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WOMEN AND MASKS:  
THE ECONOMICS OF PAINTING AND MEANING  
IN THE *MEZZA FIGURA* ALLEGORIES  
BY LIPPI, DANDINI AND MARTINELLI

A considerable number of paintings produced in Florence and usually dated to the late 1630s, the 1640s and early 1650s represents half-length figures of young women before a dark background. Among the attributes of these women, masks of similar shapes, probably made of leather and equipped with rather expressionless faces, appear regularly. Art history has not yet analysed these half-length figures as a group with related characteristics, neither in terms of style and picture size nor in terms of allegorical meaning. Most scholars, as a matter of fact, have limited themselves to discussing just one example, the so-called *Simulazione* by Lorenzo Lippi (fig. 1) in the museum of Angers which has acquired a certain prominence after having been chosen to decorate the cover of the *Seicento* exhibition in Paris in 1988.<sup>1</sup> In Lippi's painting, a woman with a serious expression on her face confronts the spectator with two objects in her hands, a mask and a pomegranate. Several art historians have interpreted one or both attributes as references to *Simulatione* in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* thus describing Lippi's woman as a personification of *Simulation* – or of a similar allegorical quality, *Dissimulation*.<sup>2</sup> Chiara d'Afflitto went one step fur-

<sup>1</sup> See *Seicento*, exhibition catalogue, Paris 1988; the entry for the picture by A. Brejon de Lavergnée is on p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> See V. von Flemming, «Dissimulazione: Lorenzo Lippi, Salvator Rosa und die Krise der Repräsentation», in: *Diletto e Maraviglia. Ausdruck und Wirkung in der Kunst von der Renaissance bis zum Barock*, ed. by C. Göttler, U. Müller Hofstede, K. Patz & K. Zollikofer, Emsdetten 1998, pp. 74-101; A.-M. Lecoq, «Une peinture 'incorrecte' de Lorenzo Lippi? », in: *Revue de l'art*, 130, 2000, pp. 9-16; S. Loire, catalogue entry, in: *Chefs-d'oeuvre du Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Angers (du XIV<sup>e</sup> au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, ed. by P. Le Nouène, Paris 2004, pp. 303-304; C. Kruse, «Ars latet arte sua», in: *Animationen, Transgressionen*.

ther in pointing attention to a lecture on *Simulazione* by Filippo Galilei that took place at the *accademia degli Svogliati* in 1642, the year in which (according to her) Lippi's painting was made.<sup>3</sup>

While the masks represented by Lippi, Dandini and others can be connected with Cinquecento and Seicento concepts of Imitation, i.e. «imitatione della natura o dell'arte» or «imitatione dell'attioni humane»<sup>4</sup>, it has also been pointed out that in the aesthetic theory of the Baroque age *simulazione*, i.e. deception, was regarded as an important and remarkably positive element of painting or the arts in general.<sup>5</sup> Seicento connoisseurs, in this sense, required the «dipingere in modo che non appaisca l'arte», which automatically involved a certain degree of artful deception, i.e. acceptable fraud or the agreeable fraud of art. However, as the term Imitation itself appears to have been employed by Ripa<sup>6</sup> in this particular sense and *Imitatione* as a terminus technicus («imitatione della natura») in connection with the arts recurs more often in the *Iconologia* than *Simulazione*, we might as well stick to the former term.

With the current state of research, other aspects related to the Florentine allegories we are dealing with deserve more attention, among them the visual and artistic traditions in which these works should be placed and a broader approach to the exact role that Ripa's book played in the formulation of allegorical subjects in Seicento Florence, especially in the 1630s and 40s. The *Iconologia* contains more than twenty different entries in which the mask is employed to outfit a personification, thus offering a wide variety of surprisingly different (negative, neutral and positive) allegories ranging between Fraud, Lie, Imitation and Painting.<sup>7</sup> Even the

*Das Kunstwerk als Lebewesen*, ed. by U. Pfisterer & A. Zimmermann, Berlin 2005, pp. 95-113; J.R. Snyder, «Sincerity in Seventeenth-Century Italy», in: *Rinascimento*, seconda serie, 43, 2003, pp. 265-286; E. Leuschner, catalogue entry, in: *Wir sind Maske*, exhibition catalogue (Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2009), by S. Ferino-Pagden, Cinisello Balsamo 2009, pp. 342-344, cat. no. VI.11.

