

Pontormo

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Masters of Art

Jacopo da Pontormo

(1494-1557)



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Jacopo da Pontormo (1550) by Giorgio Vasari

The Delphi Classics Catalogue

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F I O R E N T I N O .

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Version 1

Masters of Art Series

Jacopo da Pontormo



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Masters of Art - Jacopo da Pontormo



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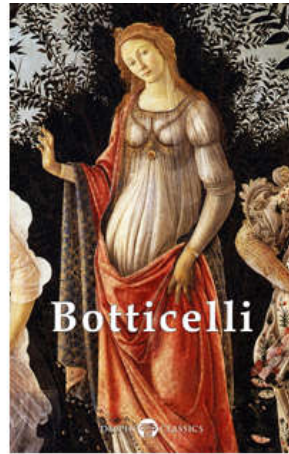
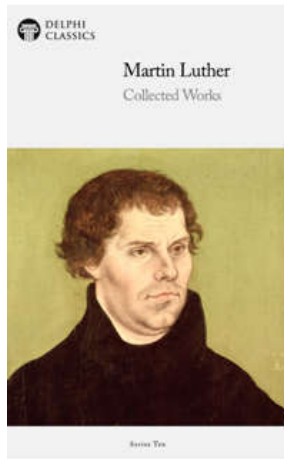
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The Highlights



Empoli, a town in Tuscany, twenty miles southwest of Florence — Pontormo was born at Pontorme, near Empoli.



The birthplace, Pontorme, Empoli



Detail of a portrait of Pontormo in the 'Trinity' by Alessandro Allori, Chapel of San Luca, Basilica of the Santissima Annunziata, Florence, 1571

The Highlights



In this section, a sample of Pontormo's most celebrated works is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

The Visitation of the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth (1516)

