



**The *play of divine beauty*: Bronzino's decoration of the Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio (1541-1543)**

**El *joc de la bellesa divina*: La decoració de Bronzino a la Capella d'Eleonora al Palazzo Vecchio (1541-1543)**

**El *juego de la belleza divina*: la decoración de Bronzino en la Capilla de Eleonora en el Palazzo Vecchio (1541-1543)**

**O *jogo da beleza divina*: a decoração de Bronzino da Capela de Eleonora no Palazzo Vecchio (1541-1543)**

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**Abstract:** Starting in 1540, Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574) commissioned a series of structural and decorative reforms in the old seat of the Republic of Florence, the Palazzo della Signoria, transforming it into the official residence of his *principato*. One of the first artistic commissions ordered by the duke was the chapel dedicated to his wife, Eleonora de Toledo (1522-1562), decorated in fresco by Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) between 1541 and 1543. This chapel stands out as one of the earliest and most significant examples of the Florentine aesthetic language from the mid-16th century. Resulted from a series of artistic and theoretical developments that took place in the first half of the century, it is characterized by highly symbolic expressiveness whose content manifests in a polysemic manner, simultaneously incorporating various levels of meaning, including political, religious, and philosophical elements. In this sense, the present study analyzes the respective pictorial cycle considering the Neoplatonic aesthetic speculations circulating within Italian and Florentine culture, influencing contemporary conceptions of the nature of artistic beauty and its appreciation, linking this process to a broader attitude that characterized Medici patronage.

**Keywords:** Agnolo Bronzino – Chapel of Eleonora – *Neoplatonism*.

**Resumo:** A partir de 1540, Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574) encomenda uma série de reformas estruturais e decorativas na antiga sede da República de Florença, o Palazzo della Signoria, transformando-o em residência oficial de seu *principato*. Uma das primeiras encomendas pictóricas ordenadas pelo duque, a Capela dedicada à sua esposa, Eleonora de Toledo, (1522-1562) decorada à fresco por Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) entre 1541 e 1543, destaca-se como um dos primeiros e principais exemplos da linguagem estética

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florentina de meados do século XVI. Resultante de uma série de desenvolvimentos artísticos e teóricos ocorridos no curso da primeira metade do século, ela caracterizou-se por uma expressividade altamente simbólica cujo conteúdo manifesta-se de modo polissêmico, incorporando simultaneamente diversos níveis de significado, incluindo elementos políticos, religiosos e filosóficos. Neste sentido, o presente estudo analisa o respectivo ciclo pictórico à luz das especulações estéticas neoplatônicas em circulação no âmbito da cultura italiana e florentina, influenciando as concepções coetâneas sobre a natureza do belo artístico e sua apreciação, vinculando este processo a uma postura geral marcou o patronato mediciano.

**Palavras-chave:** Agnolo Bronzino – Capela de Eleonora – *Neoplatonismo*.

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## I. Introduction

In 1540, at the young age of twenty-one, as part of the initiative to solidify his power, Cosimo I de' Medici (1519-1574) decided to transform the old palace of the Florentine Signoria into the official residence and court, ordering a series of renovations and expansions to the building. The primary motivation behind the duke's move was to concentrate the government in the former seat of the republican government, eliminating any physical or symbolic separation between the government and the Medici family. With the transfer of the court to this location and the reforms ordered by the duke to make the palace a suitable seat for his court, the building's size was nearly doubled, and it underwent a series of artistic interventions.

The project, initially led by architect Giambattista Tasso (1500-1555) and continued by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) after Tasso's death, included various decorative cycles



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focused on exalting the Medici family through extensive use of religious illustrations, mythological allegories, and historical-themed paintings<sup>2</sup>.

However, the artworks commissioned by Cosimo I during the first decade of his rule differ considerably from those of his later years. Starting in the 1550s, after the consolidation of his power and lineage, the political messages of the duchy became more articulate and defined, taking the form of a complex and intricate thematic repertoire with mythological and symbolic elements. These artistic programs aimed to visually represent Medici mythology and were elaborated by *litterati* in the service of the duchy, such as Cosimo Bartoli (1503-1572) and Vincenzo Borghini (1515-1580), who collaborated with the artists in conveying the duke's propaganda correctly. The art of the early duchy during the 1540s, characterized by an experimental inventiveness, becomes difficult to interpret when compared to the extensive propaganda imagery of the later years, especially considering that the authorship of its conceptual programs remains unknown<sup>3</sup>.

The artists employed in the initial projects were tasked with creating images that reinforced the political propaganda of the emerging *principato*, emphasizing certain themes of Cosimo's rule, some of which would later be abandoned. Simultaneously, some ideas influential in Medici art would not be developed in the 1540s. While this early art was characterized by an aggressive promotion of the legitimacy and inevitability

<sup>2</sup> MUCCINI, Ugo; CECCHI, Alessandro. *Palazzo Vecchio: guide to the Building, the Apartments and the Collections*. Boston: Sandak, 1992, p. 22; GÁLDY, Andrea. "Che sopra queste ossa con nuovo ordines si vadiano accommodando in più luoghi appartamenti: Thoughts on the Organisation of the Florentine Ducal Apartments in the Palazzo Vecchio in 1553". In: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 46. Bd., H. 2/3, 2002, p. 490; VAN VEEN, Henk Th. *Cosimo I de' Medici and his self-representation in Florentine art and Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 2; HIBBERT, Christopher. *The House of Medici: Its rise and fall*. New York: Perennial HarperCollins, 2003, p. 269; VASARI, Giorgio. *Ragionamenti: Sopra le invenzioni da lui dipinte in Firenze nel Palazzo Vecchio com D. Francesco Medici allora Principe di Firenze. Secondo l'edizione di Pisa Presso Niccolò Capurro Co' Caratteri di F. Didot MDCCCXIII*. Commento a cura di Eugenio Giani. Firenze: Accademia dell'Iris, 2011, I, 1, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993, p. 251-253.





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of his rule, there was a certain caution regarding certain forms of personal glorification that would later be used, such as the figure of apotheosis in the center of the *Salone del Cinquecento*, identification with gods like Apollo and Jupiter, and the parallel between Cosimo and Augustus, imagery that in the 1540s would inconveniently reveal the duke's royal aspirations. Indeed, the main themes of propaganda and art in Cosimo's first decade as duke revolved around his person and rule, focusing on legitimacy, destiny, power, and promise<sup>4</sup>.

The first of these commissions was made in the name of his beloved wife, Eleonora de Toledo (1522-1562), whose rooms on the second floor (occupying the former space dedicated to the priors and the Gonfaloniere's residence) were configured and decorated by Tasso and Vasari from 1540. Among these rooms, a particularly artistically important space was the small area created from the Camera Verde (previously dedicated to the Duchess's public audiences<sup>5</sup>), which was converted into a chapel and frescoed by Agnolo Bronzino between 1541 and 1543<sup>6</sup>. Bronzino, an apprentice of

<sup>4</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 255. The exploration of mythological and Imperial associations can be seen in pictorial decorations such as the *Quartiere degli Elementi* and the adoption by Cosimo I of the zodiac sign of Capricorn as personal *impresa*. GIOVIO, Paolo. *Dialogo dell'impresie militari et amorose*. Lione: Appresso Guglielmo Roviglio, 1559, p. 51; VASARI, Giorgio. *Ragionamenti: Sopra le invenzioni da lui dipinte in Firenze nel Palazzo Vecchio com D. Francesco Medici allora Principe di Firenze. Secondo l'edizione di Pisa Presso Niccolò Capurro Co' Caratteri di F. Didot MDCCCXIII*, *op. cit.*, I.1, p. 22, 26; I.4, p. 61; I.5, p. 64-65; ROUSSEAU, Claudia. "Astrological Imagery in the Rulership Propaganda of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici: The Villa Castello". In: CAMPION, Nicolas; ZAHRT, Jennifer (eds.). *Astrology as Art: Representation and Practice*. University of Wales Trinity-St. David, Wales: Sophia Centre Press, 2018, p. 63-85; VAN VEEN, Henk Th. *Cosimo I de' Medici and his self-representation in Florentine art and Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 8-9, 26, 31 ff.; ANDRADE, Thainan Noronha de. "Sob o signo de Capricórnio: Cosimo I de' Medici e a influência saturnina". In: *Perspectiva Pictorum*, v. 2, n. 1, p. 347-377.

