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Italienische Frührenaissance und nordeuropäisches Mittelalter

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By and large, our understanding of the nature of Renaissance art involves a quadrangular conception of the period that stems ultimately from the art-historical and art-theoretical writings of the Renaissance itself, elaborated by Vasari and codified in modern times by Warburg and Panofsky. In this view the Renaissance revulsion from the Middles Ages was accompanied by an equal and opposite propulsion toward antiquity and the exploration of the natural world. Antiquity and naturalism were thought of as handmaids of the Renaissance, the one stimulating and reinforcing the other to achieve a synthesis that would come to be characterized as 'classical' harmony and balance. These cultural developments arose from an underlying sea-change in human psychology defined by Jacob Burckhardt as the Renaissance rediscovery of the individual. And the whole phenomenon was regarded as having its geographical epicenter in Italy, where it overcame the medieval tradition that Vasari identified by that opprobrious term 'Gothic.' Although this four-part construction of the Renaissance—antiquity, naturalism, individualism, Italy—still stands, and no doubt will continue to predominate in our historical imagination, it is by now well-established that the period also witnessed a variety of exceptional, alternative, or even antithetical developments. Evidence for such deviation from the mainstream is present from the very beginning of the Renaissance process of self-definition, when Lorenzo Ghiberti in his brief sketch of the history of post-classical art, lavishes his greatest praise in sculpture not on an Italian, but on Master Gusmin of Cologne. Given the nature of Ghiberti's art one cannot assume that his interest in Master Gusmin was related to the irrational and expressionist strain in Italian art that has long been recognized as having been indebted to late medieval mystic tradition of Northern Europe. On the contrary, one must reckon with the possibility that the North may have helped lay the very foundations of Italian Renaissance naturalism. Certainly, the adoption in Italy later in the century of the oil technique bears witness to the persistent and sometimes revolutionary nature of the Italian debt to the North in precisely these terms.

However appropriate and important such acknowledgements of the Northern stylistic presence in the South during the period of the Renaissance may be, they remain peripheral to the classicism, humanism and individualism that lie at the core of Renaissance culture. Burckhardt rightly perceived that these latter concepts come together most specifically and explicitly in the Renaissance development of the independent, monumental portrait—the emblem of individuality par excellence—which in sculpture reassumed, with significant variations, the familiar forms that had been created in an-
tiquity: the free-standing figure, the equestrian monument, the bust and the medallion portrait.

My purpose in this paper is to focus on one particular episode in this epochal process of creating the image of modern man – an episode of particular importance, not only because it involved the rebirth of one of these major forms of independent commemorative portraiture, but also because it challenges in a fundamental way the notion of the Renaissance revival of antiquity and rediscovery of the individual as an exclusively Italian achievement. I refer to the portrait medal, a pure «showpiece» distinguished from the numismatic portrait by its monumental scale, the fact that it is individually cast, not mechanically struck, and that it is not conceived as a medium of exchange. My argument concerns the genesis of the key work in this context, the first true medal since antiquity, made by Pisanello to commemorate the visit of the Byzantine emperor John VIII Paleologus to Italy to participate in the Council of 1438–39 that reunited the Eastern and Western churches as part of the effort to counter the threat of Turkish invasion (Fig. I). This was the third and ultimate visit by successive Greek rulers to seek European aid. The idea of unity of East and West is expressed in the medal in two ways: the accompanying legends are given in Greek and Latin, that on the obverse naming the emperor in Greek, those on the reverse naming the artist in Greek and Latin; and in the scene on the reverse the emperor is shown adoring a Latin, rather than a Greek cross, illustrating his accession to the Catholic faith.