<sup>3</sup> C. d'Afflito, *Lorenzo Lippi*, Firenze 2002, pp. 244-245, cat. no. 71.

<sup>4</sup> See E. Leuschner, *Persona, Larva, Maske. Ikonologische Studien zum 16. bis frühen 18. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt a. M. 1997, pp. 112-113.

<sup>5</sup> Kruse, 2005 (see n. 2), pp. 105-109.

<sup>6</sup> C. Ripa, *Iconologia ovvero descrizione dell'imagini universali cavate dall'antichità et da altri luoghi*, Roma 1593, pp. 227 (*Imitatione*) and 210-212 (*Pittura*).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the introduction in Leuschner, 1997 (see n. 4), pp. 11-25.

pomegranate features in several contexts in Ripa, among them Academy, Concord and Fraud. So what gives us the confidence to call the Angers painting, for which no authentic title has been preserved, an Allegory of Simulation?

It looks as if more research on the artistic and circumstantial evidence is needed. How did the Angers allegory and the many other half-length pictures of women with masks fit into the artistic practice of Lorenzo Lippi, Cesare and Vincenzo Dandini, Giovanni Martinelli and – possibly – other Florentine painters? And in what way did these painters produce meaning in their pictures, that is: how did they communicate with their beholders by visually defining a particular allegoric constellation as prescribed by written sources or visual conventions? What is known about the buyers or collectors of the works in question, the cultural and economic conditions under which the paintings were produced and of the semantic precedents of ‘allegoric masks’ in Cinquecento painting and sculpture as well as in the arts of Florence in the first years of the seventeenth century?

In what follows, examples of the type of pictures just mentioned will be discussed: «dipinti di mezza figura» or half-lengths. The *mezza figura*, by the way, is a term already employed by Filippo Baldinucci to characterise a certain segment of Lorenzo Lippi’s oeuvre.<sup>8</sup> Most of the Florentine *mezza figura* pictures are undated and unsigned, but stylistic evidence has induced Chiara d’Afflitto, Sandro Bellesi and others to suggest dates in the late 1630s and 1640s.<sup>9</sup> So just what induced Florentine painters to create these pictures during those years?

The young woman in front of a dark background in the picture attributed to Cesare Dandini (fig. 2) is looking at the spectator with a pensive or melancholy expression.<sup>10</sup> She is represented as sitting at a table or desk

<sup>8</sup> F. Baldinucci, *Notizie dei professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua* [Firenze 1845-1847], ristampa a cura di P. Barocchi, Firenze 1974-1975, vol. V, p. 263: «[...] e fece anche altri quadri di storie e di mezza figura, che lunga cosa sarebbe il descrivere.»

<sup>9</sup> Given the fact that even the authorship of some of these paintings is contested and several of the works in question are in private collections and thus inaccessible to me, I will analyse them as a group defined by certain stylistic and iconographic characteristics and treat their attribution to individual artists as a secondary issue.

<sup>10</sup> Cesare Dandini: oil on canvas, 65 x 50 cm. On this painting see *Palazzo degli Alberti. Le collezioni d’arte della Cariprato*, ed. by A. Paolucci, Milano 2004, pp. 91-92.

with a quill in her right hand with which she has until recently been writing some text on a pile of paper. Three fingers of her left hand are touching the side of her head; the light skin of her left forearm and a large portion of her right shoulder on which some of her brown curls fall are uncovered. Between the woman and an open book placed on what might be a reading stand is a mask with orange skin, red cheeks and lips that are almost closed. As far as we see, there are no straps or bands with which the mask could be tied to the woman's face. A closely related painting, also attributed to Dandini (fig. 3), represents another young woman who appears to be meditating on a passage in a book she has been reading.<sup>11</sup> Her gaze is directed upward as if she was looking for inspiration or an inner voice. Instead of her, a winged putto in the picture's upper left corner who crowns the woman with a wreath of laurel, is seeking eye contact with the beholder. A mask, again quite expressionless, is placed at the lower left corner next to another book. A painting of more modest quality (fig. 4) looks like a compilation of elements in the two paintings just described.<sup>12</sup> The only major difference is the fact that the woman holds the mask with her left hand and puts a finger through the mask's right eye as if to demonstrate that it is void. This gesture, in fact, appears to derive from another *Woman holding a mask* (fig. 5), this time represented in a picture of oval size and directly addressing the beholder. There is at least one other such oval painting of a woman holding a mask (fig. 6), but this lady is shown without a laurel wreath, a quill or books.<sup>13</sup> The picture was clearly painted by another artist than the first one.

