ON ILLUSION AND ALLUSION IN ITALIAN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY PORTRAIT BUSTS

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ON ILLUSION AND ALLUSION IN ITALIAN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY PORTRAIT BUSTS

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(Read November 14, 1974)

Among the most notable achievements of the Italian Renaissance in art was to have revived the classical tradition of the independent portrait bust. The sculptured portrait did not actually disappear during the Middle Ages, but when it occurred it was included within some physical and conceptual context, notably as part of the decoration of churches and tombs. To say that the Renaissance revived the classical portrait is only a partial truth, however, for in their basic structure Renaissance busts differ profoundly from their ancient predecessors. The typical Roman bust (fig. 1) is rounded at the bottom, hallowed out at the back and set up on a base; its Renaissance counterpart (fig. 2) is cut straight through just above the elbow, it is carved fully in the round, and it has no base. Usually the classical work is a self-contained, abstract form, conceived only from the front and set apart by a base from its support. The Renaissance work is an arbitrarily cut off, incomplete form, conceived in three dimensions and not isolated from the support. From each artist's point of view, the other's creation is grotesque, in the one case because the bust appears like an amputated body, in the other because a human being is made into an inanimate thing. The ancient work is an ideal form, the Renaissance bust is a deliberate fragment, the effect of which is to create an illusion that is entirely new in the history of art. The arbitrary amputation specifically suggests that what is visible is part of a larger whole, that there is more than meets the eye. By focusing on the upper part of the body, but deliberately emphasizing that it is only a fragment, the Renaissance bust evokes the complete individual—that sum total of physical and psychological characteristics to which contemporaries already referred as the "whole man."

This development occurred in Florence around the middle of the fifteenth century. During the second half of the century, measures were taken to heighten the illusion of a complete, living human being. One of these involved the introduction of motion, both implied and actual. In a Bust of a Lady attributed to Antonio Rossellino, dating from the 1460's (fig. 3), the arms are separated from the body so that they may function, at least by implication, independently of the torso. Furthermore, a subtle and complicated series of departures from the strict horizontal and vertical axes to which the earlier bust had adhered, is introduced. The head turns slightly to the right and tilts slightly to the left; and the left shoulder is slightly higher than the right. The kind of motion seen here is different from that found in any ancient work. In classical busts the head may look up or down, or turn to one side or the other; but a strict vertical axis is always discernible running through the body, neck, and head, and the shoulders remain on a horizontal line. In other words, the ancient bust has an inviolable, inner structure, for which the


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In the next decade, Andrea del Verrocchio took another bold step. In his *Portrait of a Lady* (fig. 4), he echoed a relatively rare bust type in which both arms are shown in their entirety. But comparison with a Roman work of this kind (fig. 5) reveals differences no less striking than the similarities. The basic structural contrast we noted before is again present; and now also Verrocchio includes a zigzag of motion through the head, neck, chest, and abdomen. The result is a forceful illusion, not only of the whole person, but also of live action; the classical figure seems inhibited by a spinal column in which the vertebrae have fused.

The second contribution of the late fifteenth century is in the realm of expression. To be sure, ancient portraitists explored a wide range of emotions. But there is nothing from classical times to compare with the bust of Beatrice of Aragon by Francesco Laurana (fig. 6), whose inclined head and downcast eyes express a perfect demureness. And nothing from antiquity compares with Verrocchio’s bust of Giuliano de’...

Medici (fig. 7), where the proud bearing and the faint smile help to create a sense of genial self-confidence. It should be emphasized that neither of these images would have been possible without the intervening personifications of Christian virtue—the chaste maiden on the one hand, the noble knight on the other. In fact, it might be said that the Renaissance achievement consisted largely in having assimilated the medieval concept of human morality to the classical notion of human individuality.

While this is an important contribution to the portrayal of character, nevertheless there is something curiously discreet and unassuming about these early Renaissance works. The artist was evidently concerned to give an external description of the sitter, of whose inner personality we are made aware implicitly by an abrupt psychological truncation analogous to the treatment of the bust form itself. This relative objectivity has a functional counterpart in the fact that, as far as we can tell from the sources, such portraits served an essentially documentary purpose, as family records. They were made for...
the private home, to whose architecture they were physically attached, over doorways, mantelpieces and the like; and there is no evidence for one of the most conspicuous uses of bust portraits in antiquity, namely, as civic monuments.