It has always been recognized that Pisanello’s medal had two main late medieval precedents, neither of which is in itself sufficient to explain his achievement. One of these antecedents are a number of small (33–35 mm vs Pisanello’s 101–04 mm) medals struck (not cast) in North Italy toward the end of the fourteenth century. Three were made for Francesco II da Carrara to celebrate his recovery of Padua from Giangaleazzo Visconti in 1370; clearly based on Roman coins, not medals, Francesco is shown in the guise of a Roman emperor (Fig. 2). Soon thereafter (1393) Roman coins again served as models for two small struck medals by Lorenzo and Marco Sesto representing the emperor Galba and the allegorical figure of Venice (Fig. 3). These works were the fruits of a vital North Italian tradition of numismatic study and collecting from the early part of the century, which included the Veronese antiquarian Giovanni Mansi- nario, and Petrarch.

The second major precedent for Pisanello were the gold medallions of the emperors Constantine (86–95 mm) and Heraclius (94–96.5 mm) acquired by Jean Duc de Berry in 1402 (Figs. 4, 5). Although they are monumental in scale and clearly emulate ancient medals, the Constantine and Heraclius medallions, apart from stylistic considerations, are not true medals when compared to the ancient examples and Pisanello: because the two sides were cast separately and bonded together, as in goldsmith work; and because they do not represent contemporary personages. The equestrian figure of Constantine – which appears on the obverse, something that never happens in ancient medals – displays his Christianity by his resemblance, often observed, to the dashing equestrian knights surrounded by inscriptions depicted on medieval seals (see Fig. 9). In fact, the medallions are treated as two seals joined together. According to the Duke’s inventory they were set in gem-encrusted frames, so their special, hybrid char-
The two medallions are patently complementary. They were not isolated, self-contained works, however, but formed part of a flourishing, quasi-humanistic culture at the Berry court, which included a rich collection of literary works by ancient authors and classically inspired objects. Especially important was a group of gold pieces, now lost, that entered the Duke's collection by purchase at the same time as those of Constantine and Heraclius, which included medals of Augustus, Tiberius, and a plaque depicting Phillip the Arab. All these works evidently form a coherent group or series that traces what might be called the imperial history of Christianity: Christ was born under Augustus; he died under Tiberius; Phillip the Arab was the first emperor to adopt Christianity; Constantine, following his famous vision of the Cross with the words «In hoc signo vinces» and subsequent victory over Maxentius at the Milvian bridge, made Christianity the state religion; and Heraclius defeated the infidel and recovered the True Cross. This distinct Christological focus is in sharp contrast with the largely historical and biographical numismatic interests of Italians like Mansi and Petrarca, and it suggests a particular motivation.

The dramatic accretions to the Duke's collection reflect a major political and cultural enterprise that sought to establish a link between the ancient imperial tradition as represented by the Byzantine emperors and the western medieval tradition of the French king as Rex Christianissimus, the successor to Constantine as defender of the faith. Jean de Berry was the brother of Charles V and the uncle of the reigning Charles VI. The enterprise must have been motivated principally by the defeat of the Greek army by the Turks at Nicopolis in 1396. The Turkish conquest of Constantinople endangered Constantinople itself and posed an immediate threat to the Christian empire. In an effort to stem the tide the Byzantine emperor himself, Manuel II Paleologus (father of Pisanello's John VIII) visited Paris in 1400-02 to plead for a new crusade. In this context, the medallic series served to verify the continuity of the imperial tradition on which the Emperor's appeal was based.

A telling index of the extraordinary nature of this juncture in European history is the fact that the Berry medallions for the first time single out Constantine and Heraclius and bring them together as a pair. Clearly the motive was to allude to the shared heritage of the eastern and western empires through the two emperors most closely associated with the Cross as the emblem of Christian hegemony. The Cross is the theme that joins the two medallions, and this common denominator is given a specifically devotional base through the texts from St. Paul and the psalms that together introduce the liturgies of the church's two great feasts in honor of the Cross, the Invention and the Exaltation. The reference to the introit begins on the reverse of the Constantine medallion (MIHI ABISIT GLORIAE NISI IN CRUCE DOMINI NOSTRI IESU CHRISTI) and concludes on the obverse of that of Heraclius (ILLUMINA VULTUM TUUM DEUS). Constantine and Heraclius are themselves related through the two feasts since their stories are told in the Golden Legend, respectively on May 3 (Invention) and September 14 (Exaltation). The inspiration of the sign of the Cross is implicit on both obverses the Cross appearing in the inscription immediately above the head of Constantine alludes to his famous vision, and the rays of light toward which Heraclius lifts his eyes refer to the equivalent vision of the cross which Heraclius was supposed to have had before his battle with Chosroes. Finally, the Cross is also the focus of the scenes depicted on both reverses, which emphasize the deference of the imperial victors to its triumph.