What unites all these paintings, however, is the choice of the half-length mode, a dark background, an expressionless mask and a not too happy face of the young woman represented. The titles given to these pictures vary – the most recurrent variant is that of *Thalia* or *Comedy*, since the allegoric character of these works appears obvious and this Muse is traditionally shown with a mask, both in antiquity and in Renaissance art

<sup>11</sup> S. Bellesi, *Cesare Dandini*, Torino 1996, pp. 161-162, cat. no. 104.

<sup>12</sup> Cesare Dandini (and workshop?): oil on canvas, 87 × 66 cm. F. Baldassari, *La collezione Piero e Elena Bigongiari. Il Seicento Fiorentino tra "Favola" e Dramma*, Milano 2004, p. 187, no. IV.

<sup>13</sup> For painting reproduced in fig. 5 see Bellesi, 1996 (see n. 11), p. 108, cat. no. 53. Thanks Federico Berti for his help in supply with fig. 6.

from Filippino Lippi's *Muses* and Raphael's *Parnassus* onwards. Even Ripa prescribed a «maschera comica» for *Comedia*.<sup>14</sup> But while the woman's clothing does show some faint evidence of her being *lascivo* (Ripa), there is certainly no trace of the «allegro volto» the same author demanded for Comedy. An alternative or more general interpretation of these *mezza figura* women is that of Poetry. This caption, almost needless to say, is related to Francesco Furini's justly famous painting *Pittura e Poesia* of 1626.<sup>15</sup> In this picture, however, the female personification of Painting on the left – rather than Poetry who is sitting on the right – rests her right hand, in which she holds a brush, on the upper part of a mask.

The lascivious elegance and youthful vigor of Furini's two personifications of *Painting and Poetry* united is rarely achieved in other (mostly smaller) Florentine pictures of related allegorical figures, among them the so-called *Allegory of Comedy and Painting* attributed to Cesare Dandini (fig. 7).<sup>16</sup> In this painting (that is known to me only in b/w photographs), the woman on the left is more or less equipped like her sisters in the half-length pictures just cited. The woman on the right has brushes in her left and a pencil in her right hand, plasters of a classical torso and a dog, according to Bellesi that of the *Meleagro Pighini* today in the Vatican, are placed close to her.<sup>17</sup> In connection with this picture, the same author mentions two unidentified pendant paintings of «La Pittura» and «La Commedia» catalogued under the name of Dandini in an undated inventory of the Casa Stiozzi Ridolfi, a fact that implies the former existence of at least one similar group created as allegorical (half-length) pendants. But this information helps little with the identification of the precise allegorical value of the two figures in the present picture. Even the attributes of the so-called *Pittura* in the three-quarter Dandini are more numerous than those normally allotted to an allegory of Painting, rather, they appear to widen her responsibilities to include the realm of sculpture and drawing. Does she stand for all visual arts?

An artistically more attractive, but also a more problematic painting

<sup>14</sup> Ripa, 1593 (see n. 6), p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Un'altra bellezza: Francesco Furini*, exhibition catalogue ed. by M. Gregori & R. Maffei, Firenze 2007, pp. 160-163.

<sup>16</sup> Bellesi, 1996 (see n. 11), p. 114, cat. no. 58.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

both in terms of attribution and meaning (fig. 8), represents three figures next to a painting in the painting.<sup>18</sup> One of the women clearly is an allegory of *Painting*, while the identity of the other two figures is less clear – the woman holding a pencil on the right appears to be *Poetry* or *Literature*, while the figure in the middle who is pointing at an allegorical picture in the picture might represent *History*. *Pittura*, however, is characterised not only by her brushes, a palette and her colourful appearance, but also by the mask on a golden chain that is dangling from her right side and faces the beholder.