In the sixteenth century all this changes. The portrait bust becomes a consciously designed object—no longer simply half a human being, with a consciously conceived expressive purpose—no longer simply a record of the individual. A first critical move in a new direction was taken in the late 1520's in a bust by the Florentine sculptor Francesco da Sangallo (fig. 8), representing Giovanni delle Bande Nere, the father of Cosimo I de' Medici, the first grand duke of Tuscany. It follows the example of Rossellino in the horizontal cut off with the arms separated from the torso, in the turn and tilt of the head, and in the differing level of the shoulders. It follows the example of Verrocchio in that the body is cut off low, at the waistline. The arms continue just below the elbows, and the elbows are shown bent. So far as I can discover, this is the first instance of a bust with severed arms in which the arms are shown in motion. Sangallo thus combined the illusionism of the bust type with the dramatic action of the half-figure type. Another innovation is that the two arms are not symmetrical. While the right arm hangs vertically, the left moves slightly forward, breaking through a heretofore impenetrable plane facing the spectator. In addition, the character of the pose and the defiant expression give the portrait a distinct quality of aggressiveness.

Sangallo also introduced two ingenious devices in designing the amputation of the figure. The torso is cut off in such a way that the bottom line coincides with the lower edge of the armor plate. The amputation is thus dissimulated, so we cannot properly say that the figure is “cut off” at all. On the one hand, the object appears complete and self-contained; on the other hand, nothing prevents us from conjuring up Giovanni delle Bande Nere “in toto.” Furthermore, this is the first instance I know in which a severed surface—that of the left arm—is visible from the front.4 There was only one context in which such visible amputation had occurred before, in actual fragments of ancient statuary. And this is certainly what Sangallo had in mind. The great men of antiquity, were in fact known to the

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4 Seen only faintly in our reproduction.
Renaissance (as indeed they are to us) largely through the broken remains of honorific statues, and the visibly severed arm suggests not only that the bust is part of a larger figure but that Giovanni delle Bande Nere was like the venerable heroes of classical times.6

The aggressive quality of the pose and expression, the element of self-containment in the design, and the explicit reference to antiquity—these features are new and they coalesce in a new conception of the portrait bust, which is no longer simply a record, but a mode of exaltation of the individual as well. When we recall that Giovanni delle Bande Nere played a key role in the political transformation of Florence from a republic into the grand duchy that became the model for the system of absolute monarchies of the seventeenth century, the sense of this exaltation becomes clear.

For the early Christians the portrait bust became a symbol of pagan idolatry,6 a stigma so potent that the familiar classical bust type—rounded at the bottom, hollowed at the back and raised on a base—was not fully revived on a monumental scale until the second quarter of the sixteenth century, and even so in a work that cannot really be called a portrait. About 1539–1540 Michelangelo made a bust of Brutus, which is the first monumental marble sculpture of this class since antiquity (fig. 9). Michelangelo adopted not only the form, but also the pose, expression and costume of a well-known portrait type of the Emperor Caracalla (fig. 10), assimilating to it the depictions of Brutus on Roman gems and coins.7


For the antecedents to Michelangelo's innovation, see W. von Boden, "Die Anbahnung des Sockels bei den Busten der italienischen Renaissance," Amicale Berichte aus den preussischen Kunstsammlungen 40 (1918–1919): cols. 112 ff., to which should be added the actual
Apart from its form and expressive content, two points concerning the bust should be noted. One is that, although the work does not represent a contemporary personage, the time and circumstances of its execution show that it did have a contemporary political significance, reflecting the republican sentiment in Florence in favor of the assassination of a potentially tyrannical member of the Medici family. Hence, while the bust depicts the antagonist of Caesar, it also embodies an abstract idea, that of the noble


tyranicide. From the very moment of its revival, therefore, the classical bust type carried a heavy burden of meaning. It was a kind of visual metaphor, serving to raise the person represented to a higher plane of existence. The second point concerning the Brutus is that it moves in a way no earlier bust moved. Much of its powerful effect depends upon the fact that the left shoulder is thrust strongly forward with respect to the right (not just a movement of the arm, as in the Sangallo bust). In previous portraits, including ancient ones, the shoulders adhered to a frontal vertical plane. The movement gives the Brutus bust a strong suggestion of life and vitality underlying the abstract form and content, a counterpart to the "living" relevance of its subject.

