Lorenzo’s son, from Life:
a possible model, from life, of Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici

by Michael Riddick
In 1864 a terracotta *Bust of a Youth* (Fig. 01) at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello entered their collection along with a terracotta *Bust of a Young Warrior* (Fig. 02). Both were formerly located at the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence. 

In 1898, Igino Benvenuto Supino first identified the *Bust of a Youth* as the work of Andrea del Verrocchio (1435-88), noting also the subject of the bust, by tradition, as portraying Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici (1472-1503), the eldest son and successor of Lorenzo de’ Medici, the Magnificent (1449-92).

Piero is more popularly known as Piero ‘the Unfortunate’ due to the ill-fated sequence of events that complicated the succession of his father’s legacy. When Lorenzo died, Piero was only twenty years-of-age and though well-educated, lacked the diplomatic verisimilitude possessed by his father. His naivety resulted in his expulsion from Florence in 1494, settling first in Venice and later in the region of Montecassino where he tragically drowned nine years later while fleeing a Spanish incursion during the Battle of Garigliano.

Maud Cruttwell’s debut monograph on Verrocchio in 1904 excluded the *Bust of a Youth*, judging its modeling too weak to be his work. She additionally dismissed the subject’s association with Piero noting that if it were by Verrocchio, it would have been realized during the period in which he was occupied with the equestrian
monument of Bartolomeo Colleoni, a production whose superior craftsmanship much exceeded what is conveyed in the *Bust of a Youth.*

In 1969, Günter Passavant retained the possibility the bust could represent Piero, suggesting a date of origin during the late 1480s. However, he found its conventional features and simplistic handling more in-line with a practiced novice than a master like Verrocchio.

Jane Schuyler’s dissertation on Florentine portrait busts accepted the *Bust of a Youth* as a product of Verrocchio’s workshop and its association with Piero. Likewise, Piero Adorno recently accepted an association with Verrocchio’s workshop, possibly by a young talent in his studio like Agnolo di Polo (1470-1528), although Lorenzo Lorenzi’s monograph on Agnolo excludes the work, and Andrew Butterfield’s later monograph on Verrocchio omits any mention of the bust.

Anthony Radcliffe, in considering the technical facture of both the *Bust of a Youth* and Pollaiuolo’s *Bust of a Young Warrior* (Fig. 02), suggested both could be the product of Pollaiuolo’s workshop. While the arms of Pollaiuolo’s *Bust of a Young Warrior* are lost, details indicate they were separately modeled and extended outwardly from the torso similar in manner to the *Bust of a Youth,* a stylistic departure less commonly observed in Florentine portraiture of this type. Further, the body of each bust was fashioned using a similar technique which Radcliffe suggests were built-up from coils of rolled clay as if preparing a vase.

Nonetheless, a technical examination of the *Bust of a Youth* still indicated minor variations distinguishing it from the *Bust of a Young Warrior,* most notably, the overlapping of clay while modeling the torso. Thermoluminescence testing authenticated its age, settling past arguments against its antique origins.

While the *Bust of a Young Warrior* has almost unanimously been agreed upon as a work by Pollaiuolo, the stylistic inconsistency between both busts suggests an alternate origin for the *Bust*...
of a Youth, specifically in the ambit of Verrocchio, as regularly suggested in the limited attention it’s received by scholars.