<sup>5</sup> EDELSTEIN, Bruce. "The Camera Verde. A public center for the duchess of Florence in the Palazzo Vecchio". In: *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome*, v. 115, n. 1, 2003, p. 51-87.

<sup>6</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 57-60; BOSCH, Lynette M. "A Room With Many Views: Eleonora de Toledo's Chapel by Agnolo Bronzino in The Palazzo Vecchio". In: CHENEY, Liana De Girolami (ed.). *Agnolo Bronzino: The Muse of Florence*. Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2014, p. 175-177. According to Bosch, the chapel was built as a liturgical space, not as a room where Eleonora would offer her private prayers. Its liturgical



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Pontormo, began his career as a court artist in 1539, creating works for the scenic decoration of Cosimo I and Eleonora's wedding festivities and subsequently producing a series of portraits for the duchy, showcasing his idealized plasticity for which he became renowned<sup>7</sup>.

Impressing the Ducal couple with his talent, Bronzino became a court painter in the service of the Medici family, creating, in addition to Eleonora's Chapel in the Palazzo Vecchio, paintings, tapestries, festivities' *apparati*, and theatrical pieces. Consequently, the artist, who also dabbled in poetry, became close to the erudite circles of the court, joining the newly reformed Accademia Fiorentina<sup>8</sup> on February 11th (1541), in the same year he began the frescoes in the Duchess's Chapel. During his membership, the artist was able to develop his poetic skills, deepening his knowledge of both ancient and modern literature through discussions and lessons with famous literati, particularly

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function is reflected in the work's program, which is based on a Lenten reading of the Roman liturgy as it was celebrated before the advent of the Council of Trent, and masses were conducted in the location even before Bronzino's pictorial cycle was completed.

<sup>7</sup> VASARI, Giorgio. *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*. A cura di Gaetano Milanesi. Firenze: G. C. Sansoni, 1878, v. 7, III, Degl'Accademici del disegno, pittori, scultori, et architetti, e dell'opere loro, e prima del Bronzino, p. 593-596; PILLIOD, Elizabeth. "The Life of Bronzino". In: BAMBACH, Carmen C.; COX-REARICK, Janet; GOLDNER, George. *The Drawings of Bronzino*. With contributions by Philippe Costamagna, Marzia Faietti, and Elizabeth Pilliod. New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 2010, 7-8; CHENEY, Liana De Girolami. "Il Bronzino (1530-72): A Short Biography". In: CHENEY, Liana De Girolami (ed.). *Agnolo Bronzino: The Muse of Florence*. Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2014, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Established as Accademia degli Umidi on November 1, 1540, shortly after its foundation the academy was reshaped by Cosimo I, who became its patron (with opposition from some of its members), changing the institution's name. It was then called the Florentine Academy (Accademia Fiorentina). Among its goals, the academy advocated the use of the Italian language instead of Latin, translating works from other languages into the vernacular, in addition to promoting the intellectual and ideological interests favorable to the duchy. PEVSNER, Nikolaus. *Academias de Arte: Passado e presente*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2005, p. 78; GAETANO, Armand L. de. "The Florentine Academy and the Advancement of Learning through the vernacular: the Orti Oricellari and the Sacra Accademia". In: *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, v. 30, n° 1, 1968, p. 19-52; ALOIA, Elena. "Culture, Faith, and Love: Bartolome Panciatichi". In: CHENEY, Liana De Girolami (ed.). *Agnolo Bronzino: The Muse of Florence, op. cit.*, p. 135.



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delving into the works of Dante and Petrarch, which were significant influences on his poetic language<sup>9</sup>.

The artist's inclusion in the Florentine intellectual circles had important repercussions on his artistic and poetic production, characterized by the adoption of the theoretical precepts that guided the artistic production and courtly etiquette of the period, such as the virtues of *sprezzatura* and *grazia*<sup>10</sup>. In the literary field, the artist aligned himself with the Tuscan tradition in composing sonnets and canzoni following the Petrarchan model, adopting a refined style while also indulging in the writing of satirical and sometimes obscene verses with subversive tones. His ability to compose Petrarchan-style verses demonstrated a deep understanding of the Florentine poet's love poems. Furthermore, his verses revealed a significant debt to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, an influence that was strengthened with the lessons given in 1545 in the Accademia Fiorentina by Benedetto Varchi on the "divine" poet<sup>11</sup>.

In fact, the two poets cultivated a notable friendship. The historian supported Bronzino in his poetic inclinations, not only in the burlesque tradition but also in classicism based on Bembo's *Rime*. The painter, in turn, considered Varchi as a master of the "true doctrine and the true Tuscan language" who, in both poetry and prose, achieved the

<sup>9</sup> His early interest in Tuscan classics brought him closer to the banker Bartolomeo Bettini, for whom, in 1532, he painted portraits of these celebrated poets in a room dedicated to the idea of poetry and love. Cf. CHENEY, Liana De Girolami. "Il Bronzino (1530-72): A Short Biography". In: CHENEY, Liana De Girolami (ed.). *Agnolo Bronzino: The Muse of Florence*, op. cit., p. 6; PILLIOD, Elizabeth. "The Life of Bronzino". In: BAMBACH, Carmen C.; COX-REARICK, Janet; GOLDNER, George. *The Drawings of Bronzino*, op. cit., p. 5-6; GIORGI, Raffaele de. "Bronzino: Allegorical Portrait of Dante Alighieri". In: FALCIANI, Carlo and NATALI, Antonio (eds.). *Bronzino: artist and poet at the court of the Medici*. Firenze: Mandragora, 2010, p. 206-207.

<sup>10</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*. Paris: Flammarion, 2002, p. 9-10, 42, 66, 223-227.

<sup>11</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*, op. cit., p. 8-12; COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, op. cit., p. 127; CHENEY, Liana De Girolami. "Bronzino's *Triumph of Felicity*: A Wheel of Good Fortune". In: CHENEY, Liana De Girolami (ed.). *Agnolo Bronzino: The Muse of Florence*. Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2014, p. 499.





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fruits and flowers of the language<sup>12</sup>. Inspired by the *fiorentinità* cultivated by the Accademia, the artist-poet also turned to the paradigmatic example of Buonarroti (Michelangelo) as an artist and poet, which influenced both his poetic and pictorial compositions<sup>13</sup>. In the artistic sphere, like his Florentine contemporary colleagues, Bronzino interpreted Michelangelo's example in his own way, following the general lines of his master, Pontormo. The energetic and contorted movements of the *figura serpentinata*<sup>14</sup> were explored and combined with a cool color palette, an unrealistic articulation of perspectival space, rich treatment of details, and impassive expression,

<sup>12</sup> FIRPO, Massimo. "Bronzino and the Medici". In: FALCIANI, Carlo and NATALI, Antonio (eds.). *Bronzino: artist and poet at the court of the Medici*. Firenze: Mandragora, 2010, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino, op. cit.*, p. 8; COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio, op. cit.*, p. 105; LUCA, Francesca de. "Bronzino in Florentine dynastic collections: *diligenza* and *prestezza*". In: FALCIANI, Carlo and NATALI, Antonio (eds.). *Bronzino: artist and poet at the court of the Medici*. Firenze: Mandragora, 2010, p. 341; SHEARMAN, John. "Maniera as an aesthetic ideal". In: CHENEY, Liana De Girolami (ed.). *Readings in Italian Mannerism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004, p.49; HUTSON, James. *Early Modern Art Theory: Visual Culture and Ideology, 1400-1700*. Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2016, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> The term is first mentioned by Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo in his *Trattato dell'arte de la Pittura* (1584), describing it as a "precept of Michelangelo", consisting of figurative movements that evoke the shape of a pyramid, flame, snake, or S. According to the author, this precept contains "the entire secret of painting" (*tutto il secreto de la pittura*), since the greatest grace and elegance (*leggiadria*) a figure can have is when it appears to move by itself, and painters define it as their *furia*. To represent such movement, there is no more appropriate form than that of a flame, which, according to Aristotle and other philosophers, is the most active element, and its form is, therefore, the most suitable to represent movement because it has a cone and a sharp point with which it appears to break the air and rise to its sphere. "Thus, when the figure has this form, it will be very beautiful" (*Si che quando la figura haverà questa forma farà bellissima*). LOMAZZO, Giovanni Paolo. *Trattato dell'arte de la pittura*. Milano: Paolo Gottardo Pontio, 1584, I.1, p. 22-23. As pointed by Summers, Lomazzo's reference to the pyramidal geometric shape of the *figura serpentinata* descends from Plato's *Timaus*, where the pyramid is described as the most mobile form, associated with the most active element, which is fire. A language especially promoted and associated with Michelangelo, this type of figural expression, surpassing the natural movement, symbolizes the superiority of art over nature, of *ingegno* over *regola* and *idea* over *mater*, acquiring a spiritual aesthetic value. Over the course of the 16th century, the *figura serpentinata* was to become a pervasive element in the art of Maniera artists such as Pontormo and Bronzino. See SUMMERS, David. "Maniera and movement: The *figura serpentinata*". In: CHENEY, Liana De Girolami (ed.). *Readings in Italian Mannerism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004, p. 273-313.



