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Cesare Dandini (Florence 1596-1657)

An Allegory of Painting and Poetry (Ut Pictura Poesis)

Oil on canvas

47 5/8 x 40 7/8 in. (121 × 104 cm.)

Datable to the late 1640s or early 1650s



Provenance

Private collection, 1965;

Art market, Rome, 1968 (according to the Zeri database);

London art market, 1983, where acquired by the father of the current owners.

Literature

G. Ewald, 'Studien zur Florentiner Barockmalerei', in *Pantheon*, XXIII, no. 5, 1965, pp. 308 and 311.

G. Cantelli, 'Per Sigismondo Coccapani 'celebre pittore fiorentino nominato il maestro del disegno'', in *Prospettiva*, no. 7, 1976, p. 33.

P. Bigongiari, *Il caso e il caos I. Il Seicento Fiorentino tra Galileo e il 'recitar cantando'*, Florence, 1982, p. 27 note 3.

G. Cantelli, 'Mitologia sacra e profana e le sue eroine nella pittura fiorentina della prima metà del Seicento' (II), in *Paradigma*, no. 4, 1982, p. 149.

G. Cantelli, *Repertorio della pittura Fiorentina del Seicento*, Florence, 1983, p. 57, fig. 225

S. Bellesi, *Cesare Dandini*, 1996, p. 114, no. 58.

E. Leuschner, *Women and Masks: the Economics of Painting and Meaning in the Mezza Figura Allegories by Lippi, Dandini and Martinelli*, arthistoricum.net, 2015, p. 421, no. 6.

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Cesare Dandini was an Italian painter, active mainly in his native city of Florence, who made a significant contribution to the Florentine Baroque. His bold colour contrasts and elegant, linear compositions, painted with a certain polish, displayed the Florentine tradition of artists such as Carlo Dolci.

According to the biography of Filippo Baldinucci's (1624–1697), Cesare Dandini was a precocious artist who trained first with Francesco Curradi and then briefly with Cristofano Allori. Baldinucci writes that *'Pietro, suo padre, decise di rimuoverlo e lo collocò con Cristofano Allori, essendo stato precedentemente con Curradi per lo spazio di tre anni interi. Ciò avrebbe aperto un ampio campo a Dandini per diventare un grande uomo imitando lo stile di quel grande maestro.'* ('Pietro, his father, decided to remove him and placed him with Cristofano Allori, as he had already been with Curradi for three full years. This change would have given Dandini ample opportunity to become a great artist by emulating the style of that great master.').¹ He then went on to train with Domenico Passignano, who returned to Florence in 1616. Baldinucci also wrote that Dandini was an exceptionally beautiful youth, as seen in his *Self-Portrait as a young man*, and Curradi's model for numerous Madonnas, with a temperament that meant he was offended by the scurrilous activities in Allori's studio, a reaction that accords with the sense of refinement in his art. Their nephew Pietro Dandini was Vincenzo's pupil, and Pietro's two sons, Ottaviano (1681-1740) and Vincenzo (1686-1734), a Jesuit, worked as painters in Florence.



Cesare Dandini, *Self-Portrait as a young man*, Palatine Gallery, Pitti Palace, Florence

¹ Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua*, 1681, p.211.

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In 1621 he enrolled in the Accademia del Disegno and by 1631 he had acquired many patrons, notably Lorenzo de' Medici who would remain one of his most important supporters. He developed a theatrical, idealised style that was harmonious in form and colour and restrained in movement and expression. He shared with Florentine contemporaries Jacopo Vignali and Carlo Dolci a devotion to the style initiated in the 1590s by Lodovico Cigoli, Gregorio Pagani, Jacopo da Empoli, Domenico Passignano and Francesco Curradi and refined in the 1610s and 1620s by Matteo Rosselli, Giovanni Bilivert and Cristofano Allori, who was perhaps the most influential for Dandini. His production included everything from portraits in miniature on copper to large-scale portrayals of religious and literary themes, as well as half and three-quarter length secular and allegorical figures, such as the present painting.

An Allegory of Painting and Poetry (Ut Pictura Poesis) is undoubtedly one of the most elegant and refined allegorical compositions in Dandini's oeuvre, which can be dated between the late 1640s or early 1650s. Here, two allegorical female figures are shown in conversation with one another, their statuesque poses enhanced by the marble-like beauty of their pale skin. With her head turned slightly to the right, *Poetry* gestures to a putto with her left hand, and rests her right hand on an open book which is placed on an ornate wooden lectern, on which a mask hangs. Her companion, the female figure of *Painting*, is represented with her paint brushes and a stylus in her hands. The *Allegory of Painting and Poetry* is an iconographic theme which was highly regarded by the Florentine painters of the seventeenth century in reference to Horace's *Ars Poetica* and the traditional motto of *ut pictura poesis*, a Latin phrase meaning 'as is painting so is poetry'. The idea of *ut pictura poesis* captures the complementary nature of poetry, or writing, and painting, equating the inspiration of the poet and writer with the imagination of the painter. Both are concerned with the imitation of nature: the painter through visual elements and the poet or writer through words.

