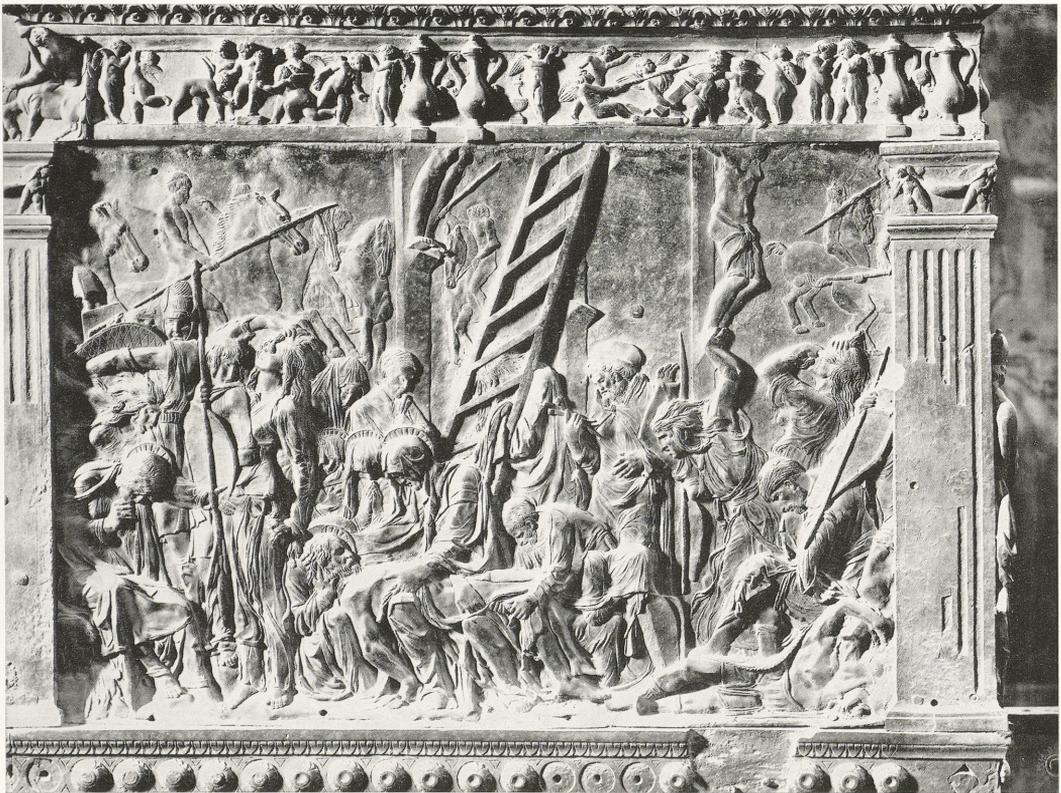


Howard Saalman: THE SAN LORENZO PULPITS: A COSIMO PORTRAIT?

The San Lorenzo pulpits continue to draw attention.<sup>1</sup> It is remarkable, however, that the pulpits, at the periphery of the 'burial environment' around Cosimo de' Medici's tomb in the center of the crossing of San Lorenzo in Florence, an environment which included the tomb itself, the altar and Desiderio's sacrament tabernacle as well as four lost saints by Donatello in niches in the end walls of the San Lorenzo transept<sup>2</sup>, bear no sign of Medici patronage. At the same time, our earliest source to mention the pulpits, Vespasiano di Bisticci, expressly refers to Cosimo's patronage.<sup>3</sup> Following a special concession by the canon chapter in 1442, Cosimo had sole rights to any sort of patronage on the main chapel, transept and nave.<sup>4</sup>

I would like to offer a suggestion in this regard. At the center of the *Pietà* panel at the western front of the southern pulpit, a strange couple stands directly behind the grieving Virgin (Figs. 1, 2). The man, clad in a simple cloak and wearing a turban-like sash wound tightly around his skull, stands apart from the conventional biblical figures around him by his defined features, pronounced chin, hollow cheeks and prominent cheek bone, large nose, sharply cut brow and domical forehead. A few straggling hairs protrude under the turban over the large exposed ear. His mouth is pursed upward. His eyes are half closed in an attitude of grief. The woman behind him, with elderly wrinkled face and shrouded head, grieves with him, her head leaning on his shoulder. They belong together, man and wife.

We have few reliable portraits to compare with these heads. But the features of the man recall several fifteenth century medals and portraits derived from them (Fig. 3)<sup>5</sup> and match the more corpulent features of the old man riding in the fresco of the *Adoration of the Magi* in the house chapel of the Medici palace<sup>6</sup>: it is old Cosimo and his wife, Contessina de' Bardi, in perpetual attendance.<sup>7</sup>



1 Florence, San Lorenzo, Passion Pulpit, *Pietà* Panel.



2 Detail of Fig. 1. Cosimo de' Medici and Contessina de Bardi (?).



3 Medal Portrait of Cosimo de' Medici (*Langedijk* [n. 5], Cat. L. 26.29), ca. 1465.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Janson*, Donatello, pp. 209 f.: *I. Lavin*, The Sources of Donatello's Pulpits in San Lorenzo, in: *Art Bull.*, XLI, 1959, pp. 19-38; *G. Previtali*, Una data per il problema dei pulpiti di San Lorenzo, in: *Paragone*, 133, 1961, pp. 48-56; *V. Herzner*, Die Kanzeln Donatellos in San Lorenzo, in: *Münchner Jb.*, XXIII, 1972, pp. 101-164.
- <sup>2</sup> Concerning the tomb, see *J. Clearfield*, The Tomb of Cosimo de' Medici in San Lorenzo, in: *Rutgers Art Journal*, 1981, pp. 13-30; The Sacrament Tabernacle: *J. Beck*, Desiderio da Settignano (and Antonio del Pollaiuolo): Problems, in: *Flor. Mitt.*, XXVIII/2, 1984, pp. 213 f.
- <sup>3</sup> *Vespasiano di Bisticci*, Vite di uomini illustri del secolo XV, ed. RDL, Florence 1938, p. 280: "Cosimo, a fine che Donatello non si stesse, gli allogò certi pergami di bronzo per Santo Lorenzo...".
- <sup>4</sup> The document of concession is published in *P. Ginori-Conti*, La Basilica di S. Lorenzo di Firenze e la Famiglia Ginori, Florence 1940, pp. 240-245, Doc. VI.
- <sup>5</sup> *K. Langedijk*, The Portraits of the Medici, I, Florence 1981, pp. 385 f; pp. 298 f, L. 26.28; 26.29.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25, 402 26.38.
- <sup>7</sup> *A. Parronchi* (Il complesso Monumentale di San Lorenzo. La Basilica, Le Sagrestie, le Cappelle, La Biblioteca, Florence 1984, p. 104) came to the same conclusion in a brief caption: "una figura virile in cui si vuol riconoscere Cosimo il Vecchio".

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