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PIERINO DA VINCI

TWO CHILDREN HOLDING A FISH

FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF
COSIMO I DE' MEDICI
AT VILLA DI CASTELLO

BENJAMIN PROUST
2020

PIER FRANCESCO DI BARTOLOMEO, CALLED

# PIERINO DA VINCI

Vinci, 1529/30 – Pisa, 1553

## TWO CHILDREN HOLDING A FISH

circa 1545

Carrara marble
67.7 x 31.2 x 32.6 cm

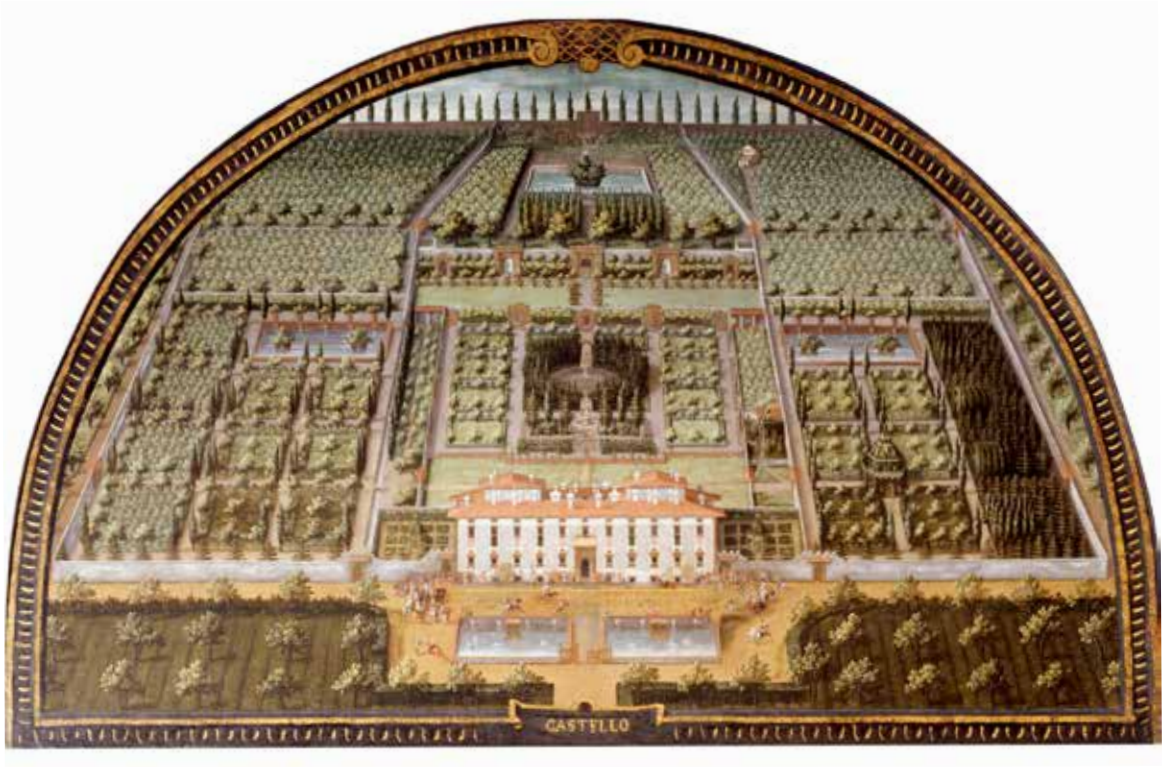
PROVENANCE
Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1519–1574) at Villa di Castello, near Florence

LITERATURE
G. Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, et architettori*, Florence, 1568, p. 417

This marble group depicts two putti standing on a low, rocky base, embracing each other, whilst playfully squeezing a large, open-mouthed fish, through which water would have once been emitted. Indeed, one can see a circular hole for a pipe on the underside of the base, that has since been blocked in. Considering the intended external location of this marble, it has survived in a remarkable condition.[1]

Only a handful of scholars have comprehensively engaged with Pierino da Vinci's oeuvre and a number of sculptures included in their studies have in fact been erroneously attributed to him, for example, the marble *Saint John the Baptist*, now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.,[2] and the two small bronzes of *Bacchus* and *Venus* in the Ca' d'Oro, Venice.[3] It is therefore a hugely important development for Pierino studies that we are able to present a rediscovered work which not only represents an exceptional manifesto of the artist's style and quality, but is also identifiable with one of his works described by Vasari, which had hitherto been presumed lost.[4]

According to the biography Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) dedicates to Pierino in the second edition of his *Lives,* published in 1568,[5] Pierino was born in Vinci, the son of Bartolommeo, the youngest brother of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). When he was aged three, an astrologer and a priest devoted to chiromancy stayed at the house of his father and prophesied that the young Pierino would possess a great genius, but also that his life would be very short. Pierino's father was convinced that his deceased brother Leonardo had been restored to him in his son, so had Pierino apprenticed with Baccio Bandinelli




1

Giusto Utens (??–1609)
*Villa Medici dell'Olmo at Castello, near Florence*
Tempera on wood, 147 cm x 233 cm
Museo Topografico, Florence (inv.1890 n.6316)