Following Michelangelo's lead, the final act in the creation of a new portrait form took place in Florence a few years later, under very different circumstances. The first busts of the ideal type representing a contemporary personage were made toward the middle of the sixteenth century by two arch rivals who were vying for the
favor of the despotic ruler of Florence, Cosimo I de' Medici. In his marble bust of Cosimo of about 1544 (fig. 11), Baccio Bandinelli perpetrated what would heretofore have been considered virtually an act of idolatry: an independent, honorific bust of a living individual in the mode of pagan antiquity. Cosimo is treated literally as though he were a Roman emperor, in the form of the bust itself, in the armored cuirass he wears, and in its adulatory function. The conception of the portrait bust as an explicit political statement initiated by Michelangelo is here turned completely about, so that from a symbol of republicanism it becomes the visual herald of modern absolutism.

The underlying modernity of the bust is evident visually, as well. In following classical precedent, Bandinelli selected the one notable type from antiquity which suggests that it is part of a larger whole. This occurs in busts of Antinous the favorite of the Emperor Hadrian, who caused him to be divinized and worshiped as a god (fig. 12). They are smooth and regular in outline, but asymmetrical, with the head turned to the side and slightly downward and one arm raised. The design deliberately hints that the bust is cut from a whole statue, and in fact the pose is derived from full-length statues of gods and heroes. The purpose clearly was to assimilate the portrait of Antinous, an ordinary mortal, to the idea of Antinous as a deity.

In suggesting that the bust is part of a statue Bandinelli shows his indebtedness to Sangallo, but he takes the significant step of referring explicitly to the outstanding classical prototype that accomplished the same thing. Bandinelli's bust differs from the ancient model, however, in two essential ways. The head and neck are tilted slightly off the vertical axis, the right shoulder is slightly higher than the left, and the raised left arm is cut free of the body. Once again, the figure has the independence and continuity of movement of a living human being. The second difference is in the treatment of the arms, where Bandinelli adopts a variation of the principle of dissimulation introduced by Sangallo. The cut of the arms corresponds to the ends of the epaulettes of the cuirass. Hence the arms are not actually amputated, and their forceful action is continued in the mind's eye. Bandinelli's bust involves a
one forward, the other back, so that a veritable counterpart is introduced, giving the figure a spatial content and a continuity of action it had never had before. Furthermore, Cellini comes to grips in a new way with the problem posed by the classical bust form, with its raised, curved outline. Bandinelli, following Sangallo, had dissimulated the edges by making them coincide with the edge of a garment or of a cut out statue. For the left arm of his figure Cellini adopts the same device, but in addition he throws a cape over the shoulders which is draped around the right half of the figure in a special way. It covers the lower edge and is arranged so that it appears folded, rather than cut off. The drapery acts as a kind of proscenium, hiding the severed edge, yet self-contained and therefore not cut off itself. As a result, only the short edge at the lower right remains to remind us that this is not Cosimo himself, but a bust of Cosimo—an essential element if the work is to carry visually its honorific message.

These Florentine busts of the mid-sixteenth century set the pattern for the entire future development of the genre. In the course of the century three major branches grew from this central Italian trunk. The Tuscan tradition was raised to new heights, particularly at the hands of Leone Leoni, whose portraits of the Hapsburg family actually brought the bust into the imperial service. In his bronze Charles V (1553-1555; fig. 14) the breast and shoulder plates of a suit of armor completely dissimulate the amputation of torso and arms; and this empty shell, which the mind fills with the spirit of the man, does not rest on an abstract base, but is carried aloft in apotheosis by the imperial eagle and two allegorical figures.

Another mode developed in Venice. In the portraits of Alessandro Vittoria (cf. fig. 15), drapery plays a role equivalent to the armor in Leoni’s. It falls in ample folds that hide the body beneath, and it is cut in irregular shapes so as to create the effect of an apron or screen before a void, which the imagination ineluctably fills up. The torsos, moreover, tend to be vastly inflated, so that the figures appear larger than life—regardless of their scale. Finally, they never have the strident tone and allegorical paraphernalia of the Medicean works. Rather, Vittoria’s

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*110 cm. high, excluding base; Verrocchio’s Giuliano de’ Medici, 61 cm.; Michelangelo’s Brutus, 74 cm. excluding base.