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reflecting the courtly preference for idealization, refinement, control of emotions, and technical virtuosity.

These elements, in line with the aesthetic concepts of the period, produced a supernatural charm, the *grazia*, freeing art from its subservience to nature. This aesthetic background, characteristic of the Florentine court and imbued by Neoplatonic metaphysics, permeated the artist's pictorial production, as seen in his frescoes in Eleonora's Chapel, the first painted chapel (public or private) commissioned by the Medici in the 16th century.

## II. The Chapel of Eleonora

The small chapel (**fig. 1**) had its walls adorned with frescoes depicting episodes from the life of Moses from the biblical book of Exodus. However, few details remain regarding the creation of its pictorial program. Despite the occasional participation of Cosimo I and Eleonora, Janet Cox-Rearick suggests that the program was the result of the involvement of erudite members of Cosimo's court in the 1540s, such as Pier Francesco Riccio (1501-1564), the influential majordomo of Cosimo I, who was responsible for the duchy's cultural endeavors and acted as an intermediary between the duke and the artists in his service. Other important figures potentially involved in the program may have included humanist Giambattista Gelli (1498-1563) and Pier Francesco Giambullari (1495-1555), both significant members of the Accademia Fiorentina<sup>15</sup>.

As the author argues, the last two, especially because of their activities as scholars of the Old Testament and enthusiasts of the figure of Moses, could have jointly contributed to the Chapel's program, providing general guidelines to Bronzino, of whom they were close friends within the Accademia Fiorentina, even portraying the scholars as Moses and Abraham in his *Christ in Limbo* (1552) for the Zanchini Chapel in Santa Croce. Gelli, in particular, emerges as the most likely candidate because of his writings that address Moses as a prefiguration of Cosimo, an association that would be

<sup>15</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 321-3.





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explored by Bronzino in Eleonora's room. The humanist would have also been involved in the elaboration of the festive *apparatus* for Cosimo's wedding, indicating his activity as a conceptual planner for artistic commissions<sup>16</sup>.

**Figure 1**



Agnolo Bronzino, Chapel of Eleonora de Toledo, 1541-1543. Fresco and oil on panel, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Source: [Web Gallery of Art](#).

Like other works of the period, the chapel's decoration is intricate, with various levels of meaning. On the vaulted ceiling, Bronzino composes a group of suspended figures,

<sup>16</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 322-324; BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*, *op. cit.*, p. 285-294.



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including Saint Francis, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Jerome, and the Archangel Michael. The Chapel's decoration is crowned with an altarpiece featuring the *Lamentation* flanked by the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin of the Annunciation. The altarpiece, the central panel now installed, is a replica from 1553 of the original scene, created around 1545 by the same artist at the request of Cosimo I, after the duke used the first panel as a diplomatic gift to his close counselor and keeper of the seals of Charles V, Nicolas Perrenot de Granvelle (1486-1550), for his intercession in favor of the duke's appointment to the Order of the Golden Fleece. The original side panels, depicting Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Cosmas, would also be replaced, making way for the current Annunciation. The altar wall is completed with frescoes of the *Erythraean Sibyl* and *King David*<sup>17</sup>.

In the cycle, the religious theme is expressed according to the precepts of the *Maniera*, incorporating figurative elements aimed at celebrating and justifying the duchy in the light of the Scriptures. On the south wall (**fig. 2**), the episode of the Crossing of the Red Sea is depicted, during which Moses, imbued with the power of Yahweh, miraculously divides the sea's waters to enable the passage of the chosen people, fleeing from the Egyptian troops of the pharaoh, which are finally swallowed by the receding waters after the Jews' crossing, freed from their exile in Egypt<sup>18</sup>.

In the fresco, partially damaged, Bronzino depicts the moment immediately following the Crossing of the Red Sea, when the people of Yahweh are safe on the shores of the Red Sea, while the Egyptian army perishes in the waters that extend to the horizon. The artist includes another episode in the composition, in which the patriarch, on the banks

<sup>17</sup> Delivered in 1553 and, once installed, Eleonora would remove the two side panels: Saint John the Baptist, currently in the Getty Foundation Museum, while Saint Cosmas, previously reported missing, was recently found. BOSCH, Lynette M. "A Room With Many Views: Eleonora de Toledo's Chapel by Agnolo Bronzino in The Palazzo Vecchio", *op. cit.*, p. 175-176; BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino, op. cit.*, p. 184; COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio, op. cit.*, p. 14; VASARI, Giorgio. *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori, op. cit.*, v. 7, III, Degl'Accademici del disegno, pittori, scultori, et architetti, e dell'opere loro, e prima del Bronzino, p. 597; FALCIANI, Carlo. "On religious painting, but also on 'sides, stomachs, etc'". In: FALCIANI, Carlo and NATALI, Antonio. *Bronzino: artist and poet at the court of the Medici*. Firenze: Mandragora, 2010, p. 278.

<sup>18</sup> *Exodus* 14:15-30.





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of the Jordan River, following divine orders, invests Joshua, his assistant, as his successor to lead the Jewish people<sup>19</sup>.

**Figure 2**



Agnolo Bronzino, Crossing of the Red Sea and the The appointment of Joshua, ca. 1542. Fresco, Chapel of Eleonora, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Source: [Web Gallery of Art](#).

Moses is portrayed according to his traditional medieval iconography, with horns that allude to the divine rays that emanated from his face after spending forty days with Yahweh on Mount Sinai<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> *Numbers* 27: 12..

<sup>20</sup> *Exodus* 34: 10-35. The representation, originating in British territory during the 11th century, reflects the confusion between the word “qaran” (meaning “radiating” or “emitting rays”) and its etymological root, “qeren,” meaning “horn,” in Saint Jerome's *Vulgate*. According to Ruth Mellinkoff, this replacement would have been deliberate on the part of the translator, aiming to maintain the context





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In its religious dimension, the decorative program of the Chapel has the Eucharist as its central theme, the incarnation and transubstantiation of Christ<sup>21</sup>. In fact, since the Middle Ages, events from the Old Testament were interpreted as prefigurations of the New, and in theological context, the Crossing of the Red Sea foreshadows Baptism. Moses, responsible for saving the chosen people from Egyptian exile by crossing the waters of the Red Sea, prefigures Christ, the “Greater Moses”, the one who saves humanity from the prison of sin, a purification manifested through the rite of Baptism, cleansing the soul's sins much like the Sea eliminated the enemies of Yahweh's people<sup>22</sup>.

Additionally, the religious scene has several connotations related to the duchy. Moses is depicted resembling Pier Francesco Riccio, a form of tribute to the *majordomo* for mediating the relationship between Bronzino and Cosimo I. The biblical scene is appropriated by Cosimo's advisors, becoming a symbol of the *principato mediceo*. The *Crossing* is a reference to the return of the Medici to power and the establishment of the duchy, identified with Moses's leadership over God's chosen people. This identification

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and the meaning of the horn in the ancient world as a symbol of strength, honor, victory, power, divinity, royalty, and salvation. While Jerome's translation was made in the late 4th century AD, no artistic representation of Moses with horns can be found before the 11th century. This gap is partially explained by the existence of an earlier iconography of the patriarch without horns, still in continuity during the *Carolingian Period* and influential in the Orthodox Church, which adheres to the Septuagint, where the prophet would never be depicted with horns. MELLINKOFF, Ruth. *The Horned Moses in medieval art and thought*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1970, p. 138.

<sup>21</sup> NATALI, Antonio. “The dukes and the Eucharist: The Chapel of Eleonora of Toledo”. In: FALCIANI, Carlo and NATALI, Antonio (eds.). *Bronzino: artist and poet at the court of the Medici*. Firenze: Mandragora, 2010, p. 100-113.

