia Fiorentina on 24 September 1545. There, he befriended and patronized influential men at the Medici court, including Varchi. However, Bettini and Varchi were already well acquainted. The previous year, on 11 November 1544, Varchi gave a public lecture on alchemy at the church of Santa Maria Novella and dedicated it to Bettini, then serving as Florentine consul in Rome, as “our merchant and patron of letters” (nostro mercante, e
Three years later, Varchi presented his *Due Lezzioni*, once again in Santa Maria Novella, to an audience of Academy members, humanists, politicians, businessmen, clergy, and artists. When the lectures were published in 1550, Varchi made a second dedication to Bettini (his patron) in the ducal printer Lorenzo Torrentino’s edition: “AL MOLTO MAG. ET SVO HONO-Randiss. M. Bartolomeo Bettini Mercatate Fiorentino. in Roma.” Bettini was then cast as an intercessor between Florence’s letterati and Rome’s fuorusciti, and he was singled out by Torrentino “among the greatest of merchants and the most worthy prelates” as well as “the best scholars and most excellent artists.”

Through the publisher’s dedication of Varchi’s *Due Lezzioni*, Bettini was reconnected with his camera painters Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino, all three of whom contributed letters to Varchi’s *paragone*. Two sonnets by Varchi on Michelangelo’s *Times of Day* in the Medici Chapel were also included in the volume, one of which was dedicated to Lorenzo Lenzi (Fig. 14) and a second to Bettini. Writing in a familiar tone reserved for intimate friends, Varchi portrayed Bettini as a literary patron with an equal appreciation of the visual arts: “Since I [Varchi] admired the darkened *Night* and the Resplendent *Dawn* of the great Sculptor, it does not seem to me improper any more, Bettini, to read how men fall in love with marble forms.”

Bettini’s patronage of Varchi from Rome in the 1540s exemplified the merchant-banker’s ongoing association with the Florentine intelligentsia, an association that was made possible by

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142 “the most magnificent and honorable Messer Bartolomeo Bettini, Florentine merchant in Rome.” Varchi, *Due Lezzioni*, 3-4: “AL MOLTO MAG. ET SVO HONO-Randiss. M. Bartolomeo Bettini Mercatante Fiorentino. in Roma … Et à Voi non devrà esser discaro che non tanto il presente secolo, quanto quegli ancora che varranno, sappiano che la vita vostra, l’ingegno, i costume, e le cortesie furono tali che non solamente tra i maggiori mercanti et i più degni preti ma appresso I miglior dottori, et i più eccelenti artefici, fu pregiate il nome vostro et tenuto caro.”


144 See Mendelsohn, *Paragoni*, Appendix A.

145 Ibid., Appendix B: “Piu non mi par Bettin del dritto fore, leggendo, che de’ Marmi huom s’innamora, poi che l’oscura notte, & l’Aurora risplendente mirai del gran Scultore.”
Cosimo I (Fig. 5) and his literary Academy. Moreover, as Leatrice Mendelson rightly notes, "The dedication to a Roman resident suggests that the object of both publisher and patron was the dissemination and popularization of Florentine academic thought outside Florence." In addition to Varchi, Bettini made a particularly auspicious contact with another member of the Accademia in the 1540s, Luca Martini (1507-1561), an amateur Dantista and Duke Cosimo’s hydraulic engineer. In Bronzino’s portrait of him, Martini holds a map of Pisa and his plans for recovering land there (Fig. 15). In 1544 Martini commissioned Vasari’s Portrait of Six Tuscan Poets (Fig. 16), which included presumably three portraits derived from Bettini’s lunettes—certainly that of Dante (Fig. 1)—while serving as a liaison between Florentine artists, intellectuals, politicians, and art patrons. In addition to patronizing artists such as Vasari, his portraitist Bronzino, and the sculptor Pierino da Vinci (1529-1553), Martini supported Varchi with the publication of his Due Lezizioni. Bettini’s involvement with Martini is also documented in an unpublished dialogue in Florence—Il Vespro di Baccio Tasio—that records an informal, three-way dialogue between fellow academicians Bettini, Martini, and Alessandro Davanzati over the comedy, the Negromante, which was performed for the duke by the Compagnia de’ Negromanti at the Palazzo Bettini. In this light-hearted exchange, which reveals a level of intimacy among the interlocutors as well as the hospitality on the part of a

146 Bettini’s close ties to Varchi are confirmed by the letters of Giovambattista Busini (b. 1501) to Varchi regarding the siege of Florence. See Giovambattista Busini, Lettere di Giovambattista Busini a Benedetto Varchi sopra l’Assedio di Firenze, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1860), 1, 3, 4, 23, 63, 68, and 74. 147 Mendelsohn, Paragoni, 95. 148 On Martini’s friendship with artists and intellectuals, see Nelson, “Dante Portraits,” n. 3; and idem, “Creative Patronage: Luca Martini and the Renaissance Portrait,” Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz 29 (1995): 283-93. 149 According to Baccio Tasio in his unpublished dialogue titled Il Vespro, the comedy Negromante was performed in Bettini’s house; presumably, Duke Cosimo was in attendance. For Tasio’s Il Vespro, see Biblioteca Riccardiana, Riccardiana 2550, fols. 152r-68v; and the codex Magliabechiano VI 238 of the Biblioteca Nazionale, Firenze, cc. 128r-148v. Cited by Leporatti in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 65-66.
fuoruscito (Bettini) to a Medici duke (Cosimo), “Baccio” delivers the opening lines in a
discussion on the genre of comedy and the role of the Tuscan vernacular.150

Bettini befriended humanists like Varchi and Martini through his skills in banking
and his largesse to their intellectual circles. Clever entrepreneurs like Bettini advanced their
political and economic interests through networks of patronage and friendship, an unclear
distinction in the Renaissance.151 For example, in 1518 Piero Soderini, the former gonfaloniere of
Florence, commissioned his fellow Republican Michelangelo to execute the tabernacle for
Rome’s San Silvestro in Capite while Soderini was living as a political exile in that city.
Michelangelo accepted Soderini’s commission while working for the Medici at San Lorenzo and
the della Rovere in Rome out of civic, professional, and personal devotion. Soderini offered to
house Michelangelo in his Roman residence as well as pay for his round-trip expenses from
Florence. He also provided the artist with a generous budget and a skilled team of assistants, and
he gave Michelangelo complete freedom over the tabernacle’s design. Though he was ultimately
Michelangelo’s patron, Soderini acted out of friendship and a shared Florentine heritage, honoring
the tacit obligations associated with patron-client relationships in the sixteenth century.152

Familial, religious, and artistic interests also inspired friendships in Renaissance
Florence. These spheres of influence often mingled in compagnie, which unlike merchant guilds
such as the Arte del Cambio were made up of men of various vocations.153 Beginning in the
1520s, informal meetings of compagnie paved the way for merchants like Bettini to interact with
other members of the urban elite as well as artists and poets. The Compagnia di San Bastiano (St.

150 See Leporatti in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 83n1.
Sebastian), for example, which was founded in 1516 behind the church of Santissima Annunziata, included among its members painters such as Pontormo and Bronzino.

The Florentine tradition of lay confraternities also paved the way for the city’s literary societies, which Bettini would ultimately support, even within the walls of his camera. In 1462 Cosimo de’ Medici established the Accademia Platonica for the promotion of the study of Plato and his philosophy. At the dawn of the sixteenth century, in 1502, Florentine intellectuals gathered at the Orti Oricellari (Rucellai Gardens), an important early center for debates on the *questione della lingua*, to regenerate and promote the Florentine language. All meetings were conducted in Italian. In 1515, following the election of Medici Pope Leo X, the city’s Accademia Sacra Fiorentina was formed under his protection to promote vernacular literature. Lectures were given in Tuscan and on Dante; in 1516 its members attempted to repatriate the bard’s remains from Ravenna. And as we have seen, in 1540 eleven Florentine merchants founded the Accademia degli Umidi, a literary “brigade” (*brigata*) that met at the home of Giovanni Mazzuoli to discuss the Tuscan language and read and promote translations of Greek and Latin texts. Only three months after its inception, it became the Accademia Fiorentina under Duke Cosimo, who kept a close watch on all meetings and discussions.

As early as 1532, however, almost a decade before his involvement with the Accademia Fiorentina, Bettini illustrated the debates then swirling around the *questione della*

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154 For documents of the Compagnia di San Bastiano, see ASF, *Compagnie religieuse soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo* 1869, Filza 2, Ricordi; Filza 1, Conti, ricevuti 1623-1760, Ricevute e giustificazioni 1734-1777. For the entries of various members, see Filza 2, Ricordi.

155 See ASF, *Compagnie religieuse soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo* 1869, fol. 1r. Bronzino was a member in 1541.

lingua at home in his private chamber. The merchant-banker consciously fashioned himself at the forefront of these discussions by decorating his chamber’s lunettes with portraits of poets singing of love expressly in “Tuscan prose and verse.” As Sherberg notes, “What distinguishes Florentine from non-Florentine voices in this debate, beginning with Machiavelli, is a sense of the importance of place, and specifically Florence, in the history of language, and an understanding that the debate is essentially geo-political in nature.”

But concern for the questione della lingua spread throughout Italy, signaling a peninsular desire for a common, national culture and foundation for future literary academies. About 1500, vernacular poets had spread the lingua toscana to Venice, Milan, Mantua, and Naples, thereby beginning the nationalization of Italian language in the face of foreign invasion. In 1528, only four years before the conception of Bettini’s chamber decoration, the published version of Castiglione’s The Courtier (he wrote it much earlier) addressed the questione della lingua in the milieu of princely court culture outside of Florence. The apposite dialogues surrounding the literary debate in The Courtier reflect national approbation of Tuscan vernacular, identifying it as being universally available to all writers of Italy:

Then, from time to time, not only in Tuscany but throughout Italy, among well-born men, experienced in courtly behavior, arms and letters, there arose the ambition to speak and write more elegantly

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160 As early as 1476 Lorenzo de’ Medici had praised the Tuscan vernacular of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Guido Cavalcanti for its range of expression, sweetness of style, and harmony in his Raccolta aragonese. On the origins of the questione della lingua, see Cecil Grayson, “Lorenzo, Machiavelli and the Italian Language,” in Italian Renaissance Studies, ed. E.F. Jacob (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 410-32.
than in those early rude and uncultivated years, when the flames from the disasters caused by the barbarians were still flickering.\textsuperscript{161}

The choice of the Italian of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio was ultimately successful, and their writings served as paragons of new dialectical communication.

In addition to language, Castiglione’s \textit{The Courtier} emphasized social decorum as a new marker of Italian culture and identity. Coming of age about the time of its publication, Florentines like Bettini modeled their friendships, politics, and patronage after the protagonists in Castiglione’s influential manual on courtly comportment. The letterati then living in a Medici principato were affected by a new code of dress and behavior alien to the mores of a Republic. As a patron eager to fashion himself and his camera in the latest elite trends, Bettini was well served by Bronzino, who joined his \textit{équipe} immediately after serving the della Rovere at their court at Pesaro (see Fig. 24).\textsuperscript{162}

Bettini’s lunettes of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—the three crowns of Tuscan poetry—and his painting of Venus and her sexually charged, adolescent son Cupid would have

\textsuperscript{161} Baldassare Castiglione, \textit{The Book of the Courtier}, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 74-75: “At this point the Duchess [of Urbino] said: ‘Rather than stray from our original purpose, let us have Count Lodovico teach the courtier how to speak and write well, either Tuscan or something else.’ ‘Madam,’ answered the Count [Lodovico Canossa], ‘I have already told you what I know on this score, and I maintain that the rules that apply to speaking are the same as those for writing. But since you command me, I will say what comes to mind in answer to Federico, who differs from my own opinion….First of all, then, in my opinion, this language of ours which we call the vulgar tongue is still fresh and new, although it has already been in use for some while. For, since Italy has not only been despoiled and ravaged but also, for a long period of time, occupied by the barbarians, through contact with these nations the Latin language has been corrupted and spoiled, and other languages have emerged from that corruption. These, like the rivers that divide at the crest of the Apennines and flow into the sea on either side, have also divided. Some that were tinged with elements of Latin have flowed through various channels to various regions of the world; one of them, tinged with barbarism, remained in Italy. And this language, since there was no one to take care of it or use it for writing or endeavor to give it any grace or splendor, was for along time in a state of disorder and flux.”

formed the perfect backdrop for entertaining Florentine letterati, whom the socially and intellectually ambitious merchant-banker wished to engage in his *Courtier*-inspired universe.

**Conclusion**

Bettini was a successful merchant-banker working in one of Renaissance Europe’s major commercial centers. He may have been propelled to commission an elaborate decorative program for the same reasons that inspired the merchant-banker Datini in Quattrocento Prato to adorn his palazzo in the height of court fashion. As Christians, both men were concerned about the fate of their souls; and as bankers both were avaricious and probably dabbled in usurious practices. But Bettini’s camera also served as a private sanctuary where he could be inspired about his future role in Florentine society through conversations with influential friends, namely the city’s letterati. We now turn to Bettini’s painters—Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino—who played a key role in the merchant-banker’s social ascent. As we will see, Michelangelo in particular shared his patron’s political convictions. In direct response to the tyrannical regime of Duke Alessandro, Michelangelo would quit Florence permanently in 1534. During his final years there, the artist was already less committed to Medici commissions. Michelangelo also shared Bettini’s social aspirations. As William Wallace has noted, “To ‘raise up’ his family was Michelangelo’s lifelong ambition.”

Indeed, Michelangelo’s own success was powered, much like Bettini’s, by insecurities over having nonpatrician origins. But Bettini selected Michelangelo, along with Pontormo and Bronzino, in part because of their artistic gifts but perhaps even more so because of their other patrons, among them dukes, princes, and even

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163 Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times*, 94.
popes. By aligning himself with these artists, Bettini elevated his status as a patron of the arts to that of Italy’s most influential citizens.
Chapter 2: Bettini’s Camera Painters

In the previous chapter, we discussed Bettini, his family, his politics, his profession, the art patronage of members of his profession, and his ties to the Accademia Fiorentina and its letterati. This chapter will continue examining Bettini’s social network by focusing on his painters—Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino—and how his choice of these men to decorate his camera was a conscious and calculated one that was essential to his ascent in Florentine society. Indeed, in selecting Florence’s leading masters in 1532, Bettini aligned himself with the city’s recently reappointed ruling family, the Medici.

Michelangelo

Of all Bettini’s artists, Michelangelo played the largest role in the merchant-banker’s chamber decoration. Philippe Costamagna keenly notes that “besides preparing the cartoon for Pontormo’s painting, Michelangelo probably influenced the pose for Bronzino’s Dante, an adaptation of the serpentine figure of Giuliano de’ Medici that the sculptor had recently created in San Lorenzo. Michelangelo may have even suggested the pose to Bronzino … [which] was repeated by Bronzino in other contempororary portraits, notably the Portrait of Ugolino Martelli [Fig. 29].”

Michelangelo’s influence is indeed evident throughout the program. But this may have been more out of loyalty than respect. As we discussed in chapter 1, the artist considered Bettini a man of honor but not his equal. Michelangelo maintained this view particularly after 1537, when his niece married into a powerful patrician family, the Guicciardini. The

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164 Costamagna in Chong et al., Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker, 331.
aforementioned 1549 letter from Michelangelo in Rome to his nephew Lionardo in Florence, in which he describes Bettini as of inferior rank, is worth citing again here but at greater length; the preceding lines reveal the artist’s obsession with noble status and his banker’s relentless pursuit of it through his wealth:

Lionardo, io t’ò scritto più volte, circa il tor donna, che tu non creda a uomo nessuno che te ne parli da mia parte, se tu non vedi mia lectere. Io di nuovo te lo replico, perché Bartolomeo Bectini [sic] è più d’un anno che cominciò a tentarmi di darti una sua nipote. Io gli è dato sempre parole: ora di nuovo m’à retentato forte per mezzo d’u’ mio amico; io ò risposto che so che tu ti se’ volto a una che ti piace e che tu ài dato quasi intentione, e che io non te ne voglio storre. Io t’avviso, acciò che tu sappi rispondere, perché credo che costà te ne farà parlare caldamente. Non ti lasciare pigliare al bonchone, perché l’oferte sono assai, e tu resterai in modo che tu arai bisognio. Bartolomeo è uoma da bene e servente e d’assai, ma non è nostro pari, e tu ài la tua sorella in casa e’ Guicciardini. Non credo che bisogni dirirti altro, perché so che tu sai che e’ val più l’onore che la roba. Altro non ò che dirti.165

Indeed, when it came to arranging political marriages, the ambitious and protective Michelangelo cared more about a woman’s “good parentage” than her wealth or beauty.166

And yet in his life of Pontormo, Vasari described Bettini as Michelangelo’s amicissimo.167 For once Vasari was not speaking in hyperbole. About 1532 the Republican merchant-banker received the gift of the artist’s cartoon for the Venus and Cupid. As we have

165 Buonarroti, Il carteggio, vol. 4, 314. For the English text, see Buonarroti, Letters of Michelangelo, vol. 2, 99-100, no. 321: “Lionardo—I’ve written to you several times about your taking a wife, telling you not to believe anyone who speaks to you about it on my behalf, unless you see letters from me. This I again repeat, because for more than a year now Bartolomeo Bettini has been trying to induce me to give you one of his nieces in marriage. I’ve always made excuses. Now he is making another determined attempt through a friend of mine. I’ve replied that I know that you’re inclined towards someone you like, and that you’ve practically made your intentions known and that I don’t want to unsettle you. I’m informing you of this, so that you may know how to reply, because I believe that the proposal will be warmly recommended to you in Florence. Don’t permit yourself to swallow the bait, just because the offers they are making are such that you would never be in want. Bartolomeo is a man of honor, able and obliging, but he is not our equal and your sister has married into the Guicciardini family. I don’t think I need to say more to you, because I know that you realize that honor is of more worth than possessions. That’s all I have to say to you.”

166 See Wallace, Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times, 108.

167 Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:277.
seen, such gifts were then reserved for Michelangelo’s coterie. According to the artist’s collaborator and biographer Ascanio Condivi (c. 1525-1574), “[Michelangelo] has received requests for works by his hand from more and more noble and wealthy people, with most generous promises, [yet] he seldom complied and, when he did, it was more out of friendship and goodwill than in the expectation of reward.”

As Michelangelo’s banker, Bettini is also mentioned in favorable terms in numerous letters to and from the artist. For example, in a letter dated 14 April 1543 from Rome to Lionardo in Florence, Michelangelo chastised his nephew for losing a contract in the mail, which he knows did not arrive because Bettini was involved in the transaction: “Lionardo, io intendo per la tua e del Prete dove desti il contracto perché mi fussi mandato qua. Non è venuto e sonne certo, perché ‘l Bectino [sic] me l’arebbe mandato insino a casa.” In addition, Bettini may have offered Michelangelo protection from Duke Alessandro in the master’s final days in Florence.

The artists patronized by Bettini—Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino—were equally affected by the Sack of Rome, the expulsion of the Medici, the reinstallation of the Republic, the siege of Florence, and the Medici return. But after 1530, Michelangelo, a staunch Republican, was particularly in demand by Clement VII, who offered to protect him and grant him liberty providing that the artist agreed to resume work on the Medici Chapel and the

168 Other recipients of Michelangelo cartoons include his assistant Antonio Mini, the aforementioned Altoviti (Drunkenness of Noah for the Sistine Ceiling fresco), Tommaso de’ Cavalieri (portrait drawing), Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici, Bernardo Vecchietti (Leda), Uberto Strozzi (fragments of the cartoon for the Battle of Cascina), and Girolamo Albizzi. See Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 7:271, 276, and 277. See also Vasari, Lives, 7:172.
171 Buonarroti, Il carteggio, vol. 4, 166. See also Buonarroti, Letters of Michelangelo, vol. 2, 33, no. 231: “Lionardo—I learn from your letter and from the priest’s where you handed in the contract to be forwarded to me; it didn’t arrive here, and I’m certain about it, because Bettino would have sent it direct to me at home.”
172 According to Mendelsohn, Michelangelo benefited from his relationship with Bettini particularly during the artist’s last months in Florence, when the merchant-banker protected him from Duke Alessandro by hiding him in his Florentine town house. See Mendelsohn, Paragoni, 94n31.
Laurentian Library at San Lorenzo. Bound once again to the Medici and now to the principato of Duke Alessandro, Michelangelo was forced to work on the sculptures of the Sagrestia Nuova of San Lorenzo as well as accept unwanted commissions from the Medici and their friends and sympathizers. Among these commissions were the David-Apollo for the Medici governor of Florence, Baccio Valori, who after confronting Alessandro’s tyranny would support Michelangelo and rejoin the fuorusciti; an altarpiece cartoon for Matteo Malvezzi; and a copy of Bettini’s Venus and Cupid for Alessandro Vitelli, captain of Duke Alessandro’s guard.

In these trying times, the artist developed a professional relationship with Pontormo, a fellow Florentine who transferred some of Michelangelo’s cartoons to panel and painted them. Two of these were the Noli me tangere for Alfonso d’Avalos (Fig. 17), the Marchese del Vasto and a member of Naples’s most noble families, and Bettini’s Venus and Cupid (Fig. 2). Commissioning Michelangelo just one year after d’Avalos, Bettini must have been aware of the artist’s recent collaboration with Pontormo on the Noli me tangere. As William Wallace notes, “La capacità con la quale il Pontormo riuscì a penetrare nel linguaggio di Michelangelo e ad interpretarne le intenzioni, convinse il maestro ad affidargli un altro lavoro importante, la Venere

174 See Giorgio Bonsanti in Acidini Luchinat, The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence, 216-17, no. 80.
176 See Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:277-79, 575; and Costamanga, Pontormo, no. 69.
177 Pontormo may have also been assigned to fresco a Resurrection lunette after Michelangelo’s designs on the wall opposite the altar of the Medici Chapel. For that unrealized project, see Ann E. Popp, Die Medici-Kapelle Michelangelos (Munich: O.C. Recht, 1922), 158-63: “Ob Michelangelo diese figürlichen Malereien allein ausgeführten hätte oder von anderer Hand hätte ausführen lassen, etwa von Pontormo, der in den Jahren 1532-34 seine Bilder ausführte (Noli me tangere, Venus und Amor), ist unbekannt.”
Indeed, through his friendship with Michelangelo, the enterprising merchant-banker may have also expected to secure Pontormo—the city’s most acclaimed colorist—for his chamber decoration.

In November 1530 Michelangelo was pardoned by Clement VII for his Republican loyalties, yet he remained a foe of Duke Alessandro and even feared for his life while living in Florence. Condivi recounted Michelangelo’s emotional state under the vigilance of the first Medici duke:

> For all that, Michelangelo lived in extreme fear, because he was deeply hated by Duke Alessandro, a fierce and vengeful young man, as everyone knows. And there is no doubt that, if it had not been for the respect shown by the pope, he would have gotten rid of Michelangelo. All the more so since, when the duke of Florence wanted to build that fortress which he built and had Signor Alessandro Vitelli summon Michelangelo to ride out with him to see where it could conveniently be built, Michelangelo would not go, answering that he had no such orders from Pope Clement. This made the duke very angry; so that, both for this new reason and on account of the old ill will and the natural disposition of the duke, Michelangelo was justified in being afraid. 179

Michelangelo was indeed afraid and burdened by unwanted commissions. In 1531 he was also distraught over the recent death of his father. The following year he found solace in Rome, from

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179 Condivi, The Life of Michelangelo, 67-69. See also idem, Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti, ed. Giovanni Nencioni (Florence: S.P.E.S., 1998), 42: “Con tutto ciò Michelangelo stava in grandissima paura, perciòché il duca Alessandro molto l’odiava, giovane, come ognun sa, feroce e vendicativo. Né è dubio che, se non fusse stato il rispetto del papa, che non se lo fusse levato dinanzi. Tanto più che, volendo il duca di Firenze far quella fortezza che fece, e avendo fatto chiamar Michelangelo per il signor Alessandro Vitelli, che cavalcasse seco a veder dove comodamente si potesse fare, egli non volse andare, rispondendo che non aveva tal commissione da papa Clemente. Del che molto si sdegnò il duca. Si che e per questo nuovo rispetto, e per la vecchia malivolenza, e per la natura del duca, meritamente aveva da stare in paura. E certamente fu dal Signore Iddio aiutato, che alla norte di Clemente non si trovò in Firenze, perciòché da quel pontifice, prima ch’avesse le sepolture ben finite, fu chiamato a Roma e da lui recevuto lietamente. Rispettò Clemente questo uomo come cosa sacra, e con quella domestichezza ragionava seco, e di cose gravi e leggieri, che arrebbe fatto con un suo pari. Cercò di scaricarlo della sepolitura di Giulio, acciocché fermamente stesse in Firenze e non solamente finisse le cose cominciate, ma ne facesse ancor dell’altrre non men degne.”
August 1532 to June 1533, but he maintained official residence in Florence until 23 September 1534. Once he was permanently installed in Rome, he never visited his native city again.  

**Michelangelo and Representations of Love and Ideal Beauty**

On the last day of March 1541 Michelangelo, now permanently living in Rome, was elected to the Accademia Fiorentina along with thirty-four new members. According to the Accademia’s statutes, men living outside of Florence, such as Michelangelo and Bettini, were eligible for admission. Since members were required to prove themselves as poets, writers, or translators of a classical text, by 1541 Michelangelo had certainly joined the ranks of Bettini’s first artist, Bronzino, as poet-painter (see below). Six years later, in 1547, Varchi spoke in front of the members of the Accademia Fiorentina and bestowed on Michelangelo his greatest recognition as a poet: the letterato employed one of Michelangelo’s sonnets on Neoplatonic theories of love as the main text for his first of two *Lezioni*. This was great praise indeed. As Wallace has rightly noted, “Michelangelo was not a ‘man of letters’; he could not write in Latin, and in such company, he was painfully conscious of his lack of learning.”

But throughout his career Michelangelo wrote over three hundred sonnets, madrigals, and irreverently biting burlesque poems. The majority of his poetry employed the noble sentiments of Petrarch and Dante, exploring the themes of love, death, and salvation. Whereas his

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183 Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Times*, 205.
choice of subjects suggested Michelangelo’s interest in aristocratic taste for the three crowns of Tuscan literature, James Saslow keenly observes how Michelangelo’s stylistic deviation from the polished “high style” of Bembo actually reveals a novel openness of expression that “prefigures the directness and emotional intensity of the baroque.”\(^{184}\)

In Bettini’s chamber, Michelangelo would have been inspired by his most beloved mentors of spirituality and earthly love, Dante (Fig. 1) and Petrarch. As Paul Barolsky aptly notes, “It is to Dante, finally and inevitably, that we must turn in order to penetrate that most profound source of Michelangelo’s self-conception.”\(^{185}\) Condivi recounts Michelangelo’s first encounter with the three crowns:

From the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent to the exile of his sons, some three years elapsed, so that Michelangelo must have been between the ages of twenty and twenty-one. To avoid those first popular upheavals, waiting for the city of Florence to assume some order, he stayed on in Bologna with [Gianfrancesco Aldovrandi], who treated him with great honor, as he was delighted with his intelligence, and every evening he had him read from Dante or Petrarch and sometimes from Boccaccio, until he fell asleep.\(^{186}\)

Condivi later expanded on Michelangelo’s modest development as a poet:

And just as he has greatly delighted in the conversation of learned men, so he has also derived great pleasure from reading the writers of both prose and poetry, amongst whom he especially admired Dante, delighted by the remarkable genius of that man, whose work he knows almost entirely by heart, although perhaps he knows the work of Petrarch no less well. And he not only has enjoyed reading verse but sometimes has liked to compose it, as we may see by certain sonnets of his which give a fine example of his great powers of invention and discrimination. And Varchi has published certain discourses and comments on some of them. But Michelangelo has applied himself to poetry more for his own


pleasure than as a profession, and he has always belittled himself and asserted his ignorance in these matters.\textsuperscript{187}

While Condivi cautiously placed Michelangelo in the camp of poets, Varchi’s exposition of the artist’s sonnet in his \textit{Due Lezzi\'oni} affirmed Michelangelo’s literary status.

Like Sandro Botticelli (1444/5-1510) in the late fifteenth century, Michelangelo also engaged with Dante by illustrating passages from his \textit{Divina Commedia}.\textsuperscript{188} Mary’s controversial youthfulness in the Roman \textit{Pietà} (1497-1500), for example, has been explained by a passage in Dante’s \textit{Paradiso}, in which Mary is referred to as “Virgin Mother, daughter of your son.”\textsuperscript{189} In 1534, while in the service of Pope Paul III painting the \textit{Last Judgment} for the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, Condivi recounted how Michelangelo introduced the figure of Charon in his bark “exactly as Dante describes him in his Inferno, in the muddy waters of Acheron, raising his oar to strike any laggard soul; and, as the bark touches the bank, all those souls can be seen vying to hurl themselves out, spurred by divine justice so that ‘fear,’ as the poet says, ‘is changed to desire.’”\textsuperscript{190}

Indeed, regardless of the scale or medium of his projects, Dante was often on Michelangelo’s mind. In an intimate drawing of a \textit{Pietà} for the pious Roman noblewoman and poet Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547),\textsuperscript{191} he quoted Canto 29 of \textit{Paradiso} in an inscription on the cross: “Non vi si pensa quanto sangue costa.” And in a monumental tomb project in marble for

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 103-05.
\item \textsuperscript{190} Condivi, \textit{The Life of Michelangelo}, 84.
\end{itemize}
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Pope Julius II, Michelangelo appropriated Dante’s *Leah* and *Rachel* from *Purgatorio*.\(^{192}\)

Described in *Purgatorio*, Canto 27, Leah personifies “active life,” appearing as the companion to Rachel’s “contemplative life.” Indeed, as Barolsky notes, “Dante plays the Virgil to Michelangelo’s Dante, and when Michelangelo says that no greater man than Dante was ever born, we should read between the lines, hearing him say in full, no greater man until my own advent.”\(^{193}\) Moreover, Dante’s *Commedia* may have served as the inspiration for Michelangelo’s cartoon for the *Venus and Cupid*. Transfixed by Matilda’s loving gaze in *Purgatorio*, Dante claimed the following: “I do not believe such light shone from beneath the lids of Venus when, through strange mischance, she was pierced by her son” (*Purgatorio*, Canto 28. 64-66).

However, whereas Dante’s dolce stil nuovo, which was predicated on the belief that “amore e ‘l cor gentil sono una cosa,” appears in Michelangelo’s sonnets from time to time, the “Sweet New Style” was never an essential idiom in the artist’s poetry. Although claiming much popularity in Quattrocento literary culture, the dolce stil nuovo was ultimately very much removed from Michelangelo’s thoughts on Platonic love between men. Rather, the Florentine Neoplatonism of Ficino, the Greek specialist discussed in chapter 1, was a stronger influence on Michelangelo than the writings of Dante, Ficino’s pupil Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), and Francesco Cattani da Diacceto (1531-1595).\(^{194}\)

Michelangelo’s diligence in poetry, particularly love sonnets, exposed him to the medium’s capacity for artistic expression. And through his literary training, he was able to render

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\(^{194}\) Diacceto was a chief disciple of Ficino and a link between Ficino and the sixteenth-century Neoplatonists; he wrote a metaphysical treatise on love titled *I tre libri d’amore*. See B. H. Sumner, “Michelangelo and Dante,” *Italian Studies* 1 (1938): 162-65.
Bettini’s *Venus* as an ideal beauty from another world. Leonardo, however, privileged the painter over the poet in his ability to induce love in the viewer through idealized forms:

If the poet says that he can inflame men with love, which is the central aim in all animal species, the painter has the power to do the same, and to an even greater degree, in that he can place in front of the lover the true likeness of that which is beloved, often making him kiss and speak to it. This would never happen with the same beauties set before him by the writer. So much greater is the power of a painting over a man’s mind that he may be enchanted and enraptured by a painting that does not represent any living woman.\(^{195}\)

As we will see, Varchi too supported Leonardo’s view on the power of painting over poetry when he links Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2) with Praxiteles’ *Aphrodite of Knidos* through their ability to inflame the hearts of men in Cinquecento Florence and Late Classical Athens, respectively (see chapter 3). Michelangelo was both a painter and a poet and therefore the ideal candidate for the design of Bettini’s muse for his chamber decoration.

In addition, in 1532 Michelangelo was exploring a Platonic love of his own. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, in August of that year the fifty-seven-year-old artist returned to Rome for what would be a ten-month sojourn prior to his permanent move there in 1534. During that brief stay, he met Cavalieri.\(^ {196}\) And it was the young Roman nobleman who inspired Michelangelo to write the following lines shortly after completing Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* cartoon:

If one chaste love, if one sublime compassion,
if one fate are equally shared between two lovers;
if the hard lot of one troubles the other;
if one spirit, if one will governs two hearts;
if one soul in two bodies is made eternal,

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raising both to heaven with similar wings;
if Love with one blow and one gilded dart
can burn and rend the vitals in two breasts;
if neither loves himself, and they love each other
with one joy and one zeal, to such a degree
that both might wish to come to a single end:
Thousands and thousands would not make a fraction
of such a love-knot, such fidelity,
and only anger could untie and break it.197

Two years later, in 1536, Michelangelo met Vittoria Colonna, who inspired the
following madrigal shortly after their first encounter:

You make me rise, my lady,
so far above myself,
that I can’t express, or even
imagine it, for I’m no longer myself.
Since you lend me your wings,
why, then, don’t I lift up
and fly more often to your lovely face,
and why can’t I stay with you,
if we’re allowed by heaven
to ascend to paradise with our mortal part?
Nonetheless, it’s my good fortune
that by your grace I’m separated from my soul,
and that it, remaining with you, can escape its death.198

Through his two muses in Rome, Cavalieri and Colonna, Michelangelo harmoniously
explored his interest in both Neoplatonic love—which he first learned from Lorenzo de’ Medici
and his humanist adviser Angelo Poliziano (1454-1494)—and religious faith and devotion
resulting from the lingering influence of Savonarola. And it was in the company of Cavalieri, and
his former collaborator Daniele da Volterra (1509-1566), that Michelangelo died in Rome thirty-
two years later on 16 February 1564. The artistic genius who had inspired love in so many artistic
creations was finally its recipient.

198 Ibid., 307, no. 154.
About 1532, Michelangelo defined ideal female beauty with Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2). His own theories of love, which he cleverly expressed in the panel’s cartoon (now lost; see Fig. 3), were the result of a life-long obsession with physical beauty. According to Condivi, the artist’s relentless pursuit of ideal beauty informed a full range of artistic production:

> I have often heard Michelangelo converse and discourse on the subject of love and have later heard from those who were present that what he said about love was no different than what we read in the writings of Plato. As for me, I do not know what Plato says on the subject, but I know very well that, in all my long and intimate acquaintance with Michelangelo, I have never heard any but the most honorable words cross his lips, such as have the power to extinguish in the young any unseemly and unbridled desire which might spring up. And that no foul thoughts could have arisen in his mind is evident also from the fact that he has loved not only human beauty but everything beautiful in general: a beautiful horse, a beautiful dog, a beautiful landscape, a beautiful plant, a beautiful mountain, a beautiful forest, and every place and thing which is beautiful and rare of its kind, admiring them all with marveling love and selecting beauty from nature as the bees gather honey from flowers, to use it later in his works. All those who have achieved some fame in painting have always done the same. In order to create a Venus, [Zeuxis] was not content to consider a single maiden, but he wanted to contemplate many, and from each he took her most beautiful and perfect feature to use in his Venus. And, in truth, anyone who thinks to arrive at some level in this art without this means (whereby true knowledge of theory can be acquired) is greatly deceiving himself.\(^{199}\)

Like Pliny’s Zeuxis, Condivi’s Michelangelo conflated various models taken from nature, art, and his own *fantasia* for compositions such as Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid*, Michelangelo’s last pagan subject and final essay on female beauty.\(^{200}\) Early in his career Michelangelo relied on direct observations of nature (life drawings) as the source for his figures. According to Vasari, the artist altered or invented specific muscles for greater expression on only four occasions throughout his career.\(^{201}\) Indeed, Bettini’s *Venus*, with her slanted shoulders,

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twisted neck, bent knees and elbows, swollen abdomen, and flattened right breast, reveals his ongoing observation of living (female) models.  

But early on, while training in Lorenzo de’ Medici’s household, Michelangelo was also exposed to antique sculpture, an influence that would inform his concetti well into adulthood. According to Craig Hugh Smyth, it was precisely about 1530, when the formal conventions of maniera finally became widely accepted, that Michelangelo achieved “a special clarity and purity in surface arrangement under the guidance of antique relief.” Ancient sarcophagi had provided Renaissance painters in particular with a model that emphasized a high degree of finish and detail, a flattening of figures against the picture plane, and a simplification of contours. These characteristics are all found in the cartoon for Bettini’s Venus, a highly finished figure compressed in a shallow, nearly two-dimensional space, and elongated beyond natural limits.

Ancient river gods (fiumi) were also a source of inspiration in Cinquecento Florence. Michelangelo himself appropriated them in his early drawings for the sculptures in the Medici Chapel at San Lorenzo (1519-34), and, as Nelson notes, in Bettini’s Venus. (Reclining female nudes were not independent subjects in antiquity.) Heinrich Wölfflin, in his praise of Michelangelo’s allegorical sculpture of Dawn in the Medici Chapel, keenly notes the influence of male fiumi on the artist’s female nudes in the 1520s and 1530s:

The ancients had river-gods, and a comparison between Michelangelo’s figures and the two splendid antique statues for which he himself prepared a place of honor on the Capitol, can throw a good deal of light on his own style. He takes over the motive and endows it with a richness which far surpasses all previous efforts…. The figures [from the Medici Chapel] are

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202 Michelangelo’s models are traditionally considered to have been all male. However, certain passages in the Venus and Cupid and the figures of Dawn and in particular Night in the Medici Chapel suggest a precise knowledge of the female anatomy. See J. J. Stark and Jonathan Katz Nelson, “The Breasts of ‘Night’: Michelangelo as Oncologist,” New England Journal of Medicine 343 no. 21 (2000): 1577-78.

203 Craig Hugh Smyth, Mannerism and Maniera (Vienna: IRSA, 1992), 81.

immensely stimulated because of the variety of planes and the major contrasts of axial direction, yet they remain at rest in spite of all this enrichment, and the strong tendency towards disintegration of the forms is countered by a still stronger will to create form. The figures are not clear in the sense that all the essential facts are stated and the principal axes made immediately obvious, but the figures are contained within quite simple spatial boundaries: they are framed in space and arranged in strata, so that they can be apprehended as pure reliefs. It is extraordinary how Dawn, for all her movement, can be read as a single plane in this sense; her upraised left arm suggests a neutral background and everything in front of it lies in one plane parallel to it.205

Interestingly, Wölfflin’s ekphrasis of Dawn seems to evoke Bettini’s Venus, which the Swiss art historian would regard as intricate and complex when compared to the “peaceful” nudes of Titian (1485/90-1576).206

Indeed, Michelangelo’s final version of Venus and Cupid challenged Wölfflin’s ideas of harmony, balance, and proportion while faithfully adhering to Renaissance theories of painting. According to Alberti, “the first thing that gives pleasure in a ‘historia’ is a plentiful variety.”207 Both figures in Bettini’s panel stimulate the eye through twisting limbs and shifting axes. Leonardo further emphasized the importance of variety (varietà) by cautioning painters to “not repeat the same movements in a single figure, be it in its limbs, hands or fingers.”208 Bettini’s Venus in particular embodies the varietà praised by both theorists through her opposing limbs, joints, and muscles.