The sacred, imperial history embodied in the Duke's medallic series culminates in this pair, but the underlying theme of the whole program is to be found among the numerous holy relics the Duke acquired from Constantinople, one of which is particular relevance here. Among the gifts brought to the Duke by the Emperor Manuel II on his visit to Paris was a relic of the True Cross itself, the very emblem of the divine power vested in the secular defenders of the faith.

The inventories of the Duke show that the medallions were bought from Florentine merchants living in France and they have sometimes been thought to be Italian in origin. The Duke owned one of the medals of Francesco da Carrara that certainly prefigured those of Constantine and Heraclius. In certain respects, moreover, the idea embodied in the medallions did in fact have its closest precedent in Florence. In the last decades of the fourteenth century Agnolo Gaddi had for the first time isolated the two feasts in painted narratives on the lateral walls of the chancel of the Franciscan church of Santa Croce - the history of the Cross through its rediscovery by Helena on one side, the story of Heraclius on the other - some years after the story of Constantine had been depicted in a nearby chapel as part of a cycle of the life of Pope Sylvester. The Franciscans, through their founder, were especially devoted to the Cross and their missionaries had been given custody of the sacred places of the Holy Land, including the sites of the Crucifixion and the finding of the True Cross in the church of the Holy Sepulcher at Jerusalem. Quite possibly the Santa Croce frescoes already reflect the dream of a recuperation of the Holy Land and a reunification of the church under the Latin cross, a dream perhaps rekindled by the visit - the first by a Byzantine emperor since Constantine seven centuries before - of Manuel's own father, John V Paleologus, to Rome and the promulgation of his submission to the Pope in 1369-70. References to such Italian precedents is wholly in keeping with the strong Italianate component of much of the art produced for the Duke.
monly agreed, partly for stylistic reasons, but mainly because of the intimate connections between them and the works of the Limbourgs, the Duke's favorite book illuminators\(^{30}\). In the Belles Heures the feast of the Exaltation is given no less than three full-page miniatures, including two illustrating the episode of Heraclius entering Jerusalem. One of these (Fig.6) is virtually a duplicate of the scene as depicted on the reverse of the Heraclius medallion, which includes at the top — incongruously but no doubt significantly — a row of lamps that recur in the illustration of the Adoration of the Cross (Fig.7)\(^{31}\); in the latter, the same figure appears, differently dressed and without crown but wearing a Byzantine-looking hat, kneeling before the bejeweled cross. The equestrian figure of Constantine appears in the miniature of the Très Riches Heures representing the Meeting of the Magi (Fig.8); with the buildings of Paris substituting for those of Jerusalem in the background, this scene conspicuously refers to the actual occasion when Charles VI rode out of Paris to meet the visiting emperor.

It is usually assumed that the medallions were the models for the miniatures, which date from the second decade of the century. However, a peculiar detail of the Constantine figure rules out this assumption. The rider does not hold reins from the bit but a line attached to a ring at the horse's chest, to which the bridle is also connected. The purpose of the arrangement is to give the rider a grip while the animal is led by a squire, as shown in the Magi miniature. The only reasonable explanation is that both works are based on a common source, which the Limbourgs transferred to their modern re-enactment of the gathering of the Magi, and from which the goldsmith extracted the horseman alone to create his quasi-evocation of the classical equestrian medal. The Limbourgs may themselves have witnessed and recorded in a drawing the magnificent encounter between Charles VI and Manuel II on June 3, 1400\(^{32}\).