<sup>22</sup> DANIELÉLOU, Jean. *Sacramentum futuri: études sur les origines de la typologie biblique*. Paris, Beauchesne, 1950, p. 152-176. The prefiguration of Christ in Moses is a theme addressed by Renaissance art since the time of Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere), who, between 1481-82, aimed to reinforce the temporal and spiritual power of the Church by commissioning a cycle of episodes from the life of Moses in his chapel. However, the pope would respect the conventional balance between prefiguration and fulfillment, dedicating half of the space in the Sistine Chapel to the representation of the prophet and the other half to the Messiah. This division does not occur in Eleonora's Chapel, whose pictorial cycle is almost entirely occupied by stories of Moses. This disproportion, according to Maurice Brock, is explained by the appropriation of Moses as a prefiguration of duke Cosimo himself. BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino, op. cit.*, p. 188.



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is reinforced by the female figure behind the patriarch, an allusion to Eleonora de Toledo (although it is not a portrait of the duchess), who was pregnant at the time Bronzino executed the fresco. The figure is at the end of a diagonal line that links her to Moses and Joshua, indicating that her offspring – Francesco, the firstborn and future grand-duke of Tuscany – is destined to succeed the patriarch (Cosimo I) as the guide of God's chosen people, the Florentine citizens. Thus, the Chapel's program also exalts Cosimo I as the new Moses, responsible for delivering the Florentines from their enemies (including the Strozzi family, whose coat of arms is seen sinking in the Red Sea) and establishing the duchy. Eleonora, in turn, gives birth to the heir who will renew the dynasty, which will forever rule the Promised Land of Florence<sup>23</sup>.

The same dynamic is maintained on the other walls of the Chapel. On the north wall, other mosaic episodes are illustrated, *The Gathering of Manna* and *Moses striking the rock* (figs. 3 and 4) occupying both sides of the wall, which was originally pierced by a small window, which, between 1581 and 1582, would be replaced by a door that would destroy a significant part of the fresco. The area around the door was subsequently decorated by Alessandro Allori (1535-1607), Bronzino's pupil, who inserted two angels holding a chalice accompanied by a host on a globe, emphasizing the Eucharistic theme<sup>24</sup>. *The Gathering of Manna* is the first miracle performed by Moses after the Jews' journey in the Sinai desert. Faced with complaints about the lack of food during the journey, Yahweh miraculously created manna from the dew around the camp, a type of granular and white seed-like texture, prepared like wheat in making bread and cakes, with which the Jewish people would have been fed for about forty years until they reached Canaan<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 305, 318; BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*, *op. cit.*, p. 188; FALCIANI, Carlo. "On religious painting, but also on 'sides, stomachs, etc'", *op. cit.*, p. 278.

<sup>24</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*, *op. cit.*, p. 184; FALCIANI, Carlo. "On religious painting, but also on 'sides, stomachs, etc'", *op. cit.*, p. 279; TAVACCHIA, Bette. "Bronzino's corpus between Ancient Models and Modern Masters". In: GÁLDY, Andrea M. (ed.). *Agnolo Bronzino: Medici Court Artist in Context*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> *Exod.* 16: 1-35.





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**Figure 3**



Agnolo Bronzino, *The Gathering of Manna*, ca. 1543. Fresco. Chapel of Eleonora, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Source: [Web Gallery of Art](#).





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**Figure 4**



Agnolo Bronzino, *Moses striking the rock*, ca. 1543. Fresco, Chapel of Eleonora, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Source: [Web Gallery of Art](#).



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On the left, on the other side of the door, Bronzino records the biblical moment when Moses strikes a rock, causing a spring of drinking water to gush forth, in order to quench the thirst of his people encamped in Rafidim, a region described as devoid of water<sup>26</sup>. The two episodes are related to the Eucharist by symbolizing the body and blood of Christ, the bread and wine<sup>27</sup>.

From a political perspective, the fresco on the north wall represents Cosimo I as a provider of abundance and health to his people, a role reinforced by the fresco on the west wall, which serves as the entrance to the room, where the miracle of the *Bronze Serpent* is depicted (**fig. 5**). After the people complained of a lack of food and spoke against God and Moses, Yahweh sent venomous serpents, whose bites caused many people's death, until finally, repentant, the Jews asked for forgiveness for their offenses and salvation from the venomous animals. To do so, the Lord advised Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it on a staff, healing from poisonous bites anyone who looked at the image<sup>28</sup>.

Just like the other works, in relation to the overall program, the *Bronze Serpent* evokes the Crucifixion of Christ, saving those who look at it from the attacks of deadly vipers, just as those who believe in the truth of the cross will be saved from the attacks of “spiritual vipers” of the devil, a typology that dates back to the Gospel of John<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> *Exod.* 17: 1-7.

<sup>27</sup> DANIÉLOU, Jean. *Sacramentum futuri: études sur les origines de la typologie biblique*, *op. cit.*, p. 116, 139-140, 169-170; COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 222-229. As Daniélou informs, in the Christian context, the distribution of manna is interpreted in relation to Christ's miracle of distributing bread to the crowd. The miracle would also be the subject of Neoplatonic allegorical interpretations. According to Philo of Alexandria, manna represents the divine Logos, reason, and the food of the contemplative soul.

<sup>28</sup> *Num.* 21: 4-9.

<sup>29</sup> DANIÉLOU, Jean. *Sacramentum futuri: études sur les origines de la typologie biblique*, *op. cit.*, p. 145-146; *John* 3:14-15: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him”.





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Figure 5



Agnolo Bronzino, *The Bronze Serpent*, ca. 1573. Fresco, Chapel of Eleonora, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Source: [Web Gallery of Art](#).

As Cox-Rearick points out, the reference to the New Testament is emphasized by the artist, placing the serpent on a cross at the top of a hill (an allusion to the Crucifixion on Golgotha) and inserting a fainting woman next to the bronze, reminiscent of the iconography of the Virgin at the cross. In political terms, the work exalts Cosimo as a





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peacemaker and healer of discord, an attribution derived from the concept of Cosimo medico, a wordplay with the surname Medici (physicians)<sup>30</sup>.

Figure 6



Agnolo Bronzino, *Deposition of Christ*, 1540-45. Oil on panel, 268 x 173 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie, Besançon. Source: [Web Gallery of Art](#).

<sup>30</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 229, 259.



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The frescoes on the walls culminate, finally, on the east wall, containing the altarpiece of the *Deposition* flanked by the panels of the *Annunciation*, presenting the theme of the Eucharist and serving as the conceptual key to the decorative program of the Chapel. Just like in the frescoes, in the original central panel, praised by Vasari as a “very rare thing”<sup>31</sup>, Bronzino makes extensive use of the stylistic form he inherited from his master, manifesting the aesthetic qualities of the *Maniera*. Despite the predominantly religious and political content of the pictorial cycle, this is expressed through the imagery of the *Maniera*, based on ideas that artistic theory and practice would extract from speculative philosophy. In fact, Bronzino's religious and courtly art, as well as his secular works, is characterized by the extensive use of nudity and sensuality, grounded in a culture steeped in Neoplatonism.

In his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (1569), known as *De amore*, Marsilio Ficino (1533-1599) elaborates the theory of love and beauty in Plotinian terms<sup>32</sup>, leaving a profound impact on 16th century aesthetics<sup>33</sup>. For Ficino, physical beauty serves as a stepping

<sup>31</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 185-188; BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*, *op. cit.*, p. 184; VASARI, Giorgio. *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, *op. cit.*, v. 7, III, Degl' Accademici del disegno, pittori, scultori, et architetti, e dell'opere loro, e prima del Bronzino, p. 597. The current central panel, from 1553, as noted by Cox-Rearick, differs significantly from the original, presenting a different chromatic configuration, reflecting a change in Florentine art in the mid-16th century. According to the author, this stylistic change occurs in response to the turbulent environment at the Florentine court, marked by the advancement of Eleonora's tuberculosis and the transformations in painting as the Counter-Reformation progresses, representing a departure from the *Maniera* style that becomes entirely evident in Bronzino's altarpieces from the 1560s. This shift towards a more sober and less sensual style also extends to the panels of the *Annunciation*, employing a devotional iconography and painted in a style that would become predominant in Florentine painting in the late 16th century.

<sup>32</sup> PLOTINUS. *The six Enneads* (translated by Stephen Mackenna and B. S. Page). Chicago: *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1977, I.6.1-9, p. 21-26. See also PLATO. *The Symposium* (edited by M. C. Howatson and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield; translated by M. C. Howatson). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, XXVIII, 210a-212b, p. 48-50.

