



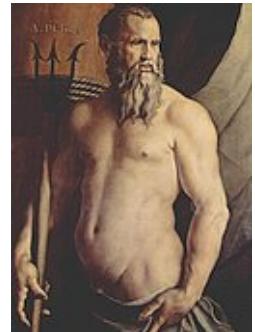
Bronzino, Agnolo (1503-1572)

by Michael G. Cornelius

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Andrea Doria as Neptune by Agnolo Bronzino.

Agnolo Bronzino was one of the leading painters of the Florentine School in mid-sixteenth-century Italy. He eventually became court painter to Cosimo de Medici.

Born in Monticelli in 1503, Bronzino studied with mannerist painter and portraitist Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557), whose style the young artist soon adapted for himself. Mannerism involves the adjustment of volume and spatial boundaries and the alteration of figures to create a harmonious unity in art and architecture. Bronzino softened and lengthened his master's brushstrokes, and in so doing he created a style unique to himself.

Most scholars conclude, based on a series of sonnets Bronzino wrote upon Pontormo's death, that the two men enjoyed a more intimate relationship than that of master and pupil. Later in his life, in 1552, Bronzino also adopted one of his own pupils, Alessandro Allori (1535-1607), as his son.

In sixteenth-century Florence, this type of arrangement often signaled a sexual relationship between two men; an older man adopting his younger lover was quite common. The two artists lived together until Bronzino's death in 1572.

Famous mainly for his portraits, such as the *Portrait of Eleanor of Toledo with her Son Giovanni* (1545-1546), and noted particularly for the softness that illuminates his figures, Bronzino also painted biblical and mythological scenes, designed tapestries and frescos, and composed poetry.

While some of Bronzino's poetry consists of rather conventional lyric verse, as well as the sonnets upon Pontormo's death, he also wrote a considerable body of burlesque verse. Often obscene and erotic, burlesque verse circulated among Florentine intellectual and aristocratic circles, whose members would have detected obscure allusions and subtexts beneath the bawdy wordplay. Bronzino's burlesque poetry is distinguished by its large number of homoerotic references and allusions.

Mannerism is often considered an artistic movement devoid of sexual expression. While mythological or biblical depictions often feature nude or partially-nude figures, such as in Bronzino's own *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time* (ca 1540-1545), there is a reticence to the nudity; bodily parts are strategically covered up, and the subject matter (in this case, mother and son) cautions the viewer against a sexual reading. Even the visual depiction of nude bodies entwined resists a sexual reading, since the bodies are placed at abstract angles to ensure and suggest modesty.

Despite these generalizations, however, there is an undeniable homoerotic subtext to several of Bronzino's famous portraits, including *Andrea Doria as Neptune* (ca 1545) and *Cosimo I de' Medici as Orpheus* (ca 1538-1540). Especially interesting in this regard is his *Portrait of a Young Man* (ca 1535-1540).

A simple portrait of a handsome youth holding two books and wearing a pinky ring, *Portrait of a Young Man* nevertheless possesses a charged eroticism, seen both in the loving depiction the artist has created as well

as in the handsome and anonymous (uncommon in Bronzino's work) model. The books may very well represent Bronzino's own Petrarchan poems, love sonnets sometimes addressed to other men. Moreover, parts of the young man's garb, especially his ring and sash, may act as symbols suggesting his sexuality.

Bronzino's work now hangs in the world's most famous museums, including, for example, the J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), and the National Gallery (London).

In both his writing and painting, Bronzino contributes significant insights into same-sex desire and relationships in sixteenth-century Florentine society.

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