In a recent summary, Maria Grazia Vaccari cautiously receded from a firm association of the bust with Piero though acknowledged its superficial similarity with a contemporaneous miniature portrait of him by Gherardo di Giovanni del Fora, presumed gifted on occasion of his marriage to Alfonsina Orsini. The miniature, painted when Piero was sixteen, portrays a relaxed youth with numerous features congruent with the Bust of a Youth (Fig. 03). The almond-shaped face with widely parted eyes, long nasal bridge, slightly protruding chin, same hairstyle and related attire are apparent. The lips, however, are pursed in Gherardo’s portrait and his portrayal is more cool than principled.
Another early, though notably different, portrait painting of Piero is found in a series of twenty-four oil-on-tin miniatures of the Medici family attributed to Agnolo Bronzino and his workshop, realized around 1555 or thereafter. The portrait shows Piero wearing a similar cap though dressed in armor. His features are fuller, compressed and his nose and lips are portrayed broader. While most portraits from the Medici series depend upon earlier painted sources the portrait of Piero’s father, Lorenzo the Magnificent, instead depends upon a celebrated terracotta bust preserved at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.\textsuperscript{18 19}

The scarcity of portraits depicting Lorenzo likely necessitated a reliance on the sculpture. Similarly, a lack of available portraiture of Piero may have also required a dependency on a sculptural source, in this case, perhaps Pollaiuolo’s \textit{Bust of a Young Warrior}, whose characteristics appear casually reflected in the painted portrait (Fig. 04). The notion suggests Pollaiuolo’s \textit{Bust of a Young Warrior} may have once been thought to portray Piero, at least during the 16th century, though to the present author’s knowledge, this has never been proposed in modern art historical discourse and would invite reasonable skepticism.
The series of Medici miniatures must have been completed by 1568 when Vasari mentions them in the second edition of his *Vite.* However, its realization post-dates both Lorenzo and Piero’s life-time requiring the artist and his workshop to have depended upon other sources.

Both the *Bust of a Youth* and *Bust of a Young Warrior* were each coated by a layer of bronze coloring applied during the 19th century though beneath was a contemporaneous ochre paint simulating a gilt surface. Undiscussed is the evidence this coloring provides in understanding the possible function and context of the busts. Examples of such busts are depicted in a few contemporary Florentine paintings, most notably a panel portraying the *Triumph of Mardocheus* from a series representing the story of Esther by Jacopo del Sellaio. A detail from the panel shows a half-length gilt bust of a woman set within a lunette above an entryway (Fig. 05). Its truncated form, lacking a pedestal-base, recalls the comparable format of the *Bust of a Youth*.

Giorgio Vasari mentions busts of this kind can be seen “in every house in Florence, above the chimneypieces, doors, windows and cornices, innumerable portraits of this type, so well made and so naturalistic that they seem to be living.”

More specifically, Vasari describes a portrait bust of “Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici and his wife, marvelously lifelike and true to nature.” He continues stating how “these two heads stood for many years over two doors in Piero’s room at the Palazzo Medici, each in a lunette; afterwards they were removed, with the portraits of many other illustrious men of that house, to the *guardaroba* of Cosimo I de’ Medici.”

Alison Wright suggests a terracotta figure painted in the color of metal, referenced in Cosimo’s 1553 Medici inventory, could refer to Pollaiuolo’s *Bust of a Young Warrior,* however, this could equally apply to the *Bust of a Youth,* which, if representing...
Piero, is noted here by Vasari, removed from its former location in the Palazzo and presumably destined for display in Cosimo’s “new hall.”

Schuyler, in recognizing the Bust of a Youth as a representation of Piero, keenly suggested a terracotta Portrait of a Woman from the Edmond Foulc collection as its pendant: a presumed bust of Piero’s wife, Alfonsina Orsini (Fig. 06).

Scarcely discussed in the literature, Wilhelm Reinhold Valentiner first preemptively attributed this bust to Leonardo da Vinci, comparing her dress with a costume in one of his sketches that is now understood to be typical Florentine attire. Willem von Bode and Cruttwell both attributed the terracotta to Verrocchio, though Schuyler suggested its generic modelling linked it more closely with a possible pupil in Verrocchio’s workshop, though not Leonardo. Schuyler commented on the similar characteristics the terracotta shares with a portrait by Sandro Botticelli accepted as representing Alfonsina (Fig. 07).
When paired, the homogeny of the two busts is apparent, both in scale, style and attractiveness (Fig. 08). Later, the *Portrait of a Woman* suffered from deep skepticism concerning its authenticity and was condemned as a forgery, deaccessioned from the Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum, and was sold at auction for a modest sum. However, in similar reprieve as the *Bust of a Youth*, the auction house offering the *Portrait of a Woman* subjected it to thermoluminescence testing revealing it was indeed fired in or around the fifteenth century.