<sup>33</sup> GOMBRICH, E. H. *Symbolic Images*. London: Phaidon Press, 1972, p. 169; MONK, Samuel Holt. “A Grace Beyond the Reach of Art”. In: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, v. 5, n° 2, 1944, p. 137 ff.; PANOFSKY, Erwin. *Studies in iconology: Humanistic themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Boulder; Oxford:





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stone to elevate the soul towards divinity, it is “the splendor that emanates from the face of God”, an attraction aroused by the divine light in those who contemplate it, perceived during the Neoplatonic process of procession or creation of the metaphysical realities of the universe, from the angels that populate the divine Mind to souls and the bodies of the earthly realm. In this dynamic, God’s radiance creates and penetrates the hierarchy of being, shining brighter among the angels (who stay in direct contact to God) and darker in the material world<sup>34</sup>. The bodily beauty is, in turn, “a certain gesture, liveliness, and grace” (“Actus, vivacitas, et gratia”) that shines in the body through the influence of its *idea*, the intelligible essence of everything that exists. Thus, beautiful bodies owe their beauty to their conformity with these archetypes that reside in the divine mind, establishing a connection that allows the viewer, through an aesthetic play, to contemplate the divine through its earthly expression or reflection seen in material forms<sup>35</sup>.

The love awakened by the sight of the beauty of bodies, souls, or angels is a love directed towards God. In spirits, it is a likeness to God; in angels, it is his image; and in bodies, it is his shadow. The one who dedicates himself entirely to God will rediscover Him, returning to the *idea* according to which he was formed, perfecting his imperfections and uniting eternally with this archetypal form, for the true man is the *idea* of man<sup>36</sup>. Ficino defines this rapture aroused by beauty as one of the divine frenzies (*divini furores*), namely, the one ruled by Venus, which, for the Florentine philosopher, is the most powerful because everyone needs it and because it is the end and goal of all the others<sup>37</sup>. The Neoplatonic theory of beauty as a token to the divine was also promoted by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1563-1594), Ficino’s *comphilosophus*<sup>38</sup>, in his

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Routledge, 2018, p. 145-147; TATARKIEWICZ, Wladyslaw. *History of Aesthetics: Modern Aesthetics*. Paris and The Hague: Mouton, 1974, v. 3, p. 145 ff.

<sup>34</sup> FICINO, Marsilio. *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (the text and a translation, with an introduction by Sears Reynolds Haynes). Columbia: University of Missouri, 1944, II.3, p. 44; II.5, p. 47; V.4, p. 68-69: “Pulchritudo est splendor divini vultus”.

<sup>35</sup> FICINO. *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, *op. cit.*, II. 5, p. 47; V.6, p. 70-72.

<sup>36</sup> FICINO. *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, *op. cit.*, VI.19, p. 103.

<sup>37</sup> FICINO. *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, *op. cit.*, VII, 15, p. 117.

<sup>38</sup> FICINO, Marsilio. *Opera omnia*. Basileae: Per Henricum Petri, 1561, v. 1, *Epistolarum libri VIII*, p. 880.



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famous vernacular commentary on Girolamo Benivieni's (1453-1542) *Canzona d'Amore*, written in the 1486<sup>39</sup>.

Francesco Cattani da Diacceto (1466-1522), Ficino's intellectual successor, composed his *I tre libri d'amore* (1508), a treatise on love based on Ficinian ideas<sup>40</sup>, keeping them alive in Florentine learned circles through his participation in the Orti Oricellari, the gardens of Bernardo Rucellai (1448-1514) where various topics such as literature, poetry, history, politics, and philosophy were discussed in the first years of the *Cinquecento*, with Neoplatonic aesthetics among them<sup>41</sup>. This conceptual background was shared and disseminated during the 16th century, permeating Italian literary and courtly culture, albeit in a somewhat diluted form. According to Kristeller, around 1516 Diacceto would have maintained contact with Michelangelo, reinforcing the artist-

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<sup>39</sup> MIRANDOLA, Giovanni Pico della. "Commento sopra una Canzona de Amore". In: *De hominis dignitate, heptaplus, de ente et uno e scritti vari* (a cura di Eugenio Garin). Firenze: Vallecchi, 1942, II.2 p. 487; 3 p. 489; 8, p. 495; 9, p. 497-498; 12, p. 500. BUSI, Giulio; EBGI, Raphael. *Pico della Mirandola: Mito, magia, Qabbalah*. Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 2014, p. vii. Benivieni's work, in turn, is directly inspired by the ideas exposed by Ficino in *De amore*, some of which are harshly criticized by Pico. On Ficino and Pico controversy, see ALLEN, Michael J. B. "The second Ficino-Pico controversy: Parmenidean poetry, eristic and the One". In: *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources*. Aldershot: Variorum, 1995, X, p. 417-455.

<sup>40</sup> DIACCETO, Francesco Cattani da. *I tre libri D'Amore Di M. Francesco Cattani Da Diacceto, Filosofo Et Gentil'Hvomo Fiorentino: con un Panegerico all'Amore Et Con La Vita Del Detto Autore, fatta da M. Benedetto Varchi*. In Vinegia: Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari, 1561.

<sup>41</sup> GAETANO. The Florentine Academy, p. 21. On Diacceto, see DEITZ, "Luc. Francesco Cattani da Diacceto: Introduction". In: KRAYE, Jill (ed.). *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts: Moral and Political Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, v. 1, p. 156-165; KRISTELLER, Paul Oskar. *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1964, p. 18; KRISTELLER, Paul Oskar. "The Platonic Academy of Florence". In: *Renaissance News*, [s.l.], v. 14, n. 3, out. 1961, p. 151; ROBB, Nesca A. *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*. New York: Octagon Books, 1968, p. 57; CELENZA, Christopher S. "The revival of Platonic philosophy". In: HANKINS, James (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 90 ff.





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poet's connection with Platonizing concepts, which had been familiar to him since his youth<sup>42</sup>.

The philosopher and the artist would both integrate the Sacra Accademia Medicea (established in 1515 and still existing around 1519). The group, under the protection of Pope Leo X (Giovanni de' Medici, 1475-1521), consisted of aristocrats eager to practice their literary and musical compositions, some of which would be sent to the Pope. This renewed contact with the Neoplatonic tradition would leave important marks on Michelangelo's visions on beauty and love<sup>43</sup>. Simultaneously, these ideas would permeate the literature of manners through the famous Baldassare Castiglione's (1478-1529) *Il Cortegiano* (1528), a widely influential work throughout the European continent, and also the poetry of Pietro Bembo (1470-1547)<sup>44</sup>. In fact, the end of the Book IV of Castiglione's work contains an almost literal exposition of excerpts from Ficino's *De Amore*<sup>45</sup>, and Castiglione's work would be an important source for the elaboration of the Vasarian concept of *Maniera*, inspired by the aesthetic discussions from *Il Cortegiano*<sup>46</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> This previous contact with Platonic philosophy would have occurred when the young artist entered in the service of the Medici family. According to Ascanio Condivi, the famous Buonarrotian biographer, everything Michelangelo know on love derived from Plato. CONDIVI, Ascanio. *Vita di Michelangelo Buonarroti*. Pisa: Presso Niccolò Capurro, 1823, VII, p. 7-8; LXIV, p. 80; VASARI, Giorgio. *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, *op. cit.*, v. 7, III, Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarruoti, p. 141-142; KRISTELLER, Paul Oskar. *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters*. Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1969, v. 1, p. 324-326; SUMMERS, David. *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 11; ROBB, Nesca A. *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, p. 239-269; PANOFSKY, Erwin. *Studies in iconology: Humanistic themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, *op. cit.*, p. 179 ff.

<sup>43</sup> CELENZA, Christopher S. "The revival of Platonic philosophy", *op. cit.*, p. 90; GAETANO. The Florentine Academy, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> RAFFINI, Christine. *Marsilio Ficino, Pietro Bembo, Baldassare Castiglione: Philosophical, Aesthetic, and Political Approaches in Renaissance Platonism*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998, p. 1-144; CELENZA, Christopher S. "The revival of Platonic philosophy", *op. cit.*, p. 91-92.

<sup>45</sup> CASTIGLIONE, Baldassare. *O Cortesão*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1997, IV.51-71, p. 316-337.