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18 Cellini is here also evidently indebted to Donatello’s St. Rassore; cf. Lavin, “Sources and Meaning” (cited in n. 1 above), p. 212.
busts display a pompous gravity and lofty concern, expressive of the ideals of Venetian republicanism.

The third major off-shoot was in Rome, where a very different formula emerged. The tone was set by Guglielmo della Porta in a portrait of Pope Paul III (1546–1547; fig. 16). The drapery again submerges the body, but instead of loose and ample folds, it forms a sort of cocoon around the figure. The body has none of the movement of the Florentine works. The outline is closed and regular and the eyes look out from the heavy, patriarchal head with an almost accusative air. The robe is decorated with reliefs explaining in symbolic terms the secular and religious mission of the pope. Paul III, it will be remembered, initiated a period of aggressive self-scrutiny in the church that blossomed into the great movement of spiritual elevation known as the Counter-Reformation.

These three great expressive conventions—modes of characterization, to be more precise—the Florentine imperial, the Venetian republican, and that of the Roman Counter-Reformation, constitute the main achievement of Italy in the sixteenth century in this domain. They fuse three essential elements: the illusion of a living presence in the bust, the allusion to classical antiquity, and the elevation of the individual represented to an ideal. A symptom of their differences from the Renaissance type is the consciousness with which the fusion was achieved. We have comments by both Bandinelli and Cellini in letters to Cosimo de’ Medici, which show that the artists were fully aware of what they were about. Cellini speaks of his portrait as being “in accord with the high manner of the ancients,” and “having the bold movement of life.” Bandinelli, in a letter of 1534, speaks of the model for his portrait as “having the life and movement of the ancients.”


Fig. 15. Alessandro Vittoria, Bust of Doge Nicolò da Ponte. Seminario, Venice (Photo Böhm).

Fig. 16. Guglielmo della Porta, Bust of Pope Paul III. Museo Nazionale, Naples (Photo Anderson).
nelli says of another of his busts of the Duke that it is "as if to see Octavian or Pompey the Great extend his arm to pacify the people." Even more striking is a further passage in which he says that if the duke should prefer a whole statue, arms and legs could easily be added—a frivolity perhaps, yet clearly indicative of the implied wholeness with which he conceived the work. Above all, busts of this period seem far more imposing—"surpassing everything ideal and pathetic" was Jacob Burckhardt's phrase for them—than their Renaissance predecessors, both visually and psychologically. Here, too, the effect had a functional counterpart; they might be displayed on pedestals of their own and, no longer confined to the sitter's home, they acquired a new "public" significance. In sum, they are pieces of monumental rhetoric, and as such they confront us with a remarkable paradox. We tend to think of the portrayal of human nature as an analytical process of stripping away convention. Instead, the development of the portrait bust since the Renaissance suggests an opposite view—that character and convention are inseparable, the one expressed through the other. In the process we have traced, the individual and the heroic emerged together as the compound product of one creative synthesis.

As early as 1514 in Mantua, busts of the quattrocento type representing illustrious Mantuans were privately commissioned to decorate an ancient city gate (cited by H. Keller, Das Nachleben des antiken Bildnisses von der Karolingerzeit bis zur Gegenwart [Freiburg i. B., 1970], p. 97, n. 3).


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13 The revival in the sixteenth century of the full-length pedestal for portrait busts was noted by A. Schiaparelli, La casa fiorentina e i suoi arredi nei secoli XIV e XV (Florence, 1908), p. 194. Surveys of the many Medicean busts which begin now to populate the façades of public buildings and the houses of the rulers' friends in Florence will be found in L'Illustratore fiorentino 6 (1909): pp. 5-9, and K. Langedijk, De Portretten van de Medici tot onsmakens 1600 (Diss., Amsterdam, 1968), pp. 66, 91, 99 f. A Florentine law of 1571 prohibited the removal or defacement of such works displayed on public and private buildings (cf. D. Heikamp, "Die Bildwerke des Clemente Bandinelli," Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz 9 [1959-1960]: pp. 130 f.; the reference is evidently to the Legge contra chi rimuove, o violasse armi inscritton, o memorie esistenti apparentemente nell' edifici coi pubblici, come privati... Florence, May 30, 1571 [copy in Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Florence], cited by L. Manzoni, Bibliografia statutaria e storia italiana [3 v., Bologna, 1876-1893] 1, 2: p. 200).