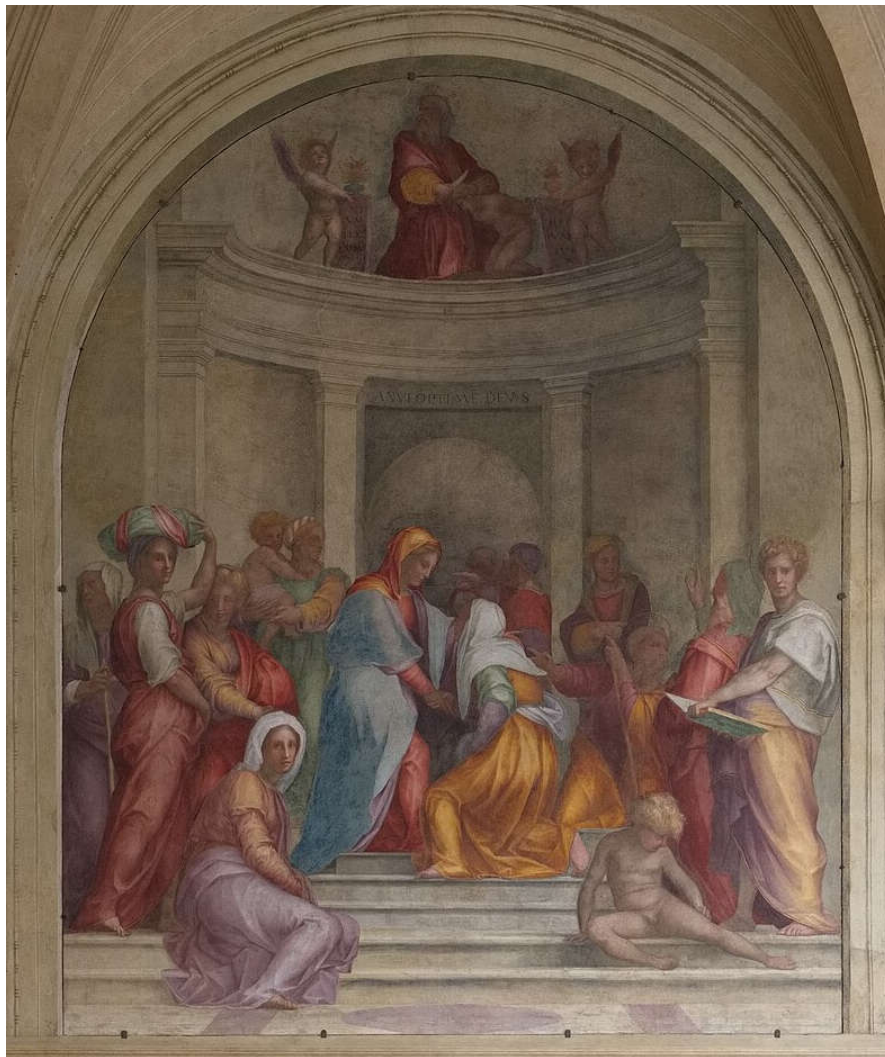


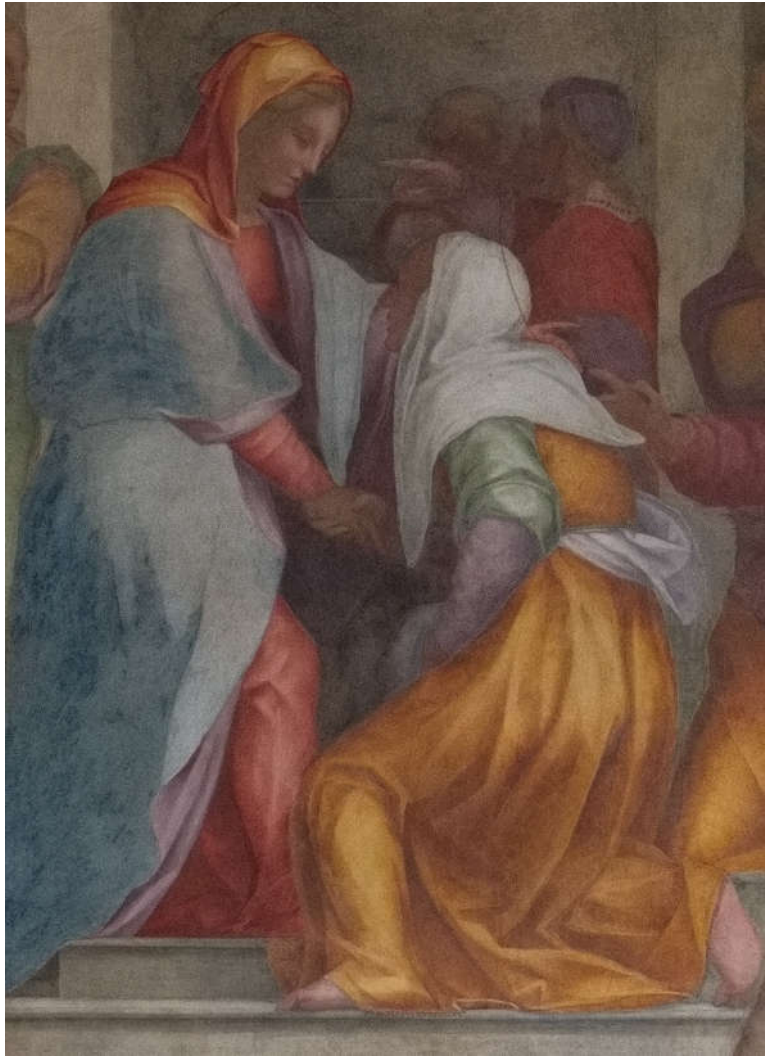
Jacopo Carucci, the great master of the Mannerist technique, who broke away from High Renaissance classicism to create a more personal, expressive style, was born in Pontorme to Bartolomeo di Jacopo di Martino Carrucci, an artist, and Alessandra di Pasquale di Zanobi. We know little of his early life. Vasari tells us how the orphaned boy, “young, melancholy, and lonely”, was shuttled around as a young apprentice in Florence. First he served under Leonardo da Vinci, before moving to the studios of Mariotto Albertinelli and Piero di Cosimo. At the age of eighteen he entered the workshop of Andrea del Sarto — it is the influence of this master that is most detectable in Pontormo’s early works. In 1518 he completed an altarpiece in the Church of San Michele Visdomini, Florence, that reveals in its agitated, almost neurotic emotionalism a departure from the balance and tranquillity of the High Renaissance.

Pontormo painted in and around Florence for most of his career, often supported by Medici patronage. A brief foray to Rome, largely to see Michelangelo’s work, also helped influence his emerging style. Haunted faces and elongated bodies are characteristic of Pontormo’s work. A seminal example of his early style is the following fresco, depicting *The Visitation of the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth*, noted for its dancelike, balanced figures, painted from 1514 to 1516. The pastoral-light palette and intricate drapery work are reminiscent of Andrea del Sarto’s brushwork. The fresco employs a pyramidal structure, pulling the viewer’s eyes up and into the wall. The crisp execution, fresh colour and dynamic narrative features establish a compelling piece of art. Only the crowded grouping of eight figures in the background, contrary to High Renaissance balance normally expected in such a work, seems to detract from the rest of the painting’s effect, perhaps betraying the artist’s immaturity.

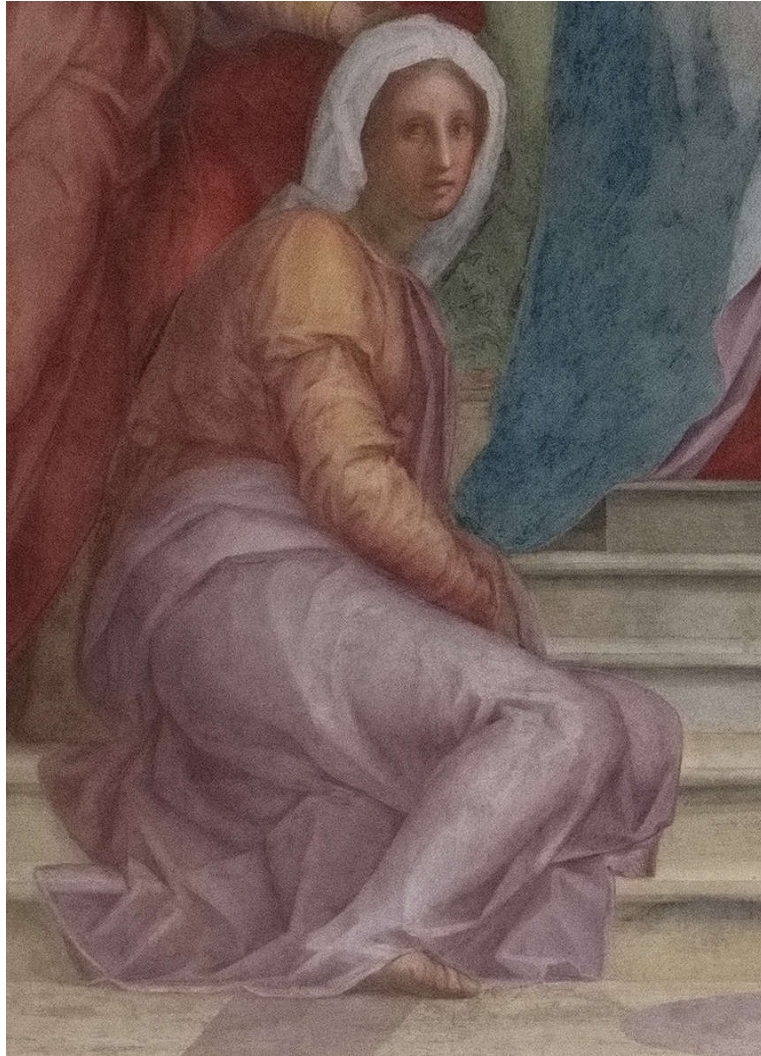
In Christianity, the subject of the Visitation refers to the visit of Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, to Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, as narrated in the *Gospel of Luke* (1:39-56). Upon receiving Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth exclaims, “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,” echoing and expanding upon the greeting given by the archangel Gabriel at the *Annunciation*. The episode is one of the standard scenes in cycles of the *Life of the Virgin* in art and sometimes appears in larger cycles of the *Life of Christ*.

This early fresco makes an interesting comparison with a painting on the same subject executed by Pontormo about a decade later, which is now housed in the parish church of Saint Michael Archangel in Carmignano, about fifteen miles west of Florence. The two compositions reveal the dramatic shift in Pontormo’s artistic development. In the earlier version, he is much closer in style to his master, Andrea del Sarto, and to early sixteenth-century Renaissance artistic principles. For example, the figures are much smaller, appearing less than half the height of the overall picture, represented in a classical style and architectural setting, positioned at a distance from the viewer. In the later work, the viewer is brought much closer to the Virgin and Saint Elizabeth, who drift toward each other in clouds of drapery. Furthermore, the architectural setting that is carefully constructed in the earlier piece is completely abandoned in favour of a peculiar nondescript urban setting.