This concept was brilliantly painted by Florentine painter Francesco Furini in his famous painting *Pittura e Poesia* of 1626, in the Uffizi (Fig. 1). In this work we see the two personifications united in an almost Sapphic embrace, mirroring each other's position, which visually represents the intimate relationship between the two arts. Painted with a lascivious elegance and youthful vigour, Furini's depiction would have undoubtedly been of some influence to his Florentine contemporaries. Although painted with somewhat more modesty than Furini, a reflection of his more conservative character described by Baldinucci, Dandini too paints his *Painting and Poetry* with their symbols of the imitative nature of art as prescribed by Cesare Ripa.

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Fig.1: Francesco Furini, *Pittura e Poesia*, 1626, Oil on canvas, 180 x 143 cm., Pitti Palace.

Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, a highly influential emblem book which described the appearance of abstract concepts, such virtues, vices, arts and sciences, played an important role in the formulation of allegorical subjects in *Seicento* Florence and was used by artists and poets to make their personifications recognisable. The first edition was published, without any pictures, in 1593, with a second illustrated edition following ten years later. Ripa achieved a fusion between visual imagery and an eloquent literary explanation for the corresponding image and so himself referenced Horaces's concept of *Ut pictura poesis*. The *Iconologia* contains

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more than twenty different entries in which the mask is employed to outfit a personification, thus offering a wide variety of surprisingly different allegories ranging between Fraud, Lie, Imitation and Painting. Beginning around the late 1630's and continuing through the 1640's and 1650's, a considerable number of paintings were produced in Florence which represented half or three-quarter length figures of young women with attributes including a mask.

Pittura, or *Painting*, is described in the *Iconologia* as a female figure 'with a chain of gold at her throat from which hangs a mask, and has written in front 'imitation'. She holds in her hand a brush, and in the other the palette, with clothes of evanescently coloured drapery' (Fig.2). The symbol of the mask represents the power of art to imitate nature and to construct artistic illusions. In our painting, as with many other *Allegories of Painting* at the time, the mask is not worn around her neck but displayed close by and placed as if to subtly imitate the putto below. Another beautifully subtle detail is the paintbrushes held by *Painting*, which are loaded with a vibrant blue and red paint, a perfect colour match to the two allegories' robes and a playful nod towards her skill in imitating nature. She is depicted partially leaning on a small table, under which are visible the classical statues of the *Belvedere Torso* and the dog of *Meleager Pighini*, today preserved in the Vatican Museums (Fig. 4 & Fig.5).



Fig.2: *Pittura* in Cesare Ripa's illustrated *Iconologia*.



Fig.3: *Poesia* in Cesare Ripa's illustrated *Iconologia*.

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Fig.4: *Belvedere Torso*, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican Museums.



Fig.5: *Meleager Pighini*, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican Museums.

Her sister in the arts, *Poetry*, or *Poesia*, is described by Ripa in his 1603 illustrated version of *Iconologia* as ‘A beautiful young woman, dressed in celestial blue, on whose dress there will be many stars, and who will be crowned with laurel’ (Fig.3) She is also described as having children by her side, a possible explanation of the presence of the putto. In our painting, Dandini adheres to Ripa’s description, with *Poetry* wearing a laurel wreath and vivid lapis lazuli blue dress. As the concept of *Ut pictura poesis* suggests that both poetry and painting are concerned with the imitation of nature, we can assume that the allegories are sharing the attribute of the mask. This is also seen in other works by Dandini from this period, such as the *Allegory of Comedy* of 1645 – 55 (Fig. 6), in which the figure of *Comedy*, or *Poetry*, identified by the laurel wreath and book and possibly the same model as in our painting, also holds a mask. Interestingly, in both this work and in our painting, Sandro Bellesi (*op. cit*) names the allegory *Comedy* rather than *Poetry*, however they can be read in the same manner.

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Fig. 6: Cesare Dandini, *Allegory of Comedy*, 67 x 51.5cm., Firenze depositi delle Gallerie.



Fig.7: Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)*, 1638–1639, Royal Collection.

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One of the most famous depictions of the *Allegory of Painting* is Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (La Pittura)* c.1638-9 in Windsor Castle (Fig. 7). She holds a brush in one hand and a palette in the other, with the mask on a gold chain around her neck identifying herself as Ripa's female personification of painting, something her male contemporaries could never do. Although Artemesia's painting aligns with her brilliant self-promotion, there are precedents for this fusing of allegorical representations with female artists. A 1611 portrait medal by Felice Antonio Casoni, in the Samuel H. Kress Collection at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., celebrating the Cremonese painter Lavinia Fontana, depicts on one side a profile portrait of the artist while on the reverse there is an *Allegory of Painting*, identifiable by the 'unruly hair' and cloth tied around her mouth as described by Ripa. Artemesia diverges from Ripa's archetype in that there is no cloth tying her mouth shut, a motif meant to suggest that art is a silent art, in contrast to poetry or music. While it has been interpreted that this was a deliberately challenging exclusion by the bold Artemesia, a statement that she or her art would not be silenced, we also see the same compositional choice in Dandini's allegory, and others. However, it is clear that throughout the seventeenth century, the figure of *Painting*, and indeed the Arts, has been recognised and celebrated by artists and writers as a strong woman, whether engaged in her work, standing statuesque and proudly displaying her attributes, or confidently looking out at the viewer.