The pairing of the two busts may suggest an impetus for their creation: the celebration of Piero and Alfonsina’s marriage.

Although Lorenzo the Magnificent rarely commissioned portraits of himself except in times of duress and political necessity, he may have been compelled to commission busts of his successor and daughter-in-law as a gesture of dynastic continuity. The quantity of surviving Florentine busts portraying young women is noted as tacit evidence they were made near the time of their subject’s marriages, commissioned by the couple
themselves or by family members. The terracotta *Bust of a Youth* and *Portrait of a Woman* may have been commissioned on occasion of the couple’s marriage, displayed at the festivities surrounding the event and later placed domestically at their residence in the Palazzo Medici. In anticipation of continuing his legacy, Lorenzo’s carefully crafted marriage arrangement between Piero and Alfonsina would have been a noticeable event for the Medici dynasty, evident by the many important figures in attendance at the banquet festival in honor of their marriage at the Villa Medici at Careggi during June of 1488.

Although Piero’s marriage to Alfonsina was arranged earlier by proxy in 1486, Alfonsina did not reach Florence until 1488 when her formal partnership with Piero was to begin on 22 May. However, the premature death of Piero’s sister, Luisa de’ Medici, delayed celebrations until the beginning of June. The couple were both aged sixteen at the time of their marriage ceremony and this youthfulness is evident in the character of the busts.

It is conceivable the proposed commission of the busts would have depended upon a familiar sculptor in service to the Medici. Lorenzo the Magnificent’s careful control over the use of his image consistently required involvement of artists loyal to him such as the post-Pazzi conspiracy propagandic medals made by his friend and

Fig. 09: Terracotta *Bust of a Youth*, by Francesco di Simone Ferrucci (?), Florence, 15th cent. (1488?), Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. 167M (left); Marble bust of Pino III Ordelaffi, by Francesco di Simone Ferrucci, Civic Museum of Forli (right)
permanent house guest, Bertoldo di Giovanni,\textsuperscript{36} or the execution of life-cast wax votives representing his likeness, displayed strategically throughout Florence after the attempt on his life, realized collaboratively by Verrocchio and Orsini de’ Benintendi.\textsuperscript{37}

Giancarlo Gentilini, in discussing a later terracotta bust of Lorenzo the Magnificent’s other son, Giovanni di Lorenzo de’ Medici,\textsuperscript{38} attributed to Antonio de’ Benintendi, noted how Antonio likely had exclusive access to his patron for reasons of loyalty and security over the dissemination of his image.\textsuperscript{39} Antonio was the son of Orsini, noted already for producing the wax effigies of Lorenzo, thus indicating a family practice for the exclusive employ of artists loyal to Medici ambitions. Documents likewise confirm Piero’s preference for retaining Medici court artists via his healthy repertoire with Michelangelo Buonarroti, the medalist Michelangelo di Guglielmino Tanaglia and goldsmith Michelangelo di Viviano, each of whom he maintained contact with during his Florentine tenure and exile.\textsuperscript{40}

A choice artist for the creation of family portrait busts would have sensibly been passed to Verrocchio, of whom Vasari credited with the revival of such sculptures in Florence.\textsuperscript{41}

A settlement of debts, dated 27 January 1495, given to Lorenzo the Magnificent’s heirs by Verrocchio’s brother Tommaso, cites: “twenty masks taken from life.”\textsuperscript{42} \textsuperscript{43} The citation refers to Verrocchio’s use of life-masks in the creation of sculpted portraiture,\textsuperscript{44} a Florentine practice common in the last-half of the 15th century.\textsuperscript{45} Considering the quantity of masks cited it could be assumed that these do not all represent casts of Lorenzo the Magnificent, but also members of his family.
The theoretical dating for the creation of the busts helps to narrow the possibilities for their maker, especially if reliant on Verrocchio with whom both busts have been almost continually associated or attributed.