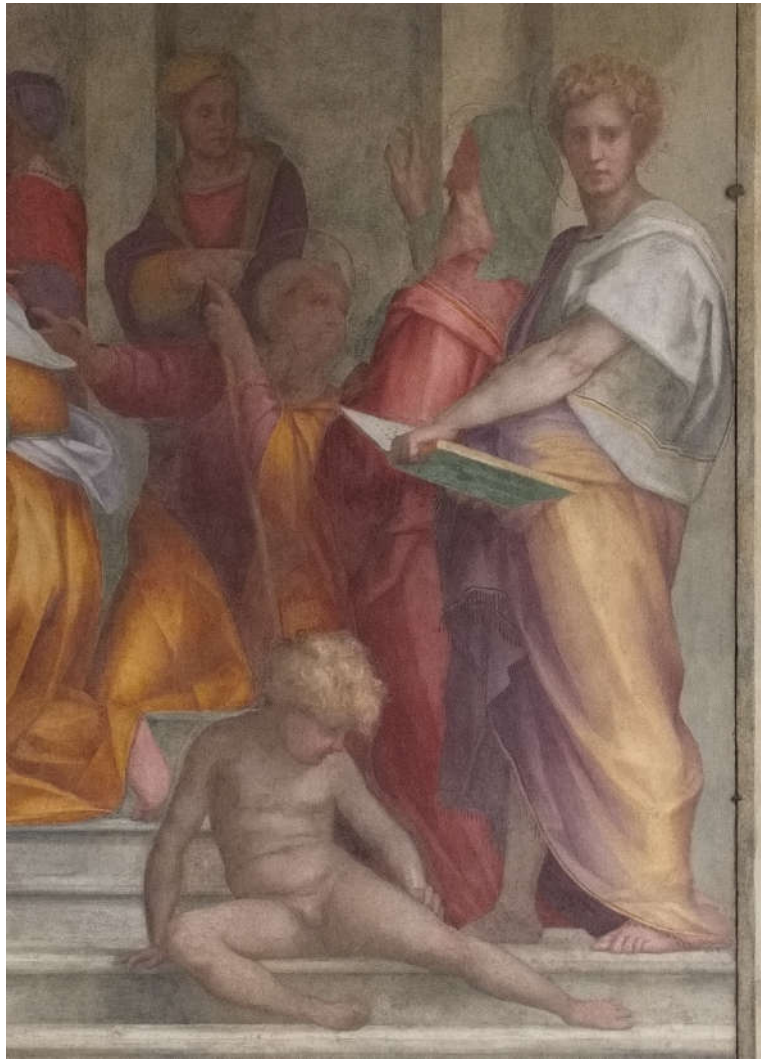




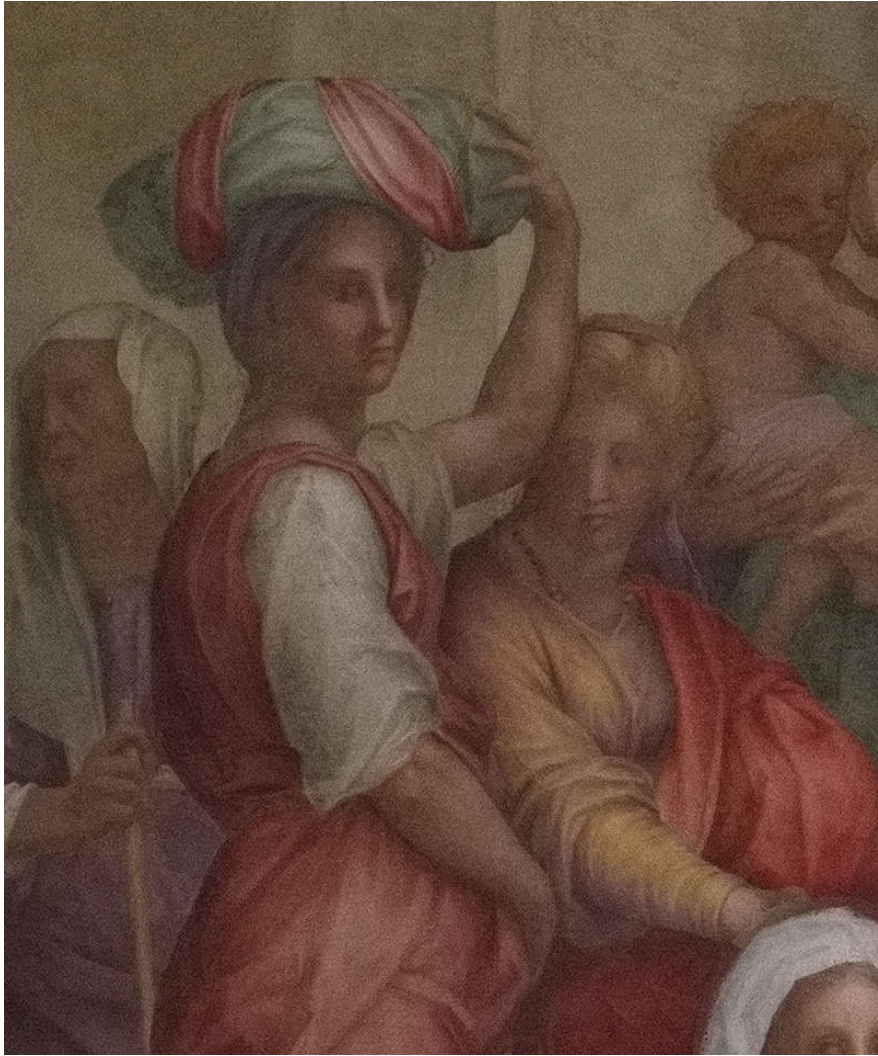
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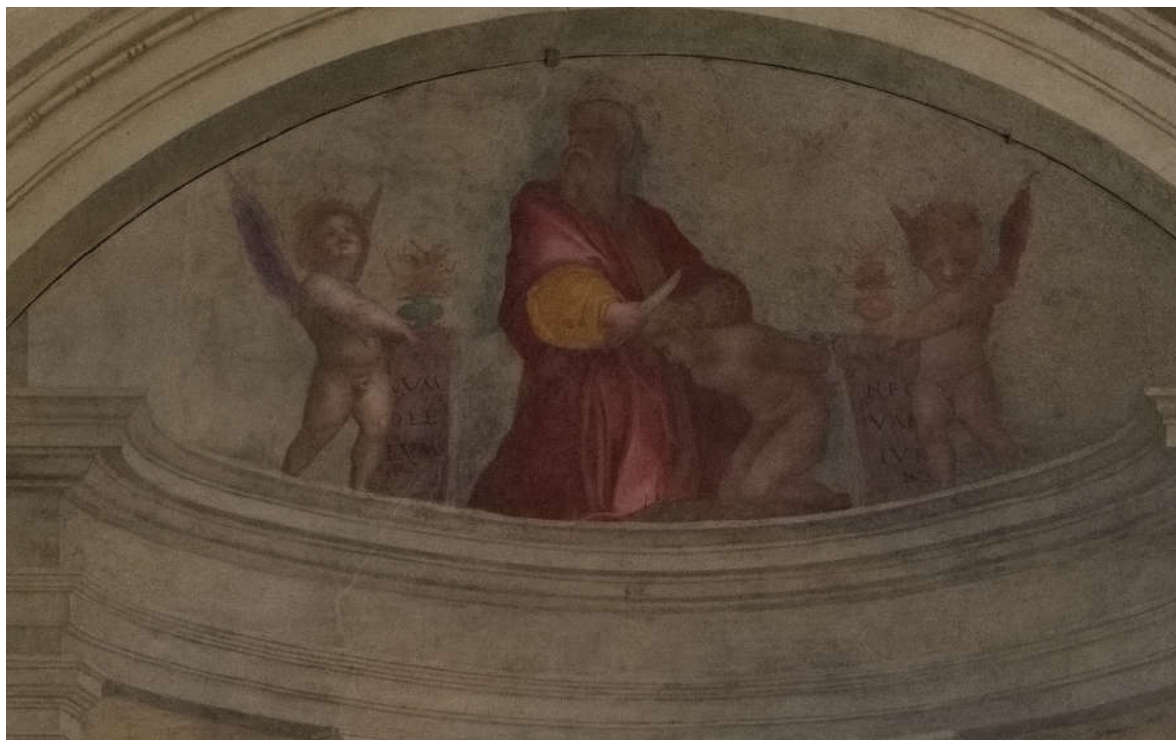
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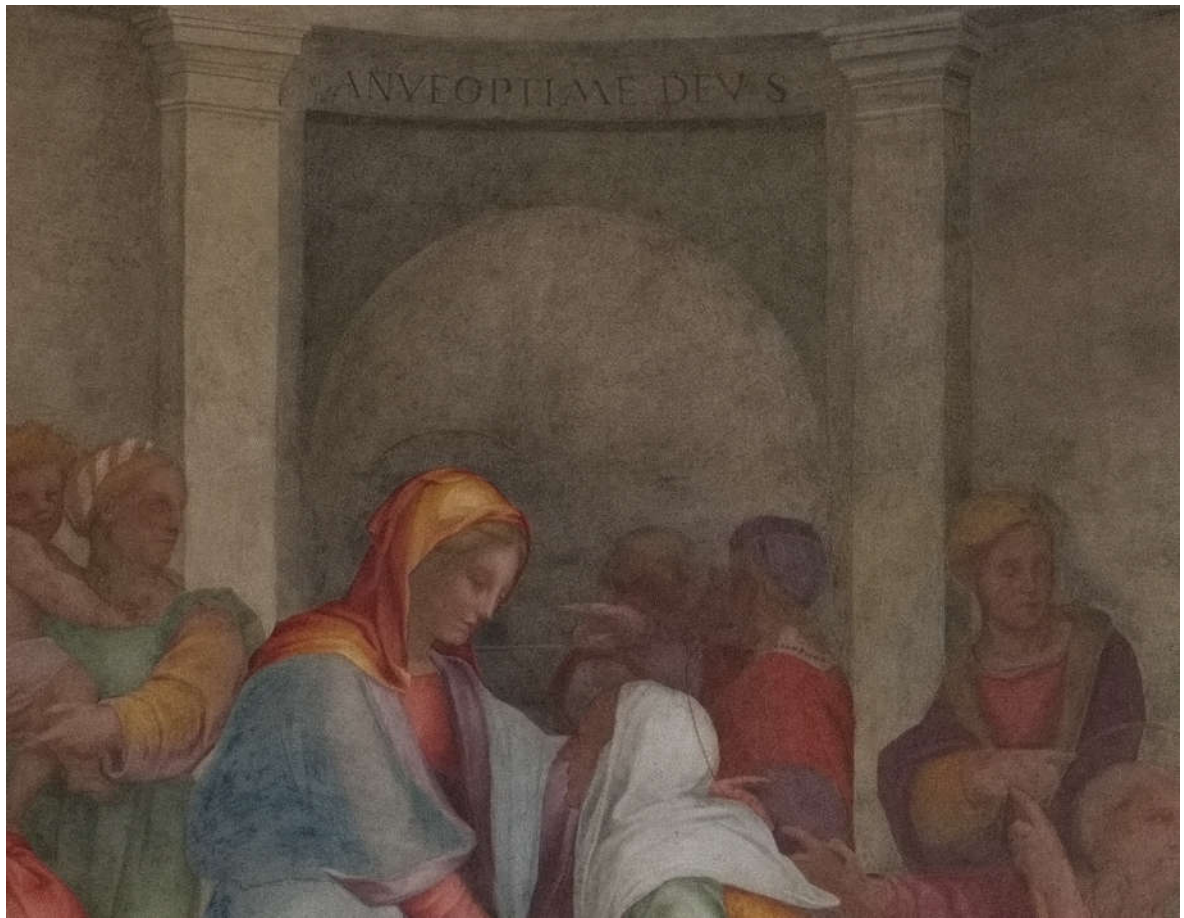
Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



The later version of the same subject, Church of San Francesco e Michele, Carmignano, 1529



Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530) was a painter from Florence, whose career flourished during the High Renaissance and early Mannerism. He was known as an outstanding fresco decorator, painter of altarpieces, portraitist, draughtsman, and colourist. Although highly regarded during his lifetime as an artist "without errors", his renown was eclipsed after his death by that of his contemporaries Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael.



