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Bartolomeo Passerotti
(Bologna, 1529 - 1592)

Portrait of a gentleman

c. 1575

oil on canvas

93 x 74 cm

36 5/8 x 29 1/8 in

Literature

F. A. Ghedini, *Antiche Pitture*, Bologna 1943, pp. 25 - 26, tav. VII (as Bartolomeo Passerotti);

R. Grandi, 'Dipinti inediti del Museo Civico Davia Bargellini a Bologna', in *Bollettino d'Arte*, 6, 71, 1986, n. 35-36, pp. 43-48.

Comparative Literature

C. C. Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, Bologna 1678;

G. Heinz, 'Realismus und Rhetorik in werk des Brtolomeo Passarotti', in *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlugen in Wien*, 68, 1972, pp. 153-169;

A. Ghirardi, *Bartolomeo Passerotti pittore (1529-1592)*, *Catalogo generale*, Rimini 1990;

S. Tumidei in A. Bacchi and S. Tumidei (eds.), *Il Michelangelo incognito. Alessandro Menganti e le arti a Bologna nell'età della Controriforma*, exh. cat., Bologna 2002, pp. 155-157.

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This beautifully preserved portrait is a striking example of the portraiture of the cultured and eccentric artist Bartolomeo Passerotti, a leading painter active in Bologna in the second half of the 16th century. The canvas appeared recently on the Italian market without a precise attribution, in spite of the fact that it was published in a 1986 article by Renzo Grandi as a masterpiece by Passerotti. We are grateful to Daniele Benati, who considers the present portrait one of the most significant examples by the artist, for confirming its attribution and for dating it to the mid-1570s.

Passerotti's fame as a painter is today often associated with the grotesque, comic and caricatured genre scenes that form one part of his output (see, for example, fig. 1). However, there is no doubt that among his contemporaries, his reputation was mainly owing to his portraits, to the extent that he was commissioned to portray *Pope Gregory XIII* himself (today in the Museen der Stadt, Gotha, fig. 2). If that portrait is a conventional 16th century 'state' portrait, then the present one represents an example of Passerotti's innovative 'staged' portraiture in which the sitter is depicted 'in action'.

Indeed, according to Carlo Cesare Malvasia's *Felsina Pittrice*, Passerotti artistically captured 'the action and the gesture which was most particular and frequent to the nature of the genius of the sitter; and in that guise not portraying them still and insensate but in action and in movement and animating them and making them the protagonists of a movement of their life'¹. The same biographer also reported that even Guido Reni 'admired his portraits and, more than once, I heard him say: that they could stand as equals with those of the Carracci and that after Titian he could not find one who painted them better than the good Passerotto'.²

The raised hand of our sitter, with his index finger pointed emphatically upwards, probably announces the start of a speech: he must be a cultured literate or a man of law, accustomed to public speaking. This gesticulation appears frequently in Passerotti's portraits from the 1570s, and can be noted in the *Portrait of a gentleman* in Leipzig and in the *Portrait of Pietro Annibale Bargellini*, dated 1576 (fig. 3).

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Benati considers the latter portrait to be one of the most stringent comparisons with our painting: “not only the eloquent gesture, but also the three-quarter-figure cut and even the near-identical dimensions, so much so that one suspects the two canvases might share the same provenance”. The powerful Bargellini family was one of the artist’s main patrons in Bologna and, still today, their family palace – now the Museo Davia-Bargellini – retains, together with the already mentioned portrait of Pietro Annibale, other family portraits that can be compared to ours in size and style, such as the *Portrait of Gaspare Bargellini* (fig. 4).

A further comparison highlighted by Benati, for “the peculiar skill in rendering the skin tone and the fabric of the garment, with its austere and, at the same time, refined shape” is with the *Portrait of the Monaldini Brothers*, now at Hopetoun House, Scotland (fig. 5): a masterpiece by Passerotti dating to c. 1580.