Alfonsina did not arrive in Florence until May of 1488, thus providing a notional terminus post quem for the creation of the busts. However, Verrocchio was not in Florence at this time, occupied with his statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni. Verrocchio had established a second workshop in Venice five years earlier and moved there probably in May of 1486.\textsuperscript{46} Lorenzo di Credi, at this time, was in-charge of Verrocchio’s workshop in Florence. However, Lorenzo di Credi was a painter and would have thus relied upon another of Verrocchio’s trusted collaborators skilled in sculpture and still connected to Verrocchio’s workshop, even after Verrocchio’s death, the sculptor: Francesco di Simone Ferrucci.\textsuperscript{47}

Verrocchio died at the end of June 1488, the month of Piero and Alfonsina’s wedding. A commission of the busts would have fallen logically into Ferrucci’s domain, a capable sculptor and one familiar with Verrocchio’s working methods. The essence of the two busts indeed maintain a Verrocchio-like aura while their eloquent yet generic formalities echo the work of Ferrucci.
In Vaccari’s most recent discussion of the *Bust of a Youth* she maintained its connection with the circle of Verrocchio while also noting its affinity with Ferrucci’s marble bust of Pino III Ordelaffi at the Civic Museum of Forli (Fig. 09). Passavant had first suggested Ferrucci as a possibility due to the stylistic influences Verrocchio had upon him. Though not his pupil, Ferrucci regularly collaborated with Verrocchio during the 1470s-80s, particularly on the funerary monument for Cardinal Niccolo Forteguerri.

Further comparisons of the busts can be made against other works attributed to Ferrucci like his marble *Virgin Adoring the Child* whose figure of Mary maintains a similarly relaxed, yet dignified pensiveness suggested by her lips. His marble *Madonna Bianca*, completed also in 1488, likewise shares the same tranquil yet exalted presence (Fig. 10, left) and his jovial marble putto at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, featuring similarly incised eyes of equivalent depth-and-dimension which stare into the distance, imparting a conscious liveliness both arresting and noble (Fig. 10, right).

Although no other quattrocento examples of its kind are known, the discovery of a possible preparatory model (Figs. 11, 12, 13, cover), either in stucco or plaster and painted at some advent in its history, adds potential new knowledge to the development of the *Bust of a Youth*.  

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*Lorenzo’s son, from Life: a possible model, from life, of Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici*
Following Florentine practice, and particularly the methods employed by Verrocchio, Ferrucci would have likely depended upon life-masks for the creation of the busts. The stucco model, life-size and in approximate scale to the terracotta, appears to have been worked-up from a cast taken from the mold of a life-mask, later worked over with modestly idealized features in the finished terracotta production.

In discussing a bust of Lorenzo the Magnificent at the Ashmolean Museum, Alison Luchs observed the likelihood it had been based upon a life-mask, idealized or regularized, particularly with respect to his nose whose character is more refined than that featured on Lorenzo’s death mask preserved at the Palazzo Pitti (Fig. 14).\(^5\) A similar idealization is apparent in comparing the terracotta *Bust of a Youth* against the stucco model (Fig. 15). The stucco model is a more faithful likeness that recalls a reasonable combination of both his parent’s noses, the broadness of his father’s and the refinement of his mother’s particularly with its horizontal underside.

Other features of the stucco model indicate it represents a mask taken from life. The soft forms of the face are flattened during this process due to the weight of gradually applied layers of wet plaster, resulting in heightened cheek bones, a flattened chin and slightly broadened lower jaw with subtly widened lips. These features are corrected in the finished bust with the cheeks heightened by a supple fleshiness around the lower jaw, the lips raised to eliminate an unnatural frown and the chin modeled with a delicate realism.

