

TRINITY FINE ART

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Mirabello Cavalori

(Florence, c. 1530/5 – 1572)

Allegorical Portrait of a Young Man

Oil on canvas, 182 x 105 cm

1565–70

Exhibited:

Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André, 11 September 2015 – 25 January 2016, *Florence. Portraits à la cour des Médicis*, cat. 33;

Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, 21 September 2017 – 21 January 2018, *Il Cinquecento a Firenze. “Maniera moderna” e Controriforma*, cat. IV.3.

Literature:

C. Pizzorusso, *Amicizia di Baccho. Variazioni su un tema del Caravaggio*, in «Artista. Critica dell’Arte in Toscana», 1998, pp. 12-13;

A. Nesi, *Mirabello Cavalori ritrattista tra devozione e quotidianità*, in «Arte Cristiana», XCII, 2005, pp. 271-278;

A. Fenech-Kroke, in *Florence. Portraits à la cour des Médicis*, (exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2015 – 2016), pp. 174-175, cat. 33;

A. Fenech-Kroke, in *Il Cinquecento a Firenze. “Maniera moderna” e Controriforma* (exhibition catalogue, Florence, 2017 – 2018), p. 152, cat. IV.3.

This painting was published by Claudio Pizzorusso in 1998 with an attribution to Mirabello Cavalori, one of the most interesting artists working in Francesco I de’ Medici’s Studiolo in Palazzo Vecchio between 1570 and 1572¹. Cavalori produced two paintings for that dazzling project which brought together the various different aesthetic strands popular in the Medici duchy at the time: *The Wool Factory* and *Lavinia at the Altar*, the latter picture also identified by Feinberg as *Glauce (Creusa) Burning on the Altar*². In the two paintings, the artist combines echoes of Pontormo with a new

¹ Pizzorusso 1998, pp. 12-13; the painting was shown in the following exhibitionse: *Florence. Portraits à la cour des Médicis*, (Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André 11 September 2015 – 25 January 2016) curated by C. Falciani, cat. 33, pp. 174-175, entry by A. Fenech-Kroke; *Il Cinquecento a Firenze*, (Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, 21 September 2017 – 21 January 2018) curated by C. Falciani, A. Natali, Florence 2017, cat. IV.3, pp. 152-153, with an entry by A. Fenech-Kroke, with preceding bibliography.

² See L. Feinberg, *Nuove riflessioni sullo Studiolo di Francesco I*, in *L’ombra del genio. Michelangelo e l’arte a Firenze. 1537-1671*, exhibition catalogue, (Florence – Chicago - Detroit 2002 – 2003), Milan 2002, pp. 57-75.

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naturalistic sensitivity in his portraits, in his handling of fabrics and in his construction of space through light, proving beyond question that Cavalori, who unfortunately died in 1572, was one of the entire project's most experimental artists.

In this life-size painting, which can confidently be attributed to Cavalori's hand, he portrays a young man standing full-figure, dressed in a simple short tunic with a cloak resting on his shoulder, his feet clad in sandals bound in the classical style. The young man pulls open his tunic with his left hand while pointing with his right to his vibrant red heart, which bears the inscription *procul prope* (*near and far*) in gold lettering. The young man's gesture in pointing to his heart with his right hand serves to introduce the allegory as a whole, which also includes other inscriptions and symbols. The inscription *hyemes et ver* (*winter and spring*) in red lettering hovers over the young man's head, while the bottom of his tunic bears the inscription *mors et vita* (*life and death*) twice over, once in dark lettering on the white hem and again in red lettering on the green tunic itself. The presence of these inscriptions prompted Claudio Pizzorusso to perceive a certain proximity between this allegory and the personification of *Friendship* as described by Cesare Ripa in the first edition of his *Iconologia*³ published in 1593, where the same gesture involving pointing to the heart and the same definitions (*longe et prope – hiems, aestas – mors et vita*) are associated with a female figure, given that the word 'friendship' is feminine (in both Latin and Italian). In the second variant of the same allegory, this time in the 1603 edition of Ripa's *Iconologia*⁴, the woman is also accompanied by a dog, as in Cavalori's picture, symbolising the loyalty required for two people to remain friends even in opposing situations: near and far, in winter and spring, in life and death. Yet, as Antonella Fenech Kroke points out⁵, Cavalori appears to have drawn inspiration for his own allegory from an earlier and rarer iconographical tradition, which had also inspired Vincenzo Borghini and Baccio Baldini. Baldini developed a conceitful allegory of Friendship for the *Mascherata della Genealogia degli Dei* (*Masquerade of the Genealogy of the Gods*) held in Florence on 21 February 1566 to celebrate Francesco I de' Medici's marriage with Joanna of Austria. Baldini's allegory is also personified by a female figure and bears the same inscription's as Cavalori's young man, but it is based on Lilio Gregorio Giraldi's *De Deis Gentium*⁶, where the personification is a young man, head bowed, sporting

³ C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, Rome 1593, p. 10.