2

Agnolo Bronzino (1503–1572)
*Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici*, 1545
Uffizi, Florence

3A–B

Niccolò Tribolo (1500–1550)
and Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
*Fountain of Hercules and Antaeus*, 1540s
(and detail of base)
Villa di Castello, Florence

(1493–1560) in Florence. However, here he was ignored, so he moved to the workshop of Niccolò Tribolo (1500–1550). Tribolo was by this time engaged in the creation of fountains (among other things) for the primary country residence and family home of Duke Cosimo I de'Medici (1519–1574) (fig. 1) – the Villa Medici dell'Olmo at Castello (fig. 2).[6] Whilst at the Villa, he contributed to carving various putti figures on the *Fiorenza* and *Hercules and Antaeus* fountains (fig. 3)[7] until he left to visit Rome in 1547.[8] Under Tribolo, Pierino specialized in sculpting putti, as his master had done when he trained with Jacopo Sansovino (1486–1570).[9] Although he was clearly inspired by Tribolo's vision and style, the young artist's idiosyncratic, graceful physicality and subtle use of chiaroscuro effects were eminently his own. In Middeldorf's words, Pierino's sculptures for Castello, while still very close to Tribolo, are 'somewhat differentiated by virtue of a peculiarly gracious liveliness and nervousness of modelling'.[10]

At some time before 1546, after Pierino had assisted Tribolo at Castello and carved the present sculpture, he was introduced to a generous and ambitious patron, the humanist and collector Luca Martini (1507–1561). Martini was a prominent member of the Medici court[11] and when he was

4

Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
*Young River God*, 1549
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Photo courtesy of Francesco Caglioti

5

After Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
*The Death by Starvation of Count Ugolino della Gherardesca and his Sons and Grandsons*, c. 1548–49
The Princely Collections of Liechtenstein, inv. SK1597

appointed ducal representative in Pisa, the young sculptor went with him. Over the following years, Martini 'ensured the works would enter the collections of the most famous patrons, such as the Medici family'.[12] Their friendship resulted in one of the most memorable alliances of the Renaissance and produced numerous masterpieces. These included the exquisitely languid young *River God* (fig. 4), now in the Louvre, which was gifted to Eleonora di Toledo by Martini and is considered one of the finest examples of Cinquecento mannerist sculpture.[13] The facial type is reminiscent of Michelangelo's *Victory* and the putti supporting the urn share a family relationship with Pierino and Tribolo's putti for the *Hercules* fountain at Castello (fig. 3a)[14].

Further works that Pierno executed for Martini include the strange and wonderfully unsettling relief depicting *The Death by Starvation of Count Ugolino della Gherardesca*, known from an after-cast in wax in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and a bronze version in the Princely Collections of Vaduz–Vienna (fig. 5) (which may well be the first independent work to illustrate a particular passage of Dante's *Divina Commedia*) and his celebrated relief of *Pisa Restored, or Duke Cosimo de' Medici restoring the Fortunes of Pisa* (fig. 6).[15]

6

Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
*Pisa Restored* or *Duke Cosimo I de' Medici restoring the Fortunes of Pisa*, c. 1550–52
Rome, Museo Pio-Clementino
© 2020. Photo Scala, Florence

7

Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
*Samson Slaying a Philistine*, 1551–52
Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

8

Bronzino (1503–1572)
*Portrait of Pierino da Vinci*, c. 1550
National Gallery, London,
on loan from a private collection

For Charles Avery, it is Pierino's work in shallow relief that best expresses his greatest contribution to European sculpture, for he writes: 'Pierino's relief style is a unique and precious achievement in the history of sixteenth-century sculpture, occupying, like the bronze *Perseus and Medusa* by Cellini, an isolated position on, as it were, a pinnacle of virtuosity that was never attained by any other artist'.[16]

During his second Roman sojourn of 1549, Pierino was probably able to renew his acquaintance with Michelangelo, whose aesthetic would further inform his work – no more so than in his group of *Samson and a Philistine* (fig. 7), which was perhaps based on a sketch that Pierino had seen in Rome.[17] It has also been noted that its full-frontal composition is half-way between Michelangelo's *Victory* for his Julius Tomb and his ideas for the pendant to the *David*.[18]

Tragically, Pierino died in Pisa after a short illness during the first few months of 1553, at the age of just 23. The only surviving image we have of the sculptor may be that painted by Agnolo Bronzino (1503–1572) around 1550, which is currently on loan to the National Gallery, London, from a private collection (fig. 8).