The extraction of the horse and rider from the processional context created an image that was anomalous in another sense when seen as an isolated equestrian monument. The animal is shown with both legs on one side raised, in the pacing gait familiar from medieval tombs and seals (Fig.10)\(^{33}\). Uccello adopted the same type three decades later for his fictive monument to Sir John Hawkwood (Fig.9), for which he was roundly criticized by Vasari. Vasari maintained that the animal could not stand in this unstable position and concluded that Uccello must have been a bad horseman not to know better\(^{34}\). Pirro Ligorio made the same point about a relief on an ancient Roman altar, in which the horse is being led by a footman — a motif strikingly like that in the Meeting of the Magi miniature (Fig.11)\(^{35}\). I strongly suspect that, whatever it represented, the common prototype of both the miniature and the medallion must have reflected an ancient composition of this sort, which also occurs frequently in depictions of the imperial adventus, or triumphal entry, on Roman coins and medals\(^{36}\). This hypothesis, if true, reveals another particular in which the medallion assimilates antiquity to the medieval tradition in order to invoke the ancient imperial sanction for the common defense of Christianity, which the modern Emperor's visit to Europe was intended to promote. In Paris such classical precedents were assimilated to a new form, from which Pisanello in turn developed his own ideas.

Pisanello's medal of John Paleologus recreated the ancient medal in spirit as well as form: it is cast, not struck, in one piece, rather than two, with a contemporary port-
cisely during the period following the council the Franciscan order, of which Bessarion became Cardinal Protector in 1458, adopted a very similar device showing the crossed arms of Christ and St. Francis with a cross between\(^4^4\). One may even discern the pervasive role of the «Franciscan connection» in a seal of the order that shows the device surrounded by the text from St. Paul, ABIT GLORIARI NISI CRUCI (Fig. 13)\(^4^5\), familiar from the reverse of the Constantinian medal and the introits of the feasts of the invention and exaltation of the Cross; the same text figures prominently in the liturgies, including the introits, of the two great Franciscan feasts, of that of Francis himself and that of the stigmata\(^4^6\).

Pisanello clearly understood the implications of both the form and the content of the Berry medals. Through them, he invoked antiquity, not as an end in itself but to vivify and illuminate the present.

Appendix

**St. Bonaventure’s Coat of Arms**

The process described here involving Bessarion and the Council of Florence may in turn be an extraordinarily sophisticated reprise of the events associated with the Second Council of Lyons convened by Gregory X in 1274, which included representatives of the Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Paleologus. The earlier council also focused on the crusade, the accession by the Greeks to the Latin demands, and the reunion of the churches, which was formally decreed, though it proved short-lived. A major protagonist was the General of the Franciscan order, St. Bonaventure, whom Pope Gregory had named cardinal the year before, in anticipation of his participation in the Council. A singular tradition has it that when Bonaventure received the cardinality, instead of adopting his family arms for his escutcheon, as was usual, he devised a design consisting of two hands nailed together, evidently symbolic not only of the Franciscan vows and identification with the Stigmata and the Passion, but also of the reunion of the churches. I have so far been able to trace the story of Bonaventure’s coat of arms back to, but no further than the Netherlandish Franciscan devotional book Den Wijngaert van Sinte Franciscus, Antwerp 1518\(^4^7\). The episode was reported from this source in a note to the 1613 edition of Pietro Galesino’s biography of Bonaventure by Henricus Sedulius, who adds that Bonaventure’s device was the origin of the emblem to the Franciscan order itself\(^4^8\). I suspect Bessarion knew and deliberately emulated Bonaventure’s council role and heraldic representation of its religious and political significance.