Vasari claimed that Michelangelo never reused his own figures: “né ha mai fatto cosa nessuna delle sue, che riscontri l’una con l’altra, perchè si ricordava di tutto quello che aveva

206 Ibid., 202.
207 Alberti, On Painting, 75.
208 Leonardo, Leonardo on Painting, 220.
fatto”; however, Charles de Tolnay has correctly identified the artist’s creation of a repertory of heads to be employed as exempla for future projects. Beginning with the example of the Virgin’s twisting head in the *Doni Tondo*, the motif reappears throughout the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the figures of Adam (*Creation of Man*), Eve (*Temptation of Man*), the Prophet Jonah, and the crucified Haman. Indeed, Bettini’s “complicated” Venus first appeared in the paragon of High Renaissance harmony and classical proportion, Adam in the *Creation of Man*. Adam reveals the same contrapposto, only in reverse, between extended and retracted limbs that would continue to preoccupy Michelangelo through 1532. Michelangelo would appropriate Adam in his designs for the sculptures of the Medici Chapel, including the unrealized fiumi destined for the bases of the tombs of Giuliano and Lorenzo de’ Medici.

Around 1530 Michelangelo paired the figure of Adam with a smaller Cupid prototype in a red chalk drawing of *Samson and Delilah* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). A painting was never realized, and the *Samson and Delilah* may have been designed expressly to resolve a challenging compositional problem: successfully integrating a small figure into a self-sufficient, reclining nude. The line drawn through Delilah’s right shin in the Oxford sheet—drawn as if she were not originally part of the composition but a mere afterthought—affirms Michelangelo’s principal concern with the reclining male, or in the case of Bettini’s camera, female nude. Indeed, at precisely this stage of the artist’s development, *Delilah* (or *Cupid*) was awkwardly introduced

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211 British Museum, London, no. 1926-10-9-1r, red chalk, 19.3 x 25.9 cm. See Wilde, *Italian Drawings*, no. 11.
to a genre the artist had already mastered, independently reclining nudes. Varchi, in his *Due Lezzeni*, praised Bettini’s “Venere,” not “Venere e Cupido,” for her allure. In Michelangelo’s compositions from the early 1530s, the smaller figures are ultimately foils for one protagonist.

Michelangelo confidently quoted himself and the great sculptures of antiquity, but his debt to his Tuscan forefathers was noted by his contemporaries, despite deliberate omissions by Vasari and Condivi. The celebrated academician and Dante commentator Giovanni Battista Gelli (1498-1563), for example, noted Michelangelo’s indebtedness to Giotto’s (1267/75-1337) figures in the Bardi Chapel of the Florentine church of Santa Croce, particularly in the emotional expressiveness of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment.* Michelangelo’s early ink drawings after Giotto’s figures in the Peruzzi Chapel of Santa Croce and Masaccio’s (1401-1428) in the Brancacci Chapel of the church of Santa Maria del Carmine also attest to the artist’s respect for his compatriots. Condivi admittedly described Donatello (1386/87-1466) as “an outstanding man in the art of sculpture and much praised by Michelangelo”; however, he also included Michelangelo’s disapproval of Donatello’s impatience in polishing his works, which were “ admirably successful from a distance, [but] they lost their reputation when seen from nearby.”

Michelangelo was also in dialogue with his contemporaries beyond Tuscany, particularly with Titian at about the time of Bettini’s commission. During the siege of Florence, Michelangelo visited Ferrara in order to inspect the city’s fortifications—then regarded as the most advanced on the peninsula—and perhaps secure cannons from Duke Alfonso d’Este’s arsenal for the Florentine Republic (see chapter 1). The artist visited Ferrera on 28 July 1529 and again that fall, on 29 September, en route to Venice, where he may have seen the paintings of

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Venus and Cupid by Giorgione, Palma il Vecchio (see Fig. 22), and Lorenzo Lotto (see Fig. 41). In return for hosting Michelangelo in Ferrara on two occasions, Duke Alfonso requested from him “something for me that is by your own hand, just as you like, sculpture or painting.”\(^\text{217}\) Indeed, in the early sixteenth century, artistic innovation and invenzione were praised above an object’s precious materials. John Shearman has keenly identified a shift in patronage after 1520, when “we find that works are commissioned for no other reason than the desire of the patron to have, for example, a Michelangelo: that is to say, an example of his unique virtù, or his art; the subject, size or even medium do not matter.”\(^\text{218}\)

In 1529 Michelangelo was primarily engaged in sculpture and architecture. However, for Duke Alfonso, whose celebrated camerino was adorned with mythological paintings by Titian and Giovanni Bellini (1431/6-1516) featuring female nudes, Michelangelo painted a seductive picture of Leda (now lost; for a faithful, contemporaneous copy of Michelangelo’s cartoon, see Fig. 23)\(^\text{219}\) to position himself in direct competition with his Venetian counterparts.\(^\text{220}\) The competition between Michelangelo and Titian in particular involved patronage, disegno versus colorito, contemporary theories of love, and the erotic power of artifice.\(^\text{221}\) Titian was well represented in Ferrara as a master of eroticized history painting. His classically inspired Bacchanal of the Andrians (Prado, Madrid; mid-1520s),\(^\text{222}\) for example, is dominated in the right foreground by an incongruous female nude reclining right up at the picture plane. Michelangelo,

\(^{217}\) Ibid., 70.

\(^{218}\) John Shearman, Mannerism (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1967), 44. Shearman also cites King Francis I of France’s request from Michelangelo in January 1519 for “some work, even small, of yours.”


in his own version of classical erotica for Alfonso (the *Leda*), eliminated Titian’s convolution of figures and distant landscape and focused instead on the female nude, Leda’s accompanying swan serving only to heighten her sexual accessibility to a male audience. A red chalk study for the *Leda* (Uffizi, Florence)\(^{223}\) depicts a reclining figure with a narrow, muscular torso and large buttock and thighs, yet another example of Michelangelo’s conflation of idealized male and female sources. Michelangelo’s contribution, possibly to Alfonso’s private camerino, surpassed the works of Titian and Bellini in its explicit eroticism. However, as a result of Alfonso’s lack of military support for the Florentine Republic (and subsequent support for Charles V), Michelangelo sent the Leda with his assistant Antonio Mini to France, where it found its way into the collection of King Francis I.\(^{224}\)

Without the delivery of the *Leda*, Michelangelo’s artistic duel with Titian was never realized in Ferrara, but the Florentine sculptor continued his dialogue with the Venetian painter in his next “open-ended” commission in Florence, Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2).\(^{225}\) In his life of Pontormo, Vasari describes Bettini’s chamber decoration as already underway by Bronzino when Michelangelo gave his good friend the cartoon for *Venus and Cupid*.\(^{226}\) As we have seen, Michelangelo had proffered his finished cartoons as gifts to friends in the past, and his *Venus and Cupid* may have been executed independently of Bettini’s preexisting decoration. Bettini would have certainly joined the ranks of Michelangelo’s accommodating patrons, such as Duke Alfonso, and he, too, would have been grateful for any work in any medium by the master’s hand. However, in 1532 Michelangelo would have also benefited from Bettini and his camera

\(^{223}\) Uffizi, Florence, no. 611Ev, red chalk, 31 x 25.5 cm. See de Tolnay, *Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo*, no. 298v.


\(^{225}\) See Goffen, *Renaissance Rivals*, 320-325

commission, which would have provided him with a second opportunity to confront Titian in the
Venetian painter’s favored medium and subject matter, the female nude.

Perhaps as a result of this competition with Titian, Michelangelo’s Venus and Cupid
was praised by both Aretino in the Veneto and Varchi in Tuscany as a pan-pensinsular paragon of
ideal beauty and central Italy’s answer to the sensually reclining nudes of Giorgione and Titian.
But who ultimately defined female beauty in early-sixteenth-century Florence? In the 1520s and
1530s, Michelangelo himself defined beauty through what Vasari described as “divine heads”
(teste divine), idealized portraits typically rendered in profile much like effigies on ancient
medals. They were adorned with elaborate hairstyles of great complexity and refinement. In
1522 Michelangelo depicted an idealized Venus figure accompanied by Cupid and Mars for
Gherardo Perini. ²²⁷ The protagonist in Venus, Mars, and Cupid, sometimes called Zenobia, was
drawn half-length and almost in profile, embraced by an abbreviated Cupid around the waist, and
shadowed by a quickly sketched Mars in the right background. The only fully worked up
passages on the sheet are Venus’ head and neck, which reflect Michelangelo’s interest in
developing an ideal physiognomic type: an aquiline nose, sensuous lips (the upper slightly
protruding over the lower), and a softly rounded chin. As Berenson notes, every one of
Michelangelo’s figures was “a renewed exploration of form which explains the deliberate
elaboration of certain parts to the neglect of others, all witnessing to an eternal preoccupation with
anatomical structure.”²²⁸

²²⁷ On the so-called Zenobia drawing, today in the Uffizi at Florence, see Berenson, Drawings of the Florentine
Painters, no. 1626; Ludwig Goldscheider, Michelangelo Drawings (London: Phaidon, 1966), no. 52; and de Tolnay,
Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo, no. 307r. Previously attributed to Bacchiacca and an unknown follower of
Michelangelo, the Uffizi drawing was returned to Michelangelo by Wilde, who acknowledged it as one of the artist’s
²²⁸ Berenson, Drawings of the Florentine Painters, 192.
The results of this exploration of beauty were applied to Bettini’s *Venus*, whose head is also depicted in profile and topped by a similar series of blonde tresses. Like Perini’s *Zenobia*, Bettini’s *Venus* has both male and female characteristics and is the fruition of Michelangelo’s dialogue with love and beauty. Iconographically, Perini’s drawing represents an early interest on the part of Michelangelo in the myth of Venus and Cupid, which the artist may have used as a learned guise for his true passion, the idealization of natural human forms.

Michelangelo’s *Three Female Heads in Profile*, a second sheet drawn for Perini in 1522, removed the mythological context of *Venus, Mars, and Cupid* and explored beauty for its own sake. Of the three heads on the sheet’s recto, the youthful female farthest left bears a striking resemblance to Bettini’s *Venus*, both in physiognomy and hairstyle. She is also the most developed, extending to almost half-length. For example, the knots and ties in her coiffure are as intricate as those of Bettini’s *Venus*, as are her full lips and aquiline nose, which dips and bulges slightly at the tip. While they were certainly not drawn as preparatory works for Bettini’s commission, Perini’s *teste divine disegni* document Michelangelo’s preoccupation with ideal female beauty in the early 1520s.

Michelangelo’s interest in ideal beauty was shared by his contemporary theorists across Italy. The Vicenzan letterato Giangiorgio Trissino (1478-1550), for example, in his *I ritratti* of 1524, praised physical beauty over virtue in his account of Isabella d’Este (1474-1539), the marchesa of Mantua and a reported beauty. The Este and later Gonzaga court letterato Mario Equicola (1470-1525), in his 1525 treatise on love, saw beauty in a virile, round face, a

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229 A contemporary Michelangelo *teste divina* study is the *Ideal Head of a Woman* (London, British Museum). See de Tolnay, *Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo*, no. 316r.
230 See ibid., no. 308r.
spacious forehead, a small but refined nose which begins at the eyebrows, full lips and cheeks, and dark, almost black eyes.²³²

Closer to Michelangelo’s native Tuscany, the Florentine poet Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1543) built on Trissino and Equicola in his extensive summation of female beauty in the first half of the sixteenth century, his Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne published in 1542:

The hair must be thick, though fine, long and curly, and it should be blonde, ranging from gold and honey to the color of bright sunshine. The brow of a perfect beauty must be twice as wide as it is high; it should be gleaming white, gently curving and serene, unmarked by any line. The eyebrows must be dark and fine as silk, perfect arches that taper towards the ends. The eyes should have dark chestnut irises with whites that are large and curving, following Homer’s description of Juno. The eyes should be fringed by a modest number of lashes, which should not be too long and neither black nor white. The ears should be soft, but not flabby, and colored more like pale pink roses or like balas rubies than like true red rubies, except for the channel that runs round the edge, which should be redder and more transparent, like the seed of a pomegranate. A beautiful woman’s cheeks should rise as if to protect her eyes, and they should become flushed with vermillion as they swell, being otherwise ivory-white, though less gleaming than the brow. The nose, apart from being perfectly proportioned, is to be slightly pointed but not turned up, because this would suggest pride, and the cartilage around the nostrils should be similar in color to the ears, though slightly less fiery. The mouth must be smallish, and neither angular nor flat. The vermilion lips should be fairly equal, neither one projecting over the other, and when seen in profile they should meet at an obtuse angle, more obtuse than the angle where the lower lip meets the curve of the chin. A woman’s smile, which should be rare and modest, is the crowning perfection of her mouth, a divine effulgence that makes of it a Paradise. The arms themselves are to be fleshy and strong, but soft

²³² Mario Equicola, Libro di natura d’amore (Venice: Bindoni e Pasini, 1531), 79r: “La habitudine sia non grassa, ma carnosa, non ossea, ma sue cosa, il colore non bianco tanto che tenda al pallore, ma misto can sangue: se é bruna, non é deforme: di questo colore era Venere, & ad Ovidio non dispiacque. Io laudo la faccia virile, che tenda al tondo piu tosto ch’al longo: la fronte spiatosa, il naso piccolo afilato che nasca dalli confine delle ciglia: le labbra che piu alla mediocre grossezza, che alla sottilezze declinen: le le guancie carnose, li occhi se laudano negri, & così dicono haverli havuti la dea della bellezza: occhi tra negri & bianchi, senza macula, longhetti, lucidi, tumidetti: allegri: tali sono laudati da Avicenna, per demostrar ingengo & somma fede: Il petto lato nel qual apena il luogo del osso vi appara: la mano grossetta, l’internodi delle dita egualmente pieni, l’ungie poco incurue, & sia la mano candidissima di fuera, ma dentro como avorio levemente tinto di ostro. Quella é dolce mano, in la quale alli confine delle dita puoco concavita si vede: Sia la persona di mediocre statura, & apsetto humano: la deforme donna é quella che ha quel.”
and resilient too, the hands white and full with curving palms. The fingers should be long and slender by contrast, tapering gently, and with a pronounced space between the index-finger and the thumb; they should be pinkish at the ends.233

Similarities between Firenzuola’s ideal beauty and Bettini’s (blonde hair, an unlined brow, perfectly arched eyebrows, a slightly pointed nose, a smallish mouth, strong arms, and long, tapering fingers) suggest that the Michelangelo-Pontormo goddess was a worthy Florentine muse for Bronzino’s poets, who sang of love above everything else in the merchant-banker’s private interior.

Pontormo

Pontormo joined the Bettini camera commission as Michelangelo’s principal collaborator from 1531 to 1533. At the time, he had a more secure foothold in Florence as court artist to the Medici. Unlike Michelangelo, the less-political Pontormo served Republican and Medici patrons alike in Florence until his death in 1556.234 In the late 1520s, he accepted commissions for portraits of prominent Republicans. As we discussed in chapter 1, during the siege he painted a portrait of Francesco Guardi “in the habit of a soldier” (Fig. 13).235 Two years later, he portrayed Amerigo Antinori moments before Antinori’s exile from Florence.236 As a staunch Republican, Antinori’s property, including Pontormo’s portrait, was confiscated by Duke

234 For Pontormo’s position in the Medici court, see Dario Trento, “Pontormo e la corte di Cosimo I,” in Monika Cämmerer, ed., Kunst des Cinquecento in der Toskana (Munich: Bruckmann, 1992), 139-44; Costamagna, Pontormo, 81-99; and Pilliod, Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori, 11-42.
235 See Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:275: “in abito di soldato”; and Costamagna, Pontormo, no. 66. See also Cropper, Pontormo, who convincingly identified Pontormo’s Portrait of a Halberdier at the Getty Museum as the portrait of Guardi described by Vasari in the life of Pontormo.
236 See Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:278; and Costamagna, Pontormo, no. 67.
Alessandro, meeting the same fate as Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2). Pontormo also painted a portrait of Carlo Neroni (now lost), for whom Bronzino executed a painting of a timely theme, the *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand* (Uffizi, Florence), derived from Pontormo’s painting of the same subject for the women of the Ospedale degli Innocenti (Galleria Palatina, Florence).  

In 1532, while taking on Republican projects such as the *Venus and Cupid* for Bettini, Pontormo was also commissioned by Medici Pope Clement VII to complete the Salone in the family villa at Poggio a Caiano. Accepting Medici projects with honor rather than exasperation, the apolitical Pontormo made cartoons for the villa’s prestigious audience chamber of *Hercules and Antaeus, Venus and Adonis*, and nude men playing *calcio*, none of which was realized in fresco. In fact, it was to assist in the execution of the Poggio a Caiano frescoes that Pontormo summoned Bronzino home from the della Rovere court at Pesaro in 1532.

Pontormo’s dealings with the Medici and their sympathizers had begun early in his career with two previously discussed commissions for private chamber decorations, Pierfrancesco Borgherini’s bedchamber panels from 1515-18 featuring the story of Joseph and Giovanni Benintendi’s *Adoration of the Magi* antechamber panel from 1518, both of which resemble Bettini’s camera program in grace and sophistication. Following the latest trends in interior decorations, Bettini called upon Pontormo, who was then armed with Michelangelo’s cartoon, to


elevate his status as a patron of the arts. The result, the Michelangelo-Pontormo *Venus and Cupid*, would become one of the most influential paintings in Cinquecento Florence.

When Pontormo’s *Venus and Cupid* was acquired by force from his studio by Alessandro’s agents, it secured the painter’s artistic ties to the Medici for the remainder of his life. In late 1534 he painted an intimate portrait of Duke Alessandro in mourning for his father Clement VII (Fig. 18), the architect of the young duke’s ascent to power in Florence.\(^243\) Alessandro was the illegitimate son of the pope and a formerly enslaved African woman; he is depicted here drawing a woman in a wood-panelled private chamber that may have resembled Bettini’s camera.\(^244\) Patricia Simons has recently argued that the woman Alessandro is sketching in Pontormo’s portrait is Margaret of Austria, the duke’s fiancée whom he had recently met in Florence, in 1533; they would not marry until 1536, when Margaret turned thirteen.\(^245\) Simons also reads Alessandro’s meditation on female beauty, here on paper, in Neoplatonic terms, a reading that may be applied to Bettini as he contemplated the Michelangelo-Pontormo *Venus and Cupid* in his private chamber, had the painting reached its intended destination: “[Alessandro] moves from the sight of material beauty to reflection upon things unworldly and divine.”\(^246\) Although we do not know more about the duke’s motives for taking Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* from Pontormo’s studio, apart from Vasari’s account that the duke wanted to do Bettini harm, it is tempting to consider the duke’s acquisition, beyond his desire for the divine, as an intended gift for his young bride when she visited Florence that year.


\(^{244}\) By 1532, however, elaborate woodwork had given way to fabric and leather as the material of choice for domestic wall treatments. See Lydecker, “The Domestic Setting of the Arts,” 42.


\(^{246}\) Ibid., 660.
Pontormo continued serving the Medici, painting the loggia of their villa at Careggi with allegorical figures glorifying the duke’s reign (now lost). This was a grand type of commission in keeping with the decoration of the Salone at Poggio a Caiano.247 Yet in spite of his new-found stability in Medici Florence, according to Vasari, Pontormo struggled with his sudden elevation to Medici court painter.248 When the duke asked Pontormo to name the price for Alessandro’s mourning portrait, Pontormo suggested only enough to repurchase a coat he had previously pawned. The duke insisted on paying him fifty scudi in addition to an annual stipend (provvisione): “Ma fu tanta non so se io me debba dire pusillanimità o il troppo rispetto e modestia di quest’uomo, che non chiese se non tanti danari, quanto gli bastassero a risquotere una cappa che egli aveva al rpesto impegnata. Il che avendo udito il duca, non senza ridersi di quell’uomo così fatto, gli fece dare cinquanta scudi d’oro, ed offrire provvissione; ed anche durò fatica Niccolò a fare che gli accettasse.”249 And from 1534, Pontormo was officially on the Medici payroll. He remained in the service of the family beyond Alessandro’s assassination in 1537, frescoing the loggia of their villa at Castello (1537/38-43)250 and the choir of the church of San Lorenzo (1546-50/51) for Alessandro’s successor, Cosimo I.251

Pontormo was the only painter in Bettini’s équipe who was not a member of the Accademia Fiorentina. Nevertheless, he was involved in Florentine literary circles and may have

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248 For Pontormo’s politics after the siege, see Trento, “Pontormo e la corte di Cosimo I,” 139-45. For Pontormo’s anti-Medici beliefs, see Costamagna, Pontormo, 74-75, 80, 86, 89, 92, 199, 252, 259-60; and for his non-partisan role in local politics under the Medici dukes, see Cropper, Pontormo, 53-58; Pilliod, Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori, 11-42; and Cropper, “Pontormo and Brozino in Philadelphia,” 6-8.
249 Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:278.
250 On the Castello loggia frescoes, see Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:282. For the preparatory drawings, see Cox-Rearick, Drawings of Pontormo, 302-8, nos. 336-44.
251 On the San Lorenzo choir frescoes, see Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:284-85. For the preparatory drawings, see Cox-Rearick, Drawings of Pontormo, 318-42, nos. 350-79.
served Bettini well in his erudite commission.\textsuperscript{252} In his diary, Pontormo recorded a bet he had made with Bronzino over their ability to recite Petrarch, whose work they both knew well.\textsuperscript{253} Pontormo also exchanged sonnets with Varchi praising works of art, and in 1553 he composed his own sonnet in honor of Cellini’s \textit{Perseus}, by which the sculptor was most moved:

\begin{quote}
But what gratified me most, and inspired me with most hope of the duke’s support, was that the artists, sculptors and painters alike, entered into the same generous competition [il paragone]. I set the highest value on the eulogies of that excellent painter Jacopo Pontormo, and still more on those of his able pupil Bronzino….They spoke so generously of my performance…that this alone repaid me somewhat for the pain of my long troubles. So then I closed the screen, and once more set myself to finishing my statue.\textsuperscript{254}
\end{quote}

Pontormo was never the poet, or academician, that Bronzino and Michelangelo would become. However, his literary pursuits and above all his professional ties to the Medici would have certainly appealed to Bettini in 1532 as he was emerging as an art patron in ducal Florence. We now turn to how Pontormo served Bettini as a master colorist and Michelangelo as a gifted collaborator.

\textbf{Michelangelo and Pontormo: Collaborators par excellence}

Bettini’s \textit{Venus and Cupid} was the final collaboration between Michelangelo and Pontormo, a partnership that accentuated the strengths and weakness of its members. According to Vasari, Michelangelo first took note of Pontormo’s gift as a painter in 1515 when he stumbled upon the younger artist’s portico fresco of \textit{Charity, Faith, and Two Putti} in the Florentine church

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\textsuperscript{252} For Pontormo’s ties to literary circles, see Pilliod, \textit{Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori}, 88-95.
\textsuperscript{254} Cellini, \textit{Autobiography}, 193-94.
of Santissima Annunziata: “Questo giovani sarà tale, per quanto si vede, che, se vive e séguita, porrà quest’arte in cielo.” But it was not until the end of the century that the Florentine scholar Francesco Bocchi (1549-1613/18) would add to Vasari’s account the quality Michelangelo found truly exceptional in Pontormo’s oeuvre, his coloring. In *Le bellezze della città di Fiorenza*, the first Renaissance guide to the city, Bocchi wrote the following:

> Perché, dopo che hebbe un giorno veduta questa opera [Charity, Faith, and Two Putti] il Buonarroti, la lòdo sommamente, come cosa rara: & inteso, come Iacopo era di età di XIX. Anni senza più, disse; se questo giovani seguita le vestigie di si raro colorito [emphasis mine], egli condurrà la pittura al Cielo.\(^{256}\)

So in Florence in 1515, in the days leading up to the entry of Pope Leo X, the seeds were planted for the union of the city’s native master designer and master colorist, a relationship that flourished for only three years in the early 1530s. But Pontormo was one of many painters who would collaborate with Michelangelo throughout his career. Among them were Daniele da Volterra, Sebastiano del Piombo (1485/6-1547), Marcello Venusti (1512/15-1579), and his future biographer Condivi.\(^{257}\) With the aid of these talented assistants, Michelangelo was free to work on the preferred passages of a composition, the male figure. As Charles Hope aptly notes, “Conventional considerations of iconography did not interest [Michelangelo]….who was


preoccupied above all by the expressive possibilities of male nudes; and if his statues could not be incorporated into a comprehensible program, this was perhaps a price he was prepared to pay.”258

For Venusti’s Annunciation in Rome’s basilica of San Giovanni in Laterno, for example, Michelangelo presented the young painter with a meticulously finished cartoon (Uffizi, Florence)259 of a muscular pair of figures without any telling accessories or background setting. Indeed, Michelangelo’s collaborators were expected to play an active role in the final execution of his concetti, giving his figures a proper context and narrative.260 Along the same lines, his lost cartoon for Bettini’s Venus and Cupid may not have included such elements as the Pontormo-esque landscape or the still life with masks, a vase of flowers, Cupid’s bow, and a male doll. In his previous collaboration with Pontormo, the Noli me tangere for Alfonso d’Avalos (Fig. 17), Michelangelo provided the celebrated colorist with a cartoon of Christ being approached by Mary Magdalene (now lost), again leaving the landscape details to the master colorist. Regretfully, Michelangelo’s cartoons for the Venus and Cupid and the Noli me tangere are both no longer extant—only four Michelangelo cartoons survive—but the variations in Pontormo’s, and later Bronzino’s, versions of the Noli me tangere suggest the master’s focus on the principal figures as well as the freedom he extended to his collaborators.261

In addition to allowing Michelangelo to focus on his invenzione and disegno, his collaborators protected him against the challenges of painting.262 In 1557 the poet and art theorist Lodovico Dolce (1508/10-1568), for example, refused to speak of Michelangelo’s coloring

259 Uffizi, Florence, no. 229F, black chalk, 40.5 x 54.5 cm. See de Tolnay, Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo, no. 393.
260 On Michelangelo’s expectations for his collaborations, see Wilde, “Cartonetti by Michelangelo,” 370-80.
261 The Noli me tangere painting in the Casa Buonarroti, Florence, has been attributed to Bronzino, who may have painted it from his master Pontormo’s version or directly after Michelangelo’s now lost cartoon. See Wallace, “Il ‘Noli me tangere’ di Michelangelo,” 443-50.
“because everyone knows that he took little care in this article.” Dolce’s observation did not reflect his own Venetian bias for *colorito*, for he praised Raphael as a paragon of harmony in color:

Raphael, on the other hand, knew how to counterfeit every sort of object marvelously by dint of coloring: flesh and draperies and landscapes, and everything that can present itself to the painter. He also did portraits from the life, like those of Pope Julius II, Pope Leo X and many grandees, which are regarded as divine.

Through his panegyric of Raphael, Dolce defined Michelangelo as a sculptor who was out of his league in painting. Raphael’s skill as a portraitist further stressed his calling as a painter; the genre was anathema to Michelangelo. Four years after Michelangelo’s death, Vasari, in his life of the artist, recounted the plotting of the architect Bramante and other rivals against the master: “If they compelled [Michelangelo] to paint, he would do work less worthy of praise, since he had no experience of colors in fresco, and that he would prove inferior to Raffaello, and even if he did succeed in the work, in any case it would make him angry against the pope.”

Michelangelo himself, in an attempt to escape the ceiling fresco commission, said to Pope Julius, “Indeed I told Your Holiness that this is not my art; what I have done [The Flood] is spoiled [with mildew]. And if you do not believe it, send someone to see.” In his life of Sebastiano del Piombo, Vasari revealed Michelangelo’s triumph over his own shortcomings, which allowed him to better compete with Raphael:

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Raphael of Urbino had risen to great credit as a painter and his friends and adherents maintained that his works were more strictly in accordance with the rules of art than those of Michelangelo, affirming that they were graceful in coloring, of beautiful invention, admirable in expression, and of characteristic design. [Michelangelo] took [Sebastiano] into his protection thinking also that by assisting Sebastiano in design, he might succeed without doing anything himself, in confounding those who held the above-described opinion [of Raphael’s superiority].

Pontormo’s coloring of Michelangelo’s cartoons was praised by Vasari as the perfect complement to Michelangelo’s disegno: “Jacopo then executed [the Noli me tangere] to perfection, and it was accounted a rare painting by reason both of the grandeur of Michelangelo’s design and of Pontormo’s coloring.”

Indeed, in commissioning Pontormo to paint the Venus and Cupid, Bettini could impress his intellectual superiors with a paragon of innovative disegno and colorito, the latter often associated with Titian and contemporaneous Venetian painting. Perhaps reluctantly, Vasari established Pontormo as a creative colorist in the 1520s with his praise of the artist’s Deposition in the Capponi Chapel of the church of Santa Felicita: “In the [vault and medallions] that Jacopo executed in the [Capponi Chapel], it seemed almost as if he had returned to his first manner; but he did not follow the same method in painting the altarpiece, for, thinking always of new things, he executed it without shadows, and with a coloring so bright and so uniform, that one can scarcely distinguish the lights from the middle tints, and the middle tints from the darks….In a word, the composition of this altar-piece is altogether different from the figures on the vaulting, and likewise the coloring.”

269 Ibid., 7:168.
As we have seen, Michelangelo was far from secure in his native Florence while designing the *Venus and Cupid* cartoon for Bettini.\(^{270}\) Following the fall of the Florentine Republic, Valori initiated a series of political persecutions, including specific orders for Michelangelo. The artist was hidden in San Lorenzo by canon Giovan Battista Figiovanni and in the private homes of friends, Bettini possibly among them.\(^{271}\) It may be as a result of Bettini’s hospitality during these dangerous years under Duke Alessandro that Michelangelo designed for the merchant-banker the *Venus and Cupid* cartoon.

In November of 1530, Pope Clement VII guaranteed Michelangelo’s safety, allowing the artist to openly resume work on the Medici Chapel. The following year, however, Valori commissioned Michelangelo’s aforementioned *David-Apollo*;\(^ {272}\) and on 21 November 1531, the pope issued a papal breve, which threatened the artist with excommunication if any commissions other than the San Lorenzo projects or the tomb of Julius II were undertaken. By August of 1532, the artist left for Rome for a ten-month sojourn, and on 23 September 1534 he was permanently installed there. Within two days of Michelangelo’s arrival, on 25 September, Pope Clement VII would die in Rome, marking the end of Michelangelo’s career under Medici patronage. The artist would leave his projects in San Lorenzo to be completed by his assistants and followers in Florence who were working from his designs.\(^ {273}\)

On 6 January 1537, the day of the Epiphany and less than three years after Michelangelo’s self-imposed exile, Duke Alessandro was assassinated by his distant cousin Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de’ Medici. To commemorate the sudden demise of Florence’s first

\(^{270}\) On the artist’s varying history with the Medici, see Cristina Acidini Luchinat, “Michelangelo and the Medici,” in Acidini Luchinat, *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence*, 9-23.
\(^{271}\) See Mendelsohn, *Paragoni*, 252n31.
\(^{272}\) See fn. 174.
\(^{273}\) In 1549-1550, for example, Michelangelo designed from Rome the ceiling, floor, and desks for the Laurentian Library; and in 1555 he designed the library’s famous stairway. The model for the stairway was sent to Vasari in Florence in 1558/9. See Wallace, *Michelangelo: The Artist, the Man, and His Time*, 130-52; and Hirst, *Michelangelo: The Achievement of Fame*, 208-16.
duke, Donato Giannotti (1492-1573), the chief of the Florentine exiles in Rome and former war secretary of Florence during the second Republic, commissioned an idealized portrait bust of Lorenzo as Brutus, the tyrant slayer, from Michelangelo for fellow anti-Medicean cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi. The unfinished sculpture, today at the Bargello, marked a fitting end to Michelangelo’s unstable dealings with Pontormo’s chief patrons, the Medici dukes, who cost him his ties with his beloved Florence and his long-established ties with the family who had provided him with a humanist education and an appreciation for the visual arts.

Unlike Michelangelo, Pontormo’s politics never interfered with his ability to procure commissions from either Republican or Medici patrons. Pontormo’s bottega was one of the most successful in early Cinquecento Florence. In that shop he trained Bettini’s first artist, Bronzino. Pontormo also befriended Vasari, whose biography of the artist is often reliable—Vasari was Pontormo’s junior by only seventeen years. However, Pontormo’s relationship with Vasari was at times tense and wrought with resentment. Scholars have argued that Pontormo’s religious beliefs may have alienated Vasari, in particular his interest in Erasmus and his “heretical belief in justification by faith alone, which Pontormo shared with Michelangelo.” In Vasari’s own words, Pontormo was “a temperate and polite man; his manner of dress and way of life were wretched rather than seemly and he lived nearly always by himself, not wishing that anyone would serve him or cook for him. He was so afraid of death that he could not bear to hear it mentioned, and he fled from the sight of corpses. He never went to festivals or to any place

275 On the painter’s political views, see Massimo Firpo, “Pontormo, Rosso and the Medici: Diverging Political Paths,” in Falciani and Natali, Pontormo and Rosso, 277-283.
276 For the credibility of Vasari’s biographies, particularly those of his contemporaries, see Patricia Lee Rubin, Giorgio Vasari: Art and History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
where people gathered, so as not to be caught in the crowd; and he was solitary beyond belief.”

Vasari also noted that “at times, going out to work, [Pontormo] set himself to think so profoundly on what he was to do, that he went away without having done any other thing all day but stand thinking.” Such was the nature of the artist and the explanation for his taking so long to complete his commissions. The pace of the artist’s collaboration with Michelangelo on Bettini’s Venus and Cupid was in keeping with Vasari’s account of Pontormo’s slow creative process; it took two years to complete. According to Vasari, Pontormo “executed [Michelangelo’s cartoon] to perfection at his leisure, as will be related, in the manner that all the world knows without saying another word in praise of it.”

In the 1530s, Pontormo reached the peak of what has been deemed a “malady of imitation,” resulting from intensive interaction with his collaborator Michelangelo. Of all Michelangelo’sassistants, Pontormo shifted his style and technique most as a result of his assimilation of the master’s forms, poses, and movements. As Sydney Freedberg has observed, “It is not possible to recall another case in which an individual so special and intense as Jacopo is so obsessed—possessed even—by another’s art.” Michelangelo’s influence, specifically from his frescoes on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, had appeared as early as the 1520s in the blond modeling of Pontormo’s Deposition at Santa Felicita. Also noteworthy are the confluence of Michelangelo’s Battle of Cascina cartoon and Medici duke effigies from the Medici Chapel in

278 Cited in ibid.
279 Vasari, Lives, 7:182.
280 Ibid., 7:172.
281 Clapp, Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo, 62.
282 On Pontormo’s intense phase of Michelangelism, see Cox-Rearick, Drawings of Pontormo, 72, 78, 277-78, 307.
283 S. J. Freedberg, Painting in Italy, 1500-1600 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 189.
Pontormo’s *Legend of the Ten Thousand*. According to Bernard Berenson, “from the start [Pontormo’s paintings] betray the influence and even direct imitation of Michelangelo.”

Prior to 1532 Pontormo’s draftsmanship had reached a mature phase of Mannerism, marked by what Cox-Rearick has defined as “a resurgence of the impulse to rhythmic ornamentalism of line and to the beauty of gleaming light-filled surfaces.” Pontormo’s study for the *Virgin of the Annunciation*, for example, reveals the artist’s refinement, radiant chiaroscuro, and decorative elongations as late as 1528. However, Pontormo’s dialogue with Michelangelo was heightened when the master specifically singled him out to paint his cartoons for the d’Avalos *Noli me tangere* (Fig. 17) and Bettini *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2). According to Vasari, d’Avalos “moved heaven and earth to have [Michelangelo’s cartoon] executed for him in painting by Pontormo, Buonarroti having told him that no one could serve him better than that master.” In his life of Pontormo, Vasari identified Pontormo’s experience working closely with these two Michelangelo cartoons as “the reason that Pontormo resolved to do everything possible, within his knowledge, to imitate and follow the noble maniera of Michelangelo.”

A third Michelangelo drawing, *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), has been advanced as another potential preparatory work designed by Michelangelo expressly for execution by Pontormo in the early 1530s.

After the Bettini commission, Pontormo continued experimenting with Michelangelo’s Adam-Venus-Tityus figure and exploring the expressive qualities of unnatural

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284 Cox-Rearick, *Drawings of Pontormo*, 277-78.
285 Berenson, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, vol. 1, 302.
287 Uffizi, Florence, no. 448F, red chalk squared, 39.3 x 21.7 cm. See ibid., 263, no. 278.
288 Milan, Private Collection, oil on panel, 124 x 95 cm. See Costamagna, *Pontormo*, no. 69.
poses beyond Michelangelo’s abstractions. Cox-Rearick has observed that the “silhouette was made more irregular, the limbs displayed in a more explosive pattern, and the proportions more distorted.”

Pontormo’s contemporary *Reclining Female Nude with a Sphere* (Fig. 19) was praised by Berenson as “a pose better calculated to bring out all the strains and pressure of the human body, and to exhibit its significant surfaces to the eye, [which] could not easily be invented, not even by Michelangelo.”

Based on such praise, Pontormo may have benefited at least technically from his collaborations with Michelangelo.

In 1532 Pontormo was also engaged in the unfinished frescoes of Poggio a Caiano for Pope Clement VII. Unfortunately, the frescoes were never realized; however, the compositional study of *Nudes Playing Calcio* from 1532-3 (Uffizi, Florence) reveals Pontormo’s shift in breadth and technique towards the scale of Michelangelo’s figures. According to Cox-Rearick, the *Calcio* study marks the first moment in Pontormo’s draftsmanship where “the technique is a wholesale exploitation of Michelangelo’s black chalk manner.”

While more flattened through Pontormo’s signature contour line, the drawing suggests the dependency of Pontormo’s figures on those of Michelangelo, specifically his *Tityus* (Fig. 20), based on Canto 31 of Dante’s *Inferno* and completed for Cavalieri in 1532.