Andrea del Sarto's 'Nativity of the Virgin', created shortly before Pontormo's 'Visitation', Chiostro dei Voti, Santissima Annunziata, Florence, 1514



Basilica della Santissima Annunziata, Florence

The Joseph Series (1517)



In 1515 Pontormo and the Florentine artist Francesco Bacchiacca were commissioned to add paintings to a series concerning the Old Testament figure of Joseph. These panels are now held in the National Gallery in London, offering a prominent example of his developing Mannerist style. Four of the panels were executed by Pontormo, forming part of a larger series of fourteen panel paintings commissioned to celebrate Pierfrancesco Borgherini's marriage to Margherita Accaiuoli in 1515. Granacci and Andrea del Sarto also contributed to the decorative scheme for the marital bedchamber in the Borgherini palace in Florence, which was commissioned by Borgherini's father and would have been one of the most lavish residences of the time.

The panels tell the story of Joseph from *Genesis 39* and were originally set into an ornate walnut wall panelling, the marriage bed, chairs and storage chests. During that time, the story of Joseph was fashionable for furniture decoration. The engaging tale of Joseph's coat of many colours, his ability to interpret dreams, the narrative's emphasis on success, family and forgiveness — all of these ingredients were regarded as appropriate subjects for the bedchamber. The story of Jacob and Joseph, and the enduring love between them, was of course an appropriate choice for a father to commission for the decoration of his son's bedchamber.

The Old Testament story tells how Jacob revered Joseph as his favourite son, rewarding him with a splendid coat. His jealous half-brothers decide to sell Joseph into slavery to a caravan of Ishmaelite merchants, who are taking perfumes and spices to Egypt. The brothers smear Joseph's coat with goat blood and tell their father that he is dead.

In Pontormo's first contribution to the series, he illustrates the chaotic scene of *Joseph Sold to Potiphar*. The diminutive Joseph in his yellow cloak stands before his new master, Potiphar, the captain of the Egyptian Pharaoh's guard. The boy's calm and trusting expression, contrasts markedly with the frenetic action of the figures surrounding him. A statue of Caritas ('charity' or 'brotherly love') in the background to the right connects to the Christological message of the story: Joseph survives his long suffering due to the enduring love of his father Jacob. The biblical story of Joseph was often held to prefigure the life of Christ.

In time, Joseph becomes overseer of Potiphar's household. After he refuses the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife and she falsely accuses him of rape, he is imprisoned. Joseph then interprets the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners, Pharaoh's butler and baker, which leads us into the second panel of the series. As Joseph predicted, Pharaoh spares the butler, but the baker is sentenced to death. In *Pharaoh with his Butler and Baker*, the Butler is seen in his restored position in front of the table, holding a goblet up for Pharaoh to drink from. However, the sad fate of the baker is related in several images in the upper panel, both on and below the intricate stairway structure, allowing Pontormo to illustrate multiple scenes at the same time. The baker's sentencing is underlined by his gradual removal away from Pharaoh. First he is apprehend by four assailants in the middle right, then he is pushed halfway up the stairs by three figures, while still clearly resisting. Lastly, he is

overcome by two figures, as he falls to the floor at the top of the stairs, his figure disappearing in the shadows.

Another prominent scene in the series is Pontormo's *Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers*, which is structured in a usually narrow and wide panel, likely intended for the bridal couple's clothes chest. The elongated image portrays Joseph after his promotion by the Pharaoh to be the ruler of Egypt. By interpreting Pharaoh's dream, Joseph recognises that Egypt will be visited by seven fat years followed by seven lean years, and that moderation and thrift alone will save the country from famine and misery. To the right, there is a granary, in reference to the wise storage policy of the Egyptians — the policy that has driven Joseph's brothers out of their homeland of Canaan to seek relief in Egypt from their famine. The scene forms a dramatic turning point in the Biblical tale. Sitting on a triumphal cart, Joseph greets the brothers that formally spurned him. Displaying their remorse, the brothers bow down as they recognise the identity of the generous ruler. In this scene Joseph is hailed as a redeeming saviour of his people, as revealed by inscriptions on his carriage and the base of the statue of Ceres inside the grain store. The words "Ecce Salvus mundi" (here is the redeemer of the world) is likely a word play on the patron's name Salvi Borgherini.

Pontormo's last contribution to the series is the highly praised *Joseph with Jacob in Egypt*, said by Vasari to have been placed on the wall next to the entrance of the bedchamber. In this painting the final chapters of the Old Testament story are depicted in a concentrated form. Jacob's move to Egypt is subtly portrayed in the same picture as the scene, where in the left foreground Joseph introduces his father to Pharaoh. On the right, there is a view of fantastical architecture, where we can see a winding staircase as Joseph's sons, Manasse and Ephraim, are being led up to the aged patriarch Jacob. On a stage-like platform of the building Jacob, lying on a bed, receives his grandsons and bestows on them his blessing.

Sadly, Pontormo's Borgherini panels are part of a decorative whole that can no longer be seen in its entirety. By the end of the sixteenth century the Stanza Borgherini had been taken apart and the fourteen individual pictures of the four participating artists are now located in various museums and collections. It is believed that the four participating artists worked together in close cooperation to create a unified cycle charting the stages of Joseph's life chronologically, remaining true to the Old Testament text. There is a recognisable unity of style in the individual panels that counterbalances any personal imprint of a particular artist. The detailed scenes in each of the compositions and the delicacy of the figures appear to look back to the late-Gothic style, enhanced by the technique of simultaneous narration employed in all the pictures. On the completion of the Joseph series in 1518, Vasari tells us that the panels were famous around Florence and beyond for their "regal splendor", helping to solidify Pontormo's reputation as an assured master of numerous techniques.



