



## Pontormo, Jacopo (1494-1557)

by Richard G. Mann

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Jacopo Carrucci da Pontormo (usually called simply Pontormo) was one of the most original and fascinating artists of the Italian Renaissance.

Born in Empoli, Italy on May 24, 1494, he was to play a decisive role in defining Mannerism, the late Renaissance style (prevailing from approximately 1520 to 1600) that featured stylized (often elongated) human figures, sudden shifts in spatial perspective, displays of artistic virtuosity for its own sake, and complex, ambiguous narratives.

Pontormo is especially known for his innovative handling of formal elements and his complex and ambiguous treatment of subject matter.

Pontormo's dairies suggest that his life was as "strained" as his art works often seem to be. Statements in his private papers and comments by acquaintances support the theory that Pontormo's relationships defied the gender and sexual "norms" being enforced with increased rigor in sixteenth-century Italy. However, his "difference" seems to have provoked deep feelings of guilt and despair.

The account of Pontormo by his contemporary Giorgio Vasari (often considered the first modern art historian) reveals many of the categorizations that recur throughout the early modern era in biographies of "bachelors" who may have been emotionally and sexually involved with others of the same sex.

Thus, Vasari repeatedly describes him as strange and bizarre, and he further insists that Pontormo was a solitary man, who virtually fled from the company of others. Yet Vasari acknowledges that Pontormo deeply loved his students, especially Battista Naldini and Agnolo Bronzino (who emerged as the leading artist in Florence during the mid-sixteenth century).

Vasari's claim that Pontormo always was concerned to have Naldini and Bronzino nearby is supported by the artist's diary, which is filled with many expressions of intense longing for them. Pontormo never referred to his pupils in explicitly sexual terms, and, for that reason, most scholars have insisted that Pontormo cannot be regarded as a "gay" artist.

Obviously, no sixteenth-century artist can be reconstructed purely in terms of modern identity categories. However, no special pleading is involved in suggesting that the intensity of Pontormo's desire for Bronzino (known to have been beautiful and elegant) and Naldini may have had a sensual component, whether it or not it was acted upon.

Pontormo's awareness of the nature of his feelings may have inspired in him the sense of guilt and self-damnation that pervades his dairies.

To solidify his relationship with Naldini, Pontormo adopted him, and he unsuccessfully sought to do the



Two paintings by Pontormo:  
**Top:** *Joseph in Egypt* (1518).  
**Above:** *Martyrdom of Ten Thousand*.

same for Bronzino. Upon Pontormo's death on January 1, 1557, Bronzino wrote a series of sonnets that proclaim the intensity of his love for his master. Citing the closeness of their relationship, Bronzino also filed a claim for the estate of Pontormo, who had not made a will.

Pontormo's restlessness and his unwillingness to conform to the prevailing artistic norms made it impossible for him to remain long as an apprentice with any single painter. Thus, between 1508 and 1512, he studied briefly with a series of major artists, including Leonardo da Vinci, Piero di Cosimo, and Andrea del Sarto.

One of his first major commissions, *The Visitation* (1515), already contained premonitions of his highly original mature approach to the creation of religious scenes. In this asymmetrical composition, the elongated figures are twisted in complex serpentine poses, and the expressions and gestures of many of them seem to have little immediate relevance to the primary visitation scene. In the foreground, a beautiful nude boy languidly scratches his outstretched leg.

Pontormo's artistic "eccentricity" is fully displayed in *Joseph in Egypt* (1518), one of his most famous paintings, now in the National Gallery, London.

In this panel, the artist managed to combine several different parts of the biblical narrative by placing them within separate spatial compartments; this narrative complexity appealed to very sophisticated, highly educated viewers, who were able to "decipher" the artist's clues.

Pontormo defied virtually all conventions of earlier Renaissance art in endowing his figures with surprising hardness and angularity, while making statues seem soft and pliable. The bright colors deliberately clash in a way that must have seemed shocking to viewers, accustomed to the soft tones of Pontormo's teachers.

The boy seated on a step in the center foreground (again, scratching an outstretched leg in a pose that seems to have appealed to Pontormo) has long been considered to be a portrait of the young Bronzino.

Impressed by this scene of Joseph's life, the powerful Medici family commissioned Pontormo to decorate the walls of a summer villa outside Florence (at Poggio a Caiano, 1520-1521). His depictions of mythological scenes there, such as *Vertumnus and Pomona*, feature beautiful, languid adolescent boys, some with erect penises.

Between 1523 and 1525, Pontormo and Bronzino sought refuge from an outbreak of the plague in the monastery of the Certosa di Val d'Ema near Florence. Pontormo's diary notations from this period reveal that he felt that his life was in danger because his sinfulness might have provoked the spread of the illness.

In the cloister of the Certosa, Pontormo executed a series of scenes of the Passion with a searing emotional intensity. In defiance of Renaissance conventions of perspective, the space is flattened and literally tilted up. Thus, the figures--even more angular and elongated than in his earlier works--are pushed out, as if to confront the viewer. The intense but ambiguous facial expressions seem to challenge the role of the spectator in the events being unfolded.

Returning to Florence, Pontormo continued to create powerful religious works, such as the *Deposition of Christ* (1526-1528). In this painting, he retained the compressed space, elongated figural proportions, and anguished expressions of the Certosa series.

But, continuing to vary his style, he now made the figures seem fully three-dimensional and highly muscled in deliberate imitation of Michelangelo, whose figure of Christ from the *Pietà* of 1495 is quoted.

Pontormo was also active as a portraitist, creating such works as *Portrait of a Halberdier* (1529-1530, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum). This elongated figure turns in a graceful, serpentine pose; the facial expression and hand gestures convey intense, but ambiguous feelings, the specific nature of which has long

been debated by scholars.

Unfortunately, the frescoes for San Lorenzo in Florence (1546-1556), the primary focus of his creative energies in his later years, have all been destroyed. However, the drawings for these reveal continuing creative explorations of the infinite possibilities of figural poses.

Pontormo most fully revealed his love of the male body in several panoramic scenes of martyrdom, such as the *Martyrdom of Ten Thousand* (date uncertain). Here, seemingly countless nude men, shown with relatively classicizing proportions (unusual in Pontormo's work), turn and twist in graceful poses.

Executions are depicted in the distance, but the primary goal of this painting seems to be the display of the beauties of the male body--of which the commander in charge seems fully aware, to judge by the bulging cloth around his crotch.

Despite the guilt evident in his writings, Pontormo here seems to be celebrating the splendor of the flesh, rather than consigning it to the destruction required by the subject.

In its boldness, Pontormo's art may be an expression of the desire for freedom from constraints, which he was not able to realize fully in his life.

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