Michelangelo’s presence continued to be felt in Pontormo’s draftsmanship in his following commissions for the Medici dukes, namely the destroyed frescoes for the Medici villas at Careggi and Castello. Pontormo’s tapestry drawings (1545-49) and unexecuted fresco project for the choir of San Lorenzo further show an interest in Michelangelo’s forms and figure types,
affirming what scholars have identified as “Pontormo’s presumed reexposure to the art of Michelangelo” late in his career.\textsuperscript{297}

With the hundred scudi he had earned from selling Bettini’s \textit{Venus and Cupid}, d’Avalos’s \textit{Noli me tangere} (Fig. 17), and the \textit{Portrait of Duke Alessandro} (Fig. 18), Pontormo purchased a new house on via Laura (today via della Colonna). However, his professional ties with Michelangelo, which according to Frederick Mortimer Clapp caused the “crushing of Jacopo’s personality,”\textsuperscript{298} came to an end following Duke Alessandro’s acquisition of Bettini’s panel. Vasari recounted the conclusion of Michelangelo and Pontormo’s collaboration in the life of Pontormo:

[While working on the Portrait of Duke Alessandro], Jacopo had finished painting the Venus from the cartoon belonging to Bettini, which proved to be a marvelous thing, but it was not given to Bettini at the price for which Jacopo had promised it to him, for certain tuft-hunters, in order to do Bettini an injury, took it almost by force from the hands of Jacopo and gave it to Duke Alessandro, restoring the cartoon to Bettini. Which having heard, Michelangelo felt much displeasure for love of the friend for whom he had drawn the cartoon, and he bore a grudge against Jacopo, who, although he received fifty crowns for it from the Duke, nevertheless cannot be said to have defrauded Bettini, seeing that he gave up the Venus at the command of him who was his lord. But of all this some say that Bettini himself was in great measure the cause, from his asking too much.\textsuperscript{299}

According to Vasari, Duke Cosimo continued Medici patronage of Pontormo after the death of Duke Alessandro, much to the delight of the new duke’s mother Maria Salviati (1499-1543), his tutor Pierfrancesco Riccio (1490-1564), and the Florentine populace.\textsuperscript{300} Elizabeth

\textsuperscript{297} See Cox-Rearick, \textit{Drawings of Pontormo}, 85.
\textsuperscript{298} Clapp, \textit{Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo}, 62.
\textsuperscript{300} Vasari-Milanesi, \textit{Le vite}, 6:282-84.
Pilliod’s discovery of the expenses of the Capitani di Parte Guelfa (a Florentine magistracy responsible for public commissions) documents Pontormo’s annual salary from the Medici from 1545-56.\textsuperscript{301}

\textbf{Bronzino}

Bronzino was Pontormo’s principal pupil and the youngest member of Bettini’s team of artists. Having actively collaborated with Pontormo at the monastery of the Certosa at Galluzzo\textsuperscript{302} and in the Capponi Chapel at Santa Felicita,\textsuperscript{303} and having painted the \textit{Pygmalion and Galatea} as the cover for Pontormo’s portrait of Francesco Guardi (Fig. 13),\textsuperscript{304} Bronzino inherited the linear style and plastic forms of Pontormo’s intense phase of Michelangelism in the early 1530s.\textsuperscript{305} By 1532, however, Bronzino had developed into a different kind of artist, a gentleman-painter and a true Renaissance courtier in dress, manner, and artistic expression.\textsuperscript{306} Indeed, Vasari praised him as a “dolcissimo e molto cortese amico, di piacevole conversazione, ed in tutti i suoi affari è molto onorato; è stato liberale ed amorevole delle sue cose quanto più può essere un artifice nobile, come è egli. È stato di natura quieto, e non ha mai fatto ingiuria a niuno, et ha sempre amato tutti i valent’uomini della sua professione.”\textsuperscript{307} The gentleman-painter caught the

\textsuperscript{301} Pilliod, \textit{Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori}, 22n33-35.
\textsuperscript{305} For Bronzino’s early collaborations with Pontormo, see Pilliod, \textit{Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori}, 53-66. For Michelangelism in both Pontormo and Bronzino, see Pilliod, “The Influence of Michelangelo: Pontormo, Bronzino and Allori,” in \textit{Reactions to the Master}, 31-36.
\textsuperscript{306} Bronzino’s technical shift from Pontormo’s style has been dated to 1529 with the \textit{Pietà with Mary Magdalene} (Florence, Uffizi), commissioned by Lorenzo Cambi for his family chapel in the church of Santa Trinita in Florence. See Maurice Brock, \textit{Bronzino}, trans. David Poole Radzinowicz and Christine Schultz-Touge (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 36-41; and Cox-Rearick in Carmen C. Bambach, ed., \textit{The Drawings of Bronzino} (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010), 96-98, no. 14.
\textsuperscript{307} Vasari-Milanesi, \textit{Le vite}, 7:605. See also Vasari, \textit{Lives}, 10:11: “most gentle and a very courteous friend, agreeable in his conversation and in all his affairs, and much honored.”
eye of Guidobaldo II della Rovere, the duke of Urbino (Fig. 24), who invited him to Pesaro in 1530, where he lived in the very milieu that had inspired Castiglione’s *The Courtier*, first published in 1528 as the manual on courtly grace and refinement.\textsuperscript{308}

At the time of Bettini’s commission, Bronzino, having just returned from a successful Wanderjahre in the Marches, was coming into his own at age twenty-nine.\textsuperscript{309} By then he was an accomplished painter, patronized by dukes and wealthy Republicans, and well-versed in the new vocabulary of Cinquecento court culture. As we saw in the introduction, Bronzino executed portraits of Dante (Fig. 1), Petrarch, and Boccaccio in this idiom for the lunettes of Bettini’s camera (see further chapter 3). Their sophistication and elegance was only rivaled by the room’s centerpiece, the Michelangelo-Pontormo *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2). Bronzino would establish Bettini’s camera as a pictorial homage to love, poetry, and Tuscany’s rich literary tradition.

Bettini’s choice of Bronzino for the lunette portraits of poets was a strategic one for a patron looking for entrée into the city’s noble and literary circles. In 1532 Bronzino had successfully appropriated Pontormo’s linearity along with the weighty forms of antiquity and the iconographic detailing of northern European prints. While the artist had already received independent commissions, it was in Pesaro that his own stylistic vocabulary developed, particularly in portraiture. His very first portrait, that of the della Rovere duke (Fig. 22) reveals the influence of Titian’s own expressive and painterly portraits of the della Rovere family. The following year in Florence, Bronzino’s style shifted towards a more sculptural idiom influenced by Michelangelo’s *Times of Day* sculptures for the Medici Chapel. Bronzino’s *Dante* (Fig. 1) for


\textsuperscript{309} For Bronzino’s return by winter or spring of 1532, see Craig Hugh Smyth, *Bronzino as Draughtsman: An Introduction* (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin, 1971), 55-56n32.
Bettini is typical of the mature, lapidary style he would employ in his portraits of sophisticated, contemporary sitters later in his career (see Fig. 29). According to Vasari, Bronzino also painted a version of the Michelangelo-Pontormo *Noli me tangere* (Fig. 17). Pontormo must have provided his pupil with Michelangelo’s cartoon so that he could execute a version for Alessandro Vitelli, the captain of the Imperial guard.

In 1539, now court painter to the Medici, Bronzino was commissioned to paint an intimate portrait of Duke Cosimo as Orpheus, perhaps as a wedding picture for his new bride, Duchess Eleonora of Toledo (1522-1562). In the 1540s and 1550s he painted the state portraits of Duke Cosimo and his family, the heroic portraits of Andrea Doria and Stefano Colonna, and the literary portraits of members of the Accademia Fiorentina such as Luca Martini (Fig. 15). As Bronzino’s patron, Bettini joined the ranks of Italy’s political and social elite at an opportune moment when the gentleman-painter was just coming into his own in Florence.

In addition to Bronzino’s abovementioned portrait commissions, Bettini’s poet series anticipated the artist’s portraits of his contemporaries set within larger, historical paintings as seen in his frescoes for the chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio (1541-45), the recently restored *Christ in Limbo* panel commissioned for the family chapel of Giovanni Zanchini in the church of Santa Croce (1552), and the *Martyrdom of San Lorenzo* fresco (1565-69). In his 1542-45 *Lamentation* (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon), commissioned by the Medici for the altar wall of Duchess Eleonora’s chapel and sent as a diplomatic gift to Nicolas Perrenot de Granvelle, Bronzino included three portraits of contemporary male figures at right in the guise of Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, and an unidentified interlocutor figure. These spectators have been


convincingly identified as portraits of artists Baccio Bandinelli (c. 1493-1560), Bronzino, and Pontormo, respectively.\textsuperscript{313} According to Vasari, Bronzino’s \textit{Christ in Limbo} again included, in addition to the standard cast of biblical figures, portraits of painters Pontormo and Bacchiacca and letterati Giovanbattista Gelli and Pierfrancesco Giambullari, two champions of contemporary Florentine in the \textit{questione della lingua}.\textsuperscript{314} Bronzino’s self-portrait also appears next to portraits of two other painters, Pontormo and Alessandro Allori (1535-1607), in the left background of the \textit{Martyrdom of San Lorenzo}.\textsuperscript{315} There, Bronzino included himself and his fellow artists as spectators engaged in conversation before the dying Lawrence and under the figure of Mercury.\textsuperscript{316}

Indeed, for Republican and Medici patrons alike, Bronzino had established himself through portraiture. However, by the 1540s the Medici court painter had also matured as a poet as a result of the Florentine intellectual climate, his membership in the Accademia Fiorentina, and the burgeoning literary culture surrounding the Tuscan vernacular. On 11 February 1540 Bronzino became the first artist to join the precursor to the Accademia Fiorentina, the Accademia degli Umidi.\textsuperscript{317} He was also accepted into the Accademia along with fellow artists Michelangelo, Cellini, and Niccolò Tribolo (1500-1550), but few artists were typically admitted as permanent members.\textsuperscript{318} It was not until 1563 that the first formal art academy was established in Italy, the Accademia di Disegno, by Duke Cosimo and Vasari.

\textsuperscript{313} See Janet Cox-Rearick, \textit{Bronzino’s Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 194-209.
\textsuperscript{316} See Cox-Rearick, \textit{Bronzino’s Chapel of Eleonora}, 209-12.
\textsuperscript{317} For Bronzino’s role in the Accademia, see Plaisance, “Une première affirmation,” 363, 369, 374-75. On Bronzino as painter-poet, see Deborah Parker, \textit{Bronzino: Renaissance Painter as Poet} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Brock, \textit{Bronzino}, 7-17.
\textsuperscript{318} See Quiviger, “The Presence of Artists,” 105-12.
Like Michelangelo, Bronzino was better positioned in Renaissance Florence as a poet than as a painter. The visual arts were not approached with the same gravity as poetry. Indeed, despite Varchi’s two 1547 lectures before the Accademia Fiorentina in which he addressed the nobility of the art of painting and sculpture with the same respect traditionally given to literature (il paragone), Cinquecento literary academies admitted no artists on the basis of their artistic productions alone.\(^{319}\) Artists often descended from artisans and merchants and were trained through apprenticeships, whereas humanists descended from professional men and members of the nobility who could afford university educations.\(^{320}\) Bronzino, for example, was born in Monticelli, a poor district of Florence located just outside the gate of San Frediano, to whom the Florentine biographer Raffaello Borghini (1537-1588) described as “honest, humble and poor parents.”\(^{321}\)

As a member of the Accademia, Bronzino had proven himself as a letterato on two separate occasions, in 1540 and again in 1563, when he reapplied after having been expelled in 1547.\(^{322}\) And while maintaining good standing in the Accademia for the remainder of his life, the gentleman-painter-poet was appointed Reorganizer of the Accademia del Disegno in 1571, following the secession of Italy’s first art academy from the Arte dei Medici e Speziali. In his final year there, Bronzino was honored as consul of the Accademia only five months before his death.

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\(^{319}\) See Quiviger, “The Presence of Artists,” 105-12.


\(^{322}\) On 4 March 1547 Bronzino and Tribolo were expelled from the Accademia by reformers Cosimo Bartoli and Pier Francesco Giambullari, who deemed most of the artist members too irreverent and burlesque in style for a literary academy. On the Accademia reforms of 1547, see Plaisance, “Une première affirmation.” In May 1566 Bronzino submitted a series of poems to the Accademia Fiorentina in order to be readmitted as a letterato. See BNCF, *Delle Rime del Bronzino Pittore, Libro Primo*, MS Magl. II, IX, 10, f. 109r.
In 1538 Bronzino wrote his first poem, “Del pennello,” six years after Bettini’s commission, but the majority of his literary oeuvre was written in the 1540s and 1550s, corresponding with the artist’s most productive years as a painter. Throughout his life he wrote over three hundred poems, of which thirty-nine were satirical compositions (capitoli) and two-hundred thirty were sonnets and canzoni. Bronzino’s poems, particularly the politically satirical burlesque works, were read before letterati, members of the clergy, and politicians at public events, including religious celebrations such as carnival. In addition, two-hundred thirty canzonieri on the subject of friends’ achievements or deaths survive between Bronzino and poets and artists such as Varchi, Cellini, Caro, and Laura Battiferri (1523-1589; Fig. 32).

Bronzino’s skill as a poet was also noted by Vasari in 1568:

[Bronzino] has delighted much, and still delights, in poetry; wherefore he has written many capitoli and sonnets, part of which have been printed. But above all, with regard to poetry, he is marvelous in the style of his capitoli after the manner of Berni, insomuch that at the present day there is no one who writes better in that kind of verse, nor things more fanciful and bizarre, as will be seen one day if all his works, as is believed and hoped, come to be printed. 324

Varchi, in a letter to Bronzino and Tribolo from 1 May 1539, affirmed Bronzino’s status as a learned poet and admirer of Dante:

In addition to both of you being very close friends of mine and your great and equal excellence—[Tribolo] in the area of sculpture and [Bronzino] in the field of painting—you both enjoy and understand poetic matters, especially Bronzino, as is shown not only in his compositions, but also by the fact that he has memorized the whole of Dante and a great part of Petrarch much more than perhaps would be believed by people who do not understand that just as

324 Vasari, Lives, 10:12; and Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 7:605.
poetry is nothing other than a speaking picture, so painting
is nothing other than mute poetry.\textsuperscript{325}

Indeed, as a poet who had committed all of Dante’s works and the majority of
Petrarch’s to memory, Bronzino took a personal interest in Bettini’s subject of poets singing of
love in the lingua toscana. In addition to his subversive commentaries couched in burlesque
poetry, he explored lyric verse in the fashionable Petrarchism as a calling card among the
Florentine letterati, who, like Bettini, would eventually form his friendly circle, or, as Petrarch
would have it, \textit{amica schiera}.\textsuperscript{326} As has been noted, Bronzino’s appreciation for Petrarch went
beyond emulation to direct quotations of the poet’s famous lines, which were used by the painter
as a foundation on which to compose his own works.\textsuperscript{327} Bronzino’s familiarity with Petrarch is
evidenced by a wager he won against his master Pontormo in 1555 over a specific passage in
Petrarch’s \textit{Trionfi}.\textsuperscript{328}

Given the artist-poet’s literary background, it is possible that Bronzino and not his
dilettante patron Bettini selected the Tuscan poets who would have graced the lunettes of the
merchant-banker’s chamber.\textsuperscript{329} Executed at the height of the Cinquecento debates over the
\textit{questione della lingua}, Bettini’s series of poets reflected themes dear to the Florentine letterati, a

\textsuperscript{325} BNCF, Magl. VII.730: “…il Bronzino come, oltra suoi componimenti, dimostra l’avere tutto Dante e grandissima
parte del Petrarca nella memoria assai più oltre che non crederebbero.” Varchi, in his dedication of his 1539
translation of book 13 of Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses} to Bronzino and the sculptor Tribolo, made the same assessment of
Bronzino as poet.
\textsuperscript{326} Bronzino directly appropriated this expression from Petrarch, who referred to the coterie he left behind for
Avignon as his \textit{dolce schiera amica}. See Parker, \textit{Bronzino}, 64.
\textsuperscript{327} Ibid., 50-56.
L’Alessandra e stette insino a sera e poi se s’andò: e fu quella sera che Bronzino e io venimo a casa a vedere el
Petrarcha, cioè \textit{fianchi, stomachi ecc}; e pagai quello che s’era giocato.”
\textsuperscript{329} As there is no evidence for the chamber program’s advisor, the patron could have determined the poets together with
his learned artists. By 1546 Bettini was certainly learned himself and capable of devising his camera program when
Nicolò Martelli described him as “being at home with Petrarch and friendly with Boccaccio.” See Nicolò Martelli,
\textit{Dal primo e dal secondo libro delle lettere}, ed. Cartesio Marconcini (Lanciano: R. Carabba, 1916), 98-120; cited and
circle for whose acceptance Bettini strived through the first stage of his well-conceived decoration.

**Conclusion**

Bettini’s choice of painters was deliberate. In selecting Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino to adorn a room in his Florentine palazzo, the ambitious merchant-banker raised his profile to that of the Borgherini, the Benintendi, the Medici, and the pope. Two of his painters were poets; they would go on to join Bettini in the Accademia Fiorentina in 1540. Pontormo was not a poet-painter but he was the city’s great colorist and a proven successful collaborator of Michelangelo, who recognized the painter’s skills in Florence in 1515 during the entry of Pope Leo X. By commissioning the *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2), Bettini obtained the finest examples of Florentine disegno and colorito in one composition. And by commissioning Bronzino to paint poet portraits for his camera’s lunettes, he joined the ranks of Guidobaldo II and his learned courtiers at Pesaro and Urbino. We now turn to the chamber decoration that was made possible by a clever patron, who at a young age and with his first artistic commission understood the propagandistic power of art.
Chapter 3: Reconstructing Bettini’s Camera Decoration

As we have seen, prior to commissioning his camera decoration, Bettini and his three camera painters played key roles in early Cinquecento Florentine commerce, politics, and culture. Bettini was a member of a Florentine family with deep Republican roots in local politics. Indeed, his purpose in commissioning the cycle of paintings for his camera grew out of the political situation in Florence in the early sixteenth century, when on 12 August 1530, three years after the Sack of Rome by Charles V, the Florentine Republic fell before Imperial troops following an arduous ten-month siege. After confiscating their property, the reinstated Medici forced Republican sympathizers into exile. Among the later exiles was Bettini, who left voluntarily and established permanent residency in Rome by 1536.330 As we discussed in chapter 2, in Florence, Bettini’s painters were both political and apolitical, but they were certainly connected to the city’s leading patrons, artists, and literary figures. The merchant-banker’s social ascent after 1532 was thanks, in large part, to them. Now that we are familiar with Bettini’s political, familial, civic, social, artistic, and literary milieu, we turn to the product of all these forces, his camera decoration. This chapter will also include a brief survey of theories of love being written and published in Italy in the early sixteenth century. Bettini, his painters (two of whom were also poets, as we saw in chapter 2), and his target audience—the letterati of Florence—took a great interest in contemporary definitions of love and its manifestation in the sister arts of poetry and

painting. As we unravel Bettini’s program, the significance of such theories, in particular Neoplatonism, will become clear.

The only complete sixteenth-century account of Bettini’s camera decoration is that of Vasari in the second edition of his *Lives of the Artists*. In his life of Pontormo, Vasari recounts how he saw three lunette portraits by Bronzino (Fig. 1) and a *Venus and Cupid* by Michelangelo and Pontormo, then in the Medici collection (Fig. 2):

> Veggendosi adunque quanta stima facesse Michelangelo del Puntormo, e con quanta diligenza esso Puntormo conducesse a perfezione e ponesse ottimamente in pittura i disegni e’ cartoni di Michelangelo, fece tanto Bartolomeo Bettini, che il Buonarroti suo amicissimo gli fece un cartone d’una Venere ignuda con un Cupido che la bacia, per farla fare di pittura al Puntormo e metterla in mezzo a una sua camera, nelle lunette della quale aveva cominciato a fare dipingere dal Bronzino Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio, con animodi farvi gli’altri poeti che hanno con versi e prose toscane cantando d’amore.331

Vasari is often inaccurate in his descriptions, but his role as Bronzino’s assistant on 30 March 1533 for the set designs of a Compagnia de’ Negromanti comedy staged at the Palazzo Antinori makes his account of Bettini’s contemporaneous decorative program exceptionally reliable.332 In his life of Bronzino, the biographer again mentions Bettini’s poet portraits, those that were completed—Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—and those that were intended.333

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331 Vasari-Milanesi, *Le vite*, 6:277. See Vasari, *Lives*, 7:172: “It thus became evident in what estimation Michelangelo held Pontormo, and with what diligence Pontormo carried to completion and executed excellently well the designs and cartoons of Michelangelo, and Bartolomeo Bettini so went to work that Buonarroti, who was much his friend, made for him a cartoon of a nude Venus with a Cupid who is kissing her, in order that he might have it executed in painting by Pontormo and place it in the center of a chamber of his own, in the lunettes of which he had begun to have painted by Bronzino figures of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, with the intention of having there all the other poets who have sung of love in Tuscan prose and verse.” Vasari’s 1550 edition of *The Lives* mentions Michelangelo’s *Venus and Cupid* cartoon and Pontormo’s panel; however, Bronzino’s poet cycle is not mentioned. See Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a’ tempi nostri, nell’edizione per i tipi di Lorenzo Torrentino Firenze 1550*, eds. Luciano Bellosi and Aldo Rossi (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), 2:910, henceforth Vasari-Bellosi, *Le vite*.

332 See Vasari, *Il libro delle ricordanze di Giorgio Vasari*, ed. Alessandro del Vita (Arezzo: Casa Vasari, 1929), 20. The comedy’s ephemeral decorations were begun in 1533, one year after the conception of the Bettini decoration.

then notes that Michelangelo designed for his dear friend Bettini the room’s central composition, the *Venus and Cupid*, to be painted by Pontormo.  

As we have seen, in 1534 the decoration was abandoned, and the chamber’s most important panel, the *Venus and Cupid* painted by Pontormo on Michelangelo’s design (Fig. 3), was seized “almost by force” from Pontormo’s studio by agents of Duke Alessandro; Michelangelo severed all professional ties with Pontormo as a result. Bettini kept Michelangelo’s original cartoon (now lost), which Vasari praised in 1568 as a “cosa divina; oggi appresso agli eredi in Fiorenza.” Today, only two preparatory drawings for the camera decoration survive: Michelangelo’s quick sketch for the *Venus and Cupid* in London (Fig. 25) and Bronzino’s study for *Dante* in Munich (Fig. 26). Bettini’s commission was a revolution in Florentine domestic interior decoration for both its scale and subject matter. And even in its present, fragmented state, divorced from its original domestic context, it continues to serve as an index for the social and political lives of privileged Republican Florentines living in the wake of the siege.

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334 Vasari-Milanesi, *Le vite*, 6:277; and Costamagna, *Pontormo*, nos. 69, 71. In his life of Pontormo, Vasari placed the Bettini chamber decoration between the Michelangelo-Pontormo *Noli me tangere* for Alfonso D’Avalos of 1531-1532 (Private Collection, Milan) and Pontormo’s portrait of Duke Alessandro of 1534 (Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago). For the *terminus ante quem* of 1533 of the *Venus and Cupid*, see Costamagna, *Pontormo*, no. 70. For a recent analysis of Bettini’s chamber decoration, see Falletti and Nelson, *Venus and Love*; and Nelson, “Dante Portraits,” 64-71. For additional comments on Bettini’s patronage of artists and humanists, see Mendelsohn, *Paragoni*, 23, 94, 162, 252n31.

335 According to Vasari, upon receiving payment from Alessandro for Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid*, Pontormo was able to construct his house on via Laura (today via della Colonna). On the forced sale of the *Venus and Cupid*, the subsequent collapse of Michelangelo and Pontormo’s friendship and artistic collaboration, and Pontormo’s investment in his new residence, see Vasari-Milanesi, *Le vite*, 6:278-79: “Avendo intanto finito Iacopo di dipingere la Venere dal cartone del Bettino, la quale riusci cosa miracolosa, ella non fu data a esso Bettino per quel pregio che Iacopo gliele avea promessa, ma da certi furagrazie, per far male al Bettino, levata di mano a Iacopo quasi per forza e data al duca Alessandro, rendendo il suo cartone al Bettino. La qual cosa avendo intesa Michangelo, n’ebbe dispiacere per amor dell’amico a cui avea fatto il cartone, e ne volle male a Iacopo, il quale, se bene n’ebbe dal duca cinquanta scudi, non però si può dire che facesse fraude al Bettino, avendo dato la Venere per comandamento di chi gli’era signore; ma di tutto dicono alcuni che fu in gran parte cagione, per volerne troppo, l’istesso Bettino. Venuta dunque occasione al Puntormo, mediante questi danari, di mettere mano ad acconciare la sua casa, diede principio a murare…” For the construction of Pontormo’s house in 1534, see Pilliod, *Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori*, 69n17.

The following analysis of the chamber will proceed in the order listed by Vasari, beginning with Bronzino’s lunette portraits and concluding with the Venus and Cupid to be placed below it. Vasari’s order may have reflected contemporaneous fresco painting practices and techniques. Indeed, even in the sixteenth century, fresco cycles were begun at the top register and completed at the bottom.  

Phase 1: Bronzino’s Poet Portraits

Subsequently, however, [Italian vernacular] came to be cultivated more in Tuscany than anywhere else in Italy; and because of this it appears to have flourished there from those early times, because more than any others the Tuscans preserved a cultured pronunciation and the correct grammatical order, and moreover have had three noble writers [Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio] who expressed their ideas ingeniously, using contemporary words and terms. (And, in my opinion, in this the most successful, when it came to the subject of love, was Petrarch.)

—Count Lodovico Canossa in Baldassare Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier

There were two stages of Bettini’s unfinished commission. The first was Bronzino’s portraits of Tuscan poets destined for the chamber’s lunettes. In selecting for the lunettes poets who sang of love in Tuscan prose in particular, Bettini was responding to contemporary debates about language, namely the questione della lingua. By commissioning Bronzino to paint poet portraits, Bettini aligned himself with the tenets of the former Accademia Sacra Fiorentina (1515-22) and the future Accademia degli Umidi (1540), renamed the Accademia Fiorentina the following year under Cosimo I (see chapter 2). Castiglione had recently published his manual on social etiquette, which was set in the della Rovere court of Urbino. His protagonists, however, praised the Tuscans for successfully spearheading the revolt against Latin and proudly

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338 Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier, 75.
establishing their dialect as a paragon of Italian speech and expression. In 1532, four years after the publication of The Courtier, Bettini would commission Bronzino to glorify those contributions of his Florentine forefathers in a series of portraits of Tuscan poets in the lunettes of a chamber in his palazzo.

As with the Venus and Cupid, numerous copies and derivations of the poet portraits are extant, including Vasari’s Portrait of Six Tuscan Poets (Fig. 16) and Carlo Dolci’s (1616-1687) red and black chalk drawing after Bronzino’s Dante (Fig. 27). Within Bronzino’s own corpus, the Bettini poet portraits are in keeping in style and compositional design with his portraits of contemporary Florentine letterati, many of whom also display the open pages of their books as signifiers of their education and social status (see Figs. 14 and 29). The Dante lunette is the only extant poet portrait from the series, but we know from Vasari that only some lunettes in the Bettini chamber were filled “per empiere alcune lunette d’una sua camera,” leaving the other spaces blank, as in the Sala dei Semibusti in the Villa Imperiale at Pesaro. In addition to Vasari’s own Portrait of Six Tuscan Poets, an anonymous Florentine Allegorical Portrait of Dante in Washington (Fig. 28) sheds further light on the lunettes’ original impression. According to Vasari, the poets were “figure dal mezzo in su bellissime,” seen at half length from below. Unlike his later version, however, the profile of Bronzino’s Dante (Fig. 1) is viewed from slightly below, and it extends to almost three-quarter length. Vasari may have mistakenly identified the poets as half-length in 1568 as a result of his obstructed perspective from the floor of Bettini’s camera.

See, for example, Bronzino’s portraits of Lorenzo Lenzi (Castello Sforzesco, Milan), Ugolino Martelli (Staatliche Museen, Berlin), Lucrezia Panciatichi (Uffizi, Florence), and Laura Battiferra (Palazzo Vecchio, Florence). See also Cropper, “Pontormo and Bronzino in Philadelphia,” in Strehlke, Pontormo, Bronzino, and the Medici, 23-28; and Cropper, “Reading Bronzino’s Florentine Portraits,” in Falciiani and Natali, Bronzino: Artist and Poet, 245-55.
The discovery in Florence in 2002 of Bronzino’s *Dante* lunette (Fig. 1) added an essential component to Bettini’s abandoned program. According to Smyth, *Dante* falls within the physical traits ascribed to Bronzino’s style, namely his characteristic faces with “prominent jaws and chins” and “large, big-fingered hands.”\(^{340}\) And yet all other portraits by Bronzino dating from the 1530s and 1540s show the sitter reciprocating the viewer’s gaze, much like a conscious dialogue between the gentleman-artist-poet Bronzino and his fellow Florentine letterati.

Bronzino’s departure from his own formula was due, in part, to the placement of *Dante* in the chamber’s lunette; its original location is confirmed by the painting’s top margin curvature, which reflects the shape of small lunettes in Renaissance interiors, particularly those capped by elliptical, “umbrella-form” vaults.\(^{341}\) The point of observation was from below, and Bronzino carefully adjusted his painting to be read from that vantage point.\(^{342}\)

In 1532 Bronzino, upon returning from Pesaro, was greatly influenced by Michelangelo’s sculptures in the Medici Chapel, particularly that of Giuliano de’ Medici. Giuliano’s torsion, created by an opposing shift of head and torso, also appears, as Charles McCorquodale notes, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art *Portrait of a Young Man*.\(^{343}\) And the same contrapposto shift in a seated pose appears in Bettini’s *Dante*, where the poet rotates his head to look over his left shoulder while providing the viewer with an en face torso. Overly stylized poses are typical of the elegance and beauty of Mannerist portraiture, but the artist also deviated from his typical portrait practice by depicting Dante in profile, perhaps in order to reveal the poet’s most telling attribute, his nose, which was seen to greatest effect from the side.


\(^{341}\) See Costamagna in Falletti and Nelson, *Venus and Love*, 186.


\(^{343}\) McCorquodale, *Bronzino*, 45.
In addition to the pose, the lapidary quality of the flesh tones in Bronzino’s *Dante*, particularly evident when compared with his more enlivened *Guidobaldo II* (Fig. 24) expressively rendered under the influence of Titian at Pesaro earlier that year, affirms Bronzino’s shift by 1532 from Venetian colorito to Florentine disegno and his interest in sculpted models. The Mannerist sculptor Cellini once commented on Bronzino’s sculptural style as follows: “I will venture to affirm that if [Bronzino] were to cultivate sculpture as he does painting, he would very probably be able to equal it.” Bronzino’s choice of canvas over panel for the painting’s support, however, may have been inspired by the paintings of Titian. Canvas paintings were common in the Veneto in the early sixteenth century but quite rare in Tuscany, an exception being Pollaiuolo’s *Labors of Hercules* series painted for the upper floor sala grande of the Palazzo Medici.

Bronzino’s *Dante* exhibits what McCorquodale has described as the artist’s “irresistible tangibility in every detail.” Bronzino almost obsessively distinguished textures in his portraits, and the *Dante* is portrayed seated outdoors on a dark brown rock in almost perfect profile, at least from the neck up. Flanked by Mount Purgatory in the distant right background and the flames of the inferno in the lower left foreground, Dante is set diagonally within the ominous setting rather than in front of it. A small sailboat floating under the poet’s left elbow further connects the foregrounded figure with his surroundings. Dante’s torso, flattened up against the picture plane, is made more available to the viewer than any other element of the composition. With his right hand, he holds up a large, open tome identified as Canto 25 from the *Divina Commedia’s Paradiso*. In addition, like Bronzino’s last major commission prior to the Bettini lunettes, the Guidobaldo portrait, the figure of Dante is pressed up against the picture

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344 Ibid., 65.
345 Ibid., 23.
plane. Both panels share Bronzino’s attention to hands, what Smyth calls “a locus of grace” for Mannerist artists. Reflecting the artist’s penchant for decorative detail, Dante’s hands appear as what McCorquodale identifies as “inanimate objects” that “crystallize the sitter’s personality or at least assumed role.”

Depicted in three-quarter length, Dante wears a matching scarlet cap and cloak, the latter being worn over a white shirt only exposed at the collar and a dark gray coat seen through the sleeves and part of the collar. The color of the jacket is picked up by the matching ear flap covering the poet’s right ear. His right hand extends protectively over an abbreviated cityscape, identified as Florence through Filippo Brunelleschi’s (1377-1446) dome and Giotto’s campanile. Hidden from the panel’s two major light sources, the city of Florence is barely visible in the rocky and barren terrain.

Bronzino’s choice of a dark color for Dante’s jacket may reflect the somber taste and Spanish fashion of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (also Charles I of Spain) at whose court black was de rigueur for male attire. Indeed, in the second book of Castiglione’s The Courtier, first published on the eve of the siege of Florence, Federico Fregoso, a diplomat and friend of Castiglione and Bembo, describes ideal court dress for men: “I am also always pleased when clothes tend to be sober and restrained rather than foppish; so it seems to me that the most agreeable color is black, and if not black, then at least something fairly dark…. I should like the clothes our courtier wears to reflect the sobriety characteristic of the Spaniards, since external appearances often bear witness to what is within.”

As in every one of Bronzino’s portraits of young men painted in the 1530s and 1540s, Bettini’s Dante reveals the propriety and decorum of the new Florentine court society established after the fall of the Republic. Charles V’s visit to

346 Smyth, Mannerism and Maniera, 49.
347 McCorquodale, Bronzino, 50.
348 Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier, 135.
Bologna in 1530 and again in 1532 must have helped spread the influence of black as opposed to the brighter colors of the Quattrocento throughout the peninsula. In dress, Bronzino’s *Dante* is a transitional portrait, bridging the painter’s Venetian-inspired portraits at Pesaro with his depictions of soberly clad Florentines in the 1530s, namely the sitter in *Portrait of a Youth with a Lute* (Uffizi, Florence)\(^{349}\) and *Ugolino Martelli* (Fig. 29).\(^{350}\)

Pontormo’s influence on his pupil Bronzino was at its peak in the years after the younger painter’s return to Florence. The breadth of Bronzino’s *Dante*, for example, recalls the voluminous, drapery-engulfed figures of Pontormo’s *Carmigniano Visitation*,\(^{351}\) even though the poet’s hands and face reveal trademarks of the gentleman-painter-poet. According to Costamagna, Dante’s pose is indebted to that of Pontormo’s figure of Saint John the Evangelist in his 1518 altarpiece for the chapel of Francesco di Giovanni Pucci in the church of San Michele Visdomini.\(^{352}\) This formal connection between the saint and the bard is supported by Maurice Brock, who notes that Dante’s principal attribute, the *Divina Commedia*, is rendered in large scale typically reserved for authoritative figures such as evangelists and doctors of the Church. In exaggerating the scale of Dante’s magnum opus, Bronzino elevated the status of the poet in Bettini’s Florence to that of a sacred figure.\(^{353}\)

Pilliod rightly notes that Bronzino’s paintings from about 1529-32 reveal both a debt to his master and a glimpse at the pupil’s future independent style.\(^{354}\) Bronzino’s *Portrait of a Lady in Green* in Windsor Castle, for example, a painting long attributed to Pontormo, has the

\(^{349}\) See Brock, *Bronzino*, 110-12; Cox-Rearick in *L’ombra del genio*, 158, no. 14; Costamagna, “*De la fiorentinità*,” 63; and Sefy Hendler in Falciani and Natali, *Bronzino: Artist and Poet*, 260, no. V.3.


\(^{352}\) Costamagna, *Pontormo*, no. 24

\(^{353}\) Ibid., 164-65.

\(^{354}\) Pilliod, *Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori*, 103.
latter’s “slightly puffy, boneless hands” that we also see in Bettini’s Dante.355 The figure of Mary Magdalene in Bronzino’s Lamentation over the Dead Christ, painted in 1529 for the Cambi family altar in the church of Santa Trinita and also formerly attributed to Pontormo,356 shares Dante’s angular jaw.357 However, Dante’s complex pose deviates from Pontormo’s conservative, naturalistic portrait of Duke Alessandro in mourning (Fig. 18) and falls further within the tradition of Bronzino’s love of contrapposto, as exemplified in his mature maniera masterpiece Ugolino Martelli (Fig. 29).

In representing Dante, Bronzino was influenced by early accounts of the poet, namely Boccaccio’s biography of him. Described by Boccaccio as sad and pensive,358 Bronzino’s Dante too is depicted lost in thought as he looks away from the viewer. As della Rovere and Medici court portraitist par excellence, Bronzino typically denied the viewer access to the psyche of his sitters, portraits or allegories alike. It is therefore not possible to attribute such qualities as “sadness” with any degree of accuracy to Bettini’s lunette poets, at least in the case of the extant Dante.

As well as being critically overshadowed by the celebrity of Bettini’s Venus and Cupid (Fig. 2), Bronzino’s lunette poets were divided and dispersed sometime after Vasari’s 1568 account. His Dante (Fig. 1), however, certainly remained in Florence, where it was copied in both drawings and paintings for over two centuries; an anonymous eighteenth-century drawing of Dante in the Uffizi confirms the influence of Bronzino’s painting in Tuscany through then.359 Indeed, the gentleman-painter-poet’s representation of Dante became a new pictorial standard for

355 See Pilliod in Falciani and Natali, Bronzino: Artist and Poet, 256, no. V.1.
357 See Falciani in Falciani and Natali, Pontormo and Rosso, 72, no. I.10.
the bard in Florence, thus contributing to Bettini’s newfound status as a cultural tastemaker in early Cinquecento Italy.

Vasari’s group portrait (Fig. 16) centers on Dante—a direct quotation from Bronzino’s portrait for Bettini’s Florentine chamber—seated prominently in the foreground accompanied on his right by the standing Petrarch and Boccaccio (again, probably based on Bronzino’s lost drawings and paintings for Bettini’s camera lunettes). In his ricordo dated 15 September 1544, in which he noted that he had delivered a painting of Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Cavalcanti, Cino da Pistoia, and Guittone d’Arezzo to his patron Martini, Vasari confirmed Bronzino’s role in the commission: he approved the picture’s final price.\(^{360}\) The three crowns are all depicted in Trecento dress and ceremoniously crowned by a laurel wreath. Over Dante’s left shoulder Vasari included a fourth poet, Guido Cavalcanti (c. 1259-1300), also crowned with the poet’s garland. Cavalcanti was a major exponent of Dante’s dolce stil nuovo, a literary movement that influenced Petrarch among others. Praised by Dante in his Vita nuova as one of the “famosi trovatori in quello tempo,”\(^{361}\) Cavalcanti wrote over fifty-two sonnets, ballads, and canzoni, almost all of which were preoccupied with the theme of love.