'Joseph sold to Potiphar'



Detail



'Pharaoh with his Butler and Baker'



Detail



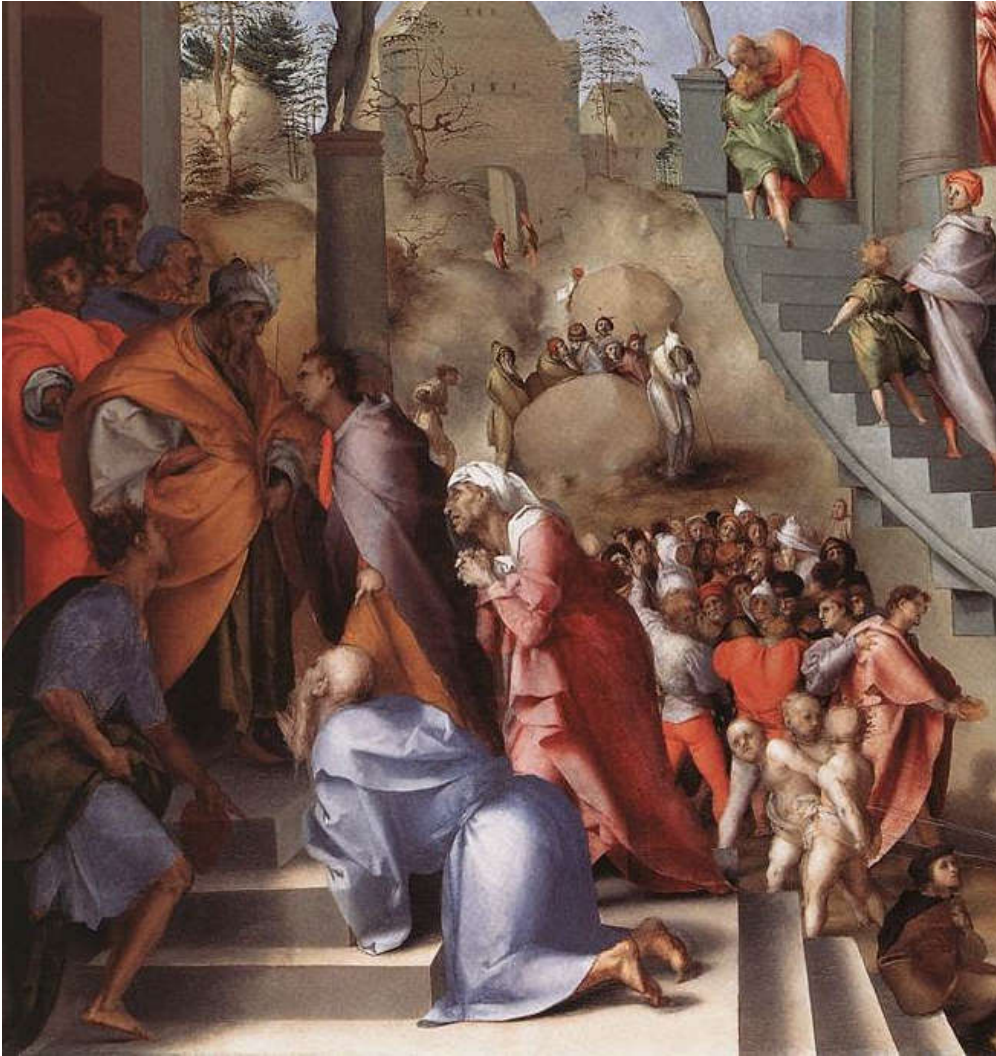
'Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers'



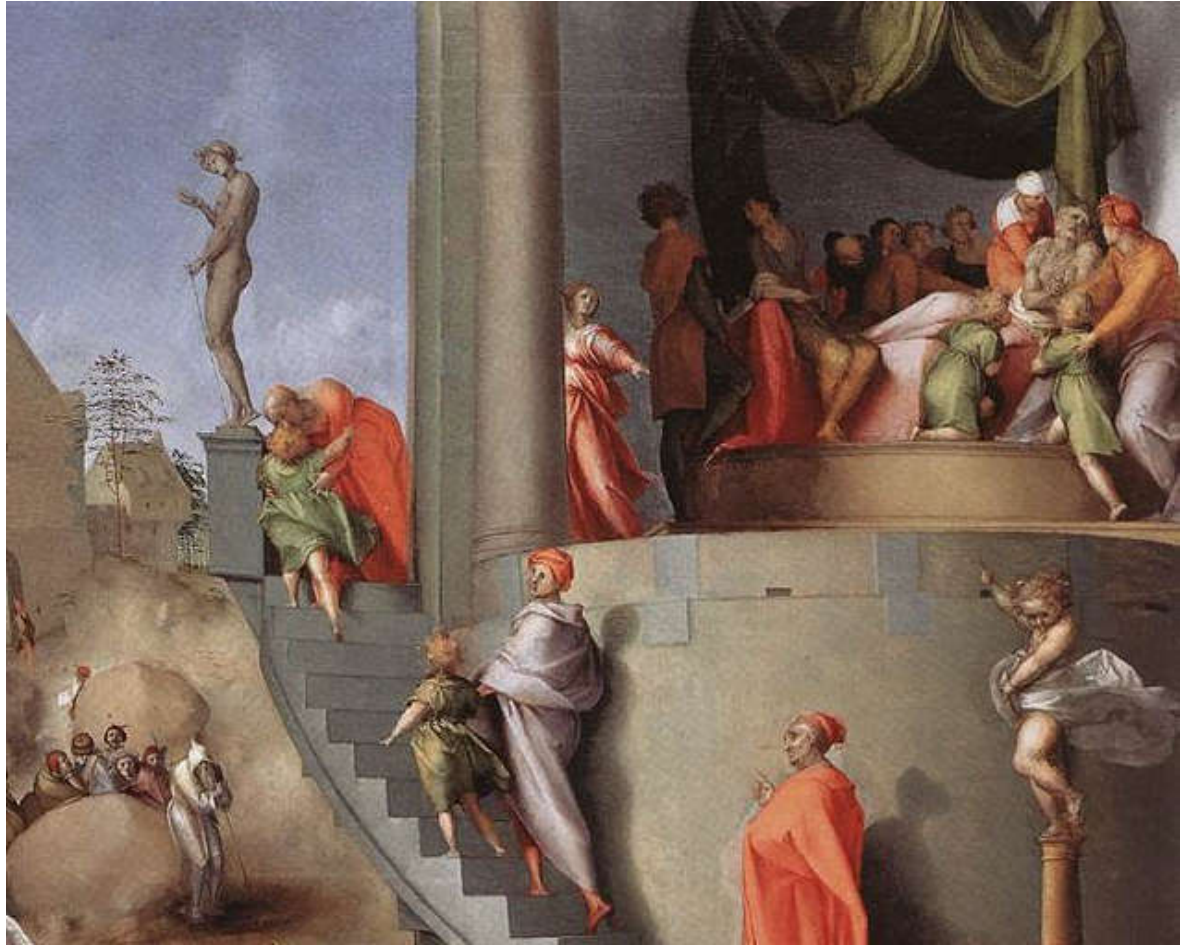
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'Joseph with Jacob in Egypt'



