

The porphyry portrait of Benvenuto Cellini in the National Museum of Renaissance.

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Abstract:

The attributions of Benvenuto Cellini (1500 - 1571) physical appearance remain a widely discussed problem. This common issue is well addressed by John Pope-Hennessy in his tome “Benvenuto Cellini”: “*We do not know what Benvenuto Cellini looked like in a fairly young age.*”¹ ... “*There is only one officially recognized portrait of Cellini. It is found among the images of other court artists of the Florentine Duke on a round-shaped fresco by Giorgio Vasari [...] Right under the picture of the already aging Cellini one finds a caption reading Benvenuto SCVL.*”² (Fig.1)

In the late XIX century French editor and erudite Eugen Plon entered to the field of public awareness an artifact, known today as the “porphyry portrait of Benvenuto Cellini” (Fig. 2). Today, this artifact is kept in the National Museum of Renaissance in Chateau d’Écouen, France, under the inventory code 12877. The recent multidisciplinary studies prove, that this portrait does not represent the sculptor’s facial traits.

Key words: Benvenuto Cellini, Porphyry Portrait, Evgen Plon, Portrait Cellini, Porphyry medallion.

Intruduction:

The fresco, mentioned by Dr. Pope-Hennessy, also known as ‘the tondo’ due to its round shape, has lived on. (Fig. 1). Vasari (1511-1572) composed a group portrait on a wall within the *Palazzo Vecchio*, depicting the Florentine sculptors and engineers standing around their duke. All the personalities shown on the tondo were easily recognizable during Vasari’s time. There are 11 individuals portrayed

¹ Pope-Hennessy, John Wyndham. «Benvenuto Cellini». // Abbeville Press. [Hazan pour l’édition française], 1985. - P. 16.

² Ibid.

on the tondo. The Duke Cosmo I surrounded by ten courtiers. Giorgio Vasari mentioned nine of them³ in his written comments and inscriptions right on the fresco: Tribolo (Niccolo di Raffaello di Nicolo dei Pericoli), Tasso (Giovanni Battista del Tasso), Nanni Unghero, San Marino, Giorgio Vasari, Baccio Bandinelli, Bartolomeo Ammanati, Benvenuto Cellini and Francesco Di ser Jacopo.⁴ Vasari failed to mention only one of his colleagues: Luca Martini.

Dr. Chandler Kirwin did contemporary studies and attributions of the personalities shown in the tondo in 1971.⁵ In accordance with Dr. Kirwin's conclusions⁶ the personalities in Vasari's tondo are thus attributed as follows (Fig. 3): 1) Cosmo I di Medici; 2) Giovanni Batista del Tasso; 3) Niccolò di Raffaello di Niccolò dei Pericoli, called "Il Tribolo"; 4) Francesco Di ser Jacopo; 5) Giorgio Vasari; 6) Nanni Unghero; 7) San Marino; 8) Baccio Bandinelli; 9) Benvenuto Cellini; 10) Luca Martini; 11) Bartolomeo Ammannati.

The results of Kirwin's research are customarily referred to as "re-attribution" of the fresco's personalities. This is because the issue of identifying and re-identifying the names of courtiers on the portrait had been raised repeatedly prior to Ch. Kirwin's studies. One such attempt to re-attribuate the identities, was made by French book-publisher Eugène Plon back in the 19th century. In his book *“Benvenuto Cellini, the goldsmith, medal maker and sculptor. A study of his life, work and artifacts attributed to him”*,⁷ Mr. Plon dared to call into question the attribution of personalities in the fresco that, until then, had been regarded as

³ Vasari, Jr. Ragionamenti del signor cavaliere Giorgio Vasari, pittore e architetto Aretino sopra le invenzioni da lui depinte in Firenze nel Palazzo di Loro Altezze Serenissime, con lo illustrissimo ed esselentis. signore D. Francesco Medici, allora principe di Firenze. Arezzo, 1762.