Fig. 13: Detail of a terracotta *Bust of a Youth*, by Francesco di Simone Ferrucci (?), Florence, 15th cent. (1488?) Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. 167M (top); a cast life-mask and preparatory model in stucco or plaster for the *Bust of a Youth*, Florence, 15th cent., private collection (bottom)
On the stucco model, circular nasal holes suggest where straws would have been inserted for the subject to breathe during the process, a method delineated by Cennino Cennini in his discussion of preparing masks in *Il libro dell’arte*. A portion of damp plaster may have been dragged downward during their removal, resulting in the flaw beneath the proper right nostril (see cover photo). This has been corrected in the terracotta bust. The use of this breathing device may also explain the widening of the upper nostrils whereas this has been made to appear more natural in the finished bust.

The upper lip has also been flattened due to the weight of the plaster and perhaps also due to some restraint from the sitter during the process of taking the mold. There is a casting flaw along the
proper left eyebrow, perhaps due to hair sticking to the wet plaster during the process, usually remedied by the application of oil over the hair, though not always successful.

The clearly defined eye sockets with their “three-dimensional egg-shaped forms,” modeled and recessed deep beneath the lids is also characteristic of modifications made to a life mask. The rough surface of the bust with its pits and raised bubbles is due to the settling of the plaster in the mold where air-pockets would have formed while casting. The dull, muted texture atop the head suggests also a cap worn during the process and the sudden outcropping of the hair at a rather sharp angle implies additions made to the working model. The presence of the independent model of the head with a protruding unfinished neck also indicates it was prepared separately from the worked-up torso and set into its vase-like opening at the top.

The marvel of the stucco model is not so much its artistic merit inasmuch as its utilitarian and historic significance. It offers a potentially tactile glimpse into the working methods of Florentine sculptors often described but scarcely observed and foremost, if representing Piero, is possibly the only true living quattrocento visage of a Medici family member known.

Fig. 15: A cast life-mask and preparatory model in stucco or plaster for the Bust of a Youth, Florence, 15th cent., private collection (left); Detail of a terracotta Bust of a Youth, before restoration, by Francesco di Simone Ferrucci (?), Florence, 15th cent. (1488?), Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. 167M (right)
Further remarkable is the survival of both terracotta busts in spite of Piero’s exile from Florence. It’s quite possible they could have remained intact at the Palazzo Medici during the French occupation of Florence. Soon after his departure on 9 November 1494, the Signoria of Florence, responsible for banishing Piero, thereafter placed a ban on the looting of objects from the Palazzo Medici which various sources note had already begun when Piero left the city. The reported extent of this looting varies considerably, however, it is known that Piero prepared the Palazzo for the arrival of King Charles VIII and for this reason, the Palazzo did receive ample protection by both the government of Florence and the French soldiers arriving ahead of the king.54

While objects belonging to the Medici did suffer losses during their exile from the city, a reasonable quantity of artworks and valuables, especially those in the Palazzo, were either preserved by the French and the Florentine government or were hidden away and protected by loyal sympathizers until the Medici returned in 1512. It is under these conditions that the busts could have survived such perilous circumstances while many other public effigies of the family were destroyed during the sacking of loyalist homes and public spaces.55

Charles’ support of Piero and the preservation of the remaining Medici collection would have also encouraged the survival of these busts. In particular, the allowance of Alfonsina to remain in Florence, further suggests the endurance of her own portrait bust. The work may have been protected by her as she travelled later to other parts of Italy, prompting its survival from the Bonfires of Vanities enacted by Girolama Savonarola in 1497 and 1498 where many female portrait busts were destroyed.56