⁴ C. Ripa, *Iconologia*, Rome 1603, pp. 16-17.

⁵ A. Fenech Kroke, in *Il Cinquecento a Firenze*, exhibition catalogue (Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, 21 September 2017 – 21 January 2018) curated by C. Falciani, A. Natali, Florence 2017, pp. 152-153.

⁶ L. G. Giraldi, *De deis gentium...*, Basel 1548, p. 73.

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a rough tunic bearing the same inscriptions as Cavalori uses in this painting. So the allegorical personification in this painting is based on Giraldi and on older sources listed by Antonella Fenech, but Cavalori added further symbols to the tradition, which makes this painting a unique piece in the sequence as a whole. The column is a customary attribute of *Fortitude*, but the two columns behind the young man here symbolise the strength, the closeness and indeed the very identity of the two people whose bond is symbolised by the knotted curtain seen in the picture's upper right-hand corner. While the knot is an obvious symbol of a bond in any culture, in 16th century Florence it would inevitably have brought to mind Petrarch's "dear knot, with which Love tied me in such a way that bitter was sweet, and weeping joy"⁷. A knotted curtain echoing the same lines in Petrarch is also found in a portrait of a young man by Francesco Salviati now in Saint Louis, where the allegory is further embodied in yet more images taken from the *Canzoniere*⁸. The presence of the knot in Cavalori's painting appears to shift the meaning of the allegory as a whole, suggesting the portrayal of a more intimate bond between two men, as hinted at in the bas-relief seen below on the opposite side to the dog, a clear symbol of loyalty. In the bas-relief, a man weeps before the clearly lifeless body of his companion, a scene which may refer to the passage in the *Iliad* (Bk. 18, 1-165) where Homer tells of Achilles' grief over the death of Patroclus, although the absence of any weapons may also mean that we are looking at Apollo despairing over the death of his beloved Hyacinth, as recounted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (Bk. 10, 162-219). In fact, the latter story would appear to be better suited to the clear allusion to love embodied in Petrarch's love knot, which is missing from all previous and subsequent depictions of the allegory of Friendship. The knot, therefore, is the symbol of a bond that continues to exist in the changing seasons, in the closeness or distance of the

⁷ (*caro nodo / ond'Amor di sua man m'avinse in modo / che l'amar mi fe' dolce, e 'l pianger gioco*), F. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 175, *Quando mi vene inanzi il tempo e 'l loco* (When that time and place come to my thoughts). Allusions to the love knot also in 271, "The burning knot that held me constantly / from hour to hour, for twenty years, / Death loosened, and I never felt such grief, / and know now man cannot die of tears." (*L'ardente nodo ov'io fui d'ora in hora, / contando, anni ventuno interi preso, / Morte disciolse, né già mai tal peso / provai, né credo ch'uom di dolor mora*). English translation by A.S. Kline (A.S. Kline, *The Complete Canzoniere* translated by A.S. Kline, 2015).

⁸ See C. Falciani in *The Medici. Portraits and Politics*, exhibition catalogue, (New York, The Metropolitan Museum, 26 June – 11 October 2021) curated by K. Christiansen, C. Falciani, New Haven and London 2021, cat. 87, pp. 277-279.

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two lovers, and finally, in life and death, as Petrarch himself tells us “but since dying well brings us honour, despite grief or death, I do not wish Love to loose me from this knot.”⁹

We do not know either who commissioned this monumental allegorical portrait, or who the two men joined by the bond depicted in the painting may have been, but it is nevertheless interesting to note that *c.* 1570, with the Counter-Reformation climate at its strongest, the picture is unique among the allegories painted in Francesco I de’ Medici’s court circle in that it celebrates with immense freedom the memory of a bond between two people of the same sex through a combination of iconographical elements subsequently systematised in the figure of Friendship by Cesare Ripa in his *Iconologia* over twenty years later.

Carlo Falciani

⁹ (*ma perché ben morendo honor s'acquista, / per morte né per doglia / non vo' che da tal nodo Amor mi scioglia*), F. Petrarch. *Canzoniere*, 59, *Perché quel che mi trasse ad amar prima* (“Though another’s fault takes me away”). English translation by A.S. Kline, see note 7.

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