9

Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
*Putto Pissatore*, c. 1546
Museo statale d'arte medievale
e moderna, Arezzo

10A

After Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
*Two Putti playing with a fish*, terracotta
Victoria and Albert Museum, London
©Victoria and Albert Museum

## A MARBLE FROM VASARI'S VITE

*Two Putti playing with a Fish*, with its astonishing psychological intensity and intimacy, is certainly one of Pierino da Vinci's most important works. This particularly complex and subtle sculpture by far surpasses his other known 'fountain youths' from earlier on in his career. Importantly, it corresponds directly to the one described by Vasari as the fourth work created by him for Castello. After a few months, Tribolo perceived Pierino's readiness to work and gave him a small piece of marble from which to carve a boy that would spurt water from his penis. This can be identified as the *Putto Pissatore* at Arezzo (fig. 9) and it was received with great praise by Tribolo and his companions. He subsequently carved two children who, with their legs entwined, held a *mazzocchio* and placed it upon an escutcheon with the Medici balls. Thirdly, Pierino carved a boy squeezing a fish that squirted water from its mouth for the fountains of Castello.[18] Then, as Vasari records:

'Tribolo having given him a larger piece of marble, Piero made from it two putti who are embracing each other and squeezing fishes, causing water to spout from their mouths. These putti were so graceful in the heads and in their whole persons and executed with so beautiful a manner in the legs, arms and hair, that already it could be seen that he would have been able to execute the most difficult work to perfection.'[19]

Before the discovery of this marble group, the composition of the sculpture Vasari described was presumed to follow a terracotta version in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (fig. 10a) and at least two bronze versions

10b

After Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
*Two Putti Playing with a Fsh* (back of fig. 10)
Victoria and Albert Museum, London
©Victoria and Albert Museum

deriving from it.[20] Gifted by George Salting (1835–1909), the terracotta version was identified as 'probably' by Pierino in 1911.[21] Pope-Hennessy maintained the attribution, which was also supported by Holderbaum. Both scholars saw it as a model for, or record of, the marble group described by Vasari.[22] However, research undertaken in 1985–86 suggested that the terracotta dated from the mid-nineteenth century and was perhaps created from a plaster copy of a sixteenth-century original. Notwithstanding, there are sometimes problems with the thermoluminescence testing procedure (which enables the date of the last firing to be calculated), as the results can be affected by X-ray examinations, and, indeed, it has transpired that the sculpture had been X-rayed prior to that sample being taken.[23] In addition to this, the terracotta is not a straight copy of the marble group and there are significant differences, which lead us to believe that the terracotta is a variation on the marble of the period. These differences include the less detailed fish in the terracotta version, the difference in the drapery, the heels of both right feet (which do not touch the ground in the terracotta) and the simple disparity in dimensions (c. 2.5 cm in height) (fig. 10b). The London putti are also unequivocally male, and the putto on the right wears a further drape which wraps entirely round his torso above the navel; further differences are discernible in the faces and hair, the latter much thicker in the terracotta. Finally, the bases are dissimilar: although inspired by the same sort of rocky style, the terracotta is not shaped with the same extension and rhythm as the marble.

Another major difference between the terracotta version and our marble group is that the terracotta version has heads that do not fit comfortably, with plaster, suspiciously, covering the necks. From comparison of the marble and photographic evidence, it is obvious the terracotta heads were swapped some time between the publication of Eric Maclagan and Margaret Longhurst's *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture*, published in 1932, and John Pope-Hennessy's catalogue, work on which was completed in 1960. The Victoria and Albert museum records provide no details, but it may be that an old break opened up, which led to them be swapped in the belief that they had been wrongly positioned before. However, a comparison between the two versions reveals it to be the heads of the marble that are displayed in the most coherent and functional way.

11

Roman
*Boy strangling a Goose*, 2nd century AD
Vatican Museums

12

Donatello (1385–c. 1466)
*Winged Putto with Fantastic Fish*, c. 1435–40
Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. 475-1864
©Victoria and Albert Museum

## SOURCES, ORIGINS AND INSPIRATIONS

Pierino's *Putti*, with their graceful elongated forms and playful countenances, represent the ultimate expression of the Mannerist artistic taste which prevailed during the mid-Cinquecento. However, for a comprehensive understanding of the work's significance, it is important to place it in a broader artistic context and, specifically, to elucidate the ways in which it responds to the canon of antique and earlier Renaissance sculpture.

Sculptures and images of child-like figures holding or struggling with animals such as geese or fish flourished in Hellenistic times. The most famous of these is perhaps the *Boy strangling a Goose* conceived by Boethius of Chalcedon in the second century BC (fig. 11). Thanks to this precedent in the ancient world, this genre of subject was revived by the leading artists practising in Florence throughout the earlier Renaissance period, whose works Pierino would have no doubt been aware of.

One of the earliest Florentine examples was Donatello's *Winged Putto with Fantastic Fish* (fig. 12), which was also commissioned by the Medici, but perhaps the most famous was Andrea del Verrocchio's *Spiritello with a Dolphin* (fig. 13), for a fountain at the Medici's villa at Careggi, near Florence. Now at Palazzo Vecchio, Verrocchio's bronze remains one of the best known by the sculptor and, like Pierino's group, adopts a theme of an energetic putto figure playing with an aquatic creature, from whose mouth spouts water. Antonio Rossellino also made a work for the Medici that is described by Vasari as 'some children opening the mouths of dolphins'[24] for the marble fountain at the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi. The whole ensemble, now in Palazzo Pitti, has been altered and unfortunately is now entirely deprived of those 'children intent on opening the dolphin's mouth', which may have been made in marble or perhaps, in bronze.[25]

Other models that offered themselves as inspiration for Pierino's group, particularly the concept of an object being held by youths whilst it is in the process of slipping away, could have been the terracotta *spiritelli* that Donatello carved atop the *Annunciation* in *pietra serena* at Santa Croce, Florence (fig. 14). More generally, however, the sensuous contrapposto of Pierino's figures reveal the influence of Michelangelo, while the chiaroscuro of the children's delicate flesh, their oblique gaze and elongated eyebrows, along with the mysterious curl of their lips, is suggestive of Leonardo's faces for the Virgin Mary and St Anne in his Burlington House Cartoon (fig. 15).