⁴ Württemberg, Franzsepp. Mannerism: The European Style of the Sixteenth Century. New York, 1963. - P. 38

⁵ Kirwin, W.,Ch. “Vasari’s Tondo of Cosmo I with his Architects, Engineers and Sculptors in the Palazzo Vecchio : Typology and Re-Identification of Portraits” // Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen institutes in Florenz. N. 15, 1971. - Pp. 105-122

⁶ Ibid. - P. 114.

⁷ Plon, Eugène. Benvenuto Cellini, orfèvre, médailleur, sculpteur, recherches sur sa vie, sur son oeuvre et sur les pièces qui lui sont attribuées. Plon et Cie, imprimeurs éditeurs. Paris, 1883. - P. 594.

authentic since the 16th century. In keeping with the theme set forth in the book's title the author brought special focus onto the issue of Cellini's portrait.

Although most personalities, including Cellini himself, appear in the fresco undersigned by Vasari with their real names, Plon cast doubt over the caption's accuracy. As the result of his studies, the book-publisher offered his own identification of personalities in the fresco as follows: 1) Cosmo I, Medici; 2) Giovanni Batista del Tasso; 3) Niccolò di Raffaello di Niccolò dei Pericoli, called "Il Tribolo"; 4) Nanni Unghero; 5) San Marino; 6) Bartolomeo Ammannati; 7) Giorgio Vasari; 8) Baccio Bandinelli; 9) Unidentified; 10) Francesco Di ser Jacopo; 11) Benvenuto Cellini. (Fig.3)

In other words, Eugène Plon argued that the white-bearded, fatigued old man wearing a high hat shown above the Duke's right shoulder does not look like Benvenuto Cellini at all, despite the caption "BENVENUTO SCVL" made by Vasari right under this face. Plon claimed in his book that "the real" Cellini in the fresco is the man that doctor Kirwin would later identify as Bartolomeo Ammannati. (Number 11 in Fig. 3.) It is noteworthy that Ammannati, a Florentine sculptor, was eleven years younger than Cellini, and for this reason the age gap between the two personalities in the fresco instantly catches the eye.

The statement, made by the French publisher, unfortunately caused a great impact on many of his contemporaries. Since 1891, three alternative versions of Cellini's face, found on the tondo would keep clashing in the public mind for the next eighty years.

Version one: Cellini is the man above the Duke's right shoulder (Number 9 in Fig. 3). Version two: Cellini is the relatively young man with a short beard left of the Duke. (Number 11 in Fig. 3). Version three: Cellini is the man that has turned his face to a viewer at the very bottom of the tondo. (Number 5 in Fig. 3). The third version belongs to British artist and engraver Joseph Collyer (1748 – 1827). Francesco Tassi in 1829 claimed that Collyer had been commissioned to make the engraving of "portrait Benvenuto Cellini" by the British publisher "Nugent". Whilst searching for the correct face of Benvenuto, the English artist

reasonably relied on Cellini's image in Vasari's tondo. But Collyer simply failed to properly identify the sculptor among the other personalities in the fresco. Collyer's Benvenuto was the man shown talking to Francesco di ser Jacopo, and suddenly turned to a viewer ⁸ (Number 5 in Fig. 3). Dr. Kirwin would convincingly prove in 1971, that the controversial figure is not Benvenuto Cellini, but the painting's author himself - Giorgio Vasari.

Both publisher Francesco Tassi and Joseph Collyer, in contrast to Eugene Plon, correctly guessed the name of Francesco di ser Jacopo, the administrator of the fortresses in the court of Cosmo de Medici. Their attribution agrees with Chandler Kirwin's.