Vasari’s two remaining “Tuscan poets” are dressed in fifteenth-century clothing and appear standing over Petrarch’s shoulder in the left background. They have been identified as Cristoforo Landino (1424-1498) and Ficino, two humanist philosophers who were influential translators and commentators of Plato and Dante, among others, in Florence.\(^{362}\) Ficino in particular revived Cavalcanti and the poems of the stilnovisti while under the auspices of Lorenzo


\(^{362}\) See Leporatti in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 66-69.
de’ Medici. Whereas their literary contributions were invaluable to the advancement of Tuscan vernacular and the resolution of the *questione della lingua*, Landino and Ficino were not likely candidates for Bettini’s series of love poets.

Also advanced to candidacy for Bettini’s series of Tuscan poets is Lodovico Ariosto (1474-1533), author of the celebrated *Orlando furioso* (1516), increasing the number of planned lunettes to potentially five. Although Ariosto was Ferrarese by birth, he wrote in Tuscan prose and would have been at least partially in keeping with Vasari’s description of Bettini’s poet cycle. In addition, Ariosto’s comedies were about Dante, the star of Bettini’s literary panoply. But of “all the other poets who have sung of love in Tuscan prose and verse,” only the three crowns can be identified with certainty as part of Bettini’s learned decoration.

Apart from its rectangular format, the Washington panel (Fig. 28) is the most faithful variant of Bettini’s lunette-shaped original. It currently has no precise attribution. Nelson first attributed it to “Bronzino workshop (?)”, reinforcing its role as a contemporary copy of the 1532 original. According to Nelson, the Washington panel lacked Bronzino’s deftness with various textures and the master’s confidence in handling oil on panel. Costamagna then attributed the panel to Bronzino in full, suggesting its role as an autograph replica after Bronzino’s own original in the lunette. Costamagna extended Bronzino’s potential role in Bettini’s camera to that of assistant to his master, Pontormo, in the secondary elements of the central *Venus and Cupid* panel. Alessandro Cecchi also attributed the Washington *Allegorical Portrait of Dante* to Bronzino, dating the panel to the early 1530s. And in 2002 Costamagna, revisiting the panel, declared it

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to be a Bronzino workshop replica, possibly commissioned by a letterato in the Academy, which included artists among its members such as Michelangelo and Bronzino.368

But if the Washington panel is indeed an autograph replica by Bronzino, who would have been its patron? One clue may be the owner of Vasari’s *Six Tuscan Poets*, Luca Martini. As we discussed above, Bronzino served as an intermediary between Martini and Vasari, justifying the final price to the patron: “Dante il Petrarcha il Boccaccio Guido Cavalcanti Guitton d’Arezzo Messer Cino da Pistoia che segli condusssono et per prezzo di pagamento senebbe scudi dieci che il Bronzino pittore fece lacordo cioè scudi 10.”369 As members of the Accademia Fiorentina, Bronzino and Martini together could have persuaded another member of the organization to commission a portrait of one of its most inspiring poets. A second candidate is the historian and collector Paolo Giovio, who could have commissioned a variant for his own museum of 484 portraits of sovereigns, artists, and literary figures (in his words, a *Templum Virtutis*), which he opened on Lake Como in 1543. After Giovio’s death in 1552, Duke Cosimo commissioned copies of his portraits for the Medici collection.370

Brezino’s *Dante* was well known in the seventeenth century, when the Florentine Baroque painter Dolci completed a detailed, highly finished chalk drawing of it (Fig. 27).371 Bettini’s lunette portrait was then most likely still in Florence but not necessarily with his heirs, with whom Vasari had last recorded Michelangelo’s cartoon for the *Venus and Cupid*.372 Dolci was certainly drawing from the original; the sheet is exceedingly faithful to Bronzino’s lunette

portrait, in both style and subject matter. Dolci captured Bronzino’s careful distinction between
the three layers of fabric around Dante’s collar, a detail typical of Bronzino that Nelson found
lacking in the Washington Dante.\footnote{Nelson, “Dante Portraits,” 64-68.} And he reproduced both the lunette format and the di sotto in sù perspective, which he employed to great effect in his articulation of Dante’s jaw. Dolci’s
Dante also shields Florence with his right hand, and Brunelleschi’s dome and Giotto’s campanile
are clearly visible. He even included the flaming summit of Mount Purgatory in the right
background as well as Bronzino’s atypically pudgy hands, found in both the Washington and
private collection panels but not in Bronzino’s male portraits from the period, where the hands
were graceful and attenuated. Indeed, Bronzino’s choice of pudgy hands for Bettini’s Dante may
have been a deliberate one, reflecting perhaps in painting what the Tuscan lingua volgare had
ushered in courtesy of Dante in language.\footnote{For the adaptation of style to subject matter in one of Bronzino’s contemporaries, see Melinda Schlitt, “Francesco Salviati and the Rhetoric of Style,” PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1991.}

By commissioning Bronzino to paint allegorical portraits of Dante, Petrarch, and
Boccaccio, Bettini reified the pioneering campaign for the lingua toscana. In his lunettes, the
physical likeness and character of the poets was secondary to their literary contributions.
Bronzino’s portraits were part of a larger tradition of allegorical portraiture in the Renaissance, a
genre that placed a premium on political propaganda over physiognomic and historical exactitude.
In 1452, for example, Benozzo Gozzoli depicted Dante erroneously crowned with a laurel wreath
in order to elevate his status to that of Petrarch and, in turn, convey the primacy of Tuscan
vernacular.\footnote{Gozzoli depicted Dante in the choir frescoes of San Francesco in Montefalco with a laurel wreath all’antica. Confined to roundels in groups of three, Gozzoli placed Dante between Petrarch and Giotto, not Boccaccio, the latter in profile. Unlike Bronzino’s Dante for Bettini, Gozzoli’s Dante is shown frontally displaying passages of his Divina Commedia. Petrarch was the only poet among the three to be officially crowned poet laureate in Rome’s Campidoglio on 8 April 1341. On Gozzoli’s Dante in Montefalco, see Elvio Lunghi, Benozzo Gozzoli a Montefalco}
vehicle of expression. In his program for the Medici Chapel in the church of San Lorenzo, which he executed while drawing Bettini’s Venus and Cupid cartoon, Michelangelo defended his idealized portraits of Dukes Giuliano and Lorenzo. According to a letter dated 1544 by Niccolò Martelli, a founding member of the Accademia degli Umidi, Michelangelo gave the following response to his portraits of the young Medici dukes: “In a thousand years nobody would know they had been different.”

While Bronzino’s Dante (Fig. 1) is the only extant portrait from Bettini’s poet series, Vasari, in the 1568 edition of his Lives, recorded seeing portraits of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio; furthermore, he recounted the patron’s intention for the room’s lunettes of including portraits of “all the other poets who have sung of love in Tuscan prose and verse.” However, the program was interrupted before work commenced on the fourth poet. Fortunately, Vasari’s own panel of Six Tuscan Poets (Fig. 16), commissioned by Martini in 1544, provides important clues as to the identity of Bettini’s remaining portraits.

In the second edition of his Lives, Vasari began his account of Bettini’s chamber commission with the Venus and Cupid (Fig. 2). However, he rightly placed the picture in its proper context, citing a chamber previously decorated with portraits by Bronzino of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Today scholars continue decoding the Venus and Cupid, which when restored in 2002 inspired an exhibition at the Galleria dell’Accademia. Fortunately, the catalog’s contributing scholars discussed Bettini’s complete commission—including Bronzino’s

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377 See fn. 364.
378 Ibid.
379 See Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love.
lunette portraits—despite the paucity of extant paintings and preparatory drawings (Figs. 1, 2, 25, and 26).  

Bettini’s Choice of Poets

Whereas Bettini’s choice of poets reflected his role in Florentine society as friend and future patron of the letterati and member of the Accademia Fiorentina, the merchant-banker’s interest in the Tuscan poets for his chamber lunettes also referenced his own heritage. As we discussed in chapter 1, the Bettini were established in Florence since 1351.  

A significant component of Tuscan identity in Cinquecento Florence was the writings of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio; despite the publication of Bembo’s Prose della volgar lingua in 1525, in which Dante’s reputation suffered a major blow with respect to that of Petrarch (the standard for poetry) and Boccaccio (the model for prose), Florentines continued honoring the writings of Dante in open lectures at Orsanmichele and Santa Maria del Fiore. Politicians, mathematicians, and scientists continued referencing Dante as an intellectual point of departure. And visual artists

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380 Bettini’s chamber decoration is mentioned in Emiliani, Il Bronzino, 63; Bacchesci, L’opera completa del Bronzino, no. 20; McCorquodale, Bronzino, 41-43; Mendelsohn, Paragone, 23, 94, 162, and 252n31; Nelson, “Dante Portraits,” 64-71; M. Marongiu in Lucilla Bardeschi Ciuilich and Pina Ragionieri, eds., Vita di Michelangelo (Florence: Madragora, 2001), 84, no. 53; Pilliod, Pontormo, Bronzino, and Allori, 100; and Brock, Bronzino, 2002, 96-100, 133, 164-66, 317-18. See also Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, in which scholars address different aspects of the panel and, consequently, Bettini’s complete program. For more recent discussions of the decoration, see Perlman, “Taking Aim at Amore,” 104-215; Costamagna, “De la fiorentinità des portraits de Pontormo et de Bronzino,” Paragone, 3rd series, 62 (2005): 50-75; de Giorgi in Falciani and Natali, Bronzino: Artist and Poet, 204-209, nos. IV.2-IV.4; Massimiliano Rossi, “…that naturalness and Florentinity (so to speak)”: Bronzino: Language, Flesh and Painting,” in Falciani and Natali, Bronzino: Artist and Poet, 177-93; Compton, “‘Omnia Vincit Amor,’” 229-60; and Grazia Badino in Falciani and Natali, Pontormo and Rosso, 320-21, no. IX.4.

381 See fn. 74.


383 For public lectures on Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in the Quattrocento, see Diane Finiello Zervas, Paola Grifoni et al., eds., Orsanmichele a Firenze (Modena: F.C. Panini, 1996), 186n22.
looked to Dante and his *Commedia* as a source of inspiration for sacred and profane commissions destined for the walls of merchant-bankers’ private apartments as well as the aisles of the Florence Cathedral. On many levels Bettini’s choice of Tuscan poets for the decoration of his Florentine chamber of love was a natural one. Bronzino’s portraits were informed by the patron’s political, social, and cultural aims, all of which coalesced in a crowning monument to Tuscan culture.

The issue dividing Cinquecento theorists and fueling Bettini’s celebration of love poets was the *questione della lingua*, the debate over the primacy of Latin or Tuscan as the official language of Italy. In his life of Dante, Boccaccio, writing on Dante’s choice of the vernacular over Latin for the *Divina Commedia*, noted the following: “Dante, seeing in his own day liberal studies abandoned, and unprotected by princes, and Virgil and other ancient poets neglected, feared that a poem of his own in Latin might suffer a similar fate, and so he attuned his medium to the needs of the present.”

It is these needs that continued to concern the Florentine populace in the sixteenth century. In Canto 33 of Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, published in 1516, 1521, and definitively in 1532—the year Bettini’s program was conceived—a host guides his guest through the murals of a hall depicting French interventions in Italy. The host states that “up till today…few of the wars here depicted have actually taken place: they were painted before they happened, the artist having divined them.”

Ariosto’s passage suggests the power of Renaissance artists to create the future. In Bettini’s coeval commission, the future triumph of the Italian language over Latin was similarly presented as a reality, nearly ten years before the establishment of the Accademia Fiorentina.

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In the Renaissance, there was a considerable disdain for Dante and vernacular literature on the whole. According to learned Latinists such as the Milanese humanist Angelo Decembrio (1415-1467), the vernacular was only useful for “amusing women and children during the long winter evenings.”\textsuperscript{386} It was not until the days of Cosimo il Vecchio and his grandson Lorenzo il Magnifico that Dante and his Tuscan vernacular enjoyed their first great triumph. In his commentary on the \textit{Commedia}, published in 1481 and illustrated by Botticelli, Landino approached the classic text Neoplatonically. While differing from Dante’s original tone, Landino presented a monument to Dante’s contribution to Italian literature. Bembo, however, in his \textit{Prose della volgar lingua} of 1525, proposed the emulation of Petrarch’s poetry and Boccaccio’s prose. In \textit{Gli Asolani}, Bembo spearheaded the vogue of Petrarchism while establishing the linguistic decorum of the Italian language. Shunning Dante for his lack of restraint, Bembo, a true Mannerist, sought form and style over content in his definition of great poetry. Bettini, however, had great appreciation for Dante, having commissioned Bronzino to paint his portrait early on in the room’s lunette cycle. Bettini’s decision to showcase Dante was followed by Martini, who, in 1544 placed the poet prominently before his six Tuscan poets (Fig. 16).

The \textit{questione della lingua} was tied with the Florentine tradition of literary academies. Beginning with the Accademia Platonica or Careggiana (1462-92), the Florentine Academy was born. Ficino’s Accademia Platonica was supported by Cosimo and later Lorenzo de’ Medici, and it was established expressly to promote the study of Plato’s philosophy. In 1502, in the Rucellai family gardens, humanists such as Diacceto, Piero Soderini, and Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) formed the Orti Oricellari (1502-22). There, meetings and discussions centered once again on Platonic philosophy, but members also attended meetings, conducted in Italian, in order to hear the finest examples of the vernacular language. According to humanist

Giambattista Gelli, the regeneration of the vernacular Florentine language that he witnessed later in his lifetime stemmed mainly from the achievements of the Orti.\textsuperscript{387}

During the duration of the Orti, the Accademia Sacra Fiorentina (1515-22) was founded and protected by Pope Leo X in the year of his triumphal entry into Florence, 1515. Continuing the Florentine preoccupation with vernacular literature, the Accademia, whose members included Michelangelo and Bembo, was well organized with a division of offices. Its agenda included lectures on Dante and other poets, and its members shared a strong desire to repatriate Dante’s remains from Ravenna in 1516. The Accademia Sacra Fiorentina was clearly in favor of the Italian language though not particularly against Latin at the same time. The Accademia formed a solid foundation for Dante in the early Cinquecento, providing Florentines such as Michelangelo and perhaps Bettini with the fundamental appreciation for Dante and vernacular literature prior to the establishment of the Accademia degli Umidi on 1 November 1540 and the Medici-sanctioned Accademia Fiorentina the following year. Through the lectures presented at the Accademia Fiorentina, Dante’s status in Florentine literary circles was secured. The Trecento poet became a model for the Florentine language and, along with Petrarch, was the topic of discussion, alternating every other month, and always in Italian.

The unifying thread behind Bettini’s lunettes of poets is love poetry, particularly that which is written in Tuscan prose and verse. The tradition of the Italian love sonnet, which began with the romantic poetry of the medieval troubadours, arrived in Tuscany by way of Sicily in the mid-thirteenth century and reached its acme in the writings of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.\textsuperscript{388}

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These poets established a standard for popular verse, which, in the first half of the Quattrocento, conflicted with the humanist revival of classical texts. However, by 1426 the vernacular was used over Latin in court documents, particularly in Lombardy. Alberti, for example, during this transitional period, wrote prose in Latin and verse in the vernacular.

However, it was not until 1468, with the reading of Poliziano’s Nutricia at the University of Florence, that Tuscan’s burgeoning poetic tradition became established in literary circles. Following his genealogical account of the great poets from antiquity, Poliziano singled out five modern writers—Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Cavalcanti, and Lorenzo de’ Medici—all of whom were Florentines like Bettini and, consequently, worthy candidates for the merchant-banker’s lunette cycle. Each writer was acknowledged for his contribution to poetry with one single work: Dante for the Divine Comedy, Petrarch for his Trionfi, Boccaccio for the Decameron, Cavalcanti for his canzone “A Lady Asks Me,” and Lorenzo for his sonnets of love.

Dante

Before the project petered out for political reasons, Bronzino had completed three of the contemplated poet portraits—Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio—expressly for the lunettes in Bettini’s chamber. We will first discuss Dante, the subject of the only poet portrait that has survived from the commission. Of all the modern poets praised by Poliziano for revolutionizing the poetic tradition, no other individual inspired Renaissance writers and artists as much as Dante. In poetry his Vita nuova (1290s) established the dolce stil nuovo as the Tuscan voice of love, a subject on which Dante would become an authority for subsequent writers and theorists.

389 See Maurizio Vitale, La lingua volgare della Cancelleria Visconteo-Sforzesca (Varese: Cisalpino, 1953).
Equicola, for example, in his influential *Libro di natura d’amore* (1525), cited Dante’s definition of love as the essence of all living beings:

> La opinione sua [Dante’s] d’Amore é questa, ne creator, ne cosa create fu mai senza Amore, il quale noi mortali é … di ogni vertu, & di ogni operatione, che merita pena: questo é, over naturale, over d’animo: naturale é senza errore; quell dell’animo o per troppo, o per poco amore puo errare….Domandando Dante che cosa é Amore, dalquale procedano & vertu & vitio, glié risposto, Che lo animo presto et veloce, apparecchiato & pronto ad amare quell che lo diletta, subito che é dal piacere eccitato, volge la nostra apprehensive, con inclinarla verso la cosa piaciuta. Questa incinatione alla piaciuta cosa é amore, poi che lo animo comincia a desiderare, fin che la cosa amata non lo fa gioire.391

In addition to his writings, Dante the individual was a popular subject for Florentine artists in the Renaissance, as is evidenced by Bronzino’s portrait of *Dante for Bettini* (Fig. 1).392 As a symbol of civic pride, Dante embodied the many achievements of Tuscan culture, and his unique profile was quickly recognized throughout the city. He was first described by his follower Boccaccio in his *Life of Dante*. There, Boccaccio provided the first physical description of Dante, on which the iconographic tradition was founded. His description was based on second-hand accounts of the citizens of Ravenna, Dante’s home after his Florentine exile in 1302:

> Fu adunque questo nostro poeta di mediocre statura, e, poi che alla matura età fu pervenuto, andò alquanto curvetto, e era il suo andare grave e mansueto, d’onestissimi panni sempre vestito in quello abito che era alla sua maturitá convenevole. Il suo volto fu lungo, e il naso, aquiline, e gli occhi anzi grossi che piccioli, le mascelle grandi, e dal labro di sotto era quel di sopra avanzato; e il colore era bruno, e i capelli e la barba spessi, neri e crespi, e sempre nella faccia malinconico e pensoso.393

391 Equicola, *Libro di natura d’amore*, fol. 7r-8r.
393 Boccaccio, *Vita di Dante*, ed. Paolo Baldan (Bergamo: Moretti and Vitali, 1991), 124-25. See Richard Thayer Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante from Giotto to Raffael: A Critical Study with a Concise Iconography* (London: Philip Lee Warner, 1911), 16-17: “Our poet was of middle height, and in his later years he walked somewhat bent over, with a grave and gentle gait. He was clad always in most seemly attire, such as befitted his ripe years. His face was long, his nose aquiline, and his eyes rather big than small. His jaws were large, and his lower lip protruded. His complexion was dark, his hair and beard thick, black and curly, and his expression ever melancholy and thoughtful.”
Surprisingly, Boccaccio’s ekphrasis includes Dante sporting a beard (*barba*), a detail not found in the later portraits. Except for the beard, the description was followed faithfully in a parchment miniature from the early fifteenth century attributed to Giovanni dal Ponte (1385-1437/8) and today in the Biblioteca Riccardiana (Fig. 30). Here, we find the characteristic aquiline nose, protruding lower lip and jaw, long face, and drawing down of the corners of the mouth, the last conveying Dante’s “expression ever melancholy and thoughtful.” Indeed, the only specification the painter does not follow is the beard, which was routinely ignored by all later artists. Dal Ponte may have also omitted it in order to emphasize Dante’s most recognizable feature, particularly when the poet was represented in profile: his nose.

In the second half of the century artists continued to look to Boccaccio’s account for Dante’s assumed physiognomy. Andrea del Castagno’s (1423-1457) *Dante* in the Villa Carducci, for example, has a bony face, a serious expression, wrinkled cheeks, and a turned down mouth. Domenico di Michelino’s *Portrait of Dante* of 1465 in Santa Maria del Fiore (Fig. 31) and Giuliano da Maiano and Francione’s *Dante and Petrarch* of 1480 in the Sala de’ Gigli, Palazzo Vecchio, follow Castagno’s prototype, though slightly more abstracted. However, by 1532 Bronzino consciously returned to the more naturalistic Riccardiana profile type of the early Quattrocento so as to avoid further abstractions and idealizations from the true source for Bettini’s *Dante* (Fig. 1).

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395 For the six-hundredth anniversary of Dante’s birth, the Italian Ministry of Instruction officially declared the Riccardiana type the most authentic extant portrait of the poet. See Victoria Kirkham, “Renaissance Portraits of Boccaccio: A Look into the Kaleidoscope,” *Studi sul Boccaccio* 16 (1987): 284n1.

396 For Domenico’s *Dante*, see Kirkham, “Dante’s Phantom,” 80.

Bronzino’s black chalk study for the head of Dante (Fig. 26)—the only extant preparatory drawing for Bettini’s poet portrait series—reveals the artist’s debt to the Riccardiana miniature. Here, Dante’s features are distinguishable in perfect profile; however, in the painted portrait Bronzino shifted the perspective, taking a *di sotto in sù* approach to the poet to reflect the distance between the visitor and Bettini’s lunette portrait inserted above. From Vasari’s vantage point, Bronzino had filled “certain lunettes in [Bettini’s] chamber...[with] half-length figures of great beauty.” If, from the visitor’s point of view, the scale of Bronzino’s three-quarter-length poets could be obscured, so too could the artist’s dependence on Quattrocento prototypes for Dante’s features.

First attributed to Bronzino by Berenson in 1938, the Munich drawing has been universally accepted as an autograph work. It shows the poet in profil perdu pushed to the edge of the sheet. Bronzino drew the poet’s head up close and at eye level, as opposed to the finished lunette. In the lunette, Dante’s profile is viewed from below, revealing the curvature under his right jaw and chin. These details are not worked up in the black chalk drawing, where more emphasis through cross-hatching appears on the cheek bone and neck. The drawing is strictly a physiognomic study, all of the attention being devoted to the head and neck and only abbreviated strokes for the collar, cap, and ear flaps. Typical of Bronzino’s early drawings, the Dante sheet is delineated by a strong, reinforced contour line that tends to flatten the figure. Bronzino’s careful modeling through both parallel lines and cross-hatching, however, gives the drawing its sculptural quality, which transfers well in the picture.

398 Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich, no. 2147 z, black chalk, 29.1 x 21.8 cm.
400 Berenson, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, vol. 2, no. 604e. See also Cox-Rearick in Bambach, *The Drawings of Bronzino*, 102, no. 16.
The Munich study falls within Scott Schaefer’s list of characteristics of early Bronzino drawing techniques, namely the artist’s “proclivities for a clear and continuous outline, a building up of the volume by the controlled and subtle use of light…, the use of the raw paper to enhance the illusion of light defining realistically the topography of the body, and various tones of shading to provide an even more distinctive three-dimensionality of the figure.”

Chronologically, it comes between two early drawings confidently attributed to Bronzino by Smyth and dated before his career as court painter to the Medici began in 1539. The Chatsworth study for the Uffizi Portrait of a Man with a Lute and the Uffizi study of the Christ Child for the Panciatichi Holy Family are dated between 1532 and 1539 by most scholars, thereby providing excellent standards against which to measure the Bettini lunettes. Describing the Christ Child drawing in particular as “modest” and “rather literal,” Smyth praises Bronzino for his careful observations of nature and the play of light. And whereas the artist’s modeling is seen as tentative, the author keenly notes a “steady indeflectibility” in the main contour line. It is this abstracting contour line that separates Bronzino from his more expressive master, Pontormo. Indeed, the Christ Child study is an excellent example of Bronzino’s independent style in the 1530s. The modeling is less controlled and polished than Bronzino’s later drawings, and it is similar to that of the Munich Dante drawing. It is in such commissions after his Pesaro sojourn that Bronzino’s distinguishing contours are established, here thickly drawn and confidently reinforced over supporting pentimenti.

402 Smyth, Bronzino as Draughtsman, 2-4.
403 The Duke of Devonshire and the Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement, Chatsworth, UK, no. 714, black chalk, squared, 26.5 x 18.6 cm. See Berenson, Drawings of the Florentine Painters, vol. 2, 273-74, no. 1957 (as by Pontormo).
404 Uffizi, Florence, no. 6639F, black chalk, 19.3 x 26.7 cm. See Berenson, Drawings of the Florentine Painters, vol. 2, 63, no. 601c.
405 For a history of the attributions of the two Bronzino drawings, see Costamagna in Bambach, The Drawings of Bronzino, 104 and 108, nos. 17 and 19.
406 Smyth, Bronzino as Draughtsman, 2-3.
The Chatsworth study for the *Man with a Lute*, however, is a better comparison with the Bettini *Dante* figure. Whereas the Bettini lunette poets were not commissioned as true portraits from life, Bronzino’s study in Munich has much in common technically with his portraits, especially those of the 1530s. In the Chatsworth portrait drawing, Smyth notes a defining outline, an abstracting play of light in “angular patches across the tunic,” and the “somber geometry of the face” with “eyes dark under evenly curving, well stressed lids.” It is in this pivotal moment in Bronzino’s career, when he departs technically and stylistically from Pontormo that Smyth defines the artist as most open to non-Florentine influences, namely that of Piero della Francesca (1415-1492). In the case of Bettini’s lunette panel, however, the facial type is very much Bronzino’s own, a harbinger of more lapidary images of the 1540s and 1550s.

Bronzino alluded to Dante’s significance in Bettini’s chamber decoration through the exposed *terzine* of Canto 25 from the *Divine Comedy’s Paradiso*, which the artist displayed up against the picture plane. Bronzino faithfully filled in the exposed pages with the following verses, alluding to the poet’s exile from Florence in 1302:

> Se mai continga che ‘l poema sacro al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra, si che m’ha fatto per molti anni macro, vinca la crudeltà che fuor mi serra del bello ovile ov’ io dormi’ agnello, nimico ai lupi che li danno guerra; con altra voce omai, con altro vello ritornò poeta, e in sul fonte del mio battesmo prenderò ‘l cappello; però che ne la fede, che fa conte l’anime a Dio, quivi intra’ io, e poi Pietro per lei si mi girò la fronte. Indi si mosse un lume verso noi di quella spera ond’ uscì la primizia che lasciò Cristo d’I vicari suoi; e la mia donna, piena di letizia, mi disse: “Mira, mira: ecco il barone per cui là giù si vicita Galizia.” Si come quando il Colombo si pone presso al compango, l’uno a l’altro pande, girando e mormorando, l’affezione; così vid’ io l’un da l’altro grande principe glorioso essere accolto, laudando il cibo che là sù li prande. Ma poi che ‘l gratular si fu assolto, tacito coram me ciascun s’affissese, ignito si che vincé ‘l mio volto. Rindendo allora Bèatrice disse: “inclita vita per cui la larghezza de la nostra basilica si scrisse, fa risonar la spene in questa altezza: tu sai, che tante fiate la figure, quante Iesù ai tre fé più caressa.” “Leva la testa e fa che t’assicuri: ché ciò che vien qua sù del mortal mondo, convien ch’ai

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407 Ibid., 3.
This was a deliberate appropriation, given that episodes from the *Inferno* and not the *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso* typically inspired works in fresco and manuscripts. In 1548, two years after commissioning Vasari’s *Six Tuscan Poets* (Fig. 16), Bronzino’s friend, patron, and fellow academician Martini commissioned a bronze relief by Pierino da Vinci of *The Death of Count Ugolino della Gherardesca and his Sons*, the first independent work of art to take a single canto from the *Comedy* as its subject.\(^{409}\)

As discussed above, the topos of Dante displaying his own poems first appeared in Quattrocento Florence on the walls of ecclesiastic and civic venues, such as Santa Maria del Fiore (Fig. 31) and the Sala de’ Gigli in the Palazzo Vecchio. However, Bronzino’s choice of Canto 25, which focuses on Dante’s plea to return from exile, was particularly telling for Bettini and his

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\(^{408}\) Dante, *Divina Commedia: Paradiso*, Canto 25, lines 1-48: “If ever it come to pass that the sacred poem to which heaven and earth have so set hand that it has made me lean for many years should overcome the cruelty which bars me from the fair sheepfold where I slept as a lamb, an enemy to the wolves which war on it, with changed voice now and with changed fleece a poet will I return, and at the font of my baptism will I take the crown; because there I entered into the Faith that makes souls known to God; and afterward Peter, for its sake, thus encircled my brow. Then a light moved towards us from that circle whence had issued the first-fruit which Christ left of His vicars; and my lady, full of gladness, said to me, “Look! Look! Behold the Baron for whose sake, down below, folk visit Galicia.” As when the dove alights beside its mate, and the onelavishes its affection on the other, circling it and cooing, so did I see the one great and glorious prince received by the other, praising the food which feeds them thereabove. But when the joyful greeting was completed, each stopped silent *coram me*, so aflame that it overcame my sight. Then Beatrice, smiling, said, “Illustrious life, by whom the bounty of our Court was chronicled, make hope resound in this height; you can, who did figure it all those times when Jesus showed most favor to the three.” “Lift up your head and see that you reassure yourself, for that which comes up here from the mortal world must be ripened in our beams.” This assurance came to me from the second fire; wheron I lifted up my eyes unto the hills which had bent them down before with excess of weight. “Since, of His grace, our Emperor wills that you, before your death, come face to face with His Counts in His most secret hall, so that, having seen the truth of this Court, you may strengthen in yourself and others the Hope which there below rightly enamors, say what it is, and how your mind blossoms with it, and say whence it came to you.” Thus the second light continued further.”

“amicissimo” Michelangelo, both of whom shared an admiration for the poet’s birthplace, a Florence they too would come to long for as exiles living in Rome. Indeed, on 29 November 1530, just two years before he commissioned his painting cycle, Bettini’s relative Girolamo di Francesco Bettini was sentenced to exile from Florence; it was confirmed three years later. In his Dante, Bronzino returns the exiled poet to Florence, where, in a chamber decoration, he becomes a symbol of the city that he so loved.

Petrarch

According to Vasari, the second poet depicted by Bronzino for Bettini’s chamber lunettes was Petrarch, now untraced. Castiglione praised Petrarch over Dante as “the most successful [poet] when it came to the subject of love.” Bembo, in his Prose della volgar lingua, lauded Petrarch and Boccaccio over Dante as the paragons of vernacular poetry and prose. And Equicola singled out Petrarch as “non solamente l’uno et l’altro Guido caccia di nido: ma é quello ch’a tutti la Gloria della lingua tolse: ne ha lasciato a posteri che possano oltre sperare: per haver havuto supreme giudicio in elettine de ottimi vocaboli dito supremo giudicio in elettione de ottimi vocaboli di qualunque regione d’Italia: & quelli con gratia applicati al patrio sermone.”

In the sixteenth century the revival of Petrarch established the vogue of love treatises in princely courts and republics alike. The fashion of courtly love, ushered in by Castiglione’s

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410 Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 6:277: “fece tanto Bartolomeo Bettini, che il Buonarroti suo amicissimo gli fece un cartone d’una Venere ignuda con un Cupido che la bacia.”

411 Michelangelo honored the exiled Dante in two sonnets he wrote in Rome in 1545-46. See Buonarroti, The Poetry of Michelangelo, 421-25, nos. 248 and 250.

412 See fn. 74.

413 Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier, 75.

414 Equicola, Libro di natura d’amore, 8v.
dialogues, was associated with Petrarch and the vernacular tradition. By the 1540s members of the Accademia were reading Petrarch’s sonnets bi-weekly and, consequently, employing the poet’s lyrical style as the ideal medium of literary production under Cosimo I.

Bettini may have also included Petrarch among his poet portraits for the bard’s propriety. The poet praised the individual in society and his ability to overcome alienation (and, ultimately, exile) through personal autonomy, both expanded upon in his *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (*Remedies for Good and Bad Fortunes*)—a 1355 text grounded in ancient, medieval, and Christian philosophy. Modeling himself after Seneca, Petrarch looked to reading as a vehicle for individual transcendence, a natural pastime for a learned patron reflecting on his role in society in the privacy of his camera. As Charles Trinkaus notes, “the ideal of individual transcendence and internalization” was as important in characterizing human behavior in Renaissance culture as the secular goals of power, wealth, and status. Petrarch’s belief in the individual placed a premium on self-awareness and discovery in Cinquecento Florence. Being judged by his peers, Michelangelo in particular, for not being “our equal,” Bettini may have found comfort in the writings of Petrarch, as well as Dante and Boccaccio, all of whom praised virtue above family connections or wealth as the true source of nobility.

Like Dante, Petrarch was consciously in dialogue with the artistic achievements of his day. In his sonnet 77 Petrarch singled out his contemporary Sienese painter Simone Martini (c. 1280-1344), who had executed a portrait of the poet’s beloved muse Laura (now lost):

Per mirar Policleto a prova fiso  
con gli altri ch’ ebber fama di quell’arte,

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417 In a conscious conflation of the sister arts of painting and poetry, Lodovico Dolce praised Petrarch as the “primo pittore de le memorie antiche.” See Lodovico Dolce and Pietro Aretino, *Dialogo della pittura*, ed. Nicolas Vleughels (Florence: Michele Nestenus e Francesco Moücke, 1735), 116.
mill’ anni non vedrian la minor parte
della beltà che m’ave il cor conquiso.

Ma certo il mio Simon fu in Paradiso
onde questa gentil donna si parte;
ivi la vide, et la ritrasse in carte
per far fede qua giù del suo bel viso.

L’opra fu ben di quelle che nel cielo
si ponno imaginar, non qui tra noi,
ove le membra fanno a l’alma velo;
cortesia fe’, né la potea far poi
che fu disceso a probar caldo et gielo
et del mortal sentiron gli occhi suoi. 418

Petrarch’s *De viris illustribus* (1330s-74)—the first post-antique account of the lives
of famous men from the classical past—served as the basis for the *uomini illustri* cycles of the
early Renaissance. And his celebrated *Trionfi* inspired artists more than any other Renaissance
body of work after Dante’s *Inferno*. 419 *I Trionfi* included, among its many characters,
representations of love, time, and fame, all of which were pulled on chariots by illustrious men
and women from Greek and Roman history and mythology. In the Quattrocento, Petrarch’s epic
found its way into Renaissance bedchambers as a popular subject for cassoni. The painted panels
on the decorative chests commissioned by the patron for his new bride were edifying in nature as
celebrations of love, honor, and commitment to marriage, church, and state.

418 Robert M. Durling, ed. and trans., *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems: The Rime sparse and Other Lyrics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 176-77, no. 77: “Even though Polyclitus should for a thousand years compete in looking with all the others who were famous in that art, they would never see the smallest part of the beauty that has conquered my heart. But certainly my Simon was in Paradise, whence comes this noble lady; there he saw her and portrayed her on paper, to attest down here to her lovely face. The work is one of those which can be imagined only in Heaven, not here among us, where the body is a veil to the soul; it was a gracious act, nor could he have done it after he came down to feel heat and cold and his eyes took on mortality.”

The vogue of Petrarchism continued in painting in sixteenth-century Florence, as evidenced by Andrea del Sarto’s *Portrait of a Girl Reading Petrarch* (Uffizi, Florence; 1526-28). Sarto depicted a young woman engaged in Petrarch’s poems, to which she directs the viewer. The subject of a woman reading Petrarch was embraced by Bronzino in his *Laura Battiferra* (Fig. 32), a poet and member of the Medici court; it was possibly painted for her friend Varchi. As with Sarto’s sitter, Bronzino’s *Laura* holds a collection of sonnets by Petrarch, two of which are carefully depicted by the artist for her audience. In *Laura*, Bronzino conflated the Sarto prototype with his own portrait of *Dante* for Bettini (Fig. 1), in which the sitter is clearly identified, along with his distinctive profile, through the *Divine Comedy*. However, unlike Bronzino’s *Dante*, in which the Trecento poet holds his own body of work as an identifying attribute, Laura holds the sonnets of her mentor, Petrarch:

Se voi poteste per turbati segni—
per chinar gli occhi o per piegar la testa,
o per esser più d’altra al fuggir presta,
torcendo ‘l viso à preghi onesti et degni—

uscir giamai, o ver per altri ingegni,
del petto ove dal primo lauro innesta
Amor più rami, í direi ben che questa
fosse giusta cagione á vostri sdegni;

ché gentil pianta in arido terreno
par che si disconvenga, et però lieta
naturalmente quindi si diparte.

Ma poi vostro destino a voi pur vieta

l’essere altrove, provedete almeno
di non star sempre in odiosa parte.\textsuperscript{422}

The right page of Laura’s transcribed copy of Petrarch’s sonnets, however, is
highlighted in the composition, pressed up against the picture plane and lit directly. The viewer is
presented with Petrarch’s sonnet 240, which deals specifically with beauty and virtue:

I’ ò pregato Amor, e ‘l ne riprego,
che mi scusi appo voi, dolce mia pena,
amaro mio diletto, se con piena
fede dal dritto mio sentier mi piego.

I’ nol posso negar, Donna, et nol negó,
che la ragion ch’ ogni bona alma affrena
non sia dal voler vinta, ond’ ei mi mena
talor in parte ov’ io per forza il sego.

Voi con quel cor che di sì chiaro ingegno,
di sì alta vertute ilcielo alluma
quanto mai piovve da beniga stella,

devete dir pietosa et senza sdegno:
“Che po questi altro? Il mio volto il consuma.
Ei perché ingordo, et io perché si bella?”\textsuperscript{423}

As the recipient of Bronzino’s canzoniere (published the same year that Bronzino
painted her portrait), Battiferra demonstrated an impressive command of Bembo’s Petrarchism.
She established herself as a Petrarchist in 1560 with the publication of her first book of poetry, \textit{Il

\textsuperscript{422} Durling, \textit{Petrarch’s Lyric Poems}, 142-43, no. 64: “If you could, by any angry gestures—by casting your eyes
down or bending your head or by being more swift to flee than any other, frowning at my virtuous and worthy
prayers—if you could ever thus or by any other stratagem escape from my breast where Love engrafs many branches
from that first laurel, I would say that would be a just reason for your disdain; for a noble plant clearly does not
belong in arid ground, and therefore it is naturally happy to depart from there: but, since your destiny forbids you to
be elsewhere, at least take care not to stay always in a hateful place.”