Although Pierino was only a teenager at the time he carved this work, he clearly already exhibited the skills of a virtuoso marble carver. It is also clear that he had studied some of the finest examples of Quattrocento sculpture that depict children, like those by Desiderio da Settignano (c. 1428–1464), Benedetto da Maiano (1442–1497) and Mino da Fiesole (c. 1429–1484). Here Pierino appears to take great inspiration from their signature puffy and cheery faces, as well as from their sparse, curly locks of hair, that lay very close to the

13

Andrea del Verrocchio (c. 1435–1488)
*Spiritello with a Dolphin*, bronze
Palazzo Vecchio, Florence

14

Donatello (1385–c. 1466)
*Spiritelli*, c. 1435
Santa Croce, Florence

15

Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519)
*The Burlington House Cartoon*, 1499–1500
National Gallery, London (detail)

skull, as shown in Mino da Fiesole's *San Giovannino* (figs. 16 and 16a). The hair of both putti are suggestive of the skilful technique of shallow relief carving for which Pierino was to become known.[26]

Pierino has also arranged these figures to engage in a series of beautiful and sophisticated internal correspondences: the gentle inclination of their heads, the direction of their gazes and position of the hands, which marked a decisive step forward in the young artist's expressive capabilities. The composition is strikingly similar to Andrea del Sarto's *Due Putti con Cartiglio* (fig. 17), particularly in the manner that both sets of putti embrace each other. The similarity between the two works may not simply be fortuitous, for Vasari reports that Del Sarto seems to have had three clay figures made by his friend and Pierino's master, Niccolò Tribolo (whom he had met in Nanni Unghero's workshop), as a model for his pictures.[27] This suggests there was some degree of active artistic exchange between the leading painters and sculptors in Florence during this period. It also provides a possible reason for the existence of the related terracotta version in the V&A, as it may have been made by Tribolo's studio as a model for a painter such as Del Sarto.

16A–B

Mino da Fiesole (c. 1429–1484)
*San Giovannino*
Metropolitan Museum, New York

17

Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530)
*Due Putti con Cartiglio*
Galleria degli Uffizi
© 2020. Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo

## VILLA DI CASTELLO: TOWARDS A NEW GOLDEN AGE

Upon his rise to power in 1537, at the age of 17, Cosimo I, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1519–1574), at once began restoring the Villa di Castello, which lay in a beautiful area of countryside, a few kilometres west of Florence, not far from the banks of the Arno.[28] It was one of the most celebrated country estates of its time and had been bought by Lorenzo de' Medici, father of Lorenzo il Magnifico, in 1477. It was part of a network of Medicean country estates and villas including Pratolino, Poggio a Caiano, Cafaggiuolo, Careggi and Petraia. These Medicean *palazzi* allowed the family to establish a system of regional control, in defensive, political, economic, cultural and symbolic terms. It is important to note that the villa housed several great artworks from the family collection. Although no precise inventories from the time of Cosimo I exist,[29] we know thanks to Vasari[30] that, in 1550, some of the most iconic paintings of the Renaissance were among those at the villa, including Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, *Primavera* and *Pallas and the Centaur* (figs. 18–20).

In 1538, Cosimo enlisted the sculptor Niccolò Tribolo (1500–1550), who was then working in Bologna, to devise a new and innovative decorative scheme. Born in Florence in 1500, Tribolo trained under Jacopo Sansovino (1486–1570) and, by 1533, worked on the Medici Chapel with Michelangelo. His real talent lay in garden design and it was he who also laid out the Boboli Gardens and those of the Villa La Petraia. Here he exhibited a gift for combining together the elegance and charm of fountains, steps, sculptures and marble embellishments. Stylistically, he can generally be described as assimilating and translating the pictorial innovations of painters such as Pontormo and Correggio into sculptural terms. He was also the man who discovered and cultivated the young Pierino da Vinci.

18

Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510)
*Pallas and the Centaur*, c. 1480–85
Uffizi Gallery, Florence, inv. 1912 no.29

19

Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510)
*The Birth of Venus*, c. 1485
Uffizi Gallery, Florence, inv. 1890 no.878

20

Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510)
*La Primavera*, c. 1480
Uffizi Gallery, Florence, inv. 1890 no.8360

The other important figure whom Cosimo brought in for the Castello project was the philosopher and historian Benedetto Varchi. The task was to design and create fountains, water features, grottos, and statues, and to unify the design of the garden. Incidentally, Tribolo also suggested substantial changes in the house, but it seems these were largely ignored, suggesting Cosimo's priority was the renovation of the grounds.[31]

Vasari again provides the most comprehensive and trustworthy contemporary account of the works that Tribolo undertook, for they had a sincere friendship.[32] Tribolo planned to extend the line of trees already in the garden all the way to the Arno, with narrow canals fully stocked with fish and crustaceans lining either side,[33] so as to offer a startlingly dramatic vista as a backdrop to the sculpture in the garden. There was to be a 'secret' garden connected to an orchard and, in the main walled garden, at the centre, a circular labyrinth of cypresses, elms and myrtles. Beyond the upper garden wall there lay a wild forest, that was somewhat disconnected from the main