A further, compelling, parallel for the present portrait – on account of the very high pictorial quality and for the excellent condition, but also for the attitude and the pose of the two sitters – is with the *Portrait of Giulio Franchini* that recently appeared on the market (fig. 6).³

As pointed out by Benati, Passerotti drew elements from the elegant portraiture of Parmigianino (1503 – 1540) and Girolamo da Carpi (1501 – 1556), further enriching this style with personal observations on physiognomy and the study of body language. Passerotti’s sitters are still based on a Mannerist ‘mannequin, with the cut-out silhouette against the red-purple coloured background and the unnatural elongation of the hands, recalling Parmigianino and some contemporary portraits by El Greco, but the brushstrokes are invigorated by sudden naturalistic accents, which are capable of giving a strong carnal depth to the face’, anticipating, as in this case, the modern results that only the Carracci would achieve in the following years.

In conclusion, the beautiful description Grandi drafted in 1986, publishing the present canvas for the first time in a little-known article which was later somehow forgotten, seems to be still exceptionally fitting: ‘From a daring pink-red curtain stands out the young virile figure with an austere and incisive face, richly dressed. The velvety black of the jacket and the satin black

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of the sleeves form an exquisite effect of transparency and tones based on the difficult chromatic chords of black. Like trumpet blasts the whites of the collar and sleeves create a very sensitive atmosphere of clever and delightful pictorial effects. The technique is free of any conventionalism (...), for certain formal attitudes, one would say that Passerotti, as well as Moroni and Tintoretto and Parmigianino, had seen the new style of El Greco, so as to draw useful elements for their own style. These are subtle elements that brought an even more aristocratic note to the already elegant art of Passerotti, of which one of the most superb and accomplished examples is the portrait now illustrated'.⁴

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Figure 1. Bartolomeo Passerotti, *Portrait of Pope Gregory XIII Boncompagni*, c. 1586-92.
Museen der Stadt, Gotha

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Figure 2. Bartolomeo Passerotti, *Merry company*.
Private collection

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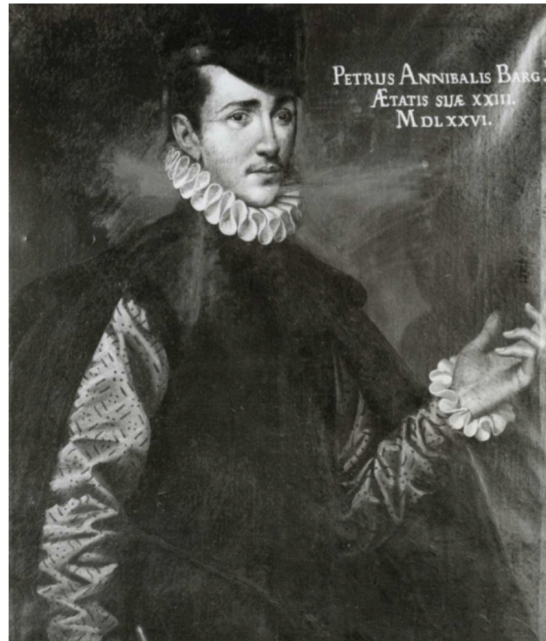


Figure 3. Bartolomeo Passerotti, *Portrait of Pietro Antonio Bargellini*, 1576.
Museo Davia-Bargellini, Bologna



Figure 4. Bartolomeo Passerotti, *Portrait of Gaspare Bargellini*, 1576.
Museo Davia-Bargellini, Bologna

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Figure 5. Bartolomeo Passerotti, *Portrait of the Monaldini brothers*, c. 1580.
Hopetoun House, Scotland



Figure 6. Bartolomeo Passerotti, *Portrait of Giulio Franchini, three-quarter length, aged 38*, c. 1575. Private collection

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Footnotes

¹ C. C. Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, Bologna 1678, pp. 189-191.

² C. C. Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, Bologna 1678, p. 191; See also A. Ghirardi, *Bartolomeo Passerotti pittore (1529-1592)*, *Catalogo generale*, Rimini 1990, pp. 50-54.

³ Sotheby's, New York, 30 January 2019, lot 39, sold for \$855,000.

⁴ R. Grandi, 'Dipinti inediti del Museo Civico Davia Bargellini a Bologna', in *Bollettino d'Arte*, 6, 71, 1986, p. 26.