\textsuperscript{423} Ibid., 402-03, no. 240: “I have begged Love, and I beg him again, to persuade you to pardon me—O my sweet
suffering, my bitter delight—if with complete faithfulness I bend aside from my straight path. I cannot deny, Lady,
nor do I deny, that Reason, who reins in every good soul, in me is overcome by Desire, who leads sometimes in a
direction where I am forced to follow him. You, with that heart that the heavens make bright with so clear an
intellect, with such high virtue—as much as ever rained down from a benign star—ought to say, mercifully and
without scorn: “What else can this man do? My face consumes him. Why is he so desirous, and why am I so
beautiful?”
primo libro dell’opere toscane, which she dedicated to Duchess Eleonora. Bronzino may have alluded to Battiferra’s profession in her portrait through a formal quotation of his Dante, namely Dante’s aquiline nose. As Costamagna has argued, “[Bronzino] replicated the pose adopted in the Portrait of Dante, then known to all, thus placing the poetess on the same level with the greatest of Tuscan writers.” As both a painter and a member of the Accademia Fiorentina, Bronzino depicted intellect as well as physical beauty in his portraits of Florentine letterati. Bronzino’s Laura as Dante was therefore high praise for his fellow poet, friend, and literary correspondent. Indeed, as discussed above, the agenda behind Bronzino’s portraits of poets is an allegorical celebration of Tuscan vernacular and the academic debates surrounding the questione della lingua, both of which took precedence over a naturalistic representation of the sitter.

Boccaccio

The third and final poet recorded by Vasari in Bettini’s chamber was Boccaccio (also untraced). Despite the great influence of his writings such as the Decameron on the visual arts, Boccaccio had an inferior view of painting vis-à-vis poetry that went against Horace’s famous dictum Ut pictura poesis. In his Genealogia deorum gentilium libri, for example, he cited the inappropriate luxury afforded painters of private chambers, like those employed by Bettini, where ecclesiastical censure turned a deaf ear and focused on poets:

424 Costamagna in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 186, no. 22.
The painter has even been permitted to decorate the palaces of princes and nobles with subjects chosen from ancient myth, the crimes of gods and men, and all sorts of fabrications (et quaecunque cuiuscunque commenta), without an interfering word from the Fathers; and anyone who will may look at these pictures as he pleases. But a poet’s creations (inventa), blazoned in ornate letters, they find more vicious to the wise than are pictures to the ignorant.428

A poet of love and of the individual’s role in society, Boccaccio, like Petrarch, praised personal autonomy in his writings, particularly in the Decameron. In 1355 he began On the Accidents of Famous Men and followed Petrarch’s humanist lead with the publication of Genealogia deorum gentilium libri, a popular Renaissance handbook of classical mythology. In Genealogia, he celebrated men from ancient, medieval, and Renaissance societies, all of whom possessed a level of humanity common to all individuals.429 Despite claiming little if any support of visual artists, Boccaccio’s oeuvre would inspire some of the finest secular paintings in Quattrocento and Cinquecento Florence and beyond.

In painting fourteenth-century Florentines or great heroes from antiquity, Renaissance artists had much to work with in the writings of Boccaccio, but in representing the author, which was Bronzino’s task in Bettini’s commission, artists often turned to fourteenth-century accounts. One such account of Boccaccio, much like Boccaccio’s account of Dante, served as an aid to painters. Written in the 1380s, the Florentine historian Filippo Villani’s (1325-1405) Book on the Origin of the City of Florence and its Famous Citizens described Boccaccio as follows:

Tall and of rather stout build, Boccaccio had a round face with the nose slightly flat above the nostrils; rather large, but nonetheless attractive and well-defined lips; and a dimpled chin that was charming when he laughed. He was pleasant and considerate in

429 Trinkaus, The Poet as Philosopher, 132-34.
conversation and he greatly enjoyed talking. He was engaging and acquired many friends, but no one would aid him in his poverty.\footnote{Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa, eds., \textit{The Decameron: 21 Novelle: Contemporary Reactions: Modern Criticism} (New York: Norton, 1977), 191.}

However, lacking the consistent iconographic tradition of Dante in the visual arts, Boccaccio posed a challenge to Bronzino and his predecessors.\footnote{For portraits of Boccaccio in the Renaissance, see Kirkham, “Renaissance Portraits of Boccaccio,” 284-305.} Castagno’s \textit{Boccaccio} at the Villa Carducci, for example, represents a non-specific figure standing aside the immediately recognizable portraits of Dante and Petrarch. Castagno distinguished Boccaccio by the large tome he holds as well as the inscription \textit{Dominus Johannes Boccaccius}, a title reserved for Florentine intellectuals and appropriately bestowed upon the poet who was trained in canon law and who served as ambassador of the Florentine commune to the papal court at Avignon. Raphael, in the \textit{Parnassus} fresco in the Stanza della Segnatura (1509-1511), crowned Boccaccio with the laurel wreath and included him among the great poets of the past; however, the Tuscan poet was denied the same honorable plane as Dante, Homer, and Virgil and was restricted to a partial three-quarter view largely overlapped by a taller bearded figure to the left and a laurel tree to the right.

Raphael’s \textit{Boccaccio}, however, faithfully adhered to Villani’s account, establishing a round face as part of the poet’s iconographic tradition. As a result of the popularity of Tuscan poets as civic symbols in sixteenth-century Florence, Dante was consistently represented as thin, Petrarch as handsome, and Boccaccio as plump.\footnote{Ibid., 301.}

Vasari, who was indebted to Raphael’s as well as Bronzino’s prototypes, closely followed Villani’s account in his \textit{Six Tuscan Poets} (Fig. 16), in which he inserted a round-faced, thick-lipped, double-chinned Boccaccio between Petrarch and Dante. Together these poets debate Tuscan language, literature, art, and culture probably as they were depicted in the upper level of
Bettini’s camera. Here, Dante holds Virgil (“VIRGILIUS”) as the model for emulation. In the Cinquecento, both models of poetry—the epic and the lyric—were advocated. Dante chose Virgil, Vasari and Martini (his patron) chose Dante, followed by Petrarch.

**Phase 2: Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus and Cupid**

“How fortunate was Titian’s situation, if we think of his peaceful, nude female figures, by comparison with these central Italians who had to rely on the most complicated poses to make a Venus interesting to their public!”

--Heinrich Wölfflin

According to Vasari, after Bettini commissioned portraits of poets for the lunettes of his camera from Bronzino (phase 1 of the decoration), the merchant-banker turned to what would become the most documented and influential panel of his decorative program, the Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus and Cupid (Fig. 2). Upon its completion, the painting was an instant success for both Michelangelo and his patron. It was first coveted in 1534, when the panel was finished but still in Pontormo’s workshop, from which it was acquired by Duke Alessandro. The following decade, in 1542, the Venus and Cupid was praised by Aretino in a letter to Duke

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434 Twentieth-century Florentines revived the sixteenth century’s appreciation for Bettini’s panel. In 1926 the Venus and Cupid was granted its highest honor as it was exhibited in the Tribuna of the Uffizi. And in 2002 it was the subject of an exhibition at the Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence. See Falletti and Nelson, *Venus and Love*.
436 According to Clapp, the panel was finished in 1535, based on Vasari’s implications that Pontormo completed the Venus and Cupid while painting the Philadelphia portrait of Duke Alessandro. See Clapp, *Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo*, 63-64.
Guidobaldo (Fig. 24) for its delineation “with a wondrous roundness of line.” Aretino’s comments indirectly elevated the status of Bettini, who had commissioned this novel creation of cross-gendered beauty:

Because the goddess infuses her qualities into the desires of the two sexes, the wise man [Michelangelo] made her with the body of the female and the muscles of the male so that with an elegant vivacity of artifice she is moved by masculine and feminine sentiments.

In his 1547 lectures on the nobility of sculpture, painting, and poetry, Varchi cited the Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus (Fig. 2) as the modern-day equivalent of Praxiteles’ marble Aphrodite of Knidos, which according to the ancient Roman writer Pliny the Elder (23/24-79) was stained on her thigh by a physically aroused spectator who succumbed to her beauty. By evoking Pliny and the great artists and patrons of antiquity, Varchi found a parallel in his own society: “Didn’t [Pliny] say that even men fell in love with marble statues, as happened with the Venus of Praxiteles? Though the very same still occurs today, all day long, with the Venus that Michelangelo designed for M. Bartolomeo Bettini, colored by the hand of M. Iacopo Pontormo.”

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437 Aretino, Lettere, ed. Sergio Ortolani (Turin: Einaudi, 1945), 137.
438 Ibid., 137. The taste for a cross-gendered beauty was noted early in the century by Equicola (Libro di natura d’amore, first published in 1525), who claimed that “the visage of a woman is praised if it has the features of a man; the face of the man if it has the feminine features, hence the proverb: ‘the effeminate male and the manly female are graceful in almost every aspect.’” See Scritti d’arte del cinquecento, ed. Paola Barocchi, 3 vols. (Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1971-76), vol. 2, 1617: “quasi per ciascun luogo femmina masculo e masculo femmina hanno grazia.” Vasari also noted Michelangelo’s taste for androgynous models in his Bacchus for the Roman banker Jacopo Galli (Bargello, Florence; c. 1496-97). According to Vasari, Michelangelo gave the Bacchus “both the youthful slenderness of the male and the fullness and roundness of the female.” See Vasari, Lives, 9:13; and Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 7:150.
440 Varchi, Due Lezizioni, 104: “…gl’huomini medesimi si sono innamorati delle statue di marmo, come avvenne alla Venere di Prassitele, Benche questo stesso avviene ancora hoggi tutto il giorno nella Venere, che disegnò Michelagnolo à M. Bartolomeo Bettini, colorita di mano di M. Iacopo Pontormo.”
In 1550 Vasari singled out Michelangelo’s cartoon “di carbone finissimo” for the Venus and Cupid (see Fig. 3) as one of the artist’s most beautiful drawings, his finished cartoons having had “no equal.” Unsurprisingly, Bettini’s commission, including the celebrated Venus and Cupid, was overlooked by Michelangelo’s biographer Condivi three years later in his 1553 life of the artist, which he wrote as a response to Vasari’s biography with greater input from the master. Michelangelo, who worked closely with Condivi on his portrait as an all-powerful genius, suppressed most evidence of his own preliminary drawings and collaborations. Condivi does, however, make a general reference to the artist’s “cartoons for various works in painting” but does not mention any specific collaborators. At the close of the Cinquecento, the cartoon was hailed by Borghini in his Il riposo, an influential and accessible introduction to painting and sculpture written in the wake of the Council of Trent (1545-63), as “il famoso cartone della Venere ignuda che bacia Cupido.”

Wölfflin’s nineteenth-century description above of central Italian audiences after the death of Raphael sheds light on the demands of sophisticated Florentine patrons on their artists in the early sixteenth century. According to the English critic and historian Kenneth Clark, “the strenuous Florentines, who delighted in the movement of a muscular back or an extended arm, took no interest in the bland and static form of Venus; and Raphael submitted himself to their authority, always retaining from those years some taste for knotty modeling.” As a product of a critical environment that praised complex, masculine figures over “peaceful” feminine beauties, Bettini proudly commissioned Pontormo to paint a Venus and Cupid (Fig. 2) on Michelangelo’s

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441 Vasari-Bellosi, Le vite, 2:910: “quello d’una Venere, che [Michelangelo] donò a Bartolomeo Bettini di carbone finissimo; e quello d’un Noli me tangere, che fu fatto per il marchese del Vasto, finiti poi co’ colori da Iacopo da Puntormo.”

442 Condivi, The Life of Michelangelo, 90.

443 Borghini, Il riposo, bk. 4, 38: “il famoso cartone della Venere ignuda, che bacia Cupido, il Puntormo da quel cartone ritraendola, ne dipinse una, che per lo disegno di Michelangelo, e per lo colorito di Jacopo riuscì cosa rarissima, e l’ebbe e tenne molto cara il Duca Alessandro.”

design (now lost; see Fig. 3) as the centerpiece of his Florentine chamber decoration. His commission placed him in the vanguard of Cinquecento art, theory, and patronage.

Michelangelo’s concetto (Fig. 25), which he conceived, modified, and reused throughout his career, addressed all of the formal tenets of Mannerist beauty and expression. In his derisive comments on “mannered” goddesses twisting and turning in fictive landscapes, Wölfflin referenced Michele di Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio’s (1503-1577) Venus and Cupid in the Galleria Colonna, Rome (Fig. 33), as the paradigmatic example of nature gone awry. Michele’s Venus and Cupid is a copy of the Michelangelo-Pontormo panel for Bettini’s chamber. Thus in 1898, Wölfflin took Bettini’s central panel to task in his discussion of the decline of Michelangelo, a period in which “nobody knew any more what simple gesture and natural movements were.”

Michelangelo’s original cartoon for the Venus and Cupid is now lost, but it can be reconstructed on the basis of a sixteenth-century copy, today at Naples (Fig. 3). That sheet is employed in this discussion. As we discussed in chapter 2, the master’s sources for Venus ranged from antique statues of fiumi to the artist’s own contemporaneous marble sculptures for the Medici tombs in the church of San Lorenzo to the period’s renewed interest in Dante’s dolce stil nuovo, which appealed to Bronzino and Michelangelo, both of whom were successful poets.

Only one, possibly two, preparatory drawings by Michelangelo exist for the painting. First is Michelangelo’s quick pen-and-ink sketch, or primo pensiero, formerly in the Casa

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446 The Galleria Colonna Venus and Cupid was previously attributed to Bronzino and Vasari. In 1963 Bernard Berenson correctly identified it as by Michele di Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio after Bettini’s cartoon or panel. See Berenson, Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Florentine School (London: Phaidon, 1963), vol. 1, 150.
447 Wölfflin, Classic Art, 202.
448 See Parker, Bronzino; and Buonarroti, Poetry of Michelangelo.
Buonarroti at Florence and today in the British Museum (Fig. 25). According to Michael Hirst, Michelangelo never designed anything till the last minute, when he was forced to do so by his patron. Given this working practice, one can date the British Museum sketch to the time of the Bettini commission, and not years before, when it could have been conceived for another project and reused later. Pen and ink became Michelangelo’s preferred medium for this early stage of the creative process out of necessity. It is in this medium that the master draftsman set down the *attitudini* of his figures. The London sketch was first connected with Bettini’s central panel in 1883. Given Michelangelo’s new ideal of female beauty, which he pioneered at this time with more heroic, active female protagonists such as the *Leda* for Alfonso d’Este (Fig. 23) and *Venus* for Bettini (Fig. 2), the British Museum study was considered a preparatory work for a *Samson and Delilah* or a *David and Goliath* in the early twentieth century. Then, Berenson and Anny Popp independently argued for a male figure reclining on the floor.

In this early sketch, Michelangelo rendered Venus with the same technique and form as contemporary river god studies for the Medici Chapel. The positions of Venus’ legs, pelvis, and torso reflect a strained type adopted by the artist in the 1520s and 30s. Venus’ head is reduced to a few nondescript strokes, perhaps reflecting Michelangelo’s distaste for portraiture. Whereas Venus’ extremities are virtually nonexistent in the drawing, the position of her legs, torso, arms, and head are almost the same as in the finished Michelangelo-Pontormo panel. However, the excessively upturned hip, previously noted in the panel, does not appear in this

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449 British Museum, London, no. 1859-6-25-553, pen and brown ink, 8.5 x 12.1 cm. See Berenson, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, no. 1504, as “doubtless a study for a Samson and Delilah”; Wilde, *Italian Drawings*, 93, no. 56; and de Tolnay, *Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo*, no. 302r.


452 Berenson, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, no. 1504.

453 See, for example, Michelangelo’s working drawing for a recumbent statue, British Museum, London, no. 1859-6-25-544.
early stage. Rather, a thinner, more refined female form seems to inhabit the Venus sketch, later embellished through the artist’s pentimenti around the thighs, hips, and torso. According to Hirst, the lack of attention in the figure’s extremities and the masculine qualities of the female goddess are common traits of Michelangelo’s *primi pensieri*, where the artist often employed male models for female subjects. Michelangelo’s tendency to slim down male models for female subjects can be seen in an earlier drawing for the figure of *Night* in the Medici Chapel. There, pentimenti are visible around the model’s left thigh and calf muscle, while the knee and foot remain untouched. The natural folds of flesh and pull of the navel in the drawing remain in the final panel.

The winged Cupid, drawn roughly one-third the scale of Venus, stands before Venus’ bent right knee with his right arm cocked as if releasing an arrow. In the finished panel, Cupid is replaced by the still life on the left, while he surmounts the female goddess and strategically blocks her pudenda from view. As discussed in chapter 2, Michelangelo may have seen Palma il Vecchio’s *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 22) on a 1529 trip to Venice during the siege; the pose of Cupid in the British Museum sketch is remarkably similar to that of Cupid in Palma’s 1525 composition, where the young god is depicted at his mother’s feet having already released his weapon.

Second is a Michelangelo drawing, today in the Casa Buonarroti, that was considered by Wilde to be a study from about 1533 for the left hand of Bettini’s *Venus*; it is now securely identified as a study for the sculpture of Giuliano de’ Medici. The final drawing by

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456 Florence, Casa Buonarroti, no. 37Av, black chalk, 37.2 x 28.2 cm. See Luciano Berti, *Michelangelo: I disegni di Casa Buonarroti* (Florence: Cantini Edizioni d’Arte, 1985), 144-45, as *Architectural Drawing and Study for Hand of Giuliano de’ Medici*.
457 Wilde, *Italian Drawings*, 93. Based on the sheet’s surrounding architectural designs for the Laurentian Library, Berti dates the Casa Buonarroti sketch to 1525-26 and rightly associates the study of a left hand with that of Michelangelo’s Giuliano de’ Medici in the Medici Chapel. See Berti, *Michelangelo*, 144-45.
Michelangelo—his cartoon for the *Venus and Cupid*—was recorded by Vasari in 1568, then with Bettini’s heirs in Florence. The Naples sheet (Fig. 3) and Michelangelo’s cartoon technique, specifically those designed for completion by other artists, together shed light on this now lost masterpiece.

Finished cartoons in the sixteenth century such as the large Naples drawing were typically designed as aids for transfer through pouncing or stylus-incising, two techniques that invariably destroyed the paper support. The fact that Vasari saw a cartoon for Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2) over thirty years after the picture’s execution confirms that the sheet had survived Pontormo’s transfer of Michelangelo’s disegno onto panel. More likely, Pontormo used a “substitute cartoon” for the transfer, thus preserving Michelangelo’s treasured contribution, a well-finished cartoon (*ben finito cartone*). The Florentine tradition of substitute cartoons was established in the early Cinquecento by Leonardo after the wildly popular presentation of his cartoon for the *Virgin, Christ Child, and St. Anne* in the church of Santissima Annunziata. Michelangelo’s finished cartoon would have been accessible to Pontormo throughout his career in Florence.

The Naples drawing was long considered Bettini’s autograph original. It was last attributed to Michelangelo in the early twentieth century by both Henry Thode and Ernst Steinmann. But since 1948 it has been ascribed to Bronzino, Vasari, and more recently an unidentified Cinquecento painter, the latter on the basis of the drawing’s weak modeling and

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458 Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, no. 86654, charcoal on nineteen glued sheets of paper, 131 x 184 cm. See Nicola Spinosa, *Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte* (Naples: Electa Napoli, 1994), 199; and Bambach, *Drawing and Painting*, 112, no. 185, as a “copy cartoon.”


Unlike the untraced original, the Capodimonte cartoon was most likely in Rome by the second half of the century. It was first documented there in 1600 in the collection of the Farnese servant Fulvio Orsini, who also possessed a fragment of Michelangelo’s cartoon for the *Crucifixion of St. Peter*.462

Bambach describes the Naples sheet as a “monumental copy cartoon,” designed with the intention of engendering numerous copies.463 Michelangelo’s presentation drawings were highly sought out, encouraging even graphic copies after the master’s originals. Numerous finished copies after Michelangelo drawings, such as the British Museum version464 of Michelangelo’s *Samson and Delilah* at Oxford, have been pricked for transfer, while the Ashmolean sheet remains intact. As Bambach astutely points out with regard to the popularity of Michelangelo’s finished drawings, “copies begot more copies.”465 However, the cartoon could also be a copy after Bettini’s finished panel. Two black-chalk drawings in Paris after Michelangelo’s lost cartoon and dated about 1578, for example, have been attributed to Bronzino’s pupil Allori.466 Previously attributed to Pontormo, the drawings match up with a panel painting of the *Venus and Cupid* in Naples, formerly assigned to the Flemish painter

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462 For Orsini’s list of possessions, see Pierre de Nolhac, “Une galerie de peinture au XVIIe siècle: Les collections de Fulvio Orsini,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 29 (1884): 427. “Quadro grande corniciato di noce, con Venere et Cupido, di mano del medesimo.” Michelangelo’s cartoon fragment for the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* was also documented there as a “grande quadro corniciato di noce.” For the *Crucifixion of St. Peter* cartoon, see Bambach, *Drawing and Painting*, 44.

463 Bambach, *Drawing and Painting*, 112.


466 Louvre, Paris, no. 24, black chalk, 301 x 421 mm; and Louvre, Paris, no. 1029, black chalk, 28.2 x 40.9 cm. See François Viatte, *Inventaire général des dessins italiens: III; Dessins toscans XVIIe-XVIIIe; Tome 1*, 1560-1640 (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1988), nos. 22 and 23.
Hendrick van der Broeck (c. 1530-1597). Roberto Longhi first attributed the colorful panel to van den Broeck, who was active in Florence, Perugia, and Orvieto but executed his most accomplished paintings in Rome about 1573. There, he painted a fresco of the Resurrection on the east wall of the Sistine Chapel while also collaborating with Vasari on the Vatican’s Sala Regia. More recently Costamagna has convincingly attributed the Naples panel to Vasari. The figures’ rosy hues and blonde highlights are in keeping with Vasari’s palette, which deviated from the somber tones of Pontormo’s prototype. Moreover, the metallic curls of both Venus and Cupid suggest the influence of Rosso Fiorentino (1494-1540), whose paintings Vasari had seen in Florence and Sansepolcro. Finally, the swath of drapery that once covered Venus’ pudenda in the Michelangelo-Pontormo panel is here absent, suggesting Vasari’s access to either the original panel or Michelangelo’s cartoon. As we have seen, in the mid-sixteenth century Vasari had access to both while serving the city’s second duke, Cosimo I, who by then had inherited Bettini’s camera centerpiece.

Among Michelangelo’s surviving cartoons is the Casa Buonarroti drawing of a Madonna and Child dated from the 1520s to 1530s and showing the artist’s earliest example of modeling in this late phase of the creative process. Michelangelo’s Virgin is here sketched in a few quick strokes, but the figure of the suckling infant is rendered in high relief through stumped charcoal and red chalk, white highlights, and reinforced shadows with pen and ink. Such cartoons by the master were valued and sought after in his day. Aretino, in a letter to the artist dated 20 January 1538, pleaded with Michelangelo for “a scrap of those cartoons which you

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468 Roberto Longhi, “Comprimari spagnoli della Maniera italiana,” Paragone 43 (1953): 15. The painting was previously attributed to Giovanni Bellini, Bronzino, and Allori.
469 Costamagna, Pontormo, no. 70.9.
470 Casa Buonarroti, Florence, no. 71F, black chalk, 54.1 x 39.6 cm. See Berti, Michelangelo, 130-31.
471 Bambach, Drawing and Painting, 266-68.
usually consign to burn in the fire, so that I may enjoy it in life and in death may take it with me to the grave.”

Bettini’s cartoon (presumably returned to him by Pontormo after the panel’s forced sale from the painter’s workshop) offered the merchant-banker a second opportunity to have his large panel painted by another artist on Michelangelo’s design.

Michelangelo’s cartoons were previously exploited in this manner by the master’s own pupil Antonio Mini (see chapter 1). Having received the drawing for the Leda (see Fig. 23) as a gift after Michelangelo denied it to the original patron, Duke Alfonso d’Este, Mini took it to France to sell to King Francis I but not before attempting to have three paintings made from it, as Pontormo had once done in Florence (Fig. 17).

Of the six disegni finiti found in Michelangelo’s Roman studio after his death in 1564, Vasari recounts that four sheets were presentation drawings and two were piccoli disegni or cartonetti. The latter were designed, like Bettini’s Venus and Cupid, as models expressly for execution in painting by other artists. Following his successful collaborations with Pontormo in Florence, Michelangelo teamed up with Sebastiano del Piombo, Daniele da Volterra, Marcello Venusti, and Condivi in Rome, artists whom the master wished to involve in the creative process.

According to Vasari, Bettini’s cartoon was completed in “carbone finitissimo,” defined by Filippo Baldinucci as an ideal medium “per disegnare in carta o cartone.” Vasari’s description suggests that Michelangelo’s original cartoon for Pontormo was a “ben finito cartone,” or well-finished cartoon, a genre established in Florence in the 1460s.

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473 See Vasari, Lives, 9:109-110: “…for Bartolomeo Bettini he made a cartoon, which he presented to him, of a Venus with a Cupid that is kissing her, a divine thing, which is now in the possession of Bettini’s heirs in Florence;”; and Vasari-Milanesi, Le vite, 7:277: “A Bartolomeo Bettini fece e donò un cartone d’una Venere con Cupido che la baccia, che e cosa divina, hogg appresso agli heredi in Fiorenza.”
476 Vasari-Bellossi, Le vite, 910.
477 Filippo Baldinucci, Vocabolario toscano dell’arte del disegno (Florence: S.P.E.S., 1681), 28.
Bambach rightly notes that “ben finiti cartoni” were valued aesthetically for their attention to detail and finish. They were rare for Renaissance draftsmen unless they were designed expressly for other artists, as was the case with Michelangelo and Pontormo. In order to preserve such highly finished drawings, more utilitarian drawings, or “substitute cartoons,” were employed by the artist for actual transfer. Lacking the finish and attention to detail of traditional cartoni, these sheets could be pricked and stylus-incised right over the final surface. It is probably through such efforts that cartoons such as Bettini’s of Venus and Cupid, Cavalieri’s now lost portrait, and Altoviti’s Drunkenness of Noah had survived till at least 1568, when they were recorded by Vasari.

Cartoons for large-scale murals and altarpieces were drawn in either finely sharpened charcoal or black chalk and highlighted with lead white. The scale of these works, like the impressive Venus and Cupid, required broad, expressive handling for the deceptive sense of relief through chiaroscuro. Bambach notes that when seen from a distance, this combination of media offers “a more legible, sculptural tonal range, and their relative ease of application quickly enabled density of tone.” Such sculptural effects would have appealed to the propensities of Michelangelo, who viewed himself as a sculptor above any other profession. Though lacking the minutely rendered details of presentation sheets, Michelangelo’s cartoons in the 1530s were drawn with an audience in mind, viewing the sheet from a great distance. According to Bambach, spatial depth was further conveyed in the master’s sheets by the degree of finish allotted to the cartoon’s foreground and background elements. Citing Michelangelo’s cartoon fragment of the Crucifixion of St. Peter (Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples), she notes how all of the figures are rendered with a high degree of refinement because only foreground figures appear in that sheet. Given this technique, Bettini’s cartoon would presumably reveal a tight and highly

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478 Bambach, Drawing and Painting, 56.
modeled Venus and Cupid, a less worked up love altar, and a slightly developed landscape in the distance.\textsuperscript{479}

Unlike the self-sufficient presentation drawings in red and black chalk that accompanied poetic confessions and depicted scenes of love in classical mythology for Perini and Cavalieri in the 1520s and 1530s, Bettini’s charcoal \textit{Venus and Cupid} was designed expressly as a preparatory work. And while both cartoons and presentation drawings achieved the same high degree of finish and plasticity of form,\textsuperscript{480} created by Michelangelo for the polished, sculptural appeal of Perini’s \textit{Venus, Mars, and Cupid}\textsuperscript{481} or Cavalieri’s \textit{Tityus} (Fig. 20),\textsuperscript{482} the presentation drawings were developed beyond the cartoons to what Wilde called an “engraving-like completeness.”\textsuperscript{483}

Like his large-scale \textit{Venus and Cupid} cartoon for Bettini, Michelangelo’s contemporary cartoon fragment for the \textit{Crucifixion of St. Peter}\textsuperscript{484} was formed from twelve glued sheets of \textit{foglio reale} size, his preferred cartoon paper from Bologna measuring 44.0 x 60.5 cm. Technically, Bambach notes that the Naples cartoon was drawn with an audience in mind. Appearing almost painterly and \textit{sfumato} from close up, Michelangelo’s forms congeal to a crisp outline from a distance, as was probably the case with the equally massive Bettini cartoon.\textsuperscript{485} A major pentimento appears in the lance of one of the soldiers to the right, which is shifted by

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{480} Wilde attributed this highly polished effect to stippling. See Wilde, “Cartonetti by Michelangelo,” 372. However, Hirst correctly notes that these forms resulted from “repeated strokes of a very soft, black chalk on what was originally a heavily grained paper.” See Hirst, \textit{Michelangelo and his Drawings}, 56.
  \item \textsuperscript{481} Uffizi, Florence, no. 598 E, black chalk, 35.7 x 25.2 cm. See Andreas Schumacher, \textit{Michelangelos teste divine: Idealbildnisse als Exempla der Zeichenkunst} (Münster: Rhema, 2007).
  \item \textsuperscript{482} Royal Library, Windsor, no. 12771, black chalk, 19 x 33 cm. See A. E. Popham and Wilde, \textit{The Italian Drawings of the XV and XVI Centuries in the Collection of His Majesty the King at Windsor Castle} (London: Phaidon, 1949), no. 429.
  \item \textsuperscript{483} Wilde, “Cartonetti by Michelangelo,” 374.
  \item \textsuperscript{484} Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples, no. 398, charcoal, 263 x 156 cm. See de Tolnay, \textit{Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo}, no. 384r.
  \item \textsuperscript{485} Bambach, “A Note on Michelangelo’s Cartoon for the Sistine Ceiling Haman,” \textit{Art Bulletin} 65 (December 1983): 661-65.
\end{itemize}
roughly three inches. This suggests that even in the final stage of the creative process
Michelangelo was recreating and refining his compositions. Bettini’s lost cartoon may therefore
deviate slightly from the final panel at Florence. In addition to technique, the Naples Crucifixion
sheds light on the function of the lost Bettini cartoon and Michelangelo’s use of substitute
 cartoons for the preservation of his finished originals. The application of a substitute cartoon
would have permitted Vasari to see Bettini’s cartoon intact in 1568.

As we have discussed, Michelangelo’s principal concern throughout his career was
the human figure. Through his collaborations, he was able to work exclusively on the human
form and leave any attributes or landscape details to his collaborators. In the case of his cartoon
for the Annunciation (Morgan Library and Museum, New York), for example, Michelangelo
worked up the drapery and flesh of the Archangel Gabriel and Virgin in great detail through his
signature use of stippling while he lightly sketched the Virgin’s lectern and interior. These
external details were developed by his collaborator Venusti in the finished panel at Rome. In
another collaboration with Venusti, Michelangelo drew a finished cartonetto of the Agony in the
Garden (Uffizi, Florence). He completed only five figures—three apostles and two
 representations of Christ—all pushed up to the picture plane. Again, the ageing artist left the
details of the setting and distant landscape to his translator.

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486 Bambach, Drawing and Painting, 44: “The small piece [of Michelangelo’s cartoon for the Crucifixion] with a
perforated design of a nude male pelvis glued as a patch onto the Naples cartoon fragment...exhibits portions of at
least two (possibly three) structural joins of paper, which suggests a relatively comprehensive “substitute
cartoon.”...the area in Michelangelo’s Pauline Chapel fresco that corresponds to the Naples ben finito cartone is
composed of ten crudely joined giornate, and the joins of the cartoon’s paper, still intact in their form of regular
rectangles, do not show evidence that the cartoon was cut for transfer.”
487 Morgan Library and Museum, New York, no. n. IV, 7, black chalk, 38.3 x 29.6 cm. See de Tolnay, Corpus dei
disegni di Michelangelo, no. 399r.
488 Venusti’s panel is today in the Galleria Nazionale Barberini, Rome.
489 Uffizi, Florence, no. 230Fr, black and white chalk, 36 x 60 cm. See de Tolnay, Corpus dei disegni di
Michelangelo, no. 409r. Venusti’s panel painting is in the Galleria Doria, Rome.
Michelangelo may have collaborated with Pontormo in a similar way, drawing his figures of Venus and Cupid and leaving the love altar and distant landscape to his collaborator. As previously noted, the distant rolling hills in the final painting are also found in numerous contemporaneous paintings by Pontormo and his pupil Bronzino, such as Bronzino’s *Legend of the Ten Thousand Martyrs* (Galleria Palatina, Florence) and his *Apollo and Marsyas* (Private Collection, New York). Given the tendency of Michelangelo’s collaborators to embellish his primarily figural compositions with still lifes and landscapes, such passages in the three extant copies of Michelangelo’s cartoon may have been inspired by Pontormo’s picture rather than Michelangelo’s disegno.

Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* was among the most influential mythological paintings in the Cinquecento. Both the cartoon by Michelangelo and the painted panel by Pontormo inspired numerous copies throughout the peninsula by Italy’s leading painters. Collectors and men of letters were equally drawn to Bettini’s prized possession, which entered the Medici collection the year it was painted by Pontormo. There, it was praised as a paragon of ideal beauty, an ideal it helped define, by the members of the Medici sponsored Accademia Fiorentina. We now turn to the picture itself and the formal and iconographical elements that contributed to its great success.

**The Venus and Cupid: A Formal and Iconographical Analysis**

The subject of Bettini’s panel is a traditional Renaissance female nude reclining in a landscape (Fig. 2), a popular theme by 1532, especially in northern Italy where Michelangelo would have seen many examples during his trip to Venice in 1529. Michelangelo-Pontormo’s full-bodied goddess, parallel to and pushed right up against the picture plane, rests en plein air on
an amorphous gathering of blue-grey drapery. The tactile qualities of the satin fabric emphasize her sensuality much as Velázquez employed it in his *Rokeby Venus* in the following century. As in the Velázquez, the exposed flesh of Bettini’s *Venus* unites the composition from her extended left leg and foot on the lower left to her noble profile and elaborate hairstyle all’antica in the panel’s upper right corner. In true maniera contrapposto grace, Venus fully extends her left leg and right arm as she retracts the opposing arm and leg from our view. Her right hand gently pulls at an arrow while her left hand merely functions as a foil for her left breast. As seen previously in Bronzino’s *Dante*, Michelangelo renders his Venus in almost complete profile. Her torso is instead presented frontally for the viewer’s delectation.

The barren landscape in the distance is composed of a single jagged hill and light-blue rolling hills off to the right. Here, nature serves as an illusionary backdrop, relating in no particular way to the foreground figure. According to Walter Pater, this is typical of the landscapes of Michelangelo, who, taking no interest in the natural world, painted backgrounds with “only blank ranges of rock, and dim vegetable forms as blank as they, as in a world before the creation of the first five days.”

Luciano Berti, in his analysis of the contemporaneous landscape in Pontormo’s *Noli me tangere* (Fig. 17), refers to Pontormo’s contribution as “bellissima l’invenzione del malinconico paesaggio.” It is this same mood that is evoked by the desolate terrain around Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid*. We are a far cry from the lush, fertile Arcadia inhabited by Giorgione’s and Titian’s reclining beauties. Indeed, lit in the background from an independent source, Pontormo’s distant landscape appears as if viewed through an invisible window, a chamber completely detached from its natural environment. The

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representation of nature is perfunctory and in keeping with Pontormo’s landscapes from the early 1530s.

Unlike her more “peaceful” sisters painted by Giorgione and Titian within rather than in front of an idyllic setting, Michelangelo’s Venus rests among a series of revealing attributes, objects that may have filled Bettini’s own camera. Set amidst an array of props rich in iconographic significance, Bettini’s Venus and Cupid falls within the Florentine tradition of large-scale favole, which Charles Dempsey notes as a word employed by Renaissance writers, for the first time in reference to Botticelli’s Primavera, for paintings based on ancient myths.492

In Bettini’s Venus and Cupid, Cupid takes on a more active role than in earlier images of Cupid accompanying Venus. Indeed, Michelangelo’s Cupid usurps the traditional roles of the love goddess’s more conventional paramours, Mars or Adonis, the focus of Venus’ devotion once she’s accidentally pierced by love’s arrow. Here, Cupid straddles his mother across her right hip as he attempts to kiss her on the lips. He defies his more common relegation to the edge of the composition, where he often serves as mere witness or voyeur to Venus’ amorous delights.493

Sharing Venus’ blonde hair and rosy complexion, Cupid appears winged, fleshy, and equally agile. However, as was deemed appropriate in contemporary treatises on love, Cupid’s cheeks are reddened from the flames of desire and love that he carries.494

494 For a comprehensive account of love treatises written in Italy about the time of Bettini’s commission, see Perlman, “Taking Aim at Amore,” 13-103.
A similar pairing of Cupid with Venus in the landscape appeared in the previous decade in northern Italy, namely in a picture by Palma il Vecchio today at Cambridge (Fig. 22). Yet the highly intimate embrace between mother and son in the Bettini panel appears to be Michelangelo’s own invention. With his left arm, Cupid reaches under Venus’ neck and caresses her under her left ear, a gesture similar to “chin-chucking” employed since antiquity to convey erotic communion. His right arm is fully extended in the opposite direction, where he grasps one of many arrows that empty out of his hidden quiver from the clutches of his mother. Cupid’s right leg awkwardly bends across Venus’ pelvis, where his foot rests on the goddess’s pudenda.

The arrows preoccupying Venus and Cupid also appear in the *natura morta* that frames the composition at left. The still life includes no less than seven arrows, a hollow stand surmounted by a folded cloak, and a vase filled with roses. Cupid’s crossbow is strapped around the base of the vase and around it are fastened two flesh-colored masks, one of an older satyr-like male and the other of an idealized female youth. From inside the stand a prostrate male doll comes into view, directly below the two masks and above Venus’ extended left foot.

Recently Rebekah Compton has successfully discussed Bettini’s complete program. Whereas arguments may be made for both a bedchamber and a study as the context for Bettini’s

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496 The incestuous seduction of Cupid and Venus was taken one step further in the following decade by another member of Bettini’s *équipe*, Bronzino, in his 1545 London *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 34). On multiple meanings for Venus and Cupid in medieval literature, see Theresa Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, & Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).


498 Venus, in pulling the arrow from Cupid’s clutches, extends her right arm across Cupid’s pelvis. Rebekah Compton has interpreted Michelangelo’s placement of Venus’ right elbow and extended forearm as a signifier of Cupid’s physical arousal, thereby heightening the painting’s eroticism. See Compton, “‘Omnia Vincit Amor,’” 247: “Venus’ arm, which crosses between Cupid’s legs in the area of the genitals, metaphorically suggests the penis and the hand’s slightly uplifted forefinger more specifically points to its erection.”
decorative program, Compton argues for the chamber as “a virtual third sphere of the heavens, where the poets—who devoted their lives and writings to love—congregate with one another after transcending the mortal world.” 499 Compton takes into account more than just the *Venus and Cupid* and hers is therefore the most plausible explanation for the room’s iconography. In a recent publication, Compton addresses Bettini’s complete program based on love, “which inspired [the lover’s] ecstatic ascent to the third realm of the heavens,” 500 including Bronzino’s poet portraits painted for the chamber’s lunettes. Previously, scholars have looked only to the *Venus and Cupid* for clues. But Compton convincingly argues that since antiquity the third sphere of the heavens was the domain of the planet Venus, the principal protagonist of Bettini’s program. 501

With the exception of Compton, scholars have typically focused on the iconography of the *Venus and Cupid*, in particular the goddess’s multifarious roles in visual and literary culture. 502 Astrologists assigned her planet the realms of love and springtime. Poets allegorized her as the embodiment of Romance, finding her most at home among the pastures and gardens of chivalrous verse. Political and religious leaders paraded her through the streets of Florence as a triumphant symbol of peaceful rule. And for fifteenth-century humanists such as Ficino, Venus was synonymous with *Humanitas*, the supreme virtue of refinement, culture, and moral values. However, for sixteenth-century letterati like Varchi, she was an object of physical desire (*Venus Vulgaris*).