21

Giambologna (1529–1608), Niccolò Tribolo (1500–1550) and Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
Fountain of *Venus* / *Fiorenza*, 1540s (detail)
Villa di Castello, Florence.

garden.[34] Varchi envisioned, on one side of the labyrinth, sculptural allegories of *Justizia, Pietà, Valore, Nobilità, Sapienza* and *Liberalità* and, on the opposite wall, more carved allegories, of *Leggi, Pace, Armi, Scienze, Sapienza, Lingue* and *Arte*.[35]

Tribolo laid out the lower garden into squares divided by paths and borders. At the centre of the labyrinth he designed a fountain, crowned by Giambologna's bronze *Venus,* who represented *Fiorenza*, standing in a typically 'Giambolognesque' pose of serpentine contrapposto, wringing out her wet hair with her hands, from which water poured forth[36] (fig.21). Vasari explains that it was Tribolo's intention that the *Fiorenza* should signify that from the mountains of Asinaio and Falterona (which were also represented in sculptural form as bearded allegorical figures in the garden) there issued the waters of the Arno and Mugnone down to Florence.[37] A larger fountain was placed between the labyrinth and the villa, which was surmounted by a bronze sculpture of *Hercules defeating Antaeus* by Ammannati, along with a sculpture of *The Apennines*.

The *jeux d'eaux* of the waterworks, grottos and fountains was clearly the main focus of the renovation project, because, even before Tribolo was called to the villa, Cosimo had charged his master-builder, Maestro Piero da San Casciano, to build an aquaduct which diverted water from the hill of Castellina, for the purpose of supplying the audacious water displays.[38] However, soon after Casciano completed the aquaduct, he died of a fever, and so Tribolo took up the responsibility of devising the complicated subterranean water-supply system.

Tribolo also created a magnificent grotto from tufa stone, known as the *Grotto of the Unicorn*, which was built into one side of the garden and took the form of a wonderful menagerie of beasts and exotic creatures (fig. 22). The square grotto included three large basins with fish and turtle feet in niches, decorated with sea animals, coral and shells. Above them were groups of native Italian and exotic animals, including an elephant, water buffalo, ox, gazelle, unicorn, goat, ram, lion, dogs, rhinoceros, giraffe, monkey, bear, wolf, sheep, rabbit, weasel, deer, camel, boar and panther. Inside, the animated waterworks continued, for artificial rain fell from the false stalactites above and streams of water were emitted from the animals' jaws, beak, and wings. The grotto even included a few bronze birds by Giambologna, which are now mostly in the Bargello. The attempt was for the creatures to appear as close to reality as possible, their coats coloured by the use of various kinds of stone and being partly painted, while some of the animals were given real horns or antlers.[39]

For Châtelet-Lange, the most significant sculpted beast at the grotto was the white marble unicorn, which suggested the groups were intended to stage a scene from the Greek 'Physiologus' story, where a unicorn makes the sign of the cross with its horn and purifies the water of a lake at which all the animals drink.[40] The legend of the unicorn was a popular in Renaissance court culture; their 'horns' (which were in fact narwhal tusks) were much coveted as objects that could stave off poisons, and were regarded as evidence of the magical creature's existence.

22

Niccolò Tribolo (1500–1550) and
Pierino da Vinci (1529/30–1553)
Grotto of the Unicorn, 1540s
Villa di Castello, Florence
© Bildarchiv Monheim GmbH /
Alamy Stock Photo

## THE ICONOLOGY OF THE GARDEN

Cosimo and his advisers on the project were perhaps aware that around 1476 Lorenzo de'Medici composed a *Selve d'Amore*[41] in which he described the paradise of a 'Golden Age', where a unicorn and other animals lived together in peaceful harmony.[42] It therefore appears reasonable to suggest that learned visitors to the garden during the late humanist period might interpret such a harmonious grouping of the sculptural animals in the grotto and the purification of the water by the Unicorn as a coded declaration that Cosimo's rule heralded a new 'Golden Age' for the city of Florence, in the form a renewed harmony, peace and prosperity.

This message was emphasized by the focal point of the garden being two large bronzes that surmounted the fountains that towered above it. First was Giambologna's *Fiorenza*, representing Florence, which crowned Tribolo's topographical allegory of the city and its surrounding countryside.[43] The other was Ammannati's *Hercules and Antaeus*, whose mythological heroism in the struggle of good over evil made no small allusion to Cosimo's strength and projected triumphs.

Châtelet-Lange concluded his iconographical reading of the gardens: 'Just as the unicorn symbolically purifies the waters of the Earthy Paradise, or, in Lorenzo's poem, the waters of the Golden Age, so it stands in Castello at the source of the rivers that make Florence fertile. The "pure", "decontaminated" water streams through the lands of the Medici to the figure of *Fiorenza*, in the allegorical sense an allusion to the existence of the Florentines, now freed from all needs and barbarism, for whom the rule of the Medici has brought a new Golden Age.'