It is well known that the mask on a golden chain (just as the bound or sealed mouth) was introduced to the art world as an attribute of *Painting* by Cesare Ripa. Here we have a clear example of the influence of Ripa's book on Florentine Seicento art. According to the *Iconologia*, the mask symbolises imitation of the real world, while *Pittura's* sealed mouth is related to the fact that painting is considered to be a mute art. In early Seicento personifications of *Painting*, however, the mask as an attribute of *Pittura* is used in a very unobtrusive way and rarely appears in any work before ca. 1620. And if it 'does' appear, it is largely confined to printed allegories rather than paintings. Palma il Giovane's two allegorical figures, the genius of *Sculpture* and the personification of *Painting*, in a drawing manual published in 1611 are a good case in point.<sup>19</sup> Antonio Tempesta, in the mid-1620s, represented a young Barberini prince in a fictive art gallery together with a *Pittura* outfitted according to Ripa's definition.<sup>20</sup> In 1630, Artemisia Gentileschi pictured herself as an *Allegory of Painting* with some of the attributes prescribed by Ripa, but one has to look twice to discover the tiny golden mask on

<sup>18</sup> The picture was exhibited as an early work of Francesco Furini at the *Wir sind Maske* exhibition in Wien: see the catalogue entry by G. Cantelli in: *Wir sind Maske*, 2009 (see n. 2), pp. 344-345, cat. no. VI.13. Having myself published the picture with a tentative attribution to Martinelli in 1997 (see n. 4, p. 296) and knowing the painting's problematic state of conservation from personal inspection, I cannot express any definitive opinion about its author.

<sup>19</sup> See the entry by E. Leuschner in: *Wir sind Maske*, 2009 (see n. 2), pp. 336-337, cat. no. VI.3.

<sup>20</sup> For the print by Luca Ciamberlano after Tempesta see E. Leuschner, *Antonio Tempesta. Ein Bahnbrecher des römischen Barock und seine europäische Wirkung*, Petersberg 2005, p. 503, fig. 14.38.

her golden chain.<sup>21</sup> In many other Seicento personifications of *Painting* (made in Florence or elsewhere), for example in the picture by Guercino in the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome<sup>22</sup>, the mask as an attribute of *Pittura* was avoided.

The initial reluctance of painters to outfit personifications of their own *métier* with Ripa's mask can only have one reason: the many negative associations of masks, which – as a device used in carnal festivities of all kinds – was often represented as an instrument of vice, worldliness, promiscuity and *malavita* in general. These conflicting associations appear to have affected the preparation of what might well be the earliest example of a *Pittura* represented with a mask on a golden chain in Florentine painting: Fabrizio Boschi's fresco in the casino di S. Marco of *Cosimo II resuscitating Painting*.<sup>23</sup> It has not yet been noted that the mask is less prominent and less clearly visible in the fresco than in Boschi's preparatory study, today in the Uffizi.<sup>24</sup> In a separate study of the figure in question, also in the Uffizi, both the chain and the mask are lacking.<sup>25</sup> The mask, in any case, was far from being a standard attribute of *Painting* in Florence during the early 1620s.

One should not assume, however, that Boschi was the first artist to represent a mask in Florentine art. Not only was there a considerable tradition of masks in different contexts in Cinquecento painting and sculpture, but these masks also came in different shapes and materials, ranging from examples whose form was closely related to what we see in Lippi's and Dandini's works to the grimacing and highly individualised 'larve' in works by Michelangelo and his followers such as in Pontormo's *Venus and Cupid*.<sup>26</sup> It is far from easy to tell which (if any) of these specimens or

<sup>21</sup> On Artemisia Gentileschi's London self-portrait cf. M.D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: the image of the female hero in Italian baroque art*, Princeton/N.J. 1989, pp. 347-348, and R.W. Bissell, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art*, New Haven 2001, p. 384, cat. no. L-90.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. L. Mochi Onori & R. Vodret, *Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica Palazzo Barberini. I dipinti. Catalogo sistematico*, Roma 2008, p. 72.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Fabrizio Boschi (1572-1642). Pittore barocco di "belle idee" e di "nobiltà di maniera"*, exhibition catalogue ed. by R. Spinelli, Firenze 2006, pp. 104, fig. 60, and 106 (detail).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105, cat. no. 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107, cat. no. 22.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Leuschner in: *Wir sind Maske*, 2009 (see n. 2), pp. 336-337, cat. no. VI.3.

types of masks resemble those that were actually carried during the carnival season, in court festivals or theatrical performances in Florence. However, as far as allegorical performances equipped by Bernardo Buontalenti, Giulio Parigi and others are concerned, several preparatory drawings represent actors who are wearing expressionless masks not unlike those that can be found in the half-length paintings by or attributed to Lippi and Dandini.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, masks as attributes of allegories created by Ripa in the 1590s met with an allegorical mode that was already being cultivated at the Medici court and elsewhere.