Detail



Detail: the deathbed of Jacob



The Borgherini palace in Florence

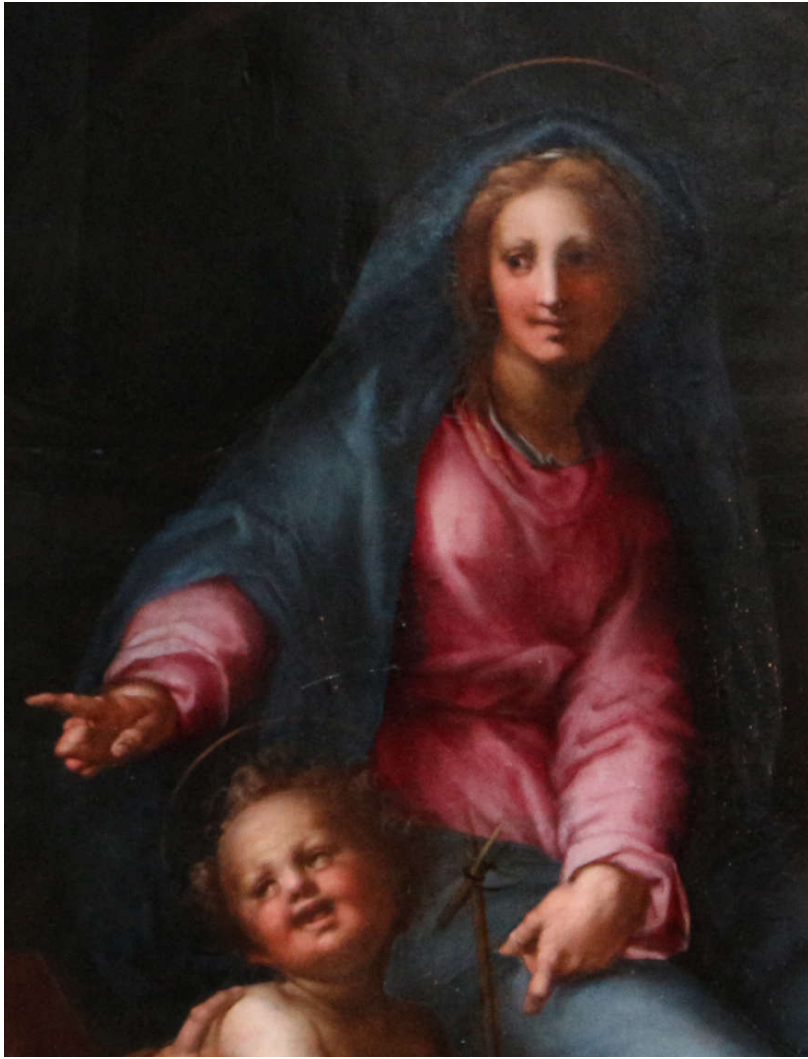
The Pucci Altarpiece (1518)



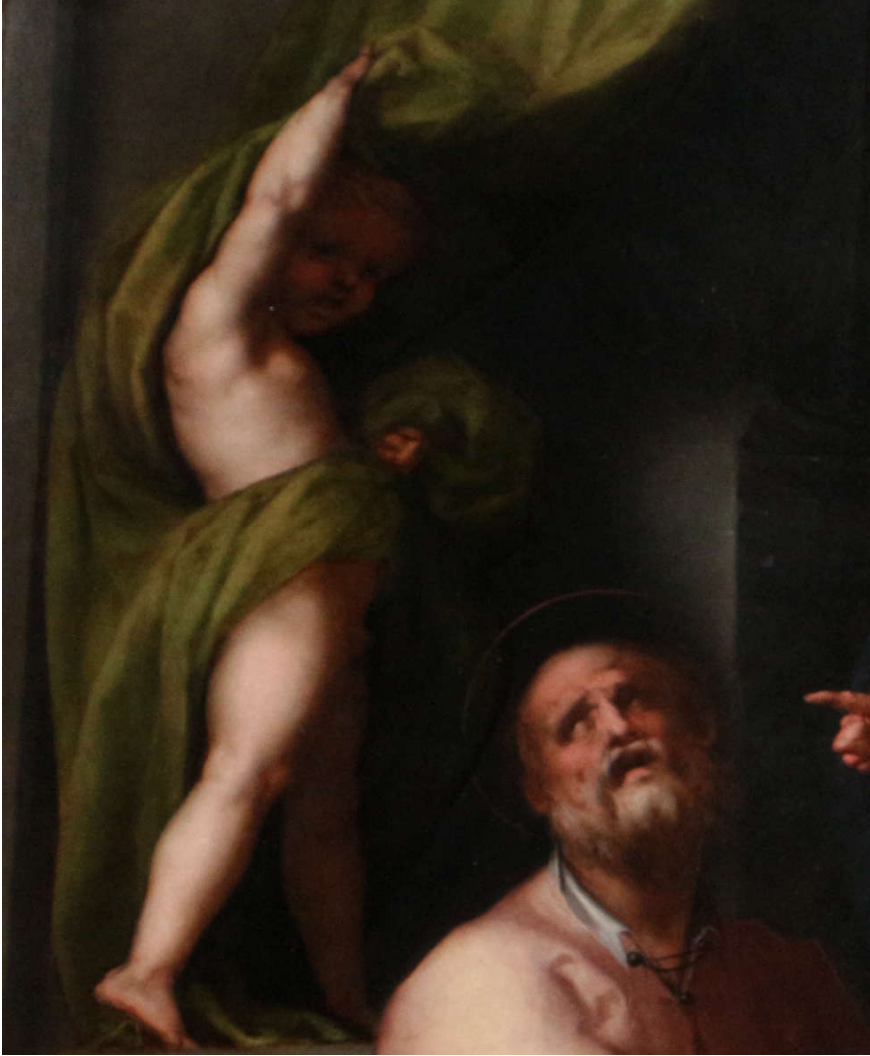
Around the same time, Pontormo produced the following altarpiece, depicting the Madonna and Child with saints, for the church of San Michele Visdomini in Florence. It was commissioned by Francesco Pucci, a collaborator of the House of Medici and a *justice gonfaloniere*. The date can be seen in the painting on the book held by Saint John the Evangelist, on the left. It is the largest oil painting by Pontormo and one of the few works by him which is still housed in its original location.