The earliest instance I have found of Bonaventure’s coat of arms is in a late fifteenth century Netherlandish painting of the saint in the Museo Franscienano in Rome, and it accompanies the figure of Bonaventure in the concluding plate showing the celebrated early members of the order in Philip Galle’s 1587 engraved life of St. Francis, dedicated by Sedulius\(^4^9\).

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**Endnotes**

5. The classic study of the early medals is that by Julius von SCHLOSSER, Die ältesten Medaillen und die An­ti­ike, in: Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses 18, 1897, pp.64–108; they were catalogued by George Francis Hill, A Corpus of Italian Medals of the Renaissance before Cellini, 2 vols., London 1930, pp.3–4; DE LORENZI (see n.4), p.9; POLLARD (see n.4), p.27f.
7. The most recent study of the medals is that by S.K. SCHÖR, in: Michele D. MARINOLI, Anne L. POOLEY and Stephen K. SCHÖR, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque Medals from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in: The Medal, No.9, 1986, pp.79–105, especially pp.81–87; full bibliography will be found in: Ex aequo solido. Bronzen van de Antieke bis zur Gegenwart, exhib. cat., Berlin 1983, pp.90–96. The original gold exemplars are lost; all extant versions are copies.
9. WEISS, Le origine (see n.4), p.346 f., is responsible for this important insight concerning the Byzantine titular formulas in Latin and Greek.
10. The introit is as follows: Gal. 6.14 Nos autem gloriari operet in Cruce Domini nostri Jesu Christi in quo est salus, vita et resurrectione nostrae: per quem salvi, et liberati sumus. Ps. 66.2 Deus miseretur nostri, et benedicat nobis: illuminet vultum suum super nos, et miseretur nostri (Invention of the Cross, in: Massal Romanum, Boston, etc., 1944, p.565; Exaltation, in: ibid., p.729; that the same text is used for both feasts was noted by Millard MEISS, French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry. The Limbourg and their Contemporaries, New York 1974, p.425, n.252). For a Franciscan use of Gal. 6.14 see below.
12. See n. 10 above.
13. As noted by JONES, The First (see n.11), p.41.
17. See SCHLOSSER (n.5), p.81 f.; Philippe VERDIER, A Medallion of the «Ara Coeli» and the Netherlandish


22. For the complete text see n.10 above.

23. Heraclius's dream was shown in Gadd's frescos at Santa Croce, mentioned below; see M.A. LAVIN (n.19), p.106, 1111.

24. Jules GUIGUER, Médaillles de Constantin et d'Héraclius acquis par Jean, Duc de Berry en 1402, in: Revue numismatique, ser.3, 8, 1899, pp.87-116, especially p.105, notes that the passage from St. Paul was the motto of the defenders of the Holy Sepulcher.

25. The reliefs and other mementos from Constantinople are listed in GUIGUER, Inventaires (see n.8), vol.I, p.46 no.101, 55 no.133; and vol.II, p.35 no.214 (True Cross). 40 no.274, 262 no.791, 285 no.1263, 332, 334.

26. For a survey of attributions, see JONES, The First (n.11), p.36.

27. GUIGUER, Inventaires (see n.8), vol.I, p.153 no.560.

28. For a full discussion and appreciation of the importance of these frescos in the context of the legend of the True Cross, see Marilyn ARAVEN LAVIN (n.19), pp.99-113.

29. See Eve BORSOK, The Mural Painters of Tuscany, Oxford 1980, p.93, 100 n.46. 101 n.74, 86; M.A. LAVIN (n.19), p.113, 325 n.78.

30. See BARKER (n.18), pp.9-14; and SETTON (n.18), vol.I, pp.312-315.

31. See the discussion of the North-South relationship in MESS, French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry. The Limburgs (n.10), pp.240-251.