As the major prototype for Bronzino’s elusive London *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 34), the Michelangelo-Pontormo *Venus and Cupid* may have prided itself on a

499 Ibid., 233.
500 Ibid., 231.
501 Ibid., 233. Claudius Ptolemy proposed this system of cosmology in his *Almagest*, arguing that ten concentric heavenly spheres—in outward order, the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, fixed stars, Primum Mobile, and Empyrean Heaven—surround earth at the center of the cosmos.
similarly complex iconographic program. As Aretino noted, Michelangelo specifically intended for his figures to be understood by only a select few. De Tolnay has proposed the subject of Bettini’s panel as “the psychic process of falling in love—that is, love’s attack on the heart.” His theory is supported by Michelangelo’s extant sketch for the Venus and Cupid (Fig. 25), in which Cupid releases his arrow in the early stages of love’s assault. The scene is concluded in Pontormo’s painting (Fig. 2), where Cupid’s attack has rendered Venus, the victim of love’s advances, vulnerable. With her left index finger, she points to the newfound wound in her heart while her outstretched right arm extends towards the altar of love. Within the altar the bows and arrows may symbolize the wounds inflicted by love; the roses, love’s transitory state of joy; the masks, love’s deceit and Michelangelo’s own homage to his early training in the Medici sculpture garden; and the supine doll set within the box, love’s ultimate price, paralysis and death.

Apart from its symbolism as an erudite essay on love, Bettini’s Venus and Cupid, like Bronzino’s London Allegory, is an unabashedly erotic work of art. Mythological representations of love provided Renaissance artists and patrons with a learned excuse to execute sexually desirable figures, which normally challenged pictorial convention. Described as Michelangelo’s “erotic period,” the years 1520-35 include the artist’s dealings with Perini, Mini, Cavalieri, and Bettini. For these and other friends, the artist made suggestive drawings such as the Leda (Fig. 23), the Ganymede, and Tityus (Fig. 20). Michelangelo’s Leda was even translated into painting, perhaps as a result of its primary function as a diplomatic gift during the siege of Florence, when

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503 See Roskill, Dolce’s Aretino, 168.
506 Goldscheider, Michelangelo Drawings, 18-19.
Ferrara’s military aid was much needed in defense against imperial forces. However, in Ferrara Michelangelo was drawn not only to the city’s fortifications but also, as discussed above, to Bellini’s and Titian’s erotic panels for Alfonso’s camerino.

Cupid’s attack on Venus has been recently interpreted as an illustration of Dante’s “stony woman” (donna petrosa), the heroine of a sequence of four long poems titled *rime petrose.* According to Dante and later Petrarch, the *donna petrosa* cruelly denied the advances of her lovers much like Michelangelo’s *Venus.* In his Petrarchan madrigals of the late 1530s, Michelangelo often alluded to the cruel yet beautiful nature of women who gave him both tremendous joy and pain:

This lady of mine is so quick and bold
that even as she kills me, with her eyes
she promises me all my joys, while at the same time
she holds her cruel sword within my wound.
And thus, within my soul
I feel both death and life, though opposites,
together for a brief moment;
if her grace chases anguish
away from me, it’s to set a longer ordeal:
for evil harms much more than good can help.

Wrought with oppositions, these lines reveal the allure of the poet’s muse and the ease with which she inflicts pain. The obscure male doll lying inside the altar of love may be a victim of Venus’ cruel rejection.

The voice behind classical mythology as erudite pornography in Renaissance Italy was the first-century Roman poet Ovid (43 BC-AD 17/18). In book 10 of his *Metamorphoses,* Ovid described Cupid wounding Venus, a possible source for the central panel of Bettini’s camera:

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507 On the political motives behind the *Leda* commission, see Wallace, “Michelangelo’s *Leda,*” 473-99.
For, while her son Cupid was kissing Venus, with his quiver on his shoulders, he unwittingly grazed her breast with an arrow which was projecting from the sheath. The injured goddess pushed her son away. The wound was deeper than is seemed, deeper than she herself at first realized. The goddess of Cythera, captivated by the beauty of a mortal, cared no more for her sea shores, ceased to visit seagirt Paphos, Cnidos rich in fishes, or Amathis with its valuable ores. She even stayed away from heaven, preferring Adonis to the sky.\textsuperscript{510}

Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses} was indeed a major influence on sixteenth-century visual culture, especially through the series of prints of the \textit{Loves of the Gods}, which were engraved by Giovanni Jacopo Caraglio (1500/05-1565) in 1527 after drawings by Perino del Vaga (1501-1547) and Rosso.\textsuperscript{511} Prints were a major iconographic source for Renaissance painters and played a significant role in Bettini’s artistic circle.\textsuperscript{512} Caraglio’s \textit{Loves of the Gods} in particular employed many devices visible in Bettini \textit{Venus and Cupid}, namely the “slung-leg” and “chin-chuck” motifs from antiquity, as well as that of the voyeur, represented in Bettini’s panel in the form of the satyr mask hanging over Venus’ altar of love. Caraglio’s print of \textit{Neptune and Thetis}, for example, depicts a fully accessible Thetis-Venus figure caressed by Neptune and carefully observed by a winged Cupid holding Neptune’s trident.

Caraglio’s twenty-one \textit{Loves of the Gods} included \textit{Saturn and Philyra}, \textit{Vulcan and Ceres}, \textit{Jupiter and Io}, and \textit{Apollo and Hyacinth}, all of which were accompanied by a winged

\textsuperscript{510} For an Ovidian interpretation of Bettini’s Michelangelo-Pontormo \textit{Venus and Cupid}, see Perlman, “Taking Aim at Amore,” 2004, 149-83.
Cupid set off to the side. Perino also designed a *Venus and Cupid* for the series, although its iconography differs significantly from Bettini’s panel. Perino’s *Venus* is nude, though not as accessible as Michelangelo’s goddess, and rests on a bed while accompanied by a winged Cupid. The two figures in the print, however, are not in dialogue with one another, for Cupid sleeps while Venus seductively plays with her hair and looks on lovingly at her son. As Talvacchia notes, these two figures, “symbolic of carnal love…are shown iconically, with no narrative references.”

Certainly more in keeping with Michelangelo’s composition is Caraglio’s *Venus and Mars* (Fig. 21). Aside from Mars, both the Michelangelo-Pontormo panel and Caraglio print include images of Venus and a winged Cupid. In the print Venus straddles Mars’ left thigh in a slung-leg motif as Mars caresses Venus while pulling her lips to his. Cupid reclines like a prostrate river god while holding up an arrow directed at Venus. These shared poses and gestures are ultimately more implicit of sexual union than explicit. For example, in Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid*, Cupid partially conceals Venus’ pudenda with his left foot, which draws more attention to the goddess’s erogenous zone. In both works the unobstructed display of flesh, the sensual nature of the figures’ embraces, and the proximity of the partners’ lips all intensify the sexual tone of the compositions.

Although the myth of Cupid wounding Venus was not employed by Caraglio in his *Loves of the Gods*, as we have seen Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* does include this story, which certainly informed Palma il Vecchio’s painting (Fig. 22) and possibly Michelangelo’s cartoon (see Fig. 3). Ovid’s account was taken up earlier in the sixteenth century in a drawing by

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514 Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*, 134.
515 Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Rome, no. FC 5934, engraving, 17.5 x 13.3 cm. See Strauss, *Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 28, 106.
Raphael; it was engraved by Agostino Veneziano around 1516. Raphael’s tame version of the myth shows Venus being pierced by Cupid’s arrow, with no visible resistance, on her right-hand finger. Like Bettini’s Venus, she simultaneously gestures with her left hand to her heart, where the internal wound slowly develops. Cupid stares at his victim while leaning against her thigh, a closeness which Venus heightens by resting her right arm on Cupid’s shoulder. Lacking the overt eroticism of Bettini’s Venus and Cupid, Raphael’s concetto still depicts a sexually charged rapport between mother and son and may have inspired Michelangelo in Florence.

In 1532, however, the wounding of Venus (or disarming of Cupid) became considerably more ambiguous and iconographically challenging in Bettini’s cartoon, perhaps in response to the sophisticated tastes of Medici patrons in Florence. This “commitment to ambiguity,” which has been defined as essential in Mannerist poetry as well as painting, created a complex field of interpretation that invited the spectator to playfully engage with the work. For example, as Bettini’s protagonists are about to kiss, their eyes are preoccupied with other matters. Venus, ostensibly gazing into her son’s eyes, looks beyond Cupid to her altar of love, while Cupid, aware of her distraction, looks down at her right hand, which grasps an arrow from his quiver. In addition, the arrow grasped by both Venus and Cupid is shown point up, while all of the other arrows in Cupid’s quiver are shown point down. Is Venus disarming Cupid or potentially wounding him herself? The direction of the arrow appears to be from Venus’ hand to Cupid’s quiver, and not the other way around.

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517 On the wounding of Venus in Bettini’s Venus and Cupid, see Keach, “Cupid Disarmed, or Venus Wounded?”, 327-31; and Perlman, “Taking Aim at Amore,” 133-38.
518 Parker, Bronzino, 153-54.
Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* is not the first example of Cupid being attacked by his own arms. In a pair of Florentine prints dated about 1470,519 Cupid is shown blindfolded and tied to a tree while four well-dressed women assault him with his own arrows and attempt to cut off his wings with swords. As victims of love’s pain and subsequent suffering, they retaliate against the source of their frustrations. All of Cupid’s assailants are women, thus suggesting either Cupid’s capacity to fool women who are in love or women’s moral necessity to fight off love’s temptations. As Talvacchia has shown, this is typical of the ambiguous nature of erotic imagery.520

Although classical texts described Cupid as the son of Chaos, Night, or Day, Renaissance audiences usually interpreted the ambiguous demigod as the offspring of Venus. Consequently, their amorous attachment in Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* may have been seen as one of incest.521 In his *Metamorphoses* Ovid addressed the subject of incest in his account of Myrrha and her father, Cinyras (book 10, 314-15). Writing of Myrrha’s love in a sanctimonious tone, the Roman bard placed her story immediately before his account of Cupid wounding Venus: “‘Tis a crime to hate one’s father, but such love as this is a greater crime than hate.” Myrrha and Cinyras’ offspring, Adonis, becomes the object of Venus’ obsession after Cupid pierces her heart with his arrow. Her crime of incest is defended by Myrrha on the grounds that it is both legal among the animals and a vehicle for strengthening relationships by combining sexual and familial bonds in an incestuous capacity. However, as Leonard Barkan astutely notes, incest in the Renaissance was “not only a preservation of these relationships: it is the quintessential confusion

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According to Petrus Berchorius’s *Metamorphosis Ovidiana moraliter explanata*, written in Latin around 1340 but still widely read in the sixteenth century, Cupid’s erotic embrace of his mother—*Cupido matrem osculans*—was a crime against nature, a lethal mixture of blood which resulted from unrestrained sexual desires: *per appetitum luxurie ipse consanguine*.

Indeed, incest was highly frowned upon in early sixteenth-century Italy. Bembo, in *Gli Asolani* of 1505, wrote the following about it:

> For whenever the love of something is lighted in us, it straight impels us to follow and seek for that thing; and while we do so, it leads us headlong into perilous disorders and a thousand miseries. It drives a brother to covet the unnatural embraces of a sister for whom he feels an evil love, a stepmother to covet those of a stepson, and sometimes (*what I shudder to say*) a father to covet those of a virgin daughter: things rather monstrous than bestial, which it is much better to pass over in silence than to describe.

In Cinquecento Florence fathers also coveted their sons. In 1520 a man was convicted of sodomizing his. Before being burned to death, the offender was paraded through the streets of Florence and had his flesh torn with pincers. According to the contemporary chronicler Giovanni Cambi, “that sin was never again heard of in the city.”

Even during his “erotic period,” Michelangelo was a conflicted pagan and Christian.

After receiving his humanist training in his youth in Lorenzo de’ Medici’s household, he was

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exposed to the fiery preaching of Savonarola, whose Bonfires of the Vanities in 1497 destroyed numerous lustful works of art—and for which Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* would have been a perfect candidate. Scholars have interpreted Michelangelo’s projects contemporary with the *Venus and Cupid*, such as the *Tityus* (Fig. 20), as “the sin and punishment of illicit sexual indulgence, of the torments of a man who through sensuality has become godless.”

Presented as a pendant drawing to the *Ganymede* for Cavalieri, Michelangelo’s *Tityus* has been interpreted as a symbolic representation of the artist’s own agony with love. Tityus, bound to the rock as Michelangelo’s soul was bound to its physical shell, suffered the pains of unrequited love, both physical and spiritual. Fortunately, however, as a result of Ficino and his Academy under Lorenzo, Neoplatonists explored classical mythology as a vehicle for religious teaching and successfully obscured the line between the sacred and profane and the moral and erotic. The improper kiss, for example, between Venus and Cupid in Bronzino’s London *Allegory* (Fig. 34) could be read symbolically within the tradition of Pico della Mirandola’s “death of the kiss” (*morte di bacio*):

Through the first death, which is only a detachment of the soul from the body,…the lover may see the beloved celestial Venus…; but if he would possess her more closely…he must die the second death by which he is completely severed from the body…. And observe that the most perfect and intimate union the lover can have with the celestial beloved is called the union of the kiss…many of the ancient fathers died in such a spiritual rapture,…they died the death of the kiss.

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527 De Tolnay, *Corpus dei disegni di Michelangelo*, no. 345r. Further symbolic meanings of the *Tityus* and *Ganymede* drawings have been explored by James M. Saslow in idem, *Ganymede in the Renaissance*, 17-62. Saslow’s reading of the personal meanings of *Tityus* complicates Panofsky’s interpretation, but as those personal overtones may have been unknown to Bettini, they are omitted here.
Although these lines have been more appropriately applied to Michelangelo’s Leda (Fig. 23), who was in fact loved by a god and set free from her physical limitations, Michelangelo’s Venus and Cupid (Fig. 2) also focuses on an imminent kiss and may be equally explained by a Neoplatonic reading.\(^{530}\)

Michelangelo’s moral truths and judgments informed his attitude about sexual misconduct in early Cinquecento Florence. In contemporary medical tracts, coitus itself was traditionally referred to as the “act of Venus.”\(^ {531}\) Venus in the 1530s and 1540s was mythologized in visual culture as the cause of syphilis, a paralyzing pandemic that was introduced to Italy in 1494 by King Charles VIII of France and his invading mercenary army of Swiss, Spanish, Flemish, and Italians (see Fig. 12). The disease, known in Italy as il morbo gallico, was sexually transmitted and marked by lesions, skin discoloration, painful swelling of joints, and hair loss, which led to a vogue for wigs and masks. Within the courts of Italy and France in the 1540s, artists freely addressed syphilis as an appropriate subject matter for their sophisticated patrons. Michelangelo’s Venus and Cupid, the centerpiece of Bettini’s chamber decoration, may have therefore functioned as a warning against irresponsible sexual behavior, a message well-suited for the private chamber of a young and wealthy Florentine just coming into adulthood.

Whereas Michelangelo’s view of love and Ovid’s myth of Venus and Cupid account for some of Michelangelo’s details in Bettini’s Venus and Cupid, certain passages remain unclear in the chamber’s central panel. The ancient Greek bucolic poet Moschus of Syracuse has been recently advanced as the missing link in deciphering Michelangelo’s concetto.\(^ {532}\) Moschus’ Runaway Love in particular, an idyll from the Greek Anthology (9. 440), was a popular text

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\(^{530}\) On Michelangelo and the morte di bacio, see Goffen, Renaissance Rivals, 309-10.


\(^{532}\) See Leporatti in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 75-82.
among artists and poets who addressed the subject of Venus and Cupid in Renaissance Florence. 

*Runaway Love* was the most ancient account of Cupid to have survived from antiquity.

According to Moschus, Venus searches the streets for her son, who mischievously escaped her watchful eye. Cupid is vividly described as having bright cheeks, curly hair, the body of an adolescent boy, and the disposition of a deceptive joker. In her cautioning the local residents against Cupid’s demeanor, Venus admits that her son even launched arrows at her. Unlike Ovid, who represented Cupid as an innocent child who inadvertently grazed his mother with one of his arrows, Moschus created a Cupid who consciously attacked his mother with the same cunning reserved for other victims.

*Runaway Love* was discovered in the Quattrocento in the circle of Lorenzo il Magnifico, when Ficino drew upon the idyll while translating Plato’s *Symposium* from Greek into Latin. Poliziano had translated *Runaway Love* into Latin in 1473, and Girolamo Benivieni (1453-1542) eventually translated it into Italian. Following the temporary fall of the Medici before Savonarola, Benivieni published his *Opere*, which included his translation of Moschus, in 1519, followed by reprints in Venice in 1522 and 1524.533 *Runaway Love* enjoyed continued success in the sixteenth century, being translated into the vernacular by Luigi Alamanni (1495-1556), Firenzuaola, and Varchi. However, Benivieni’s edition conflated the amorous poetry and classical Neoplatonism celebrated by Lorenzo de’ Medici with the spiritual infusions promoted in Savonarola’s sermons. Michelangelo may have referenced Benivieni’s final version of the *Runaway Love*, which was accompanied by a fragment of Propertius’ *Elegy* 2.12. The reading of Cupid as a symbol of sexual love by both Moschus and Propertius was interpreted by Benivieni in the sixteenth century as a cautionary tale against carnal love and, ultimately, moral death, carnal

533 *Opere di Hieronymo Benivieni* (Florence: Giunta, 1519), 40r; cited by Leporatti in Falletti and Nelson, *Venus and Love*, 78, 84n18.
love being sharply contrasted with the spiritual ladder of love championed by Ficino and the Neoplatonists. While Venus represented the spiritual realm of love, her son personified physical pleasure. Their struggle, beautifully articulated by Michelangelo and Pontormo, illustrated the dual nature of love, which Moschus depicted through Venus, who is in control of her emotions, and Cupid, who is at the mercy of his libidinal drives.

Perhaps the best way to define the meaning behind Bettini’s elusive *Venus and Cupid* may be the way one art historian has approached its later dependency, Bronzino’s London Allegory (Fig. 34): “I believe that the painting *in toto* was to serve as a conversation-piece, so leaving room for ambiguous identities to amuse the cognoscenti.” Through the paradigm of interpretive performance, educated visitors to Bettini’s camera could give praise to the host as well as to his collaborating artists, Michelangelo and Pontormo.

**The Venus and Cupid: Neoplatonism Behind Closed Doors**

Looking more broadly, outside the Ficinean milieu, one finds numerous theories of love—from antiquity through the Cinquecento—that may have inspired Bettini and informed his poet-painters Michelangelo and Bronzino. Among the many discussions central to the Accademia Fiorentina was the cult of love and beauty. However, debates on the meaning of both carnal and Platonic love began in Greek philosophy; they were revived by Neoplatonists in Renaissance Florence, where the discourse was expanded to include theories of ideal beauty. Christine Raffini notes that “if Neoplatonism is about love, love is about beauty—being both the cause and goal of love.” By Bettini’s day, debates on love and beauty became more playful and even erotic. Such

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discussions were often codified in *trattati d’amore*, or love treatises.\textsuperscript{536} Designed to glorify princely patrons, *trattati d’amore*, like iconographically challenging paintings, flattered their intended readers and audience at large. The courts that developed throughout Italy, especially in Mantua, Ferrara, Urbino, and Florence under the Medici dukes, were receptive to such discourse.

Indeed, theories of love and ideal beauty played a major role in Florentine visual culture, reflecting a larger current of Neoplatonism that swept through the city. In an age in which beauty was debated, redefined, and revered, secular paintings such as Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* that were inspired by Neoplatonic theories of love were in great demand. Neoplatonism deals, above everything else, with love, and the movement’s Renaissance founder, Ficino, defined love as the single divine force responsible for harmony in the universe. For the first time, in 1468, Ficino translated and commented upon Plato’s *Symposium* at the Medici villa at Careggi. In his commentaries on Plato, Ficino defined beauty as the inspiration behind love, God as the center of the universe, and beauty as a mere reflection in the physical world of God’s goodness. An emphasis was placed on the beauty of the human form, such beauty reflecting “the ray of God infusing all creation, whereby man in particular is drawn, even though unconsciously, to seek the highest.”\textsuperscript{537}

In his translation of Plato’s first speech, Ficino wrote on the origin of love created out of chaos:

> When we say love, we mean by that term the desire for beauty…love attracts beauty…but the turbulent passion by which men are seduced to wantonness, since it attracts them to ugliness, is considered the opposite of love… and let us so devote ourselves to


\textsuperscript{537} Sumner, “Michelangelo and Dante,” 165-66.
Love that we shall be content with His own end, which is beauty itself.\textsuperscript{538}

The power of love in Neoplatonic theory is reinforced in Plato’s second speech on what lovers seek:

[Lovers] seek beauty, for love is the desire of enjoying beauty….If the eye alone recognizes, it alone enjoys. Therefore the eye alone enjoys the beauty of the body. Since love is nothing more than the desire of enjoying beauty, and beauty is perceived by the eyes alone, the lover of the body is content with sight alone. Indeed the lust to touch the body is not a part of love, nor is it the desire of the lover, but rather a kind of wantonness and the derangement of a servile man.\textsuperscript{539}

In addition, Ficino’s belief in a philosophical concord between Plato and Aristotle, united in a common search for truth, was passed down to his pupil Pico della Mirandola. Pico acknowledged the obstacles the body introduced to the soul and its ascent to divine love. Under Lorenzo the Magnificent, the Platonic symposium was recreated and included Landino, Bernardo Nuzzi, Giovanni Cavalcanti, and Ficino, among others.\textsuperscript{540}

In Florence, Neoplatonism helped bridge the literary and artistic milieu of Lorenzo the Magnificent with that of Varchi and Bettini. As Nesca Robb notes, the Neoplatonic movement was “instrumental in the psychological and technical transition from the Quattrocento to the Cinquecento.”\textsuperscript{541} The earlier century regarded man and his mortal limitations as the ideal, in his perfectly human state. But beginning with Botticelli and his interest in Neoplatonic

\textsuperscript{538} Sears Reynolds Jayne, trans. and ed., Marsilio Ficino’s Commentary on Plato’s Symposium (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Studies, 1944), First Speech.
\textsuperscript{539} Ibid., Second Speech.
\textsuperscript{541} Ibid., 215.
doctrines of beauty, a new aesthetic ideal that transcended the physical world of man was introduced to the city’s visual culture.\textsuperscript{542} Deviating from the early Renaissance admiration for nature as the artist’s true mistress, his figures were of a poetic and linear quality recalling the abstractions of the Middle Ages. In addition, Botticelli, an artistic exponent of Ficino’s Neoplatonism, conveyed Ficino’s interest in philosophical harmony and unity. Ficino aimed at reconciling such opposing forces as Christianity and paganism, body and soul, and authority and individualism. In a similar attempt at redefining the ideal, Botticelli created pagan and religious figures from the same sources.\textsuperscript{543}

In the early sixteenth century, treatises on love such as Equicola’s \textit{Libro di natura d’amore}, first published in Venice in 1525, and Castiglione’s \textit{The Book of the Courtier}, set in the court of Urbino in 1507, expanded Ficino and Pico’s interpretations. But about the turn of the century, the patrician collector and cardinal Bembo provided another possible source for Michelangelo’s iconography. The impact of Bembo’s \textit{Gli Asolani} (written about 1497 and published in 1505) in particular, a series of Platonic discussions of love, was felt in Bettini’s Florence, as is evident in Bronzino’s 1537 portrait of Ugolino Martelli (Fig. 29).\textsuperscript{544} The young Ugolino, shown surrounded by books in the family palace in Florence, holds a work by Bembo, in addition to Homer’s \textit{Iliad}.

\textit{Gli Asolani} became the great prototype of all courtly Neoplatonic treatises, stressing artistic over philosophical paradigms. Written to both simplify Ficino’s metaphysical notions and impress letterati and cultured political figures, it quickly became important in Renaissance


\textsuperscript{544} See Gottfried, Pietro Bembo’s \textit{Gli Asolani}.”
Like Michelangelo and Bettini, Bembo transferred to Rome under Pope Paul III Farnese in 1539, where he was elected to the College of Cardinals (see introduction).

Bembo’s masterpiece is based on three young men who pair up with three women and attend the Asolo wedding of one of the ladies of the former queen of Cyprus, Caterina Cornaro.

Among the men is Perottino, who sets the stage by denouncing love to his match Lisa:

But when men had made Love a god on the grounds which you, Lisa, have just heard, they thought it fitting to give him a certain form, in order that he might be more completely known. Therefore they drew him naked to show not only that lovers have nothing of their own, because they themselves are the possessions of another, but also that by despoiling themselves of judgment, they become naked of all reasons. They painted him as a boy, not that one born together with the first of men is really a child, but because he makes those who follow him become children in their powers, as if some new Medea with her strange potions made babies out of white-haired patriarchs. They gave him wings because lovers, who are lifted on the pinions of their mad desires, flit lightly through the empty air, even, their hopes make them believe, right up to heaven. Furthermore, men gave him a burning torch to grasp because, just as the brightness of a fire pleases, but its burning grieves, so Love, which seems to be a pleasant thing, delights us at first sight, but when we understand it by experience, grows immeasurably harsh; which were it known before he burnt us, how much narrower would the kindom of this tyrant be today and how much less the crowd of lovers! Yet we, being enamored of our own undoing, troop joyfully to the flame like butterflies; nay, frequently we even set fire to ourselves, and then, like Perillus in the bull which he devised, we clearly see ourselves consumed by the very flames we lighted. But to complete the portrait of this evil god which men have painted with the various colors of their misery: to all the things which I have told you, Lisa, they add his bow and arrows to signify that Love inflicts such wounds on us as some skillful archer might; yet these are all the more deadly that he gives them in the heart, and have this added disadvantage, that he never grows weary or is moved by pity when he sees our powers

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545 Pietro Bembo: Opere in volgare, 7.
failing; nay, he only deals his blows the faster, the more he feels that we grow weaker.  

By the early sixteenth century, when *Gli Asolani* was ultimately published, Italian courts became important centers for debates on love and ideal beauty, particularly in Mantua and Urbino. In 1525 the letterato and courtier Equicola, then a member of the Mantua court of Isabella d’Este, published his *Libro di natura d’amore*, an influential text on theories of love as well as proportion and color. Equicola’s writings often influenced contemporary painters, including Bellini and Titian, who according to Shearman based their bacchanalian paintings for the camerino of Alfonso d’Este on the courtier’s texts. Through his influential trattato, Equicola also marked a further stage in the secularization of Neoplatonism, devoting two chapters to the iconography of Venus and Cupid. He surveyed their legends and provided readers with lists of the names, symbols, and attributes that had been assigned to the two gods by various races and religions. In the following, Equicola grounds contemporary theories of love in antiquity, citing Aristophanes and Lucretius in particular:

> Li Academici furon d’opinione che amor fusse un desio di goder et fruir quello compitamente che li par ornato di ogni somma bellezza, onde lo amante desia tutto esser nel corpo dell’amato perche sempre dalli dardi di Venere ferito, subito di sidera congiungerse, ne altro disidera (como dice Aristophane) che di due diventare uno: Il genital humore al suo corpo soavemente estratto in l’horto dell’amata spargere: donde se tal felicita alli amanti aviene stringonsi in amoroso giuoco mordendosi per il disio d’esser l’uno nell’altro, et l’altro nell’uno: Ma in vano dice Lucretio che a tal effetto la natura repugna, perlaqualcosa ligati insieme dissolversi & risolversi in dolce moto se affaticano, fin ch’el li que fatto humore per la forza di Venere con tremante commotione lascia deli amanti l’indebite membra.

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He goes on to cite the Greek view, according to Plato, love’s power to stir the soul, “perche in citato scorre, attrae l’anima per l’impeto suo, da questa forza è chiamato himeros, & oltra questo é detto … che significa, non esser del piacer piacere, ma de cosa absente, & che ‘altrove…”549

But the courtier is careful to distinguish between love and desire, noting that “disiderio è solamente nelle cose non havute, amore nelle cose possedute et da possedere.”550

Within three years of the publication of Equicola’s trattato, Castiglione published The Book of the Courtier, also inspired by a princely court, Urbino. In his influential text, an instant standard manual on etiquette, Castiglione disseminated the writings of Ficino and the Quattrocento Platonic Academy’s views on love—physical and divine—as a synthesis of pagan and Christian beliefs. In Florence, his book became a model for courtly elegance, grace, and wit, as well as a paragon of linguistic excellence, adopted later by the Accademia della Crusca as its prototype. In book 4 of the Courtier, Bembo gives a speech on love using Ficino and the Neoplatonists as a point of departure. Having recently published his Asolani, Bembo is called upon by the courtiers of Urbino as an expert on love and beauty. In his speech, Bembo interprets Ficino’s love-theory as the desire to enjoy beauty, the binding force of love, and the spiritual potential of beauty. Castiglione grounded Ficino’s theories in the realities of court life, adapting Neoplatonism to a lover’s acts in hopes of impressing ladies.

In The Book of the Courtier, Castiglione also proposed a “ladder of love” that began with the sensual love of the youth (corresponding to Ficino’s vulgar love) and aimed for the mature love of the divine. Ficino had a similar approach to philosophy, defining the discipline as “una somiglianza e una felicissima imitazione di Dio, una salita dalle cose inferiori alle superiori,

549 Ibid., 75r-75v.
550 Ibid., 75v.
dalle tenebre alla luce.”

According to Olga Zorzi Pugliese, Castiglione established the ladder of love to “lead the lover along the path from an appreciation of particular physical beauty right up to the mind’s eye’s contemplation of absolute beauty in God.” Beginning with sensation and appetite, the human soul climbs, with reason and choice, to will and spirituality. Indeed, as Raffini notes, the source of inner beauty, and, consequently, outer beauty, is heavenly, for the attainment of beauty and love required an ascent to a contemplative life. Growth therefore developed both inwardly and outwardly.

It is this ladder of love that may have defined the ascent of the soul in Bettini’s camera. Bronzino opened his burlesque poem “La cipolla del Bronzino pittore” (“The Onion of Bronzino the Painter”) with the following lines:

Amor passa per gl’occhi e questa appunto passa per gl’occhi e passa anche pel naso e ’n questa parte vince amore d’un punto.
Amor di pianto è sempre fonte e vaso, questa fa pianger più che la mostarda e non gli cede punto in questo caso.
Amor riscalda e questa par che ci arda; amor saetta e questa ancor s’avventa, né stato o condizion d’alcn riguarda.
Amor fa che l’amato si diventa e chi mangia di queste si trasforma in esse, si che par ch’ognun lo senta.
Amore unisce l’un con l’altro e ’informa, questa per modo gli spicchi congiunge, che l’uno a l’altro son materia e forma.

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554 Bronzino, *Rime in burla*, ed. Franca Petrucci Nardelli (Rome: Treccani, 1988), “Della cipolla,” II, 52-66. Translated by and quoted in Parker, *Bronzino*, 31: “Love enters through the eyes and in the same way the onion enters through the eyes, and passes through the nose as well, and in this respect it scores an extra point over love. Love is always a fountain and vase of tears: the onion causes more tears than mustard and in this respect is in no way inferior to love. Love warms and the onion seems to burn us. Love shoots arrows, and the onion too attacks everyone without any regard for rank or condition. Love makes one become the beloved; and anyone who eats onions is turned into onions so that everyone can smell him. Love unites one soul with another and gives them one form; the onion joins its rings together in such a way that each one gives matter and form to one of the others.” Here Bronzino compares love to an onion and plays with the conventions of love and language in the Medici court.
Bronzino was, indeed, thinking about love at the time of the merchant-banker’s commission. Although all the previous authors discussed love seriously, Bronzino treated it with humor, replacing its spiritual associations with the carnal and the grotesque. This is particularly evident in his popular burlesque capitoli. In “La cipolla,” for example, the poet-painter applied his literary wit and ambiguity to the theme of love, perhaps inspired by amore featured in Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2). Particularly appropriate to Bettini’s panel is Bronzino’s analogy of love’s arrows and an onion’s assault. Indeed, both attack: one through the skin, the other the nose.

Bronzino praised Michelangelo above any other artist in his poetry. And among the merchant-banker’s *équipe* of painters, it is Michelangelo, Bettini’s friend and possible advisor, whom Erwin Panofsky singles out as the only one of his learned contemporaries who “adopted Neoplatonism not in certain aspects but in its entirety”; moreover, Panosky sees the artist as perhaps “the only genuine Platonic among artists influenced by Neoplatonism.” Like Michelangelo’s Medici tombs of Giuliano and Lorenzo in San Lorenzo, Bettini’s program begins at the lowest level with the physical attraction of beauty. Beauty, inevitably intertwined with love as noted above, compels the soul heavenwards, with the help of unrest and grief. According to Ficino, “the soul, as our Plato would have it, can fly back to the heavenly father and fatherland on only two wings, that is intellect and will.” As Laura Westra convincingly argues, Ficino’s “two wings” represent philosophy and religion, working together in harmony in order to keep the soul afloat. According to Westra, “one needs both philosophers to stimulate the intellect for man’s flight towards the Father and Country, and priests to direct his will.”

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555 Parker, *Bronzino*, 91-95.
Indeed, Platonic love in the Renaissance expounded the doctrine that the soul should be devoted to divine beauty, which was reflected on earth in physical beauty. In a sonnet dated within a few years of Bettini’s commission, Michelangelo wrote the following: “Nor does God, in his grace, show himself to me / anywhere more than in some fair mortal veil; / and that alone I love, since he’s mirrored in it.”\textsuperscript{557} Saslow notes a further connection between this poem and Bettini’s circle of letterati, citing a letter sent by Michelangelo to the priest of Santa Maria del Fiore in which a version of the sonnet was enclosed and in which Michelangelo expressed his satisfaction over Varchi’s discussion of his poem in his \textit{Lezzi}.\textsuperscript{558}

Michelangelo, in his ideal figure types, elevated the human form to the lofty scale of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. For his classical subjects, such as the loves of Venus and Cupid, the artist turned to the venerated past, finding comfort and solace for his Neoplatonic views of love. As we have seen, scholars have applied a Neoplatonic reading to Michelangelo’s \textit{Ganymede} and \textit{Tityus}, the former representing the ascension of the soul through the ecstasy of Platonic love, the latter the castigation of lust and its potential to imprison the soul.\textsuperscript{559} According to Baruch Kirschenbaum, “the association of themes of love and the antique is a natural one, for not only is the antique classical but it is also pagan, and can serve where Christian iconography can not or dare not.”\textsuperscript{560}

On the Sistine ceiling, for example, Michelangelo fused ancient Greek and Roman gods with Christian doctors and holy figures, giving full physical form to spiritual entities. By Bettini’s time, however, the Albertian faith in man as the measure of all things had passed.

\textsuperscript{557} Buonarroti, \textit{Poetry of Michelangelo}, 238, no. 106.
\textsuperscript{558} Ibid. See Saslow’s annotation of no. 106. For Michelangelo’s letter to Cavalieri, see Buonarroti, \textit{Letters of Michelangelo}, vol. 2, 118, no. 343.
Bettini’s artists, devoid of their ancestors’ beliefs in universal harmony, created a language in which form supplanted content, and representations of Venus stimulated their audience formally while leaving little to be said by way of *virtù*. Indeed, Bettini’s panel and Bronzino’s later *Allegory with Venus and Cupid* feature incestuous scenes, as noted above. As Leonard Barkan keenly notes, Ovid’s tales of self-love, homosexuality, and incest—which make up much of love as defined in the *Metamorphoses*—“arise from a metaphoric view of human categories, and all represent a refusal to affirm the world outside the self and to build connections with it.” Beyond his camera, Bettini’s outside world was far from welcoming, particularly for a staunch Republican living under ducal Medici rule. The mood in Florence may have therefore informed Michelangelo’s concetto, which anchored the decorative program of Bettini’s most private chamber.

For Michelangelo, perfect Platonic love was finally realized in 1532, shortly after completing Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* cartoon when he met Cavalieri. As de Tolnay rightly notes, Michelangelo’s “experiences in love, first with Cavalieri, then with Vittoria Colonna, bore out Plato’s theory that the worship of carnal beauty is merely a prelude to the contemplation of divine beauty,”561 once again evoking Castiglione’s theories of the ladder of love. It is in this erotic-Neoplatonic vein that Michelangelo drew the *Venus and Cupid* for Bettini. As we have seen, the connection between Cavalieri’s drawings and Bettini’s cartoon is further evidenced by the formal affinities between, for example, the reclining river gods in the *Fall of Phaeton* or *Tityus* and the reclining goddess of love, accompanied by an aroused Cupid.

We are given great insight into Michelangelo’s state of mind at the time of the Bettini commission through one of the first letters written by the artist to the young Cavalieri, dated 1

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January 1533. In the text, Michelangelo, the older, learned, and well-established artist and Neoplatonist, defers in great humility to the beauty of youth:

Most inadvisedly I was prompted to write to your lordship, and had the presumption to be the first to move, as though I had a debt to pay in replying to a letter of yours. Afterwards I recognized my error the more, so much did I enjoy reading your reply, for which I thank you. Far from being a mere babe, as you say of yourself, you seem to me to have lived on earth a thousand times before. But I should deem myself unborn, or rather stillborn, and should confess myself disgraced before heaven and earth, if from your letter I had not seen and believed that your lordship would willingly accept some of my drawings. This has caused me much surprise and pleasure no less. And if you really esteem my works in your heart as you profess to do in your letter, I shall count that work much more fortunate than excellent, should I happen, as I desire, to execute one that might please you.  

Perhaps with equal admiration for a youthful Bettini, recorded a few years before the chamber decoration as among the 400 giovani who gathered in Piazza Santo Spirito during the siege of Florence (see chapter 1), the artist may have been moved to express his feelings in a generous cartoon of pagan love and worship.