The Pucci Altarpiece includes a representation of Saint Joseph on the left, holding the Christ Child, in a role that is usually undertaken by the Virgin. The presence of Saint Joseph is explained by the fact that the Gospel of James deals with Christ's childhood and praises Joseph's paternal cares. Saint Francis is connected to the name of the commissioner and the devotion of his order towards Jesus. This work was the artist's first major commission, which was widely praised throughout the Renaissance. Vasari went so far as to declare it was best of all of Pontormo's creations. The vivacity of the Christ child and the effortless structure of the composition, where each figure exists independently in its own plane and yet connects directly with the subject, underline a master of rare talents. Despite the crowded cast of no less than nine figures, the painting retains a balanced and harmonious impression, reinforcing the sacred tone. The adept use of *chiaroscuro* perhaps learnt from his first master Leonardo, on many of the figures also reveals how far the artist had come since his earliest works.





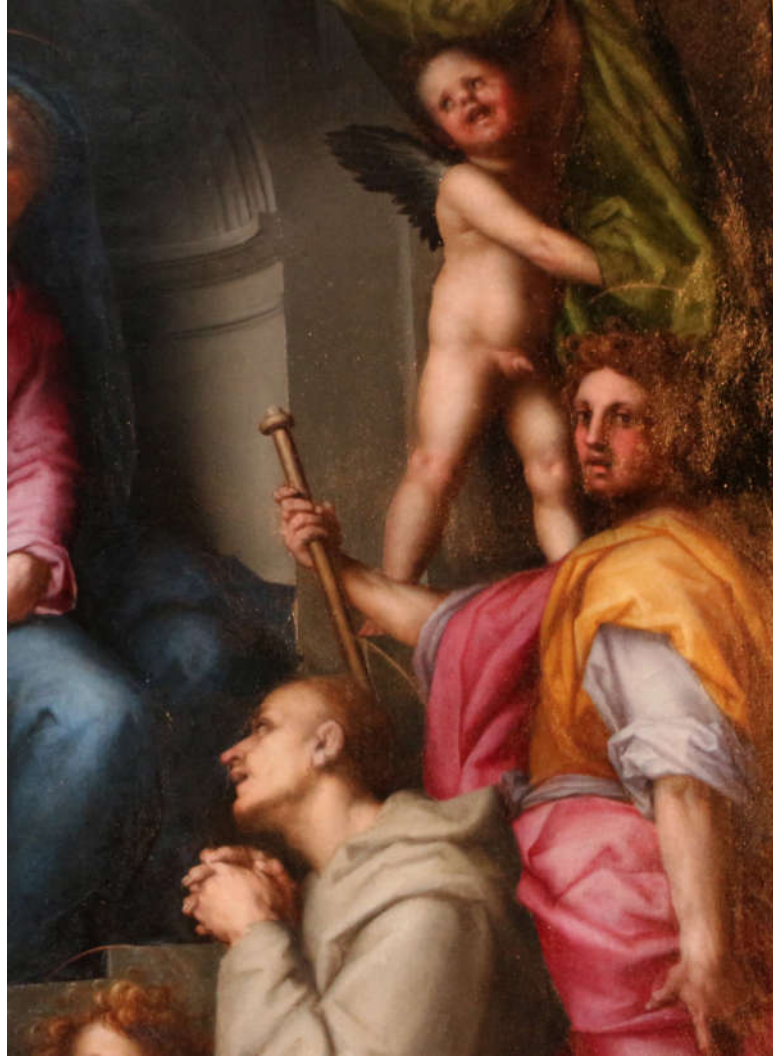
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Detail



Detail



Pontormo's study for the figure of Saint Francesco, Getty Museum



The church of San Michele Visdomini, Florence

Portrait of Cosimo the Elder (1519)



The Italian banker and politician who established the Medici family as effective rulers of Florence, Cosimo the Elder (1389-1464) was a central figure of the Italian Renaissance. He developed agriculture, boosted trade, provided noteworthy public works, such as rendering the Arno navigable, as well as constructing churches, chapels and palaces. Cosimo named himself protector of all genres of art and promoted the rediscovery of classical literature. Under his rule, Florence became one of the pioneering cities of Europe, to the extent that his fellow citizens assigned him the title 'Pater Patriae'.

Fifty years after Cosimo's death, Pontormo was commissioned to paint this portrait by Goro Gori da Pistoia, probably by request of Pope Leo X, originally known as Giovanni de' Medici. Since October 1519, Gori had long been the secretary and loyal advisor of Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino, and grandson of the Pope, who had died on 4 May of the same year. The Duke's death had left the foremost branch of the Medici dynasty with no legitimate heirs, but the birth of the child that would become Cosimo I de' Medici on 12 June to Giovanni delle Bande Nere and Maria Salviati, descendant of the cadet branch of the family, renewed the household's hope. In line with the wishes of the Pope, his godfather, the child had been baptised with the name of the head of the family.

Cosimo is depicted in profile, inspired by the iconography of medals coined after 1465, the year in which the Signoria had endowed him with his new title. The artist presents him in a red velvet cape and hat usually associated with portrayals of the saints Cosma and Damiano, protectors of the Medici family. The three letter Ps sculpted on the back of the chair identify Cosimo as "Father and founder of the homeland" (Pater Patriae Parens) — a reference to an ancient coin bearing the profile of the Roman orator Cicero, with whom Cosimo was often compared.

To the left, the Medici emblem, the vine-prop, is visible — a branch broken off the laurel tree from which a new shoot had developed, symbolising the continuity of the bloodline. The motto on the scroll states that 'one broken branch does not weaken the other,' which is taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*, when Anchises prophesies to Aeneas the future of his bloodline and the foundation of Rome. This appears to support the theory that the painting had been commissioned to celebrate the birth of Cosimo, who would go down in history as Cosimo I, the first Grand Duke of Tuscany.

It could be argued that this portrait served as Pontormo's entry ticket into Medici circles; the canvas entered the Ottaviano de' Medici's collection, before passing to that of his son Alessandro. Shortly after its completion, Ottaviano commissioned Pontormo to paint several frescoes of the 'salone' at the villa di Poggio a Caiano, cementing his status as a rising star of the Florentine art world.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



Bronze medal of Cosimo the Elder by an unknown Florentine artist, c. 1469



Angelo Bronzino's 'Portrait of Cosimo I de' Medici', c. 1545. The 'Portrait of Cosimo the Elder' is believed to have been commissioned to celebrate the birth of Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574).

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