<sup>46</sup> SHEARMAN, John. "Maniera as an aesthetic ideal". In: CHENEY, Liana De Girolami (ed.). *Readings in Italian Mannerism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004, p. 38 ff.



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The metaphysics of love and beauty would also be approached by the Florentine Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1543) in his *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* (1541) where it is maintained that beauty or *grazia* is an occult measure and proportion, an immaterial quality. Firenzuola's work would exert an influence on Bronzino's art<sup>47</sup>, which would also be stimulated by the aesthetic discussions held by Benedetto Varchi in his booklet, *Il libro della beltà e grazia* (1543), where the historian defines an "Aristotelian" beauty, inferior and accessible only through the senses in well-proportioned bodies; and a "Platonic" beauty, immaterial and superior, the *grazia*, perceived by the soul, which can reside in poorly proportioned bodies, but still making them attractive due to a metaphysical quality<sup>48</sup>.

Thus, the Neoplatonic theory of beauty circulated among the audience to which Bronzino directed his pictorial production. It ensured that the erotic beauty of nude bodies was not interpreted as vulgarity or an incitement to impure desires but rather as a manifestation of divine beauty, stimulating the viewer's mind to contemplate the splendor of God through aesthetic attraction<sup>49</sup>. The idealizations and representations of impossibly beautiful bodies, as Bette Tavacchia points out, can thus be better understood from the perspective of Neoplatonism, which was disseminated in Florence during the second half of the 15th century and closely linked to the patronage, propaganda, and dynastic mythology of the Medici family. These cultural trends, which Duke Cosimo I made great efforts to preserve, permeated much of his dynastic commissions<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> FIRENZUOLA, Agnolo. *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne*. per Giouan. Griffio, 1552, I, fl. 26r-26v; TATARKIEWICZ, Wladyslaw. *History of Aesthetics: Modern Aesthetics*, *op. cit.*, p. 201; CROPPER, Elizabeth. "Reading Bronzino's Florentine portraits". In: FALCIANI, Carlo and NATALI, Antonio (eds.). *Bronzino: artist and poet at the court of the Medici*. Firenze: Mandragora, 2010, p. 248-249.

<sup>48</sup> VARCHI, Benedetto. "Libro della beltà e grazia". In: BAROCCHI, Paola (ed.). *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento: Fra Manierismo e Controriforma*. Bari: G. Laterza & Figli, 1960, v. 1, p. 83-92.

<sup>49</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*, *op. cit.*, p. 240-241; DELUMEAU, Jean. *A civilização do Renascimento*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 2017, p.381.

<sup>50</sup> TAVACCHIA, Bette. "Bronzino's corpus between Ancient Models and Modern Masters", *op. cit.*, p. 51.





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A clear testament to Bronzino's familiarity with the aesthetic aspects of this tradition can be found in one of his sonnets. In these verses, the artist describes his intense desire to create the most beautiful face possible to represent Christ, eager “to imitate the most beautiful among all beautiful faces to adorn the King of Heaven”, highlighting how the contemplation of this face will transcend the earthly realm:

How much what is heavenly is separated from the earthly,  
Which quickly becomes invalid and conquered in the face of great light.  
Came my eye, my ingenuity, and my study  
The soul lost in such gracious appearance.  
Admiring grace or beauty,  
Abandoned the body and rose to the lofty ideas;  
From there, I don't know what I see, maybe the concept  
Partly united with such divine height,  
but neither art nor hand obeyed it<sup>51</sup>.

Although the poem laments the failure to reproduce the celestial perfection of the concept in matter, the verses echo anxieties also expressed by Michelangelo. Inspired by the poetry of Dante, Petrarch, and Michelangelo, which contains allusions to these ideas, as well as by the aesthetic visions circulated in the Accademia Fiorentina, these ideas would have come naturally to the painter-poet<sup>52</sup>. The concept of beauty developed

<sup>51</sup> BRONZINO, Agnolo. *Sonetti di Angiolo Allori detto il Bronzino ed altre rime inedite di piu insigni poeti*. Firenze: Nella Stamperia Magheri, 1823, p. 108: “Quanto il celeste è dal terren diviso / Che tosto infermo al gran lume, e conquiso / Venne l'occhio, e l'ingegno, e l' studio mio. / L'alma smarrita in sì leggiadro aspetto / Ammirando or la grazia, or la bellezza / Lasciava il corpo, e all' alte idee saliva; / Onde, che'l ver non so, forse il concetto / In parte aggiunse a sì divina altezza, / Ma l'arte nè la man non l'obbediva”.

<sup>52</sup> BUONARROTI, Michelangelo. *Poemas* (apres., comentários e notas: Andrea Lombardini; trad.: Nilson Moulin; *Posfácio*: Giulio Carlo Argan). Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1994, 8, p. 43; 41, p. 108-9; 44, p. 45; BUONARROTI, Michelangelo. *Rime* (a cura di Enzo Noe Girardi). Bari: Laterza, 1967, p. 116; 107, p. 117; 164, p. 174. Dante and Petrarch, whose poetry inspired Michelangelo and Bronzino, were considered by the Renaissance Neoplatonic philosophers as divinely inspired poets, having theology as the main theme of his works. TRINKAUS, Charles Edward. *In our image and likeness: humanity and divinity in Italian humanist thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 685. On the Neoplatonic implications about the writings of Dante and Petrarch, see also RAFFINI, Christine. *Marsilio Ficino, Pietro Bembo, Baldassare Castiglione: Philosophical, Aesthetic, and Political Approaches in*



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by Florentine Neoplatonists and diffused through the courtly culture in which Bronzino was involved is readily integrated into the religious themes, whose “*grazia che eccede la misura*”<sup>53</sup> functions as an aesthetic artifice aimed at producing enchantment in the viewer. Belief in the power of beauty, a central characteristic of the Maniera art, will be pervasive throughout Bronzino's career as an artist, never abandoning the Neoplatonic play of inducing spiritual contemplation through bodily beauty, a process that is also present in the Chapel of Eleonora<sup>54</sup>.

In this decorative cycle, the artist systematically avoids a faithful imitation of nature, relying on the artificiality of *grazia*<sup>55</sup>. In the *Deposition* (**fig. 6**), the body of Christ is held by the Virgin with the assistance of Saint John the Evangelist (whose inspiration from Michelangelo's *Pietà* is evident), around whom there is a group mainly composed of women, with the exception of three men in the upper right corner, separated from the main group in the foreground, among them Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who contribute to the burial of Christ<sup>56</sup>. The composition is invaded by two angels next to Christ, each holding a chalice and a veil, indicating the symbolic and Eucharistic character of the panel, celebrating Jesus' body as the “bread from heaven”, the “bread of angels”, and the “bread of the altar”. This aspect is also emphasized by the group of five angels suspended in the upper region of the panel, carrying the *arma Christi*, the instruments of the Passion<sup>57</sup>.

The transcendent aspect of the scene extends to the treatment of the figures. Despite the drama involved in the scene, it is not reflected in the facial expressions of the characters, who remain unperturbed and serene. This is especially evident in the figure

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*Renaissance Platonism*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998; CHASTEL, André. *Arte e Humanismo em Florença na época de Lourenço, o Magnífico: estudos sobre o Renascimento e o humanismo neoplatônico*. São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2012, p. 169-92.

<sup>53</sup> VASARI, Giorgio. *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, *op. cit.*, v. 4, III, Proemio, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> TAVACCHIA, Bette. “Bronzino's corpus between Ancient Models and Modern Masters”, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>55</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

<sup>56</sup> *John* 19:38–42.

<sup>57</sup> NATALI, Antonio. “The dukes and the Eucharist: The Chapel of Eleonora of Toledo”, *op. cit.*, p. 101; COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.





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of Saint John the Evangelist, who supports the upper torso of Christ. His idealized and calm countenance contrasts with the tortuous movement of his body and head. In fact, such serenity reflects the courtly preference for self-control and the suppression of passions, which were popularized in European culture through Castiglione's work as indicative of good “maniera”, attributes that were quickly absorbed by artistic culture. This expressiveness, combined with the marble-like and polished treatment of the figures, devoid of individualizing traits and imperfections, contributes to the creation of an effect of immateriality and transcendence within the composition. This is further confirmed by the lack of concern in introducing the scene into a three-dimensional, perspectively composed landscape, indicating that the episode takes place in a suprasensory and symbolic sphere.