So we see that many strands of love theories informed Bettini’s Venus and Cupid, a painting regarded by Varchi and other letterati as a paragon of Cinquecento ideal beauty. The cult of love and beauty that informed the camera’s centerpiece was propagated in Florence through the Accademia Fiorentina, but it was established there in the Quattrocento with Ficino’s translation of Plato’s Symposium. A Neoplatonic reading of love in both poetry and painting followed with influential contributions by Botticelli, Bembo, Equicola, Castiglione, Bronzino, and Michelangelo, who designed love’s most eloquent expression, the Venus and Cupid, for his ambitious patron and his fellow Florentine letterati.

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Contemporary praise of Bettini’s unfinished camera such as that of Varchi focused on Michelangelo and Pontormo’s collaboration, but ultimately, Neoplatonism alone does not explain its fullest meaning. As we have seen, the room’s decoration began with Dante (Fig. 1), Petrarch, and Boccaccio, which were inserted into the chamber’s lunettes above. Only together could the lunette poets and the Venus and Cupid unlock Bettini’s artistic program and its complete message of love, written specifically in Tuscan prose and poetry and reflecting the patron’s position on the questione della lingua.563

André Chastel correctly addresses the room decoration’s essential dialogue between earthly and spiritual realms, describing it as “a sort of profane sanctuary honoring love, where Michelangelo’s cruel goddess is spoken to by the poets.”564 There, Michelangelo’s Venus was a physical embodiment of love at its most carnal and accessible. Intended to be seen at eye level, she was depicted on a human scale inducing earthly pleasures, or, as Varchi would have it, the viewer to fall in love. In the lunettes, placed high above in a celestial world symbolic of heaven, the three crowns of Tuscan love poetry look down on their muse and are moved by her beauty. Elevating their desires to a higher plane through poetry, they praise love and all its wondrous powers, and appear as if singing from a choir gallery (cantoria).

We now turn to a final mode of analysis, reception theory, to examine Bettini’s intended audience and what they would have contributed to the camera had the program been realized.

563 On the questione della lingua, see Gelli, Giambattista Gelli and the Florentine Academy.
Chapter 4: Bettini’s splendore: The Camera’s Physical and Social Functions

Now that we have discussed Bettini’s chamber and its iconography, we can begin to place it within the merchant-banker’s domestic and social context. As Goldthwaite aptly notes, “To the extent that the goods man surrounds himself with help establish, and maintain, his relations with other men, consumption involves him in a sort of ritual activity; and even if certain kinds of consumption seem only to satisfy personal pleasure rather than make a social statement, it is nevertheless likely that those pleasures themselves are socially conditioned.” But where did Bettini house his worldly possessions? And what was the architectural function of the camera within the Palazzo Bettini? There are convincing arguments in the paintings for two options: a bedchamber (see Fig. 35) or a private study (see Fig. 36). Vasari gives us little guidance, describing the room simply as “una camera sua.” But as we will eventually see, an examination of Bronzino’s poet portraits (Fig. 1) within the overall decorative program complicates a straightforward reading of the camera as a bedchamber and argues more strongly for a private study. Although the original function of the room is not certain, one thing is: it was a special space in Bettini’s Florentine palazzo designed to house and promote Tuscan culture. In this chapter we will examine the two possible functions of Bettini’s camera as well as the room’s social function, for which we must turn to other contemporary merchant-banker domestic commissions in Italy and beyond.

Determining a room’s function is important for the objects commissioned there. In book 3 of his influential treatise on painting, De’ veri precetti della pittura, published in 1587 and

dedicated to the duke of Mantua in an attempt to revive the art of Italian painting then in decline, Giovanni Battista Armenini (1525-1609) advised the patron to decorate his chambers in accordance with each room’s function. Paintings were ideally different in each room, ranging from those for the master, to the guests, and the children. According to Armenini, “worse is that those few paintings made for the houses of illustrious men are, at times, so badly planned and the subjects so awkward that there is neither significance nor substance of anything in the world.”

Renaissance theorists believed that one’s domestic decorations revealed an insight into the soul, into one’s character and order. Armenini blamed decorative error on the ignorance of the commissioned artists, who, in his day, were educated and learned men of much success. The patron, on the other hand, often did not propose the subject of the program, lacking an awareness of the proper allegories and moralizing myths appropriate to domestic décor. If a cycle or program was executed properly, the soul was manipulated, preferably in a virtuous pursuit, and the intellect was stimulated. Concluding his discussion of decorative chambers, Armenini praised the taste of Tuscans and Romans above all others, “for they do not marry women unless, besides the dowry, there is a beautiful and well painted picture, since the Tuscans are most acute in knowing the strength and excellence of this art.”

Through the beauty of ornamentation, the viewer in the Renaissance was forced to contemplate the presence of the divine in everyday domestic trappings.

According to Vasari’s description of Bettini’s chamber decoration, the paintings of Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino were destined for “una sua camera,” a phrase suggesting either the patron’s bedchamber or his scrittoio, the latter being an overt index of wealth and

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568 Armenini, *On the True Precepts*, bk. 3, 360-61. For the Italian text, see idem, *De’ veri precetti*, bk. 3, 214.
sophistication in the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{569} In \textit{The Book of the Courtier}, Castiglione used the word \textit{camera} for a private sanctuary like a study, where a prince can escape the responsibilities of the state and focus on the vita contemplativa: “The courtier will never attempt to make his way into the camera or private quarters of his master uninvited, even though he possesses considerable authority himself; for often, when princes are by themselves, they enjoy the liberty of saying and doing just what they please, and so they do not want to be seen or overheard by anyone in a position to criticize, and this is quite proper. So it seems to me that those people are in error who condemn a ruler for keeping in his rooms persons of little worth except in the matter of knowing how to give good personal service, for I do not see why princes should not be free to relax just as we like to do.”\textsuperscript{570}

But to complicate things further, private rooms in Cinquecento Italy were often tourist destinations: the term often used for such a space was \textit{casa aperta}. In sixteenth-century Venice, for example, libraries and other private chambers were cited in guidebooks as open to intellectuals and scholars armed with letters of introduction. The patrician Giacomo Contarini’s Grand Canal Palazzo Contarini delle Figure at San Samuele was where, according to visitor accounts, “various and important propositions [and] many noble discourses…were made many times every month on diverse most fertile subjects by many eloquent men of much erudition and the highest judgement, both nobles and foreigners, who came together to converse virtuously as in


\textsuperscript{570} Castiglione, \textit{The Book of the Courtier}, 127.
a very noble Academy.” The diarist Marin Sanudo (1466-1536) invited not only friends but even strangers into his home at San Zan Degolà to see his private collection, which ranked among the city’s top tourist attractions, after only the Treasury of San Marco and the Arsenale.

Within these homes, the power of images to elevate the soul was celebrated and exploited by Florentine patrons in the sixteenth century (see chapter 3). In the words of Armenini, who was active in his native Faenza as well as Rome:

As I have said, I have practiced in various cities and have been led through many palaces and houses, even into their secret chambers. I have found these most splendid and richly decorated with tapestries, brocades, and other lesser household items. And I have seen that they all boasted admirable works of art, except for paintings of sacred images, which were mostly small pictures of some figures made in the Greek manner, very awkward, displeasing, and covered with soot. They seemed to have been displayed for every reason except to inspire devotion or to adorn such places. Since all of us are Christians and true Catholics, it is in truth a real shame that such expense is gone to in various excessive displays, whereas in the rooms in which we repose and pass the greater part of our lives in sweet peace there is not even one graceful and well-conceived painting. And where should we turn everyday to entreat almighty God if not to these beautiful images, so that He will grant our prayers and maintain us in grace and in a happy state? However, I do not say that this is true everywhere, for while traveling in Lombardy, I saw very admirable paintings in the possession of many citizens. These were painted by Titian, Correggio, and Giulio Romano with mysteries of our Lord and of the Holy Virgin. When the matrons whose works these were saw them uncovered, tears came to their eyes out of emotion, so profound and excellent were the paintings. In this respect, therefore, the custom of Tuscany and Rome is certainly excellent….Therefore, we may conclude that the essence of ornamentation for our rooms lies in pictures painted in the aforementioned ways, so that one will always have special zeal for


the divinity of these beautiful images which are presented to our
eyes almost like the very ones who are in heaven. 573

Indeed, chambers like Bettini’s were often designed as the spiritual nucleus of a Florentine palazzo, going far beyond the limited functions of modern-day bedrooms and studies.

**Bettini’s Camera as Bedroom**

“Lascivious things are to be placed in private rooms, and the father of the family is to keep them covered, and only uncover them when he goes there with his wife, or an intimate who is not too fastidious.”

--Giulio Mancini 574

The first possibility is a bedroom. In 2002, I argued for this function for Bettini’s camera on the basis of the classical iconography in the Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus and Cupid. 575 Also, about 1532 Bettini was at the appropriate age to consider marriage 576—just two years before, he was among the giovani who defended the Florentine Republic. 577 Marriage was a time when Renaissance men spent lavishly on household goods that, as Musacchio aptly notes, “reflected the ambitions of the new husband, whether dynastic, economic, political, intellectual,

574 Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, ed. Adriana Marucchi (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1956), 143: “…e le cose lascive affatto si metteranno ne’ luoghi ritirati, e, se fusse padre di fameglia, la terrà coperte, e solo alle volte scoprirle quando vi andérà con la consorte o persona confidente e non scrupolosa.”
575 See Aste in Falletti and Nelson, *Venus and Love*, 3-25.
577 See fn. 95.
or more likely, some combination of all four.\textsuperscript{578} In addition, whereas the word \textit{camera} often referred to the patron’s study in Renaissance Italy, in Florence it also referred to the bedroom—the room that housed one’s most precious paintings and furniture. For example, the camera in the Medici Palace was the master bedroom, where, in addition to sleeping, the patron would conduct political meetings and oversee the writing of legal acts. In 1465, upon his departure from Florence, the son of the king of Naples entered the Medici Palace to find the host, Piero de’ Medici, asleep in his camera.\textsuperscript{579} In 1494 the ambassador to France strategically waited in Piero’s anticamera not to hear him sleeping but to best overhear his dealings with the ambassador from Milan in his adjacent camera, by then a combination bedroom, reception hall, and study.\textsuperscript{580}

Given the nature of political and business dealings conducted in bedchambers in Florentine palazzi, bedchamber decorations reflected the room’s function and importance. In 1492 Lorenzo de’ Medici’s principal bedchamber on the piano nobile of the Palazzo Medici was adorned with a walnut four-poster bedstead, a walnut daybed, a reversible bench, two leather armchairs, a walnut cabinet, three painted chests filled with clothes, a poplar credenza, an ostrich egg, and a valuable gilt copper wall clock.\textsuperscript{581} Among the sculptures and paintings was a marble relief by Donatello of the Ascension, a freestanding marble nude of Hercules, four mosaic panels,

\textsuperscript{578} Musacchio, \textit{Art, Marriage, and Family}, 57. Lindow, however, has recently questioned this assumption, arguing on the basis of inventory analyses that Florentines continued spending lavishing on objects and furnishings for their homes well beyond the ritual of marriage. See Lindow, \textit{The Renaissance Palace in Florence}, 146.


\textsuperscript{581} In 1512 Lorenzo di Piero de’ Medici commissioned a copy of the 1492 inventory of the Palazzo Medici, which was drawn at the death of his grandfather Lorenzo. The Medici returned to Florence in 1512 after an exile that began in 1494. Commissioning a copy of the inventory before their exile helped Lorenzo di Piero reclaim his family’s confiscated, looted and sold possessions—by 1492 the palace housed the city’s finest private collection of antiques, paintings, sculptures, books, jewelry, cameos, coins, and rare vases. See Richard Stapleford, ed. and trans., \textit{Lorenzo de’ Medici at Home: The Inventory of the Palazzo Medici in 1492} (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 27-28.
a Flemish canvas painting, and Lorenzo’s birth salver.\textsuperscript{582} The seamless intermingling of the fine and decorative arts in Lorenzo’s bedroom is illustrated in a contemporaneous religious painting of \textit{The Dream of St. Ursula} by the Venetian painter Vittore Carpaccio (1460/6-1525/6; Fig. 35).

Here, Ursula rests in a costly four-poster bed surrounded by an inlaid wood plinth. The walls are decorated with green fabric to shoulder height, and the chamber is filled with a built-in storage cabinet, a stool, a chair, a cassone, a table covered with a Turkish carpet, a religious painting, and two allegorical sculptures.

Much like a private portrait, which was often commissioned in the Renaissance to commemorate a marriage, large-scale paintings were often commissioned on the occasion of the patron’s rite of passage—reaching adulthood, marriage (early thirties for men and mid-teens for women), or the birth of a child\textsuperscript{583}—before an audience too large to be accommodated in a study. For example, Vasari recounts how Salvi Borgherini commissioned Baccio d’Agnolo, del Sarto, Pontormo, Granacci, and Bacchiacca to furnish and decorate the bedchamber of his son, Pierfrancesco, in honor of his marriage to Margherita Accaiuoli in 1515.\textsuperscript{584} The elaborate Gesamtkunstwerk, which was afforded great publicity when city officials attempted to remove the paintings from their domestic context and gift them to the king of France, included carved chests, chairs, a lettiuccio, wainscoting, a marriage bed, and at least fourteen paintings of the Story of Joseph from the Book of Genesis.\textsuperscript{585} Joseph’s moral life, which addressed adultery, chastity,

\textsuperscript{582} Ibid., 86-93.
\textsuperscript{583} Late-fifteenth-century account books indicate that the acquisition of art objects for private houses rose significantly in moments of major transition, namely marriage and childbirth. See John Kent Lydecker, “Il patriziato fiorentino e la committenza artistica per la casa,” in \textit{I certi dirigenti nella Toscana del Quattrocento}, ed. Francesco Papafava (Florence: Francesco Papafava, 1987), 213-18; Musacchio, \textit{Art and Ritual of Childbirth}, 35-57; Musacchio, \textit{Art, Marriage, & Family}, 2-61; and Deborah Krohn, “Marriage as the Key to Understanding the Past,” in Bayer, \textit{Art and Love}, 9-15.
forgiveness, and, ultimately, a happy marriage, served as an exemplar of the benefits of virtuous living for the newlywed couple in their private chamber.

While Borgherini’s program was described by Vasari as a civic treasure, the format of the chamber decoration was a bit out of fashion with regard to the latest trends in domestic interiors, which by then typically involved less painted furniture and more wall frescoes adorned with illusionistic architectural motifs in the manner of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. In the late Quattrocento, Botticelli was already adorning in fresco Giovanni Tornabuoni’s bedroom in the Villa Lemmi with images of Ginevra Gianfigliazzi accepting flowers from Venus in a garden of love, appropriately symbolic of her virtue and fertility. ⁵⁸⁶ According to Vasari, Botticelli painted “in various houses throughout the city round pictures, and many female nudes” ⁵⁸⁷ typically in the private apartments and bedrooms of wealthy Florentine patrons. In Cinquecento Rome, Sodoma painted a trompe l’oeil fresco of the *Marriage of Alexander and Roxana* (1516-17), ⁵⁸⁸ based on a description from antiquity by Lucian of Samosata (117-180) of a painting by Aëtion, for Agostino Chigi’s bedchamber in the Villa Farnesina, expressing the invention of the artist as well as patron. ⁵⁸⁹ Indeed, by 1515 Borgherini’s taste for painted furniture was retardataire, leading scholars to support Vasari’s claim that Pierfrancesco’s father was the true patron of the program. Although Bettini followed the progressive trend of secular themes “in a room of his own,” in format his *Venus and Cupid* was clearly an easel panel intended to be hung or inserted into the wall much like the Borgherini panels. Borgherini’s commission was the most spectacular program of its kind in Florence, and Bettini was certainly able to overlook the Borgherini’s

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⁵⁸⁹ See Lynch, “Patriarchy and Narrative,” 35-38. Brenda Preyer has found evidence supporting Pierfrancesco as the patron of the bedroom panels, contrary to Vasari’s claim. See her forthcoming publication on the Borgherini.
political leanings as Medici sympathizers and, like them, embrace the much-admired patronage of
the city’s ruling family.

Florentines like Bettini invested greatly in the decoration and furnishings of
bedrooms at the time of a marriage in the family, the camera being the focus of ornamentation and
specific accounts.\(^590\) The bedchamber was literally the seat of dynastic power, the origin of a
family’s lineage, and the indicator of its future. Due to the mysterious danger surrounding
childbirth in post-plague Italy, bedroom decorations also took on the role of talismans with the
intention of bringing as much control and positivity to childbearing as possible. Florentine
couples were particularly sensitive to “visual contagion” during conception and gestation,
imprinting positive images such as beautiful nude men and women on the inside of cassone lids
(Fig. 40) so as to affect the minds and ultimately the uteruses of pregnant women.\(^591\) Alberti, in
his treatise on architecture, instructed Florentines to hang “wherever man and wife come together
… portraits of men of dignity and handsome appearance; for they say that this may have a great
influence on the fertility of the mother and the appearance of future offspring.”\(^592\) Bettini’s Venus
could have been strategically placed in a bedroom much like the “large figure of a woman, nude,
lying down, painted behind a bed” by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo recorded also in 1532 by

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\(^{590}\) Accounts such as the *spese di camera*, the *masserizia di camera*, and the *spese di camera mia* were opened specifically for the decoration of a bedchamber. See Lydecker, “The Domestic Setting of the Arts,” 217-21.


\(^{592}\) Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, 299; and idem, *Della architettura*, 313: “Ma nelle camere dove i padri de le famiglie hanno a dormire con le lor mogli, avvertiscasi che non vi si dipinga se non volti di uomini o di donne bellissimi ed onorati, e dicono che questo importa grandemente quanto allo ingravidare de le matrone, e quanto alla bellezza de la future progenie.”
Marcantonio Michiel as being above the bed in the Venetian house of the merchant Andrea Odoni.\textsuperscript{593}

In addition, the multiplying importance of bedrooms in Cinquecento Italy increased the exposure of their decorative programs over those of the Quattrocento, when Alberti viewed chamber decorations as intended solely for the pleasure of the patron and his wife.\textsuperscript{594} Whereas Alberti described the pride a husband derived from giving his wife a ceremonial tour of their new house, which culminated in the bedroom, in the early Cinquecento Borgherini’s wife Margherita steadfastly defended her decoration as if it were a national treasure. In preventing the transfer to France (the traditional but unreliable ally of Florence) of her private bedroom panels as a diplomatic gift to Francis I, whose support the Republic desired in its fight against the Medici, Margherita saw their potential loss as a violation of her self, her family, and her city. She addressed King Francis’s agent, Giovan Battista della Palla, with great ire and conviction:

“Adunque—diss’ella—vuoi essere ardito tu, Giovambattista, vilissimo rigattiere, mercatantuzzo di quattro danari, di sconficare gl’ornamenti delle camere de’gentiluomini, e questa città delle sue più riche et onorevoli cose spogliare, come tu hai fatto e fai tuttavia per abbellirne le contrade straniere et i nimici nostri?”\textsuperscript{595}

Later in the century, in 1562, Michelangelo’s and Bettini’s friend, the letterato and artistic adviser Annibale Caro (1507-66), who like Bronzino embraced the burlesque style in his writing, described the ideal Renaissance bedroom program for the villa at Caprarola of his patron

\textsuperscript{595} Vasari-Milanesi, \textit{Le vite}, 6:262. For the English text, see Vasari, \textit{Lives}, 7:160-61: “You vile slop-dealer, you little two-penny peddler, to strip the ornaments from the chambers of noblemen and despoil our city of her richest and most honored treasures, as you have done and are always doing, in order to embellish with them the countries of foreigners, our enemies!”
Cardinal Alessandro Farnese in a letter to the painter Taddeo Zuccaro (1529-1566): “essendo ella destinata per il letto della propria persona di S. S. Illustriss. vi si debbono far cose convenienti al luogo e fuor dell’ordinario [emphasis mine], così quanto all’invenzione, come quanto all’artificio.”\footnote{Annibal Caro, \textit{Lettere del Commendatore}, ed. A.F. Seghezzi, vol. 3 (Milan: Società tipografica de’ classici italiani, 1807), letter 78, 158-60.} An artist’s style and invention had been singled out for praise since the dawn of the Cinquecento, and the fact that Caro encouraged Zuccaro to apply his \textit{invenzione} to the decoration of the camera dell’Aurora, the cardinal’s bedroom, suggests the desire for a large audience, at least larger than Farnese alone.

Bettini certainly showcased Michelangelo’s \textit{invenzione} at home by commissioning the artist’s last female nude and what his contentemporaries regarded as the paragon of a new ideal beauty. Whereas Vasari’s account of Bettini’s decoration does not establish the \textit{Venus and Cupid} and the poet portraits as being commissioned expressly for the merchant-banker’s bedroom, a strong connection can be made between the overall decorative program and that of contemporary programs for Florentine bedchambers and antechambers.

If they were in fact set within a bedchamber, then the camera’s adorning panels may have ultimately been designed as a powerful influence on pregnancy and childbirth. Childbirth was highly celebrated in post-plague Florence and often accompanied by certain props that reassured its success. As Musacchio notes, “any object, art, or ritual that could provide women with a certain amount of protection and meditation was clearly desirable.”\footnote{Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions in Renaissance Italy,” 42.} Armed against the vicissitudes of nature, Renaissance women were reproductively empowered and given ostensible control of even the sex of their child. It was at this time in a woman’s life, notes Musacchio, that
maternal imagination was believed to be most susceptible, and the sight of “beautiful things” would stimulate such processes.

The idea of pictures causing physical imprinting during conception had roots in antiquity. In the third century, the Greek writer Heliodorus, in book 4 of his *Aethiopian Tale*, a wildly popular book in the Renaissance after it was discovered in 1526, included a colorful account of the birth of Charicleia. In the palace bedroom where she was conceived, Charicleia’s mother Persina, Queen of Ethiopia, had decorated the walls with pictures not of Venus and Cupid but of the love of Perseus and Andromeda. In a letter to her daughter, Persina remembers Charicleia’s surprising birth in detail:

After [your father] had been married to me ten years, and we had never a child, we happened to rest after midday in the summer…at which time your father had to do with me…and I by and by perceived myself with child. All the time after, until I was delivered, was kept holy, and sacrifices of thanksgiving were offered to the gods, for that the King hoped to have one now to succeed him in his kingdom. But thou were born white, which color is strange among the Ethiopians. I knew the reason, because while my husband had to do with me I looked upon the picture of Andromeda naked….and so by mishap engendered presently a thing like to her.  

As quoted briefly in this chapter’s epigraph, Giulio Mancini (1558-1630) in his *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (written between 1614 and 1621 and circulated widely in manuscript throughout the century but only published in the nineteenth century) advised patrons to decorate their bedrooms in the following manner:

Lascivious things are to be placed in private rooms, and the father of the family is to keep them covered, and only uncover them when he goes there with his wife, or an intimate who is not too fastidious. And similar lascivious pictures are appropriate for the

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598 Ibid.
rooms where one has to do with one’s spouse; because once seen they serve to arouse one and to make beautiful, healthy, and charming children…not because the imagination imprints itself on the fetus, which is of different material to the mother and father, but because each parent, through seeing the picture, imprints in their seed a similar constitution which has been seen in the object or figure…And so the sight of similar objects and figures, well-made and of the right temper, represented in colour, is of much help on the occasions; but they must nevertheless not be seen by children and old maids, nor by strangers and fastidious people.  

Bettini’s chamber, crowned by Bronzino’s handsome Tuscan poets, was further adorned by a sensually reclining pagan goddess, whose presence encouraged sexuality, and more appropriately, procreation. Moreover, the male doll falling out of Venus’ love altar recalls the terracotta or stucco dolls presented in dowries for the inspiration of maternal instincts among young brides.  

Bettini’s “camera genetrix,” so to speak, was carefully designed for the assurance of future offspring.  

Because Bettini’s decoration was interrupted and eventually abandoned in 1534, the precise location of the Venus and Cupid panel under Bronzino’s lunette portraits is uncertain. Similar panels depicting reclining Venus figures commissioned for Florentine bedchambers, such as Botticelli’s Venus and Mars (Fig. 37) and Piero di Cosimo’s Venus, Mars, and Cupid (Fig. 38), have been advanced as headboard decorations for double beds. And narrative series such as Uccello’s Battle of San Romano or Pollaiuolo’s Labors of Hercules were hung above eye level. However, having previously commissioned Bronzino to fill in the lunettes with poets, Bettini required a significant distance between the two tiers in order to assist his guest in reading the complete program more clearly.

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600 Mancini, Considerazioni sulla pittura, vol. 1, 143.
601 Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions in Renaissance Italy,” 54.
602 See Wilhelm Bode, Botticelli (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1926), 36-37.
603 See fn. 35.
The iconography of Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* (depicting the goddess of love with her son, love incarnate) is certainly suitable to a bedroom, and though the term *camera* is ambiguous in Cinquecento inventories, the Michelangelo-Pontormo panel alone may suggest that Bettini’s room was a bedchamber. Venus and Cupid was a paradigmatic pair for Renaissance bedchambers, where Venus reigned over new couples as the patroness of love and, ultimately, fertility. Vasari specifically mentioned Bettini’s choice of Tuscan poets who “sang of love,” which emphasized the role of love and its deities in bedroom decorations. Myths surrounding Venus lend themselves to allegories of love (when shown with Cupid), marriage (when shown with Vulcan), and infidelity (when shown with Mars). Domenico Beccafumi’s (1484-1551) *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 35), for example, was commissioned about 1517-19 by Francesco Petrucci, a member of the ruling Sienese family, to hang over his matrimonial bed in the family palazzo. Petrucci married Caterina Piccolomini some years earlier, in 1512. As in the Bettini panel, Beccafumi’s Venus dominates the composition, reclining, here semi-nude, in a landscape and turning her pelvis, the locus of her reproductive powers, unnaturally toward the viewer. She, too, looks over her right shoulder to Cupid, whom Beccafumi paints holding a whirligig, a reference to his role as a jester. However, despite the formal similarities between Petrucci’s *Venus and Cupid* and Bettini’s, it is unlikely that Michelangelo would have known the Sienese picture as he is not recorded there after 1501.

Venus as nuptial goddess first appeared in the ancient literary tradition of marriage poetry (*epithalamia*) as a talisman of family fertility and prosperity. Lucretius, for example, in

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605 Michelangelo signed the contract for the Piccolomini altar on 19 June 1501. No location for Michelangelo is indicated, and it is most likely that he signed the contract in Florence. See Hirst, *Michelangelo*, 52-56, 103.
his *De rerum natura*, praised Venus Genetrix as the source of all living things and mother of future dynasties:

Venus Genetrix, mother of Aeneas and his race, pleasure of men and gods, nurturing Venus, who beneath the smoothly gliding heavenly signs fills to teeming ship-bearing sea and the fruitful earth, since through you every kind of living thing is conceived and rising up looks upon the light of the sun: from you, goddess, from you the winds fly away, the clouds of the heaven flee from you and your coming; for you the wonder-working earth puts forth sweet flowers, and for you the wide stretches of the ocean laugh and the heaven grown serene glows with outpoured light. For as soon as the face of the spring day is exposed to view, and the breeze of the generating west wind blows fresh and free, then first the birds of the air make your presence known, goddess, and your advent, pierced to the heart by your power. Then the herds of beast prance about over the rich pastures and swim across rapid rivers, and each, held captive by your charm, follows with passionate desire wherever you go on to lead. Thereupon throughout the seas and mountains and rushing rivers and the leafy homes of birds and verdant plains, striking soft love into the breasts of all creatures, you cause them with passionate desire to propagate generations after their own kind. Since therefore you alone govern the nature of things, since without you nothing rises into the shining borders of light, nor is anything joyous and lovely made, you I seek as partner in writing the verses that I am trying to fashion on the nature of things for our Memmius, endowed with all gifts, whom you, goddess, have at all times wished to excel.

Renaissance orators appropriated the hymns of Lucretius in their epithalamia, which were delivered at wedding banquets or in front of the church. However, their panegyrics had a didactic purpose: a celebration of the bride, her newfound companion, the joys of their sexual pleasure, and the virtue of female beauty. Unlike biblical sermons, which promoted celibacy as a higher ideal and chastised beauty as the vehicle for lust, wedding orations were faithful to their

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antique functions, in which the speech titillated the couple to engage in the erotic pleasures of their wedding night. As Rona Goffen keenly notes, “marriage was considered the only legitimate arena for the exploration of female fecundity—that most fundamental means of production, on which the family’s, and indeed society’s, well-being depends.” Moreover, praising the beauty of both the bride and groom reinforced the erotic purpose of epithalamia, namely encouraging the couple to proceed to the bedroom and procreate. The Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus and Cupid was lauded as the new ideal of beauty in Medici Florence and was thus the perfect messenger of love, prosperity, and fecundity for a new couple as they entered their bedchamber together for the first time.

When he was of the right age to marry, a Florentine patrician spent a significant sum on adorning his wife and the chamber in which they would sleep. In Bettini’s case, this was money well spent since marriage, as noted by Melissa Bullard, was “perhaps the single most important means of improving social status in a society with limited access to the ranks of the patriciate.” The bedchamber decoration served as a countergift to reestablish the equality between partners, which was temporarily disrupted by the dowry. And a popular theme for these decorative programs was Venus depicted in command of her domain from a bed that reflected those found in contemporary Florentine bedchambers. However, prior to taking on her leading role in bedroom decorations, Venus entered the boudoir surreptitiously at the time of a marriage through cassoni.

610 On this counterweight to the bride’s dowry, Klapisch-Zuber notes that husbands would spend “between one- and two-thirds of the promised dowry (in holdings or in cash), trousseau included.” See Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 220.
612 Ibid., 224.
The precursors of Bettini’s large, oblong panel are reclining female nudes painted on the inside lids of Florentine wedding chests from the second half of the Quattrocento. These nascent Venus figures were painted to complement reclining male nudes found on the inside lid of pendant cassoni. In one example of this prototype dating from about the 1440s (Fig. 40), Giovanni di Ser Giovanni (Lo Scheggia; 1406-1486) painted the sides and front of a chest with events from Roman history as allusions to the patron’s virtue and noble character. Secular themes were slowly replacing religious subjects in the fifteenth century as patrons sought to legitimize their roles as the true heirs of ancient Roman virtù. On the underside of the lid, however, completely unrelated to the moralizing tales of antiquity, a female nude was depicted reclining against a neutral background, a suggestive, private image invested with the power to encourage sexuality, and ultimately procreation, for the benefit of the family’s future. Images of Venus and celebrations of love and sex were appropriate subjects for bedroom programs, and sexually charged themes such as Cupid kissing Venus in Bettini’s panel, while ultimately alluding to the bride’s fecundity and the family’s subsequent prosperity, were well suited for private viewing.

All across central and northern Italy in the late Quattrocento, Venus—the matriarch of the bedchamber—gained independence from the confines of inner cassoni lids. In Florence, for example, Botticelli’s Venus and Mars (Fig. 37), which was commissioned for a marriage chamber in a Florentine town house, features the goddess of love as the ultimate victor over the god of war in a sheltered grove set before an idyllic landscape. The physical pleasures of love—

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613 See Paul Schubring, Cassoni: Truhen und Truhenbilder der italienischen Frührenaissance (Leipzig: K.W. Hiersemann, 1923), nos. 289-90, who attributes the paintings on the cassone to the circle of Benozzo Gozzoli; Cristelle L. Baskins, Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 112-17, figs. 41-42; and idem, The Triumph of Marriage: Painted Cassoni of the Renaissance (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2008), 23-28, fig. 14. For other examples of cassoni inner lid decorations, including those conceived as pairs, see Schubring, Cassoni, nos. 184-85; Musacchio, The Art and Ritual of Childbirth, 132-34; and idem, Art, Marriage, and Family, 154, figs. 150a and b.

614 See Musacchio, Art, Marriage, and Family, 151-56.

615 See Horne, Botticelli, 140-42; and Lightbown, Sandro Botticelli, vol. 1, 90-93.
references to the procreative and dynastic role of the bedchamber—are also alluded to in Mars’ blissful slumber as amorini play with his traditionally daunting arms. This detail of frolicking satyrs is derived from Lucian’s description of an ancient marriage picture, Aëtion’s *Marriage of Alexander and Roxana*, a painting discussed above in connection with Sodoma’s fresco for Chigi’s bedroom in the Villa Farnesina. Piero di Cosimo’s *Venus and Mars* (Fig. 38) ushered Lucian and Botticelli’s pictorial prototype into the Cinquecento by employing the same cast of characters enjoying the pleasures of consummated love in a similar landscape setting. Piero, however, introduced Cupid into bedroom decorations as a principal figure in the foreground, symbolizing lust and fertility through a pet rabbit.

But even more in Venice, the visual tradition of Venus in the bedroom flourished, and Venus and Cupid (independent of Mars, Bacchus, or Vulcan) took center stage. The seminal work of this northern topos is Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* (Dresden, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie; c. 1510), possibly commissioned for the wedding of Girolamo Marcello and Morosina Pisani on 9 October 1507. Cupid (painted out by 1837) originally accompanied Venus and was seen by Cinquecento audiences as seated at his mother’s feet and holding a suggestive bird (*uccello*), then read a metaphor for a man’s penis. Giorgione’s *Venus* inspired other Venetian painters, such as

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619 In the late-fifteenth century, the Florentine scholar Angelo Poliziano identified the pet bird in poem 2 of the *Liber Catullianus* as a metaphor for a penis. See Angelo Poliziano, *Opera* (Lyon: Seb. Gryphivm, 1533-1536), vol. 1, 520; cited in Julian Ward Jones, Jr., “‘Catullus’ ‘Passer’ as ‘Passer,’” *Greece & Rome* 45 (Oct. 1998): 188. In addition to a penis, an *uccello* also signified an accessible boy or anus in Renaissance burlesque poetry. See Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships*, 151.
Palma il Vecchio and Lorenzo Lotto, to take up the theme. Palma’s Venus and Cupid (Fig. 22) depicts Ovid’s tale of Cupid wounding Venus and igniting her desires for Adonis (Metamorphoses, book 10, 518-22). Lotto’s Venus and Cupid (Fig. 41) reinforced Venus’ role in bedroom decorations by showing Cupid urinating or ejaculating through a marriage wreath onto Venus as a salacious reference to fecundity and prosperity in the bedroom.621

Like Lotto’s picture, Bettini’s Venus and Cupid may have been commissioned expressly as a wedding picture in 1532. While wedding pictures in the Cinquecento traditionally included portraits of the husband and wife, seductive females such as those of Lotto and Michelangelo stood in for the bride and her sexuality—it was, of course, more decorous to portray the new bride with the aid of a body double. Moreover, Bettini’s Cupid slings his left leg over Venus’ pelvis, the “slung-leg” motif which, as we saw earlier, was a conventional sign for copulation and marriage in Renaissance art. According to Leo Steinberg, the “canonic form [of the motif] requires that each partner maintain his own seat, so that the leg that is thrown across becomes a gesture toward the other, a wooing or claiming, an action that visibly changes a relationship or establishes a condition.”622 In Bettini’s panel Cupid and Venus are united by Cupid’s left leg, which bisects Venus’ frontal plane. Michelangelo previously employed the “slung-leg” motif as an allusion to marriage in his Pietà at St. Peter’s, in which Christ’s legs are slung over the Virgin’s lap as a symbol of mystical marriage to her son.623 Since the twelfth century Mary had been viewed as both the mother and bride of Christ and thus interchangeable with the Church. In the Medici Madonna (Medici Chapel, San Lorenzo, Florence; 1524-34), a

620 See Rylands, Palma il Vecchio, no. 67. Palma’s influence on Michelangelo’s Venus and Cupid for Bettini is evident in Michelangelo’s only extant drawing for the commission (Fig. 25). See Joannides in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 200.
623 On Michelangelo’s use of the slung leg motif, see ibid., 231-85.
commission contemporary with Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid*, Michelangelo once again alluded to marriage between mother and child through Jesus’ straddling gesture on his mother’s lap. Bettini’s Venus was clearly a product of Michelangelo’s fantasia and idealizations and not a portrait; however, Renaissance wedding pictures were not required to convey an exact likeness of the patron’s wife.\(^{624}\)

As we have seen, the décor of Bettini’s camera was in many ways consistent with that of late Quattrocento and early Cinquecento bedchambers. The physical beauty of Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* was confirmed by Varchi and was in keeping with the reclining female nudes painted by Botticelli, Giorgione, Piero di Cosimo, and Lotto for bridal chambers in central and northern Italy. Yet Bettini’s program consisted of more than the *Venus and Cupid* panel, and the patron was more than a merchant-banker. As the next section will show, the second option, the scrittoio, a private room designed for a homeowner’s intellectual and spiritual pursuit in the company of intimates, is more probable for the camera.

**Bettini’s Camera as Study**

The second possibility for the function of Bettini’s camera is a private study, or *studiolo* or, in Cinquecento Florence, *scrittoio*. As we have discussed, the term *camera* was broadly defined in Bettini’s day. As we have seen, the iconography of one of the paintings in the room, the *Venus and Cupid*, suggests it might have been a bedroom. Indeed, Bettini’s chamber program centered on the Michelangelo-Pontormo panel, a painting very much in keeping with the Venus paintings that graced bedrooms in Renaissance Italy; however, its scale is far larger than

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that of any of its bridal-chamber-destined counterparts. Moreover, paintings of Venus and Mars by Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506) adorned the study of Isabella d’Este in Mantua, reflecting the simultaneous emergence of mythological painting and the collector’s study around the turn of the century. In the sixteenth century Armenini summarized the Renaissance penchant for decorative domestic interiors, observing that studies in particular were adorned like other small chambers in the house “except that we may add oil paintings or life-size portraits of illustrious persons, painted by the most excellent masters, who should also be responsible for the patricians which are to be made in accordance with their orders and designs.”

Bettini’s decoration, which included both a mythological painting in oil and a series of portraits of illustrious men of letters, falls within such contemporary descriptions.

As Stephen Campbell rightly notes, “A room designated as a studiolo defines its owner—however otherwise identified as merchant or prince, male or female, contemplative or connoisseur—as a reader, and even the space for housing of a personal art collection is simultaneously identified as a space for personal reading. This is why mythological subjects appear in such a space: the interest in mythology lay, in large part, in concerns with the nature of reading.”

Indeed, reading and writing were among the prestigious pastimes of Italy’s predominantly urban ruling elites. As Dora Thornton observes, “Reading, studying and thinking were considered by Renaissance writers to be free and pleasurable pursuits which gave shape and elegance to one’s leisure, so that a study represented the ideal of making the pleasures of thinking and working continuous with the rest of one’s existence.”

Bettini’s complex cycle of paintings allowed the merchant-banker to demonstrate his reading of Moschus, Lucretius, Ovid, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio at home, in his private study, to the city’s letterati. Campbell notes that

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for socially ambitious mercantile elites like Bettini, “private reading, especially of the approved classical texts drawn upon by Petrarch in *De vita solitaria*, defined a sphere of values which was separate and distinct from those of politics and the marketplace.”