Nowadays art historians reject Cellini's attributes proposed by Eugene Plon and Joseph Collyer. The white-bearded old man wearing a hat shown in profile above the right shoulder of Duke Cosmo I is quite reasonably believed to be Benvenuto's true image.⁹

Methods:

The absence of identified pictorial self-portraits of Cellini stated by Pope-Hennessy was in contradiction with the general trends of 16th-century society and the sculptor's personal egocentric worldview. The paradox appears especially striking because a considerable number of Cellini's artistic masterpieces have survived. That is why the author of the current research found it highly probable that the sculptor concealed his self-portraits in some secondary figures found in his creations. The missing self-portraits and life-time portraits of Cellini could be discovered by methods of anthropological biometrical comparisons, usually applied in criminology.

In most cases, anthropological comparison makes it possible to establish either the full identity or the digital expressed degree of likeness between persons

⁸ Tassi, F.M. "Vita di Benvenuto Cellini", orefice e scultore fiorentino, scritta da lui medesimo, restituita alla lezione originale sul manoscritto poirot ora laurenziano ed arricchita d'illustrazioni e documenti inediti dal dottor Francesco Tassi, vol. I, Firenze, 1829.

⁹ Pope-Hennessy, John Wyndham. Benvenuto Cellini. Abbeville Press. [Hazan pour l'edition française], 1985. - P. 16.

represented in different images, despite the objective limitations of biometric methods when applied to works of art. The methods are specially appropriated when applied to the oeuvres of Renaissance and Mannerism period, as the portraits of that time are particularly realistic¹⁰. In the framework of this study, two methods of biometric comparison have been used consistently: the method of Raoul Perrot¹¹ and the method of Alphonse Bertillon¹².

It is impossible to identify Cellini's self-portraits or his lifetime portraits by other artists without understanding the aesthetic, historical and cultural context in which they were created, therefore a considerable part of the research undertaken for purposes of this study pertain to the realm of museology and art history. First of all, there were found and identified all men faces among the personages of Cellini's art heritage, whose appearance corresponded to the literature self-portrait of Benvenuto. Then, the universally acknowledged portrait of Cellini in his old age by Vasari, displayed in Palazzo Vecchio, served as the reference image for comparison with all other faces in the study for this research. If comparison with the reference image led to a positive result, the examined picture was included in the set of images to be compared among them.

The face represented on the porphyry medallion was compared with the other newly discovered portraits of Cellini.

Discussion and results:

Mr. Plon, besides of his mistaken attempt to re-attribute personages of Vasari's fresco in Palazzo Vecchio, also entered to the field of public awareness an artifact, known today as the "porphyry portrait of Benvenuto Cellini" (Fig. 5). *«M. Eugen Piotte obliged us very much by handing to us [for study] a portrait made on porphyry, which has the following inscription on the reverse side made in silver letters: "Benvenuto Cellini, nato di Giovanni di Andra e di Maria Lisabetta di*

¹⁰ Woods-Marsden, J. «Ritratto al Naturale»: Questions of Realism and Idealism in Early Renaissance Portraits // Art Journal, N.Y., Vol. 46, no. 3, 1987. – P. 209.

¹¹ Perrot, Raoul. Biométrie faciale et expertise d'oeuvres d'art // Paleobios, No. 15. Lyon, 2007.

¹² Bertillon, Alphonse. Identification anthropométrique : Instructions signalétiques. Melun, 1893.

*Stefano Granacci, il di d'Ognissanti nel 1500".*¹³ M. Plon dates the 8,5 cm medallion by the first half of the 16th century and believes, that the piece is exactly the depiction of the “portrait of messer Benvenuto in nut-wood frame”, according to the notary public’s evidence, hung on a wall in the goldsmith’s house at the moment of Benvenuto death.¹⁴

This mentioned notary act of 1570 (1571) deserves a special attention: Dr. Pope-Hennessy, when he says that “*only one portrait of Benvenuto Cellini has been recognized officially*”¹⁵, probably proceeds from his conviction, that the other indubitable authentic portrait of Benvenuto, known to us from a Florentine notary act of 1571 (1570), has been completely lost: “*In the lobby: ... a portrait of Messere Benvenuto in a nut-wood frame, a wooden bench four cubits long, ...*”.¹⁶ The portrait of “Messere Benvenuto” in the lobby is framed, and therefore, we can deduce it could only be a painted picture or a drawing. It is certainly not a sculpture or some kind of relief. It is also hard to imagine that Cellini would have placed a simple framed piece of graphic on the wall of his lobby, at the most visited place of his house.