From Vasari's description it is clear that the great number of putti sculptures for the project reflected a common motif of the fountains:

'The base of the tazza, upon which are seated eight children of life size, all in the round and in various attitudes, who, linked together with the legs and arms, make a rich adornment and a most beautiful effect … those children that are on the shaft of the tazza are not wet, and they appear to be there in order not to get wet by the rain, almost like real children, full of delight and playing as they shelter under the lip of the tazza, which could not be equalled in its simplicity and beauty …. Opposite the four paths that intersect the garden are four children of bronze lying at play in various attitudes, which are after the designs of Tribolo …. Above this tazza begins another shaft, which has at the foot … four children of marble in the round, who are pressing the necks of some geese that spout water from their mouths.'[44]

From the nature of their embrace, linked together through their legs and arms, from the way they press the necks of creatures to make them spout water from their mouths, in a manner that is full of delight and playfulness – it is clear that the present work belonged to the same scheme, and was conceived in the same spirit, by the same hands and minds, as the other putti carved by Pierino and Tribolo at Castello.

As we read in Vasari, most of the putti carved to adorn these magnificent fountains were engaged in various mischievous and playful pursuits. One imagines that this would have been considered highly appropriate for the decoration of a pleasure garden, for they perhaps reflected the relaxed and whimsical nature of the activities that Cosimo and his guests may have engaged in at the estate. The excitable, playful and frivolous spirit of these youths would have also complemented the *jeux d'eaux* of the waterworks and likely encouraged connections to be made between the transience and joy of both water and youth, perhaps recalling Lorenzo il Magnifico's celebrated canzone:

'How beautiful Youth is,
That's always flying by us!
Who'd be happy, let him be so:
Nothing's sure about tomorrow.' [45]

In the mid-Cinquecento, the sight of inumerable child-like putti adorning the fountains, may have represented a literal manifestation of the *Fountain*

23

Lucas Cranach the Elder (c. 1472–1553)
*The Fountain of Youth*, 1546
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

*of Youth* of medieval tradition. The mythical fountain was believed to have regenerative and healing powers and bathing in it was thought to bestow eternal youth and the elixir of life upon the participant. Such a scene was depicted in the exactly contemporaneous painting of *The Fountain of Youth* by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1546 (fig. 23). Another reference point for Cosimo's court may have been an earlier depiction of the *Fountain of Youth* appearing in the famed mid-fifteenth century manuscript of the text known as *De Sphaera* (fig. 24). This illuminated codex is regarded by many as the most beautiful astrological book of the Italian Renaissance and was well known in Italian court circles at the time, having been commissioned by Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, and his wife Bianca Maria Visconti.

Any idea that the sculptural programme at the Castello gardens were 'merely' decoration and not agents in a thoroughly planned and calculated social, cultural and political project should be dispelled by the knowledge that Cosimo brought in the philosopher and historian Benedetto Varchi to work with Tribolo.[46] Indeed, Vasari declares these intentions for the programme explicitly, which was to demonstrate 'the greatness and the goodness of the house of the Medici, and represent all the virtues (that) are found in the Duke Cosimo'.[47]

The sculptures at the villa were unequivocally and exclusively modern and there was a notable absence of ancient works of art included in the scheme, which contributed greatly to the sense that it signalled a new era under Cosimo. The Castello garden project was perhaps the first to break with

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Cristoforo de Predis (c. 1440–1486)
*The Fountain of Youth*, in *De Sphaera*, c. 1450s
Modena, Biblioteca Estense
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the tradition of including antiquities in a grand Italian garden. In fact, the introduction of free-standing, exclusively contemporary sculptures in a garden was likely invented at Castello, for Châtelet-Lange has found no records of this being the case before 1540.[48]

This overt display of the patronage of the arts and culture (for socio-political ends) had ancient and medieval precedents. In antiquity, there existed the concept of *liberalitas* – the generous giving of money to the citizens by a benevolent ruler, as depicted in the Aurelian relief panel of *Liberalitas* on the Arch of Constantine, Rome. With his extraordinary programme of artistic patronage for the Castello gardens, Chandler Kirwin has argued that Cosimo linked the ancient concepts *liberalitas* and *artes* to demonstrate the munificence of his *imperium*,[49] in order to revive the fortunes of the Medici family. In the late medieval period, the nobility would assert 'their newly found status through visible symbols', in accordance with the 'theory of magnificence'. For Wright, this is demonstrated by Cosimo at Castello through his 'intention of surpassing prior norms in the practice of garden design and decoration in a way which would reflect the transition from mercantile society with "republican" sentiments to an aristocratic society ruled by a duke.'[50]

It is therefore important not to dismiss the subject matter of this sculptural group as simply playful and whimsical, for the comprehensive visual and thematic scheme of the decoration of the gardens at the Villa Castello – for which the present marble was carved – represented a clear social, cultural and political project.