As we will see, there are many additional arguments for the room’s scrittoio function, of which the most convincing is that of Elizabeth Cropper, who recently discussed Bettini’s program—the *Venus and Cupid* and Bronzino’s poet portraits—within the broader context of Bronzino’s contemporaneous portraits of Florentine men painted on the eve of their departure from Florence’s newly created duchy (see Figs. 14 and 29). As Cropper notes, “after so many had died or been cast out for political reasons, portraits and sonnets could bring Tuscan friends together in a sodality of Tuscan language and art that sought to become universal throughout Italy.” Indeed, in 1532, Bettini, with the help of Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino, kept the politics and culture of Republican Florence alive at home despite the growing power of Duke Alessandro beyond his closed doors.

From the Quattrocento, study decorations had become increasingly elaborate celebrations of learned patrons, most notably the princely rulers of Urbino, Ferrara, and Mantua. In 1458 the writer and businessman Benedetto Cotrugli (1416-1469) from Ragusa (today Dubrovnik) wrote his *Libro dell’arte di mercatura*, a profile of the life, the body, the spirit, and the home of the merchant based in part on the practices he observed in Florence. In book 4, devoted to the merchant’s home and household, Cotrugli advised the merchant to live near the central marketplace in a building whose beauty improved that of its owner. And within the building’s piano nobile, the merchant should have a studiolo for business matters on the

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mezzanine and therefore separate from the rest of the household, which would not be disturbed during client visits:

Et primo, vuole essere sita in loco piano et propinquo a luogo de negotiationi et ricepto de mercanti, il che è grande commodità, perché molte volte li acade andaré o mandare a casa et per essere presto fa il facto suo….Secondo, de’ havere onorato introito per li forestieri che non li cognoscono se non per fama, et molto t’attribuisce bella presentia et residentia di casa. Tertio, havere nell primo solaro uno scriptoio habile alle facciende tue, et dextro che d’ogni banda si possa sedere et separato, senza dare impaccio alla famiglia di casa per li forestieri che vengono a contare teco.630

Indeed, Renaissance studioli or scrittoii provided peaceful and personal environments for the renewal of spirits through the contemplation of humanistic pursuits such as music, art, and literature; for the completion of business, for which it functioned as an office; and for the outward display of status through its function as a repository of precious objects, including paintings by the most sought-after contemporary artists.631 In De vita solitaria, Petrarch defined the function of the study as a room in which one could achieve communion with God, the Muses, and the patron’s historical exemplars, all in order to foster the vita contemplativa.632 About 1400 Datini used his scrittoio in his majestic home in Prato principally for business matters; unlike Petrarch, he was not interested in humanist pursuits.633 In 1424 the Florentine politician Niccolò da Uzzano (1359-1431) was wealthy enough to have two private scittoii on the ground floor of his palazzo:

630 Benedetto Cotrugli Raguseo, Il libro dell’arte di mercatura, ed. Ugo Tucci (Venice: Arsenale, 1990), bk. 4, 230; cited and quoted by Franceschi in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, At Home in Renaissance Italy, 169.
631 On the many functions of a studiolo, see Franco Franceschi in Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, At Home in Renaissance Italy, 166-71.
632 Petrarch, De vita solitaria, ed. Antonio Ceruti (Bologna, 1879), 132.
one that functioned like a library and the other devoted to business activities. And in 1492, in his celebrated study on the piano nobile, Lorenzo de’ Medici displayed some of the most valuable objects in the family palazzo: seventy-five cameos, twenty-seven rare vases, a gold reliquary, jewelry, five clocks, a bronze statuette, fifteen maps, nineteen richly bound books (including texts by Dante and Petrarch), and eighteen small mosaics and paintings, among them a St. Jerome in His Study attributed to Jan van Eyck. Carpaccio’s St. Augustine in His Study (Fig. 36) illustrates how such sculptures and curiosities adorned the walls and surfaces of a contemporaneous studiolo in Venice. Thornton has credited such Renaissance trends in interior decoration to “the renewed interest in the letters of Pliny the Younger from the early fifteenth century onward [which] stimulated awareness as to how the ancient Romans had intermingled books, paintings and busts in libraries and studies.”

Bettini’s study would have included these objects as well as inkstands, lenses, spectacles, penknives, paperweights, and reading cushions.

Also in Florence, Machiavelli, writing much later in Bettini’s own milieu, observed how he consciously changed his dress upon entering his scrittoio in the evening to best engage with the works of his favorite ancient Roman poets:

> When evening comes, I return home and go into my study. On the threshold, I strip off my muddy, sweaty, workday clothes and put on the robes of court and palace, and in this graver dress I enter the antique courts of the ancients and am welcomed by them. And for the space of four hours I forget the world, remember no vexations, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death: I pass into their world.

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634 See Wolfgang Liebenwein, Studio: Storia e tipologia di uno spazio culturale, ed. C. Cieri Via (Modena: Panini, 1992), 43-44; cited in Franceschi in At Home in Renaissance Italy, 170.
635 See Stapleford, Lorenzo de’ Medici at Home, 28-29, 94-119.
Perhaps due to their restricted access to visitors, studioli were traditionally decorated with little pomp and ostentation until the mid-1470s, when they were opened to a larger audience as boastful pronouncements of the patron’s scholarly prowess. As these once private chambers became public stopovers on the princely grand tour, study decorations were aggrandized as conspicuous examples of self-fashioning. As Thornton rightly notes, “By the middle of the sixteenth century a clearly established visiting circuit of studies had come into existence.”

Since Bettini’s camera featured a painting larger in scale than those painted expressly for a bedchamber, its size may be another piece of evidence that the room was intended instead for the patron and his growing circle of letterati. Moreover, the works of Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino would have best served Bettini’s ambitious social agenda when viewed and discussed by many, not closed off for his own enjoyment.

In 1465 Alberti advised Florentine patrons to “make the parts [of the house] that are particularly public or are intended principally to welcome guests, such as the façade, vestibule, and so on, as handsome as possible.” The most elaborate example of a camera that functioned as a study and a reception room is Mantegna’s Camera Picta (1465-1474), commissioned by Duke Lodovico Gonzaga for the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua. Intended to impress foreign dignitaries, Gonzaga’s chamber was painted with contemporary scenes of the duke and his wife holding court under the watchful eyes of eight Roman Caesars who witnessed the events from the vault much like Bettini’s poets.

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638 On the shift of the studiolo from a private to a public space, see Clough, “Art as Power,” 22-25.
639 Thornton, The Scholar in His Study, 114.
640 Alberti, On the Art of Building, 292. See also Alberti, Della architettura, 304: “Nè sarà maraviglia che mi piaccia colui che vorrà che quelle parti de la casa massime che hanno a stare in pubblico, e che hanno ad essere le prime, per ricevere gratamente quelli che vi verranno ad alloggiare, com’è la facciata de la casa, l’antiporto, e simili, sieno molto onoratissime…”
In addition to portraits and genre scenes, studioli decorations included other types of art, in particular sacred and secular narrative painting. For example, in the mid-Quattrocento Duke Federico da Montefeltro commissioned Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation* (Urbino, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche; 1458–60) for his studiolo in the Palazzo Ducale at Urbino as an evocation of his spiritual life. This room with religious decoration was complimented by a second, half-size studiolo of a strongly secular nature, the Tempietto delle Muse. Located directly underneath the duke’s celebrated study, the smaller Tempietto was discussed in 1587 by Bernardino Baldi, who noted figures of Apollo, Minerva, the nine Muses, and “una donna nuda à sedere, che tiene la coscia manca sopra da dritta.” This seated (or reclining?) Venus figure was in fact the room’s artistic focal point and therefore essential as a vehicle for contemplation in addition to a celebration of the patron’s creativity. Bettini’s decoration fused these two spheres in its central panel of Venus and Cupid, a moralizing image intended to inspire the contemplation of love all’antica while ultimately engendering spiritual communion with God.

Another aspect of Bettini’s cycle of paintings was often associated with the studiolo. Bronzino’s poet portrait series is formally indebted to a studiolo iconographic tradition: cycles of famous or illustrious men (*uomini illustri*). In the Renaissance, history’s celebrated heroes were often immortalized on the walls of civic palaces and private dwellings as exemplars of military prowess or moral rectitude. Indeed, Bettini’s Tuscan poets first appeared in domestic interior decorations as members of such cycles.

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644 In Quattrocento Florence, Tuscan poets were represented alongside heroes from antiquity such as Alexander the Great, Brutus, Furius Camillus, and Cicero in the *aula minor* of the Palazzo Vecchio (now lost). See Ludwig Bertalot, “Humanistics in der Anthologia Latina,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 66 (1911): 73n2. On the origin of *uomini illustri* cycles, see Schubring, “Uomini famosi,” *Repertorium für Kunstwissenschaft* 23 (1900): 424-25. For a general study of the subject, see Jean Alazard, “Sur les hommes illustres,” in *Il mondo antico nel*
In 1586 Armenini praised uomini illustri cycles as ideal decorative programs for sixteenth-century men’s chambers:

And where the young men [sleep], one should paint stories of men who are well known to us from history, such as Mucius, Horatio, Scipio, and Curtius; through these examples we can awaken the young men and cure them of vices such as cowardice, laziness, avarice, and indolence, of which the world is full, and inflame their hearts with the desire to perform magnanimous and generous deeds.\(^{645}\)

Whereas episodes from the lives of great men of antiquity were often ideally suited for decorative panels on the walls and furniture in sleeping chambers, their portraits were associated with study or library decorations since antiquity, when portraits of illustrious men, including poets, decorated the libraries of Cicero, Aristotle, and Tiberius.\(^{646}\) In the Middle Ages, both the nobility and the bourgeoisie frescoed their private residences with important figures from history, literature, and classical mythology. Manuals such as Suetonius’ *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* and Plutarch’s *Lives* of ancient warriors, statesmen, and orators were reproduced in countless medieval manuscripts. By 1340 Petrarch had nearly completed his *De viris illustribus*, the first biographical survey of famous Roman leaders since antiquity. His biography inspired Francesco il Vecchio da Carrara’s *Sala virorum illustrium* decorations in Padua (1367-79).\(^{647}\) Equally influential was Boccaccio’s *De casibus illustrium virorum*, which was listed in Armenini’s *Art of Painting*, along with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Vincenzo Cartari’s

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Genealogia dei Dei degli antichi, as required reading for all painters of history. In his Trattato di architettura of about 1464, the architectural theorist Filarete (c. 1400-c. 1469) described the Milanese ambassador to Florence as being notably impressed with Piero de’ Medici’s scrittoio, which was filled with effigies of Roman emperors and other celebrated men.

Uomini illustri cycles inspired patricians to lead a virtuous life all’antica in the privacy of their own homes; and for merchant-bankers with patrician aspirations such as Bettini, appropriating an ancient motif traditionally reserved for political leaders meant an increase in social capital, which was essential in the competitive arena of artistic patronage in Medici Florence. Bettini’s choice of Petrarch and Boccaccio in particular may have been a tribute to the fourteenth-century revivers of the classical genre celebrated by Suetonius and Plutarch. Their texts directly inspired uomini illustri cycles much like the writings of the ancient poets. Bettini’s camera was ultimately a paragone of painting and poetry, and the patron’s choice of poets for his lunettes series was apparently well-researched. The classical tradition of uomini illustri cycles was therefore consciously revived in Cinquecento Florence by the Medici as well as Bettini, a member of the city’s thriving merchant class.

Prototypes for Bettini’s poet series are found throughout Italy, beginning with Giotto’s nine Roman and Hebrew heroes—Alexander the Great, Solomon, Hector, Aeneas, Achilles, Paris, Hercules, Samson, and Caesar—commissioned in 1330 by King Robert of Anjou for the Castelnuovo in Naples (now lost). Early Renaissance patrons and artists gave physical form to the heroes of Pliny, Livy, Plutarch, and Suetonius, establishing a classical topos for

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648 Armenini, On the True Precepts, bk. 3, 277.
learned patrons of artists and humanists. Giotto’s cycle, like the *Sala vivorum illustrium* in Padua mentioned above, was inspired by Petrarch’s *De viris illustribus*. However, it was not until the fifteenth century that uomini illustri cycles were painted in Tuscan civic palaces such as the lost series in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. In 1413 the Sienese government commissioned Taddeo di Bartolo (c. 1363-c. 1422) to paint nine civic virtues personified by Roman military heroes such as Cicero, Camillus, and Scipio Africanus for the antechapel of the Palazzo Pubblico. However, Siena’s uomini illustri cycle differed from previous cycles in Naples and Padua in that all of the figures were taken specifically from Republican history, Siena being a Republic. In addition, the nine virtues were arranged on two levels in the chamber, the upper level figures being placed in lunettes, like Bettini’s poets. Siena’s uomini illustri frescoes are the first extant example of the new humanist tradition in a Republic, and thus may have appealed to Bettini in his choice of a poet series. Bettini’s commission would then have paid homage to his Republican roots in a political environment dominated by a newly installed Medici duke.

The Medici, a family whose patronage Bettini consciously emulated in his camera decoration, introduced the tradition of uomini illustri to Florentine domestic interiors in the late Trecento. According to Vasari, Cosimo il Vecchio’s father, Giovanni di Bicci (1360-1429), commissioned Lorenzo di Bicci (1350-1427) “to paint in the hall of the old house of the Medici … all those famous men that are still seen there today, very well preserved.” In the mid-Quattrocento Carducci commissioned one of the most famous uomini illustri cycles in Renaissance art for his villa outside of Florence at Soffiano. Around 1450 his painter Castagno

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frescoed three women and six men, the latter almost all Florentine, standing side by side and terminating with effigies of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. Castagno’s series elevated the Tuscan poets to the status of Old Testament prophets and Roman heroes. In addition, Castagno’s figures were infused with the artist’s characteristic psychology and expression. They engaged one another in an animated discussion, perhaps over the questione della lingua.

In conclusion, the evidence here for a studiolo is good. Quattrocento and Cinquecento accounts of decorative programs in private studies suggest that the iconography of Bettini’s cycle of paintings is in keeping with such private spaces. Bronzino’s poet portraits, for example, have been examined within the Renaissance tradition of cycles of illustrious men, painted for studies alongside pictures of reclining female nudes, as discussed in the studiolo program of the Palazzo Ducale at Urbino. Accounts of studies in princely and ducal courts are particularly germane to this study as both the Medici and the city’s lesser patrons such as Bettini looked to Urbino, Ferrara, and Mantua for examples of learned artistic patronage.

The function of the studiolo was also discussed above through accounts by Petrarch, Alberti, and Machiavelli. On the eve of Bettini’s commission, Castiglione cautioned his ideal courtier to “never attempt to make his way into the chamber or private quarters of his master uninvited,” confirming the room’s role as an inner sanctum for spiritual and intellectual contemplation. Such leisurely pursuits were essential for socially ambitious men like Bettini, who

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656 The poets embodied Florentine civic pride as links to the city’s literary tradition. Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio’s biographies appear in Filippo, Giovanni, and Matteo Villani’s Chroniche of 1348.

in emulation of the peninsula’s ducal courts befriended and supported local letterati. Eight years after Bettini’s private commission, the Accademia degli Umidi, the precursor to the Accademia Fiorentina, was formed in Florence in the house of another merchant, Giovanni Mazzuoli. (Once it was taken over by Duke Cosimo, the Accademia Fiorentina would hold meetings in the Palazzo Medici, the Studio Fiorentino at the Florentine university, the church of Santa Maria Novella, and, beginning in 1550, the Palazzo della Signoria’s Salone dei Dugento.) Indeed, most of the Accademia’s founding members were merchants. Prior to the foundation of that organization, the city’s merchants and letterati mingled in private homes to discuss love and language. In a Florentine palazzo, a studiolo would have been the most appropriate room for such academic encounters.

In addition to the two possibilities just considered, the bedroom and the study, there is a third less likely function for Bettini’s camera: the camera d’oro. The homes of patricians in Florence and especially Venice often included an additional study designed for the display of treasures and natural wonders. The camera d’oro or the camerino delle anticaglie (room of antiquities) was the primary destination for visitors to Gabriele Vendramin’s Venetian casa at Santa Fosca, which was designed to showcase the patron’s treasures of modern and ancient art. In the description of the contents of his camerino delle anticaglie for his will of 1548, Vendramin declared that the objects displayed there, which “brought a little peace and quiet to my soul during the many labors of mind and body that I have endured in conducting the family business [a soap factory], are so pleasing and dear to me that I must pray and beseech those who inherit them to treat them with such care that they shall not perish.”658 The camerino delle anticaglie could

indeed be a proto-art museum in which the collection was destined to remain intact. Sadly, Vendramin’s collection was dispersed in the 1650s, and Bettini’s was dispersed, in the case of Pontormo’s *Venus and Cupid*, before it ever reached its intended chamber.

As we discussed above, a special room for peace and quiet was the destination for Bettini’s paintings, supporting Compton’s recent argument for the room as a “third space.”659 And camere d’oro were designed to showcase a specific collection, which Bettini’s certainly was given the reputation of his painters and the instant popularity of the *Venus and Cupid* and the *Dante*. Bettini’s camera was fashioned to showcase these masterworks by Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino, and by 1532 collections were already dictating spatial dispositions in Venice in, for example, the camera d’oro and tribuna or camerino delle anticaglie that framed Domenico and Giovanni Grimani’s collections.660 But Bettini was a social and ambitious man who defined himself by his association with local Republican merchants and letterati. And despite the quality and importance of his series of pictures, which were regarded in Florence as treasures of contemporary art and certainly worthy of a room that also functioned as a museum, a camera d’oro would have been too private a room for the merchant-banker’s social agenda: a calculated, conspicuous ascent in Florentine society.

As we have seen, the term *camera* was defined in various ways in Cinquecento Italy: a bedchamber, a studiolo, and a particular type of studiolo designed to showcase a collector’s most treasured possessions. I have argued in the past that despite the lack of evidence establishing the room as a bedroom, “a strong connection can be made between the decoration of Bettini’s camera and that of decorative programs for contemporary bedchambers and

659 Compton, “‘Omnia Vincit Amor,’” 229-260.
antechambers.”

My position was then based on Bettini’s age at the time of the commission and the protagonist of his chamber’s centerpiece, Venus. In 1532 he would have been of an appropriate age for marriage, which was the right of passage that spurred a Florentine nobleman’s greatest expenditure on material goods for the home. Despite finding no evidence for Bettini ever marrying, I argued that, in addition to marriage, the subsequent ritual of beginning a family was another reason Bettini commissioned the Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus and Cupid. And I cited paintings of nude women, in particular Venus accompanied by Cupid and Mars, that adorned cassoni, spalliere panels, and large easel paintings in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian bedchambers.

In that same essay, however, in a discussion of the role of Venus and Cupid in the multifunctional bedroom, I also argued that “sexually charged subjects such as Cupid kissing Venus, while ultimately alluding to the bride’s fecundity and the family’s subsequent prosperity, were ideally suited for private viewing.” And as a future member of the Accademia Fiorentina and a future patron of the city’s letterati, Bettini would have employed a private room in his Florentine palazzo for academic debates on the cult of beauty and love, in particular Neoplatonic love, as we discussed in chapter 3. His camera was in fact decorated to support his metaphysical interests in love, and the cycle of paintings he commissioned from Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino served as a backdrop for private debates with his fellow letterati—Bettini’s intended audience for the camera program—on love, beauty, Dante, Petrarch, and the merits of Tuscan over Latin as Italy’s official language. As Cropper has persuasively argued, “for Varchi and other fuorusciti, the bough to which they attached themselves in exile was not golden but laurel, and Tuscan ties of literary culture and friendship were more enduring than the Latin rhetoric of

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661 Aste in Falletti and Nelson, Venus and Love, 15.
662 Ibid., 19.
empire. Prior to his own exile from Florence by 1536, while still living under the yoke of ducal Medici rule, Bettini decorated his camera as a private space, far too private to have been a bedchamber, where, protected from the Medici empire outside, he and his fellow Republican merchant-letterati could safely debate the art of love as sung in Tuscan by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.

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Conclusion

This project began as an examination of the patronage of an ambitious merchant-banker (Bartolomeo Bettini) and the art of his painters (Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino) in early ducal Florence. After approaching a handful of surviving works completed for the patron from multiple angles, this microhistory evolved into an analysis of social mobility in sixteenth-century Italy and the role of conspicuous consumption and domestic display in getting there. These four chapters offer insights into the mutually beneficial relationships that patrons and artists forged in Florence during a period of great political and social change. Bettini’s camera decoration was designed for a room where art, politics, and social status intersected. It was informed by a merchant-banker’s politics; his social network and ambitions; his equally ambitious and highly sought-after painters; and his camera’s function—a private study—which would welcome and inspire the patron’s intended audience, the Florentine letterati, through its compelling cycle of paintings.

In chapter 1 we examined Bettini’s origins. Bartolomeo’s family was noble and Tuscan, with ties to Molezzano. Michelangelo considered him a man of honor but not a member of his patrician class, keeping Bettini’s niece from marrying into his family. Indeed, Bettini was painfully aware of his noble-yet-nonpatrician status in Cinquecento Florence, and this fueled his great ambition. His ancestors shared his social pretensions, and by the fifteenth century they built a family palazzo to “appropriate a heritage,” as Lindow has described the typically Florentine Renaissance practice (see chapter 1), in their ancestral quartiere of San Giovanni, adjacent to the future home of the ruling Medici. In addition to their ambitions, the Bettini were Republicans, supporting the Florentine constitution through the siege of 1529-30. Bettini would remain a
staunch Republican through ducal Medici rule. When his camera’s centerpiece, the
Michelangelo-Pontormo *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 2), was taken by force from Pontormo’s studio,
he and his client-cum-painter Michelangelo began their plans for life in exile in Rome.

In chapter 1 we also discussed the role of wealthy merchant-bankers in Cinquecento
Florence and the art patronage of this prosperous class. In decorating his camera with a cycle of
paintings by Michelangelo, Pontormo, and Bronzino, Bettini joined the ranks of privileged local
merchants such as the Borgherini and the Benintendi as well as that of the Medici and, in the case
of his patronage of Michelangelo, the pope. But Bettini’s patronage went beyond that of leading
contemporary artists. He also supported the city’s letterati, whom he would join in 1540 in the
newly founded Accademia Fiorentina. In 1550 Benedetto Varchi, the Accademia’s most active
member, would dedicate the publication of his *Due Lezziioni* to Bettini, then serving as Florentine
consul in Rome, as “our merchant and patron of letters.”

But Bettini’s literary interests, particularly his support of the Tuscan language in the contemporary academic debates over
Tuscan versus Latin (the *questione della lingua*), were revealed early on, in 1532, when he
commissioned paintings for his camera of poets who sang of love in the *lingua toscana* (see Fig.
1) and a representation of a Neoplatonic ideal beauty, the *Venus and Cupid*.

In chapter 2 we were introduced to the painters of Bettini’s cycle. Michelangelo, who
contributed a cartoon of *Venus and Cupid* to the camera decoration (see Fig. 3), was a fellow
Republican as well as Bettini’s friend and client. Bettini would serve as one of the artist’s
bankers in both Florence and Rome. At the time of the camera decoration, Michelangelo was
working for both Republicans and Medici supporters, including Alessandro Vitelli, the captain of
Duke Alessandro’s guard. By 23 September 1534 Michelangelo would quit Florence
permanently for Rome; Bettini would join him there within two years. Also at this time the artist

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664 See fn. 141.
was engaged in poetry, inspired in part by the works of Dante and Petrarch. And in 1532, the year he completed Bettini’s cartoon of *Venus and Cupid*, he met Tommaso de’ Cavalieri, the Roman nobleman who would inspire his numerous representations of love in finished drawings and poems.

Here, we were also introduced to Michelangelo’s collaborator on the chamber decoration, Pontormo, a far less political painter who never left his native Florence and continued serving the Medici through his final years. Michelangelo and Pontormo had previously collaborated on a *Noli me tangere* painting, a masterpiece of the former’s disegno and the latter’s celebrated coloring. Like Pontormo, Bettini’s third painter, Bronzino, would serve the Medici through the remainder for the rest of his life in Florence. He was a court artist par excellence, and when Bettini commissioned him to paint poet portraits for his chamber’s lunettes, Bronzino had just returned from serving Duke Guidobaldo II and his court at Pesaro. Bronzino was also a poet and a member of the Accademia Fiorentina. He had committed all of Dante’s works to memory and the majority of Petrarch’s as well.

In chapter 3 we reconstructed Bettini’s unfinished program by examining the surviving paintings and drawings and discussing contemporary accounts of the painting cycle, beginning with Vasari. The chapter was divided chronologically by the chamber’s two phases—Bronzino’s Tuscan poets and Michelangelo and Pontormo’s *Venus and Cupid*—with a formal and iconographic reading applied to both. Under phase 1, we discussed Bettini’s choice of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio for Bronzino’s paintings within the Florentine tradition of literary academies in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the *questione della lingua* in Bettini’s day. Under phase 2, we explored the genesis of the room’s centerpiece and the contemporary cult of
love (including Neoplatonism) and beauty, which informed Michelangelo’s concetto and paved the way for its immense popularity.

And in chapter 4 we discussed the possible functions for Bettini’s camera: a bedchamber and a private study. We concluded it was a scrittoio on the basis of three factors: a study’s function as a private space designed for quiet contemplations and intellectual pursuits; Bettini’s ties to the Florentine letterati; and the program’s iconography. As we discussed, the cycle of paintings illustrated the contemporary debates on love (through the Venus and Cupid) and language (through portraits of poets who sang of love in the lingua toscana) that were then consuming the letterati whom Bettini, an ambitious merchant-banker with patrician pretensions, wished to support and ultimately join.

Indeed, it is only after examining the patron, his family, his position as a staunch Republican, his city as a Medici duchy, his client Michelangelo (who deemed Bettini a “uomo da bene e servente e d’assai, ma non è nostro pari”665), and his camera as a proto-Accademia Fiorentina that the room’s elusive iconography is fully grasped. Bettini’s private study and its celebrated decorative program reflected both the patron’s private and public life. As Thornton keenly observes, “It was not only the fact of owning a study, but also the nature of its decoration and contents which indicated an individual’s credentials, and many of the characteristic things found in the room subtly suggest ways in which an individual related to a wider social world.”666

Bartolomeo Bettini was a successful merchant-banker and, as we have seen, a calculating patron of the arts. As Musacchio notes in her discussion of gender roles in Renaissance Florence, “men had multiple and simultaneous identities, whether inside the home as husbands, fathers, and widowers or outside it as merchants, government officials, and guild and

\[\text{\footnotesize 665 See fn. 1.} \]

\[\text{\footnotesize 666 Thornton, The Scholar in His Study, 1.} \]
confraternity members.” As a result of his initial role as a gifted art patron—commissioning at a young age a wildly popular chamber decoration in which Michelangelo “made for him a cartoon of a nude Venus with a Cupid who is kissing her, in order that he might have it executed in painting by Pontormo and place it in the center of a chamber of his own, in the lunettes of which he had begun to have painted by Bronzino figures of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, with the intention of having there all the other poets who have sung of love in Tuscan prose and verse”—he positioned himself well for social elevation in Florentine society. Much like Michelangelo, whose patrician status Bettini coveted, Bettini’s life and work would remain in dialogue with that society, beyond the camera and beyond his beloved Florence, as a fuoruscito in Rome.

667 Musacchio, Art, Marriage, and Family, 9, 668 See fn. 364.
Epilogue

After 1532, and throughout the Cinquecento, Bettini’s camera program, especially its sexualized centerpiece of *Venus and Cupid*, continued inspiring artists and theorists of love. 

Immediately after his ill-fated collaboration with Michelangelo on Bettini’s chamber centerpiece, Pontormo drew a *Study for a Madonna and Child* (Fig. 42)\(^669\) that converted Michelangelo’s incestuous mythological subject into a nursing Madonna who maternally takes a break from her reading to attend to her son. This formal play between pagan and Christian imagery may reflect the Renaissance Neoplatonic interest in the Great Concord (the concord of Aristotle and Plato with Scripture).\(^670\) In his *Genealogia deorum gentilium libri* written in Latin prose in about 1360, Boccaccio noted that “the old [pagan] theology can sometimes be employed in the service of Catholic truth, if the fashioner of the myths should choose. I have observed this in the case of more than one orthodox poet in whose investiture of fiction the sacred teachings were clothed.”\(^671\)

It is also in keeping with Michelangelo, a passionate pagan and Christian who embraced sacred and profane sources for his paintings and sculptures, beginning with his early masterpiece, the *Roman Pietà*.\(^672\) In her discussion of the Michelangelo-Pontormo *Venus and Cupid*, Leatrice

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\(^{669}\) Uffizi, Florence, no. 6534Fr, black chalk, 28 x 40.5 cm. See Cox-Rearick, *Drawings of Pontormo*, no. 325.


\(^{672}\) See Steinberg, “The Metaphors of Love,” 231-45.
Mendelsohn rightly notes that “in the 1530s, religious themes could still be represented using mythological figures without fear of polluting the Christian meaning.”

According to Berenson, Pontormo’s *Madonna and Child* “is but a variant, and I venture to believe a happier variant, upon Michelangelo’s cartoon for a Venus embraced by Cupid.” Pontormo’s *Madonna*, inverted in direction, reclines on her right side, while maintaining the same pose as her prototype. His figure type, here drawn within the same year as the Bettini commission, is transformed to a monumental scale and defined by curved limbs, high breasts, flattened torso, highly muscular limbs, and a disproportionately small head, all traits of Michelangelo’s sculpture of the early 1530s. While the Uffizi drawing could be a study for a lost or unexecuted *Madonna and Child*, it is more likely an exercise for Pontormo, who skillfully appropriated Michelangelo’s form and technique after their collaborations.

The second drawing in the Uffizi, Pontormo’s *Reclining female nude with a sphere* (Fig. 19), also revisits Bettini’s goddess of love as the nude reclines on drapery with her legs splayed like the Venus. Resting on the same hip as the Bettini prototype, Pontormo’s Venus is equally muscular and massive but highly sculptural in finish through crisp contours and fine modeling. Pontormo’s female nude has smaller, rounder breasts, the familiar small head, and the same left foot seen in the Bettini panel. Yet the curve of the former’s torso bends beyond the hyperextensions of the Bettini Venus to an unnatural degree of torsion. According to Berenson, the Madonna intentionally reclines “in an attitude intended to display the utmost of the nude in all its parts.”

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674 Berenson, *Drawings of the Florentine Painters*, no. 2037. Berenson dates the drawing some years after the Bettini commission, yet still under the influence of Michelangelo’s “over-finished style of draughtsmanship” of the early 1530s.

675 Uffizi, Florence, no. 6586F, black chalk, 16.7 x 15.3 cm. See Cox-Rearick, *Drawings of Pontormo*, no. 329.

676 Berenson, *Drawings of Florentine Painters*, vol. 1, 319.
Cinquecento and how painters there were forced to employ “the most complicated poses to make a Venus interesting to their public.” Pontormo returned to the Venus and Cupid motif late in his career in a black chalk study at Florence dated 1550-56. In this later version, Cupid aggressively maneuvers Venus’ face, bringing her lips closer to his. Giving up the fight, Venus now succumbs to her son’s advances in a more serpentine and languid composition typical of Pontormo’s late draftsmanship. As Cox-Rearick notes, Pontormo’s late Venus and Cupid is the only drawing from the San Lorenzo period not connected to the choir project. Bettini’s commission would stay with the artist till the end of his career.

Bettini’s Venus and Cupid also influenced erotic prints by other artists, among them Giulio Bonasone’s Venus and Cupid from around 1544, part of the engraver’s Seven Planets series. Venus, shown for our pleasure fully nude and standing awkwardly but fully exposed up against the picture plane, is embraced from behind by a blindfolded Cupid. As in Bettini’s composition, Cupid attempts to kiss his mother while caressing her right cheek.

The following year, Bronzino, perhaps commissioned by Cosimo I for a diplomatic gift to King Francis I of France, painted his famous Allegory with Venus and Cupid (Fig. 34), borrowing many elements from the Bettini panel. Bronzino’s exposure to the Michelangelo-Pontormo Venus and Cupid during the Bettini commission influenced what would become his most celebrated composition. In addition to the common central figures of Venus and Cupid, the inclusion of masks, and the subject of Venus disarming Cupid, the original position of Bronzino’s Cupid reflects that of Cupid in the Michelangelo composition: behind his mother and reaching over her

677 See fn. 433.
678 Uffizi, Florence, no. 6754Fv, black chalk, 26.6 x 40.2 cm. See Cox-Rearick, Drawings of Pontormo, no. 383.
torso. In the later version, however, Venus seems much more compliant with her son’s advances; her mouth is now open and her upper teeth and tongue are exposed, all while Cupid grabs her left nipple. Nineteenth-century critics of the painting, then in London, were particularly troubled by a passage that also appears in Bettini’s central panel. In a letter dated 3 February 1860 from the National Gallery’s first director, Sir Charles Eastlake, to its keeper Ralph Wornun, Sir Charles states that “if the details of the Kiss (Venus is kissing Cupid) are altered, the rest may pass.” Less disconcerting in both Bettini’s and Eastlake’s day was the representation of Cupid as an adolescent rather than a mischievous boy. Unsurprisingly, Bronzino homoeroticized his slightly older subject by rotating Cupid’s lower body towards the viewer, exposing his buttocks, which to at least some part of the predominantly male audience would have aroused sodomitic thoughts.

Ten years later, the wealthy Florentine banker Alamanno Salviati (1510-1571) also looked to Bettini’s chamber decoration for inspiration. Alamanno was a member of one of the city’s great families of arts patrons; he was the brother of Maria Salviati, mother of Medici Duke Cosimo I and patron, indirectly, of Pontormo’s loggia frescoes in the family villa at Castello. At the time of his commission, his family had known the city’s great master Michelangelo for over half a century. According to Condivi, the Salviati was already in contact with Michelangelo in 1503, when the artist was planning Pope Julius II’s tomb. Satisfied with Michelangelo’s designs, Pope Julius had “Salviati pay [Michelangelo] a thousand ducats in Florence” for the required marble quarried at Carrara for the project. Like Michelangelo and Bronzino and Bettini,

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682 Condivi, The Life of Michelangelo, 29.
Alamanno Salviati was a member of the Accademia Fiorentina, which was founded by his nephew, Duke Cosimo, and where he too would have embraced the cult of love and beauty.

In 1555 Salviati commissioned Bettini’s painter Bronzino to adorn his bedchamber in the Palazzo Salviati (formerly the urban residence of the Portinari) on the via del Corso in the quartiere of Santa Croce with a large *Venus, Cupid, and a Satyr* (Fig. 43); instead of the older Pontormo, he commissioned Bronzino’s exact contemporary Michele di Rodolfo del Ghirlandaio (1503-1577) to paint the room’s three additional panels after Michelangelo designs (see Fig. 33). The four paintings were completed as overdoors (*sopraporte*) and with such stylistic harmony that Michele’s contributions were also attributed to Bronzino in a 1583 inventory of the Salviati household. Taking his lead from Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid*, Salviati commissioned Bronzino to take the erotic appeal of Venus one step further, heightening the sexual tone of the prototype by introducing a leering satyr in the role of voyeur. Vasari praised the painting, and its voyeur, as “a Venus with a satyr beside her, the Venus being so beautiful that she is indeed the goddess of Beauty.” And as an additional tribute to Bettini as an important tastemaker in Cinquecento Florence, Salviati’s three panel paintings by Michele directly quoted Michelangelo’s sculptures *Dawn* and *Night* and one Michelangelo painting, the *Venus and Cupid* (Fig. 33).

Bettini’s painter, Bronzino, would be called upon again late in life, in 1571, a year before his death, for one more erudite domestic decorative program, Grand Duke Francesco I de’

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683 Galleria Colonna, Rome. See Cox-Rearick in Falletti and Nelson, *Venus and Love*, 208-10, no. 34.
685 On the issue of voyeurism in Cinquecento erotic art, see Aste, “Giulio Romano as Designer of Erotica,” 44-53.
Medici’s studiolo in the Palazzo Vecchio. The grand duke commissioned Bronzino, his pupil Allori, and their workshop to adorn the walls of his Wunderkammer, in which Francesco’s precious objects were stored. The philologist and Medici court humanist Vincenzo Borghini (1515-1580) was the room’s advisor.

After the Counter-Reformation, formerly public images of frolicking gods and goddess like Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* became veiled in private chamber decorations under protective covers, where their reception could be controlled by the patron and his companions much as Alberti had advised in the Quattrocento. Domestic interiors, once again, functioned expressly for the pleasures of the inhabitants and not for society at large. In the wake of the Council of Trent, Bronzino’s pupil Allori reinterpreted Bettini’s *Venus and Cupid* in his own version painted about 1570, today in the Uffizi (Fig. 44). Previously attributed to Bronzino as a copy after Michelangelo’s cartoon, the panel was returned to Allori by Fritz Goldschmidt in 1911.

Commissioned by Francesco de’ Medici on the eve of his ascent to grand duke following the abdication of his father, Cosimo I, it was intended as a gift to Francesco’s Venetian lover and future mother of his son Antonio, Bianca Cappello (1548-1587). Allori based his composition on both Michelangelo’s celebrated concetto and, in honor of the patron’s mistress, Venetian paintings of Venus reclining in a landscape (see chapter 3). As the final interpretation of the Bettini *Venus and Cupid* motif in the sixteenth century, Allori’s image maintains

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Michelangelo’s coy struggle between mother and son, here the mother being somewhat more successful at defending herself than in Bettini’s version. Allori’s Venus is in the exact same pose as Bronzino’s Colonna panel for Salviati. Both versions include Venus keeping the crossbow just out of Cupid’s reach. Allori’s Venus again reclines out of doors on an encompassing drapery and is now accompanied by two kissing doves, symbols of the goddess. The painter focuses on the moment of Venus’ defense and resistance to love, perhaps in response to Francesco’s state of courtship with his beloved Bianca. Before being pierced by love’s arrow, Venus is capable of maintaining the upper hand and Cupid has yet to straddle her pelvis. The reserve in expression and noble stoicism of Allori’s Venus recalls the matronly grandeur of the Michelangelo prototype. The distant landscape, visible through the shrubs in the left background, also recalls the Michelangelo-Pontormo panel, both including the natural setting as a perfunctory addition that in no way relates to the composition.

In 2008, Jacqueline Marie Musacchio explained the reason for Grand Duke Francesco I’s interest in Michelangelo’s Venus and Cupid as the inspiration for his gift to his lover Bianca: “Francesco, like Cosimo before him, admired Michelangelo and tried to bring the aged artist back to Florence. Allori’s reference to Michelangelo therefore helps associate the painting with Medici taste.”693 As in life, when Bettini’s Venus and Cupid panel was taken by force by Alessandro de’ Medici for the family’s private collection, so in death and in the hands of his artist’s pupil, Allori, would Bettini’s first commission ironically become synonymous with the taste of the city’s ruling class that he both despised and emulated, from within Florence and from without.

693 Musacchio in Bayer, Art and Love in Renaissance Italy, 36.
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