Any mundane attribute is carefully avoided in the name of refinement and grace. Its syntax is a frozen *pathos*, according to which emotions are controlled by stylized attitudes and the cold behavior of the characters<sup>58</sup>. The idealized and symbolic plasticity is also formed by the artificial treatment of light, where the artist uses pervasive luminosity, neutralizing the formation of intense shadows and dispensing with *chiaroscuro*, enhancing the perception of unreality. Although the characteristic luminosity of Bronzino's art is often interpreted as a response to the issue of the *paragone* between painting and sculpture, this artistic articulation also has a theological dimension, as Carlo Falciani reminds us. It is based on the conception that visible light, radiated upon the world, would be a visible manifestation of divine light, a view of Neoplatonic origin disseminated in Christian theology from the metaphysics of light of Pseudo-Dionysius (5th–6th century AD), and important source for Ficino's *De amore*<sup>59</sup>. In this sense, the ubiquitous luminosity of Eleonora's Chapel is a visual manifestation of heavenly light, connecting and stimulating the observer's soul to ascend to the lofty realms.

<sup>58</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio*, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

<sup>59</sup> FALCIANI, Carlo. “On religious painting, but also on ‘sides, stomachs, etc’”, *op. cit.*, p. 279; FICINO. *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, *op. cit.*, II.2, p. 43-44; III.1, p. 53; PSEUDO-DIONÍSIO AREOPAGITA. *A hierarquia celeste* (trad., comentários e notas explicativas de Carin Zwilling). São Paulo: Polar, 2015, I.2.121a, p. 18; I.2.121a-b, p. 19; I.3.121c-d, p. 20; II.3.140c-141a, p. 27; III.1.164d, p.37; III.2.165a, p. 38; VII.1.205c, p. 59; XV.4.333a-336a, p.115-116.



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The same plasticity extends to his frescoes of the Life of Moses. The episode of the *Crossing of the Red Sea* and the *Appointment of Joshua* (**fig. 2**) takes place in an equally static and predominantly artificial setting. The sea, into which the Egyptian troops are plunging, does not have its waters stirred, even with the desperate movements of the plunging soldiers. Similarly, the expressions of the chosen people of Yahweh, carefully modeled in an idealized and pearl-like manner, demonstrate serenity, contrasting with the emotion and intensity of the biblical account, eliminating the *sfumato* through which the natural glow of human skin would be simulated. The entire composition is bathed in a pale and unnatural frontal light, disconnected from the sunlight falling on the horizon. Brock draws attention to the arbitrary use of pigmentation, so that the rocky peak deliberately changes tones, shifting between orange, greenish, and a darkened hue<sup>60</sup>. The combination of these factors, as noted by Cox-Rearick, contributes to the dramatic emptiness of the fresco<sup>61</sup>.

Any emotion and materiality are thus purified by *grazia*, which is expressed in the marbled beauty and sensuality of the characters, such as the young woman assisted by the man with his back turned in the lower left corner, with one of her breasts exposed; the pair of androgynous youths in the center of the composition above Joshua (whose hair is sculpted like a statue), witnessing their enemies being swallowed by the waters of the sea; and the young man in the lower right corner, reclining in *contrapposto* like a river god, whose pose recalls the michelangesque *ignudo* located in the upper left corner of the *Separation of the Earth and the Waters* on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The same androgynous sensuality, emphasized by the unnatural luminosity, can be seen in the frescoes that cover the other walls. In the *Gathering of Manna* (**fig. 3**), it is presented in the young man represented in the pose of a canephorus in serpentine form holding an amphora with the divine food, occupying the left side of the episode<sup>62</sup>.

On the right, Moses is once again shown in splendor, striking the rock from which a spring of drinking water emerges, a figure that lacks any trace of shadow, alluding to his divine enlightenment (**fig. 4**). Below him, a group of people leans over the

<sup>60</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino, op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>61</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio, op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>62</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino, op. cit.*, p. 200.



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miraculously created fountain, among whom the women are idealized with pearly tones, referencing ancient sculptural models. This imagery is especially present in the West fresco, showing the *Bronze Serpent* (**Fig. 5**), in which the female figures are all *antica* idealizations, and their sensuality serves to capture the viewer's attention to the divine spectacle, as can be seen in the character on the left, with her breasts exposed in profile, turning towards the Bronze Serpent, whose movement serves as a visual expression of the Neoplatonic process of contemplating the divine: beauty and eroticism fulfill the purpose of directing the observer's gaze to the sacred reality, just as the sensuality of the figure directs the beholder to divine salvation, as demonstrated by the woman's attention turned towards the mosaic Serpent, prefiguring the salvation of humanity wrought by the Son of Man.

This dynamic is recurrent in Bronzino's artistic production, as noted by Maurice Brock in his interpretation of the panel executed by the artist of Christ in Limbo (1552) for the Zanchini Chapel of Santa Croce<sup>63</sup>.

This syncretic corpus, combining religious, political, and aesthetic connotations, finds its synthesis in the ceiling fresco (**Fig. 7**). The composition is divided into four regions, each occupied by a sacred figure. Above the altar wall is Saint Michael the Archangel in serpentine movement, fighting a demon, being the most idealized figure in the ensemble, with a finely executed face and torso endowed with the same androgynous sensuality as other male figures in the wall frescoes below, expressing the quality of the *grazia*, through which its divine provenance is symbolized.

To his left, in a counterclockwise direction, is Saint Francis along with his companion, Brother Leo, in contemplation, receiving the stigmata of Christ. At the time of the fresco, the saint was a special object of devotion for Cosimo and Eleonora, in honor of which they named their firstborn, Francesco, an unusual name in the Medici family, whose birth is referred to on the wall just below the saint, serving as an additional allusion to the Tuscan prince<sup>64</sup>. Next is Saint Jerome in exaltation, accompanied by the

<sup>63</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino, op. cit.*, p. 272.

<sup>64</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio, op. cit.*, p. 318.





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lion that, cured by the saint, became his companion<sup>65</sup>. Finally, Saint John the Evangelist reappears on the ceiling as the inspired writer holding his Gospel along with his attribute, the eagle<sup>66</sup>.

The oval detail in the center of the vault, displaying a three-headed representation of the Trinity connected to garlands of flowers and fruits accompanied by *putti* framing the composition, is also a later repaint, replacing the former coat of arms of Cosimo and Eleonora, which had become outdated in light of the new marital union of Francesco and Joanna in 1565<sup>67</sup>.

The ceiling complements the levels of meaning expressed in the frescoes on the walls, although it is not directly related to the theme of the Eucharist. In relation to the duchy, especially Eleonora's role, the garlands with the *putti* marked the role of the duchess as *genetrix*, whose fertility is also referred to in the Chapel's frescoes by a variety of elements like the pregnant woman behind Moses in the scene of the *Crossing of the Red Sea* (**fig. 2**) and, indirectly, in the scenes of Moses's miracles in which he feeds his people, accompanied by various female figures with their children (**figs. 3 to 5**)<sup>68</sup>.

<sup>65</sup> VORAGINE, Jacobus A. *Legenda Aurea*. Lipsiae: Impensis Librariae arnoldianae, 1801, CXLVI, p. 655-656.

<sup>66</sup> The attribution of the animal to the saint is due to several factors. In antiquity, the bird was considered the one that flies highest, being associated with John because he begins his Gospel “from heaven” – the account of the creation of the universe by the Word, described in John 1:1, which reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”. Secondly, the profound vision of the animal becomes an allusion to its role as a Revelator, whose vision allowed him to see future events. Cf. FERGUSON, George. *Signs and symbols in Christian art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 5.

<sup>67</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino, op. cit.*, p. 184.

<sup>68</sup> COX-REARICK, Janet. *Bronzino's Chapel of Eleonora in the Palazzo Vecchio, op. cit.*, p. 316.



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**Figure 7**



Agnolo Bronzino, Ceiling of the Eleonora de Toledo Chapel, ca. 1541. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Source: [Web Gallery of Art](#).





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Additionally, the ceiling fresco dialogues with the Neoplatonic connotations of Bronzino's Mannerist aesthetics. It is notable that the composition, with the exception of Michael Archangel, is entirely composed of saints who transcended their earthly condition and assumed a divine character when they achieved holiness, in line with the process of spiritual ascent produced by physical beauty as a reflection of divine beauty. This process of spiritual elevation, from the earthly to the heavenly, is confirmed by the garlands along with the *spiritelli* or *genii*, which, according to an ancient and medieval tradition, represent the creative impulse of nature, linked to the concept of *natura genetrix*<sup>69</sup>. In the Chapel of Eleonora, these beings serve as intermediaries between the earthly and the spiritual, connected by the abundance promoted by the heavens on the material world. Thus, inhabiting the domains of Neoplatonic doctrine on beauty, the program indicates a process in which the earthly, imbued with the *grazia che eccede la misura*, represents an initial impulse towards transcendence, the departure of the path that leads to divine realm.

