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ANTONIO PISANO

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PISANELLO

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*MEDAL PORTRAIT OF LEONELLO D'ESTE*

Bronze

6.7 cm diameter

Obverse: Leonello d'Este, in profile to the right, inscribed LEONELLUS MARCHIO ESTENSIS

Reverse: Triple-faced head of an infant flanked by two poleyns (armour to protect the knee) suspended from olive branches, signed OPUS PISANI PICTORIS

Provenance

Probably Contini Bonacossi Collection, Florence

Spink, 24 January 2008, lot 92

Literature

A. Armand, *Les médailleurs italiens des quinzième et seizième siècles*, Paris, 1883, n. 4, p. 3

J. G. Pollard, *Medaglie italiane del Rinascimento nel Museo Nazionale del Bargello*, vol. I, Florence, 1984, n. 7, pp. 41-44

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J. G. Pollard, *Renaissance medals*, vol. 1, Italy, Washington, 2007, cat. 6, pp. 13-14  
*The Renaissance portrait: From Donatello to Bellini*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2011, n. 67, pp. 202-205

A highly original painter, draughtsman and medallist, Pisanello travelled extensively and worked for several Italian courts, at Mantua, Ferrara, Pavia, Milan and Naples. His resplendent frescoes, elegant painted portraits and medals made him one of the most popular artists of his day, however many of his paintings and frescoes have been lost or damaged. His most original contribution to the early Italian Renaissance was the personal commemorative medal, a form of art that was enthusiastically embraced by his courtly patrons.

Pisanello is thought to have made his very first portrait medal in 1438-1439 when he was in Ferrara for the visit of the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Paleologus. It is signed 'OPVS PISANI PICTORIS' and depicts the emperor in profile on one side and on the reverse the emperor on horseback praying before a cross. By adopting a formula that included a portrait in profile on one side and an allegorical scene on the other, cast in metal, Pisanello had invented a new form of court art that illustrated a ruler and his achievements. While the specific reason for this creation is not known, it is manifest that Pisanello, for his design, was indebted to ancient Roman coins. Actively excavated and collected in Italy, the latter bore the portraits of rulers and had allegorical representations on their reverse. Reviving this antique art form, Pisanello's medals formed a contemporary record of rulers and they could be presented as personal marks of favour that could be carried and passed from hand to hand. The artist, who was trained not only as a painter but also as a sculptor and metalsmith, displayed remarkable talent in modelling and casting the medals. He also demonstrated his accomplishment as a humanist courtier in designing the portraits and the original iconography that accompanied them on the reverse. The portraits in profile featured on his medals were based on a life-study of the models and many of Pisanello's preparatory drawings have survived<sup>1</sup>.

The most enthusiastic of Pisanello's patrons was the cultivated Leonello d'Este (1407-1450), who became Marchese of Ferrara in 1441. That year Pisanello painted his likeness, depicting him in profile in court dress against a background of roses (Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo, fig. 1)<sup>2</sup>. In the early 1440s, Pisanello also realised a series of remarkable portrait medals of Leonello d'Este. On the obverse the Marchese always faces left, except for the medal of the present type, where he faces right. The various reverses in the series show the artist's quality of invention and feature a blindfolded lynx, a reclining male nude, two youths carrying baskets, and two men seated below the mast of a ship. These allegorical images reflect the intellectual sophistication of Leonello's court and the meaning of most of them remains obscure today. The only medal to bear a date - 1444 - was modelled on the occasion of Leonello's marriage to Maria of Aragon. On its reverse it shows a lion, an image of Leonello whose first name affords a flattering pun, standing in front of Cupid.

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<sup>1</sup> the bulk of the drawings is preserved in the Codex Vallardi in the Louvre, Paris

<sup>2</sup> Tempera on panel, 28 x 19 cm

The present medal, perhaps the earliest in the series<sup>3</sup>, pictures Leonello d'Este facing right, with short curly hair and wearing a surcoat with scale decoration over mail. The reverse shows a three-faced putto flanked by olive branches from which are suspended poleyns, pieces of armour designed to protect the knee. Pisanello's accuracy in the representation of armour is characteristic of his work; it shows his capacity for detailed observation, as well as the importance accorded to armour, one of the most highly prized possessions of rulers at the time. The imagery on the reverse appears to present the association of Prudence - the three-faced putto who can see the past and the future and hence act with circumspection - and Peace, illustrated by a piece of armour hung, and therefore out of use, from olive branches. Some scholars have proposed a different meaning for the peculiar three-faced putto, which might be a representation of the muse of epic verse Calliope, as described by Guarino da Verona, Leonello d'Este's tutor, who wrote that she has 'three faces composed together, since she has set forth the nature of men, heroes and gods.'<sup>4</sup> The branches on both sides of the medal have also been described as juniper, a favourite plant of Leonello.

Another cast of this medal is in the collection of the British Museum, London, the Galleria Estense, Modena, the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence and the National Gallery in Washington.

The present medal is said to have been part of the Contini Bonacossi collection, Florence. Put together by Count Alessandro Contini Bonacossi (1878-1955), the collection included paintings, among them masterpieces by Andrea del Castagno and Giovanni Bellini, as well as precious furniture, maiolica and sculptures. A portion of the collection was donated to the Italian state and is now part of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.



Fig.1 Pisanello, *Portrait of Lionello d'Este*,  
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, 58MR00010

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<sup>3</sup> see *Pisanello, painter to the Renaissance court*, exhibition catalogue by L. Syson and D. Gordon, National Gallery of Art, London, 2001, p. 121. The text of the catalogue raises questions about the attribution of the medal to Pisanello. However, all the previous and subsequent literature confirms the attribution to Pisanello and we see no reason to doubt it.

<sup>4</sup> see K. Lippincott, "Un Gran Pelago": The Impresa and the medal reverse in fifteenth-century Italy" in *Perspectives on the Renaissance Medal*, S. Scher ed., New York, 2000, pp. 75-83