32. The most recent attributions have been to the Limburg brothers or to the Duke's court painter Michelet SAULMO, cf. JONES, The First (n.11), p.39; Ex aequo solidio (see n.7), p.94; SCHRER in: Maricola et al. (see n.7), p.83. The relationships between the medals and the Limburg miniatures have been most thoroughly discussed by VEVER (see n.17); MEISS, French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry. The Late Fourteenth Century (see n.16), p.358, 304ff.; and MEISS, French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry. The Limburgs (see n.10), p.64f.; 150f.; JONES, The First (see n.11).

33. MEISS (French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry. The Limburgs, see n.10, p.131) suggests that the lamps continue the idea of divine illumination that inspires the obverse of the medal. The emperor in his wagon also reappears as the chariot of Apollo in the calendar miniatures of the Très Riches Heures, recalling the name that appears in the field of the obverse of the Heraclius medal (as noted by MEISS and others, see ibid., p.185).

34. On the meeting, see BARKER (n.18), p.173ff., 397. The observation concerning the horsemen's harnesses and the assumption of a common source are due to JONES, The First (n.11). JONES attributes the medals to the Limburgs themselves, who were traced as guildsmen; they were in Paris at the time of Manuel's visit, having been ransomed from captivity in Brussels by the Duke on May 2, 1400 (MIND, French Painting in the Time of Jean de Berry. The Limburgs, see n.10, p.67). - The suggestion of a common source in a drawing of the procession was made by JONES, The First (see n.11), p.39. Similar reasoning suggests that the lights depicted on the obverse of the Heraclius medal were transferred from a prototype of the Adoration of the Cross (ibid.).


bissonder wapen gheoordeerte, sinen staet voeghenende. Ende heeft doen maken eenen blauwen schilt, ende dar in ons heeren hant, met sinte Franciscus hande vast in trouwen op makanderen genaghelt. Ende dar is des minderbroeders wapen, dwele is in een blau velt, want alle haer ghedachten, werckende ende oeffeninghen sulle si nae den hemel verheffen; ende demcken op der trouwen die si gode ende alle sijne heylighen in haerder professien gheloofte hebben; ende dese handen sijn teamen ghenaelt want sy hier aff nemmermeere vry ende los en moghen worden etc. Die paus confirmeerde hem dese salige wapen de welci hi in sijn zeghel ende al ommte daert van node was deede drucken. Ende noch staet dese wapen zel zijn beelt gheschildert huden op den dach in alle plaersen, daer syn figuer staet, also di paus Sixtus ordineerde.«

48Henricus SEDULUS, Historia seraphica vitae B.mi P.Francisci Assisiatis, illustratum q. virorum et feminarum qui ex tribus eius ordinibus relati sunt inter sanctos, Antwerp 1613, p.293: «Addit etiam [i.e., Den Wijngaert], tum Sanctum Bonaventuram insignia sibi fecisse, non nobilis sua gentis usurpasse, sed Christi manum Divi Francisci manu clavo confixant: quo significare voluit, professionis nostrae sponsonem nulla ratione solvendam, sed perpetuo ratam fixamque servandam: unde hac deinceps Ordini Seraphici signa habentur.»

4 Medal of Constantine, 1402
5 Medal of Heraclius, 1402
6 The Limbourg Brothers, Heraclius with the True Cross at the Gate of Jerusalem, ca. 1408. Belles Heures of the Duc de Berry, fol. 156. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters
8 The Limbourg Brothers, The Meeting of the Magi, ca. 1411-16. Très Riches Heures, fol. 51 v. Chantilly, Musée Condé

9 Uccello, Sir John Hawkwood. Florence, Cathedral
10 Seal of Henry III (1216–72)
11 Funerary altar of M. Junius Rufus, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery
12 Arms of Cardinal Bessarion. MS Corale 2, fol. 1r. Cesena, Biblioteca Malatestiana
13 Seal of the Franciscan order with legends
   - absit gloriarum in cruce - and - omnia in ommis -
   (after Bascape 1969–78, see n. 45, II, pl. XIV, no. 3)