Cosimo, Tribolo and Varchi conceived for Castello the first single coherent garden design programme[51] and were the first to introduce the aspect of allegory into a garden's design, it having previously only been used in interiors. They laid the foundation for this tradition, which was to reach a climax at Louis XIV's Palace of Versailles.[52] Cosimo's grand project at the Villa was therefore one of his first major achievements as ruler. Although it is hard to quantify the garden's precise socio-political and cultural impact, the garden's success no doubt assisted Cosimo in his ambition of ensuring the revival of the Medici dynasty. It initiated a new Florentine 'Golden Age' of artistic production and patronage under Cosimo, centred at Castello, which rendered it perhaps the most important of the Medici's country residences and made it the pre-eminent platform for their influence over the city of Florence which lay below. Cosimo himself went on to become the greatest patron of the arts of the Renaissance period, creating the Uffizi but also overseeing the completion of the Pitti Palace and the Boboli Gardens and, through a constant supply of generous commissions, supporting a myriad of contemporary artists who became titans of European Renaissance art.

## THE FATE OF THE VILLA DI CASTELLO AND ITS COLLECTION

Following Cosimo's death in 1574, members of the family, beginning with his son Ferdinand I, continued to inhabit the villa, each leaving their imprint on the building and its collections. However, the 1663 inventory of Castello testifies that, already by the second half of the seventeenth century, most of the artworks had been moved to other residences, in particular to Palazzo Pitti, with nothing of importance being left at the villa.[53]

Upon the death in 1737 of Gian Gastone, the seventh and last Medicean Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Medici properties and art collection passed on to his sister Anna Maria Luisa, Electress Palatine, who continued to live in a wing of the Pitti Palace until her death in 1743, when the dynasty became effectively extinct. In her testament known as the 'Family Pact', devised to prevent divisions and inevitable sales of artworks, the Electress entrusted the family art collection to the Tuscan state, on condition that no part of it be alienated.

The villas and palaces, with their contents, thus virtually passed into the hands of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine, who, in the person of Francis I, Holy Roman Emperor, had succeeded the Medici as Grand Dukes of Tuscany. The upheavals caused by the French Revolution later led to a temporary hiatus, during which these rules were not respected.

Throughout the eighteenth century, a number of changes befell the Villa di Castello, including the dismantling of several fountains, the *Fountain of Florence*, for instance, on which Niccolò Tribolo and Pierino da Vinci had worked, and its crowning statue of *Fiorenza/Venus* by Giambologna was transferred to the nearby Villa della Petraia. It may also have been at this time that Pierino's *Putti Playing with a Fish* could have been transferred to the Grotta di Madama in the Boboli Garden.[54] However, a move such as this may have occurred as early as the second half of the sixteenth century, when Cosimo I was concentrating his efforts on the building of Palazzo Pitti.

In 1799, as a result of the French Revolutionary Wars, the Habsburg-Lorraine were forced out of Florence, their palaces at least in part ransacked by the French army. Following a brief spell under the house of Bourbon-Parma, Tuscany was then annexed to France, with Elisa Bonaparte nominally at its head. After the collapse of the Napoleonic system in 1814, however, the Grand Duchy returned to the Habsburgs, in whose hands it remained until 1859, when it became part of the Kingdom of Sardinia, the royal residences and villas passing into the hands of the royal house of Savoy.

Throughout the nineteenth century Villa di Castello fell into a state of increasing disrepair until, in 1919, it was donated by King Victor Emmanuel III to the Italian State. By this time, as a consequence of wars and dynastic vicissitudes, it had been deprived of most of its contents.

As mentioned above, the testament of the Electress Palatine effectively bound the Medici collections to the Tuscan state. However, a number of artworks and properties had already been sold or given away by members of

the family over the previous decades, especially as diplomatic gifts. From the first years of his ascent to power, Cosimo I perfected the art of the gift as a way of cementing relationships with other states. Needless to say, the Grand Duke could count on one of the most impressive art collections in the world, with new works being regularly commissioned from the artists active at his court.

For example, Bronzino's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, originally intended for the altar of Eleonora of Toledo's chapel at Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, was given by Cosimo I to the advisor to Emperor Charles V, Nicolas Perrenot de Granvelle, before 1550 (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon). Sculpture played perhaps an even more important role in this context. Thus, already in 1537 the young Cosimo I presented Francisco de los Cobos y Molina with 'a statue and some fabrics', the sculpture being the *Saint John the Baptist* attributed to Michelangelo by Francesco Caglioti, which was already in the Medici collection (Saviour's Chapel, Úbeda, Andalusia, Spain). The gift of Michelangelo's marble highlights the importance of sculpture as a gift between European courts, as well as the fact that the Medici rulers would habitually tap into their valuable collections of paintings, sculptures and works of art in search of a suitable present.

The practice was continued by Cosimo I's heirs. In 1601 his son, Grand-Duke Ferdinando I, gifted Giambologna's *Samson and a Philistine* (executed c. 1560) to the Duke of Lerma, a chief minister of King Philip III of Spain. Importantly, this marble originally formed part of an ornamental fountain made for the Medici family. Only twenty years later, in 1623, it was given by King Philip IV to the Prince of Wales, later King Charles I, who in turn gave it to the Duke of Buckingham, and it is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, representing the only marble sculpture by Giambologna in the United Kingdom.