The notary did not have any doubt about the identity of the subject depicted on the portrait. The sitter is unquestionably “*messer Benvenuto*” for him. It is also certain that the notary met Cellini himself, and therefore, the jurist was able to recognize the sitter as “messer Benvenuto”.

The fact, that the portrait was exposed by Benvenuto on the most visited place of his residence, leads us to conclusion that Cellini found his image on the portrait quite satisfactory, and even took pride in it. Reflections on the probable

¹³ Plon, Eugen. Benvenuto Cellini – Orfèvre, médailleur, sculpteur. Recherche sur sa vie, son œuvre et sur les pièces qui lui sont attribuées. Plon et Cie, Paris, 1883. – Pp. 133-134.

¹⁴ Inventaires dressés après le décès de Benvenuto Cellini le 16 février 1570 / Vie de Benvenuto Cellini écrite par lui-même. La Table Ronde, 2002, - Pp. 650 – 655.

¹⁵ Pope-Hennessy, John Wyndham. Benvenuto Cellini. Abbeville Press. [Hazan pour l’édition française], 1985. - P. 16.

¹⁶ De Falgano, Giovanni. Inventaires dressés après le décès de Benvenuto Cellini le 16 février 1570 / «Vie de Benvenuto Cellini écrite par lui-même». La Table Ronde, 2002. –P. 650 – 655.

authorship of the portrait in the nut-wood frame on the wall will bring us to a supposition that the painting was most likely made by Cellini's hand.

Unfortunately, all traces of this artifact were lost, as Francesco Tassi by the middle of the 19th century witnesses: "*we do not have any new evidence as regards the existence of this portrait.*"¹⁷

According to the Plon's hypothesis, the Florentine notary should describe in his act the found porphyry medallion. This hypothesis does not have enough basis, as the description of this artifact as "small", "round", "size of hand", "medallion", "stone", "porphyry" would be much more appropriate in that case than the identification of the artifact as "a portrait in a nut-wood frame". An opposite is also true: the characteristic "in a nut-wood frame" for the round miniature of 8,5 cm seems to be irrelevant, as it is a small round shape miniature made on stone. In addition, it is almost impossible to identify a minuscule wooden round frame as being made of "nut-wood".

Mr. Plon claims that "*several portraits made on porphyritic stone are kept in the Pitti Gallery*" and that "*all of them date back to the same epoch as regards the time of their creation.*"¹⁸ But scholars disprove this claim.¹⁹ The data available nowadays suggests that only two portraits on porphyry ever existed. One of them shows "Benvenuto Cellini" whilst the other one, represents "Ferdinando I Medici". Both of the known porphyry artifacts were made by an unknown Florentine craftsman in a way that stood wide apart from artistic good skills. Since the birth of Cellini and Ferdinando I is spaced out by a period of about fifty years.

The publisher himself felt a definite logical discomfort when he had to compare Cellini's face on the medallion with the face of "Cellini" on Vasari's

¹⁷ Tassi F. M. *Recordi e documenti Cellini, Benvenuto, Le Opere di Benvenuto Cellini, arricchite di note ed illustrazioni.* Società editrice Fiorentina, Firenze. 1843. - P. 423.

¹⁸ Plon, Eugen. *Benvenuto Cellini – Orfèvre, médailleur, sculpteur. Recherche sur sa vie, son œuvre et sur les pièces qui lui sont attribuées.* Plon et Cie, Paris, 1883. – P. 133-134.