This sense is also reflected in the various treatments given by the artist to the designs of the saints and that of Saint Michael the Archangel. As Brock points out, Saint Jerome, Saint Francis, and Saint John do not have Mannerist features; they are represented according to their conventional characteristics. Saint Michael, on the other hand, portrayed as a *figura serpentinata*, whose features are marked by evident androgynous sensuality in his face and torso (covered by armor that suggests transparency), is entirely Mannerist, exhibiting Bronzino's artificiality. This disparity, according to the author, may have been deliberate, serving as a reference to Michelangelo, whose influence as Bronzino's artistic inspiration is significant in the Chapel. Through the artificiality of his pose, the angel would announce that artificiality would prevail over verisimilitude, demonstrating the conquest of art over nature, of *grazia*, seen as an immaterial and divine quality, over matter<sup>70</sup>. Indeed, the imagery of this spiritual journey is embodied

<sup>69</sup> ECONOMOU, George D. *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972, p. 29-57.

<sup>70</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino, op. cit.*, p. 204-7; SUMMERS, David. "Maniera and movement: The figura serpentinata", *op. cit.*, p. 273-313.





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in the figure of Saint Michael as an important synthesis<sup>71</sup>. Christian mysticism, from Pseudo-Dionysius onwards, began to conceive angelic beings according to a metaphysical hierarchy that links God to humanity. The angels orbit God, turning to contemplate His face, also playing the role of reflecting and distributing divine light to the subsequent degrees, filtering it to make it bearable for ontologically lower beings<sup>72</sup>. This idea was resumed by Marsilio Ficino, who incorporated the hierarchy of angelic beings into Plotinus' metaphysical model, identifying them with the divine Mind, from which divine light radiates to the lower spheres and ultimately human beings.

This emanative process is also understood as a ladder, through which it is possible to reach God through divine love. In this sense, angels are intermediaries and transmitters between God and humanity, ensuring that humanity can fulfill its mission to return to its origin, uniting with God<sup>73</sup>. In this regard, the demon about to be struck by the archangel on the ceiling of the Chapel of Eleonora can be understood as a representation of earthly impulses that prevent human beings from contemplating higher spiritual spheres, serving as an admonition to the viewer of the location, so that they do not content themselves with the aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of the figures on the chapel's walls, but should use the impulse of this attraction to seek the beauty of Christ's truth.

## Conclusion

This framework permeated the courtly culture of Cosimo I, and themes related to Neoplatonic doctrine and occult philosophy were disseminated in various ducal commissions, especially from the mid-16th century, when the Medici family's

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<sup>71</sup> On the Neoplatonic symbolism of Saint Michael, see CHENEY, Liana De Girolami. "Giorgio Vasari's Saint Michael: A Symbol of Neoplatonic Light". In: *Cultural and Religious Studies*, Mai.-Jun. 2015, vol. 3, n. 3, p. 152-166.

<sup>72</sup> AREOPAGITA. *A hierarquia celeste*, op. cit., VI.2.201a, p. 55-VII.4.212b, p. 67; XV.5.336a, p. 116.

<sup>73</sup> FICINO. *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, op. cit., III.1, p. 53; V.4, p. 68-69; 6, p. 72; VI.17, p. 100-101.



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propaganda apparatus took on a definitive form<sup>74</sup>. Belonging, however, to an earlier context, when this symbolic repertoire was still in its nascent stage, Bronzino's art emerges from the combination of 1540s artistic culture and theoretical reverberations resulting from the circulation and popularization of Neoplatonic themes within the Florentine learned circles. Endowed with various levels of meaning, Bronzino's art is addressed to an idealized observer who, familiar with this Neoplatonic conceptual background, is able to grasp and decipher the allusions contained in these paintings, expressed through aesthetic devices such as nudity and eroticism, understood as an aesthetic tool capable of stimulating the mind to reach divine truth. The same erudition was expected by the painter from the devotees who contemplated one of his religious paintings displayed in public spaces<sup>75</sup>.

However, as a result of the social and cultural changes brought about by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), ecclesiastical authorities became reticent regarding the use of nudity and eroticism in public religious commissions, elements that began to be considered as indecorous and inappropriate, considering that only the minority of the public would be able to understand the philosophical connotations behind the beauty and sensuality

<sup>74</sup> Based on a symbolic conception of the world, these ideas would eventually find a mythological expression through which the duchy would promote its image, justifying its rule as a manifestation of cosmic order, in which the figure of the duke emerged as an *alter deus*, a divine representative with the mission to bring prosperity to the Tuscan people. See CRUM, Roger J. "Cosmos, the World of Cosimo: The iconography of the Uffizi Façade". *In: The Art Bulletin*, v. 71, n. 2, jun. 1989, p. 237-253; CHASTEL, André. *Arte e Humanismo em Florença na época de Lourenço, o Magnífico: estudos sobre o Renascimento e o humanismo neoplatónico*, *op. cit.*, p. 364; GOMBRICH, E. H.. "Renaissance and Golden Age". *In: Journal Of The Warburg And Courtauld Institutes*, [S.L.], v. 24, n. 3-4, 1 jul. 1961, p. 306-309; VAN VEEN, Henk Th. *Cosimo I de' Medici and his self-representation in Florentine art and Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 29-31; ANDRADE, Thainan Noronha de. "Sob o signo de Capricórnio: Cosimo I de' Medici e a influência saturnina", *op. cit.*, p. 347-377; ROUSSEAU, Claudia. "Astrological Imagery in the Rulership Propaganda of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici: The Villa Castello", *op. cit.*, p. 67; VASARI, Giorgio. *Ragionamenti: Sopra le invenzioni da lui dipinte in Firenze nel Palazzo Vecchio com D. Francesco Medici allora Principe di Firenze. Secondo l'edizione di Pisa Presso Nicolò Capurro Co' Caratteri di F. Didot MDCCCXIII*. Commento a cura di Eugenio Giani. Firenze: Accademia dell'Iris, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> BROCK, Maurice. *Bronzino*, *op. cit.*, p. 240-241.



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of the painted bodies<sup>76</sup>. While scholars and courtesans could understand beauty and sensuality as tokens to access divine beauty and truth, these could, in the uneducated, awaken lustful and impure passions and stimuli, effects that were evidently undesirable in a religious environment. In this sense, we find the famous critique by Raffaello Borghini in his *Il Riposo* (1584), where the author, from a Counter-Reformation perspective, criticizes the excessive sensuality of some figures painted by Bronzino in the panel of *Christ in Limbo* in the basilica of Santa Croce and the *Resurrection* in the church of Santissima Annunziata, both executed in 1552: the first, for the excessive voluptuousness of the female figures; the second, due to the androgynous beauty of an angel, improper to the place, but acceptable if it was installed in a private setting<sup>77</sup>.

These works, Borghini adds in the second book, must be seen in a Platonic way, considering that material beauty is an expression of divine and absolute grace, but such consideration may not be cultivated by those unfamiliar to this philosophical background, justifying its seclusion from public space<sup>78</sup>. Although by negation, Borghini's exposition records the lasting influence of the "Platonic" way of seen religious paintings, intimately connected to the aesthetic language of the Maniera, which would give way to Baroque art, guided by Tridentine precepts. Particularly relevant, however, the combination between the Neoplatonic speculations of beauty and the religious art demonstrates the strength and depth with which the Ficinian doctrine of the *prisca theologia* would penetrate the artistic culture of the 16th century, blending organically with the religious piety of Cosimo and Eleonora. Art, more than a vehicle for the transmission of intellectual content, becomes a revelation of the divine.

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<sup>76</sup> TATARKIEWICZ, Władysław. *History of Aesthetics: Modern Aesthetics, op. cit.*, v. 3, p. 209 ff.; BLUNT, Anthony. *Teoria artística na Itália 1450-1600*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2001, p. 106 ff.; HUTSON. *Early Modern Art Theory*, p. 125.

<sup>77</sup> BORGHINI, Raffaello. *Il Riposo*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, I, p. 93-94, 98.

<sup>78</sup> BORGHINI. *Il Riposo*, II, p. 132.





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