It is not unlikely that Pierino's *Two Putti Playing with a Fish* was removed from its original location at Villa di Castello and gifted by Cosimo I de' Medici or one of his successors to a European prince or diplomat, an occurrence which would be in line with well-known, documented precedents. However, the marble could also have been sold at the time of the Riccardi acquisitions in the first half of the seventeenth century, or it could have left Tuscany at the time of the French occupation. The latter hypothesis would perhaps explain the reappearance of the sculpture on the French market in the twentieth century.

1 However, its gently abraded surface does bear the slightest effects of weathering, which, as highlighted by Francesco Caglioti in his 2018 study of the present work, only further indicates the work's antiquity. The heads of both figures have at some stage been reattached (at the base of the neck of one and below the chin on the other), as well as both noses and the right leg of one (at the knee and just above the foot). Lastly, the left side of the sculpture's base displays a restoration c. 5 cm wide that almost reaches the other's right foot.
2 Re-attributed to Susini by Caglioti 2012, pp. 5–6 and notes 34–39 (pp. 58–60), and pp. 34–37, figs. 30–33.
3 Re-attributed to Susini by Draper 2016.
4 Caglioti, 2018.
5 Vasari, 1568, p. 416.
6 Vasari, 1568 (1912–14), pp. 41–43.
7 Caglioti, 2018: 'Although the exact authorship of some of the Castello sculptures is questionable, it seems fairly certain that the supine putto holding a fish and the putto turning his shoulders to the spectator on the Fountain of Hercules and Antaeus are his.'
8 Vasari, 1568, p. 418.
9 Avery, 1970, p. 216.
10 Middeldorf, 1928, p. 305.
11 Avery, 1970, p. 2016.
12 d'Alburquerque, 2018, p. 37.
13 Completed after 1549, it was presented by Martini to Cosimo I's consort, the Duchess Eleonora of Toledo, who then gave it to her brother, Don García, for his estate of Chiaia, Naples. Cf. F. Loffredo, 'La villa di Pedro de Toledo a Pozzuoli e una provenienza per il "Fiume" di Pierino da Vinci al Louvre', in *Rinascimento meridionale*, no. 2 (2011), pp. 93–113. See also Vasari 1568, p. 419.
14 Avery, 1970, p. 2016.
15 The first relief depicts a subject particularly close to Martini's literary and philological interests. The second relief's complex iconography, on the other hand, was arguably conceived by Martini himself (cf. d'Alburquerque, op. cit., p. 40 and note 17).
16 Avery, 1970, p. 219
17 Ibidem, p. 219
18 Vasari, 1568 (1912–14), p. 43.
19 Vasari, 1568, p. 417: 'Et avendogli dato il Tribolo un pezzo di marmo maggiore, ne cavò Piero due putti che s'abbracciano l'un l'altro, e stringendo pesci, gli fanno schizzare acqua per bocca. Furono questi putti sì graziosi nelle teste e nella persona e con sì bella maniera condotti di gambe, di braccia e di capelli, che già si potette vedere che egli arebbe condotto ogni difficile lavoro a perfezzione.'
20 See Christie's London, 9 June 1999, lot 290, and 10 November 2005, lot 353. The casts are respectively 66 and 62.2 cm high.
21 The Salting Collection, London, 1911, p. 11.
22 Pope-Hennessy, 1964, pp. 442–43.
23 https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16273/two-boys-with-a-fish-group-da-vinci-pierino/ (online catalogue updated 29 Jan. 2020).
24 Vasari: 'alcuni fanciulli che sbarrano delfini che gettano acqua'.
25 Caglioti, 2018.
26 Caglioti, 2018.
27 Gramberg, 1931, p. 227.
28 Châtelet-Lange, 1968, p. 51.
29 Only those of 1499, 1598, 1610, 1638 (published in Wright, 1976).
30 Vasari, 1550 (1912–14), III, p. 248.
31 Vasari, 1964, p. 459.
32 Châtelet-Lange, 1968, p. 51.
33 Vasari, 1964, p.460
34 Ibidem, p. 460.
35 Chandler Kirwin, 1971, p. 114.
36 Vasari, 1568 (1912–14), VII, p. 22.
37 Ibidem.
38 Châtelet-Lange, 1968, p. 51.
39 Ibidem, p. 52.
40 Ibidem.
41 Lorenzo de'Medici, *Tutte le opera*, Milan, 1958, II, *Scritti d'Amore*, 'Selva seconda', v. 91, p. 308, where it is dated "probably after 1476".
42 Châtelet-Lange, 1968, p. 54.
43 Ibidem, p. 57.
44 Vasari, 1568 (1912 – 1915), VII, p.23
45 'Quant'è bella giovinezza, Che si fugge tuttavia! Chi vuol esser lieto, sia: Di doman non c'è certezza.'
46 Chandler Kirwin, 1971, p. 114.
47 Vasari, 1568 (1878), VI, p. 83 ('La Grandezza e la bontà della casa de' Medici' represent 'tutte le virtù [che] si truovono nel duca Cosimo').
48 Châtelet-Lange, 1968, p. 57.
49 Chandler Kirwin, 1971, p. 114.
50 Wright, 1976, p. 358.
51 Keutner, 1965, p. 236.
52 Châtelet-Lange, 1968, p. 57.
53 Firenze, Archivio di Stato, Miscellanea Medicea 31.10.
54 Vasari, 1568, p. 417.

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