¹⁹ Collomb, Anne-Laure. *La Peinture sur pierre en Italie 1530-1630. Thèse de doctorat d'Histoire de l'Art, Université Lumière Lyon 2. Histoire de l'art et archéologie – CNRS UMR 5190.* Lyon, 2006.

fresco, which he attributed incorrectly. In fact, Plon tried to compare the face of Ammannati (Number 11 on Fig. 3), mistaken him with Cellini, and that of “porphyry portrait of Benvenuto Cellini”. Both faces do not look very much alike, even if the questionable mastership of the craftsman who produced the porphyry medallion allows broad interpretation of the sitter’s facial traits. Ammannati on the tondo by Vasari has a round-form of skull, whereas the sitter in the porphyry medallion possesses an elongated head. Moreover, the facial proportions, shapes of noses and brows are very different on each of the compared portraits.

At the 2007 Parisian auction House “Drouot” sold ²⁰ the picture, attributed as the “Portrait of monsieur Strozzi” by unknown follower of Cornelius de Lion (Follower of Corneille de Lyon (Flemish b. ca. 1501-1574). “Portrait de monsieur de Strozzi”. Oil on panel, 23x18 cm. Privet collection) ²¹ (Fig.2, Right). This picture is also signed, as well as the porphyry portrait. The inscription on it, placed on the both sides of the sitter head identifies him as “monsieur Strozzi”.

It is obvious that “monsieur Strozzi” represented on the panel and “Benvenuto Cellini” shown on the porphyry medallion are the same people. One of these pictures could be only a copy of another. Considering that the porphyry medallion is smaller, than the picture, and the quality of painting on the wooden panel is higher than the craft on the stone, the porphyry portrait was most likely painted after the “monsieur Strozzi” picture, in contradiction with the M. Plon’s theory that the porphyry portrait was drawn from life.

Also, this poor piece of portraiture on porphyry could not be present anywhere close to Cellini during the latter man’s lifetime. Benvenuto was a refined aesthete and it is hardly conceivable that he would have put up a portrait of himself of such miserable quality.

²⁰ Millon & Associates. Richelieu Drouot, Salle 1, Friday, March 23, 2007. URL: <http://www.artvalue.com/auctionresult--follower-of-corneille-claude-c-portrait-de-monsieur-de-strozz-1498207.htm>. (Date of request 2.10.2016)

²¹ Communiqué of past auctions / Artnet.com. URL: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/corneille-de-lyon/portrait-de-monsieur-de-strozzi-w-zsak7XrVBO3kbbQ9Gd4g2> (Date of request: 30.06.2016)

It was established as a result of the current study that Benvenuto Cellini is represented on 10 different pictures, reliefs and statues, contemporary to his life. Besides of known fresco by Vasari there are:

1. Cellini, Benvenuto. "Bust of Cosimo I Medici", 1545. Bronze 110 cm. Bargello Museum, Florence. Detail: anthropomorphic head on the Duke's right shoulder armour plate.
2. Cellini, Benvenuto. "Perseus rescuing Andromeda", 1552-1553. Bronze, relief. 81 x 90 cm. Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence. Detail: "man with his arm raised".
3. Cellini, Benvenuto. "Perseus", 1552-1553. Bronze. 320 cm. Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence. Detail: mask on the back of Perseus's head.
4. Cellini, Benvenuto. "Jupiter", 1552-1553. Bronze. 98 cm. Pedestal of Perseus. National Museum, Florence.
5. Cellini, Benvenuto. "Bearded man", 1540-1545. Paper, graphite. 28.3 x 18.5 cm. Royal Library, Turin. (Fig. 5, Right)
6. Cellini, Benvenuto. "King Francis's salt seller", 1540-1543. Gold, enamel wood, ivory. 26,3 x 33,5 cm. Detail: "Ocean". Art History Museum, Vienna.
7. Cellini, Benvenuto. "Portrait of a bearded man in a red cap", 1558–1562. Oil, paper pasted to canvas. 61 x 48 cm. Private collection, Paris. (Fig. 5, Left).
8. Bordone, Paris (1500–1570). "Portrait of a jeweller", 1540. Oil on canvas. 98 x 80.5 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich. (Fig. 4, Right)
9. Bordone, Paris. "Lovers or Spouses", 1525-1530. Oil on canvas. 81 x 86 cm. Pinacothèque de Brera, Milan. (Fig. 4, Left).