While the timing of Piero’s tenure as successor to the Medici dynasty may have been ill-fated, as also perhaps with the lost identity of his possible portrait bust and that of his wife, our present survey, speculative as it may be, hopes to suggest a brief moment in time when the prospect of a continued Medici legacy in Florence was sustained, hopeful even, and captured brilliantly in the austere yet noble visages portrayed by a sculptor whose talents herewith have rendered what Cruttwell described of the Alfonsina as “one of the most attractive portraits of the fifteenth century.”57
Endnotes

1 Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. 167M.
2 Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Inv. 166M.
3 Andrea della Robbia’s glazed terracotta of a Boy also accompanied the two terracotta busts, probably once donated by private citizens during the hospital’s long history.
5 After several unsuccessful organized attacks on the Republic of Florence, in retribution for his expulsion, he later joined the army of Louis XII in 1503. During a retreat of the French at the Battle of Garigliano, Piero drowned while attempting to transport equipment to the mouth of the river. See Lisa Goldenberg Stoppato (1999): Research Notes for an entry on Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici. The Medici Archive Project, accessed February 2020: bia.medici.org
10 Lorenzo Lorenzi (1998): Agnolo di Polo: Scultura in terracotta dipinta nella Firenze di fine Quattrocento. Italy.
15 A larger example of the same portrait, attributed to Perugino, is in the private collection at Firle Place in Lewes, UK.
17 Several of these same features are also observable in the painted depiction of Piero at age 11-to-13, as portrayed in Domenico Ghirlandaio’s Confirmation of the Franciscan Rule from the Sassetti Chapel frescos.
20 “Fatti di piazza di stagno e tutti d’una grandezza medesima … tutti naturali, vivaci e somigliantissimi al vero.” / “Small squares made of tin plate and all of one size, portraits made natural, lively and very similar to the truth, with an excellence of painting.”
23 G. Vasari (1568): op. cit. (note 22), p. 157. Schuyler points out (J. Schuyler [1976]: op. cit. [note 8], p. 24) that while Vasari describes this bust as the work of Mino da Fiesole, the text is frequently misread as a referring to Piero (di Cosimo) de’ Medici, Lorenzo’s father, of whom Mino made a marble bust whereas it explicitly describes the name of Lorenzo’s son, Piero. The statement has led to the presumption that Mino also realized a lost or unidentified bust of Piero di Cosimo de’ Medici’s wife, Lucretia Tornabuoni. The 1492 inventory of the Palazzo Medici notes Mino’s bust of Piero (di Cosimo) as located above the door of the antechamber to Lorenzo’s room. See Eugene Muntz (1888): Les Collections des Medicis au XVe siecle, Paris-London, p. 62. Since Mino died when Lorenzo’s son, Piero, was thirteen years-of-age, Vasari either wrongly identified the artist or the sitters of the busts he describes. Such oversights by Vasari are not uncommon. See for example: L. Fusco and G. Corti (2006): op. cit. (note 40), p. 139 or a wider range of examples in Wolfgang Kallab (1908): Vasaristudien. W. Grasser & Kie, Wien, Austria.
25 The bust was also coated with a 19th century bronze patina.
Endnotes

Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum (private communication, February 2020).


35 Ibid.


38 Giovanni di Lorenzo de’ Medici was Piero di Lorenzo de’ Medici’s younger brother, the future Pope Leo X.


43 The 1495 settlement also mentions payment due for “the heads in the cortile,” which Cruttwell suggested might relate to the twenty life-masks, as sculpted busts would have filled the friezes in the courtyard.

44 Vasari commented “it was Andrea’s habit to model in this way living things, to be able to catch their essence and imitate them more easily.” See G. Vasari (1568): op. cit. (note 41).


49 In a past lecture, Alison Luchs also speculated that Ferrucci could have been involved in the creation of the Bust of a Youth, though inquires whether he was talented enough to have produced it. She notes another Florentine bust of a Gentleman (National Gallery of Art, Inv. 1943.4.75) is possibly by the same hand or from the same workshop (private communication, January 2020).