All the self-portraits of Benvenuto Cellini identified has common stylistic approach. All of them agree with the literary Cellini's self-portrait in presenting the author as a heroic personality. The heroic nature of artistic images is created with the help of a technique discovered by Michelangelo and known as *terribilità*: frowning brows and confident look of the eyes. Cellini always tended to idealize and heroicize his appearance. In some instances, the "improvements" of his facial features went beyond the limit.

Cellini's facial appearance has a few characteristics, some of which can be treated as his distinctive features: broad cheekbones; an underdeveloped and somewhat protruding mandible, with the lower lip overbiting the upper lip; a large nose which is thin and straight at the bridge, but has a thickening and a small dimple on the tip; green-greyish eyes which appear to be set close to the bridge of the nose; almond-shaped eyelids; rather thick eyebrows, although in some self-portraits Cellini tried to make them less expressed; Cellini began to grow bald early, but the process slowed down with age; in spite of that, Benvenuto Cellini had lost his hair on the top of his head by the age of 50; thin and strong hands; an athletic build and straight posture, which Cellini preserved throughout his life.

The portraits of Benvenuto's life time that should be acknowledged as the most characteristic and realistic representations of Benvenuto Cellini's appearance are the works "Lovers or Spouses" and "The Portrait of a Jeweller" by Paris Bordone. The porphyry portrait from Ecouen does not correspond to any of newly discovered portrait of Cellini.

Conclusions:

"The portrait of Benvenuto Cellini" made on porphyry stone is a pseudo-portrait of the sculptor. It does not correspond to his real appearance.

As the true life-time portraits and Cellini self-portraits were not discovered yet, the hypothesis of Mr. Plon lived on. In 1971, The State Post of Romania issued a stamp in occasion of the 400th anniversary since Cellini's death. The "porphyry portrait" was chosen as a base for the stamp.

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Illustrations:

Fig. 1



Left: Vasari, Giorgio (1511-1572) "Cosmo I di Medici among court sculptors, architects and engineers", 1563. Fresco. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

Right: Vasari, Giorgio (1511-1572) "Cosmo I di Medici among court sculptors, architects and engineers", 1563. Fresco. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Detail: Portrait of Benvenuto Cellini.

Fig. 2:



Left: Unknown artist, portrait of Benvenuto Cellini on porphyry. Diameter 8,5 cm. Porphyry, Museum of Renaissance, Ecouin.

Right: Unknown follower of Cornelius De Lion. "Portrait of monsieur Strozzi". Datation is not known. Oil on wood. 23x18 cm. Privet collection.

Fig. 3:



Location of personalities in Giorgio Vasari's fresco Cosmo I di Medici among court sculptors, architects and engineers.

Fig. 4:



Left: Bordone, Paris. "Lovers or spouses", circa 1525. Oil on canvas, 81 cm x 86 cm. Pinacoteca di Brera. Milan

Right: Bordone, Paris (1500-1570). "Portrait of a Goldsmith", circa 1540. Oil on canvas 98 cm x 80.5 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Fig. 5:



Left: Cellini, Benvenuto. "Bearded man in a red cap" (Self-portrait), circa 1560. Oil, paper glued to canvas. 61 cm by 48 cm. Private collection

Right: Cellini, Benvenuto. "Bearded man" (Self-Portrait), circa 1543. Paper, graphite, 28.3x18.5 cm (1540-1543) (?) Royal Library, Turin.