Yet one should realise the difference between masks as allegorical attributes and technical devices: masks worn in allegorical performances were a means to reveal rather than to cover up, i.e. to communicate a universal truth by negating their carriers' individual features to interfere with that truth. Susini's sculpture was made for the Boboli in 1622 and is traditionally known as the *Inganno*.<sup>28</sup> The marble represents a woman in the act of uncovering her face. Stylistically, the figure is close to the allegorical designs by Parigi and his colleagues, but, paradoxically, the work does away with the tradition of the 'revealing' mask of allegorical performance and becomes an allegory in the sense of the *Iconologia*, i.e. a personification defined by her standard attributes. Only in combination with her other features and attributes, among them the flowers and the fox (which can both be found in Ripa), does her gesture contribute to semantic clarity.

Do these observations help us in interpreting Lippi's painting (fig. 1) in Angers? They do insofar as they reveal that a considerable range of formal and semantic options for 'allegorical' masks in Florentine art existed prior to Lippi but that Ripa's *Iconologia* must have exerted a regulating or normative influence on such representations. Artists using or combining attributes available from the *Iconologia* must have expected to obtain a higher degree of semantic precision. Their efforts can thus be paralleled (*si parva licet componere magnis*) with those of the accademia della Crusca regarding the regulation of the Italian language. But how can we understand a painting as the 'still-life' attributed to the circle of Cesare Dandi-

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, the *Fortuna* by Giulio Parigi in C. Thiem, *Florentiner Zeichner des Frühbarock*, München 1977, fig. 114.

<sup>28</sup> On Susini's sculpture see C. Pizzorusso, *A Boboli e altrove. Sculture e scultori fiorentini del Seicento*, Firenze 1989, p. 37.



ni<sup>29</sup>, in which a mask and a bronze statuette in the manner of Giambologna are placed next to each other on a marble plate or table, with a carefully crafted piece of architecture added in the background? Is there any other option than to read the picture as an abbreviation or re-employment of Ripa's precepts for *Imitatione*, i.e. as a visual affirmation of the creative powers of the arts (including theatre) to imitate or simulate and to construct artistic illusions?

Yet, what do we make out of the pomegranate in the left hand of Lippi's woman (fig. 1)? Does the combination of a mask and a pomegranate create a clearer allegorical identity – such as is the case in Susini's *Inganno*? In my opinion, the notion of Unity or Concord as defined by Ripa (= a multitude of semen is circumscribed and united by the fruit's skin) has been discarded too swiftly in favour of Fraud (= the attractive outside of the pomegranate hides an unpleasant inside) – not to mention Lecoq's proposal to understand Lippi's pomegranate as a symbolic vagina that, according to her, turns the entire picture into an allegory of the deceitfulness of the female sex.<sup>30</sup> *Concordia*, in fact, is one of the most recurrent allegorical notions of the *melagrana* in sixteenth and seventeenth century Italian art. Rosso Fiorentino, for example, represented François Ier as a Roman ruler who holds a pomegranate, thus symbolising the French king's power to unite and control the divergent forces in his population.<sup>31</sup> And in Seicento Milan, Giovanni Paolo Bianchi engraved a composition of Christoph Storer, whose *Concordia matrimoniale* (fig. 9) is represented by a standing woman who is wearing a dress that is decorated with hearts.<sup>32</sup> She holds a pomegranate in her right hand (whoever wants to see a vagina in it is free to do so) and a thunderbolt in her left that she hides behind her back – just in case the ideal of matrimonial unity or concord should need some reinforcement. A *mezza figura* personification (fig. 10) ascribed to Pier Dandini, the son of Vincenzo, is represented with a

<sup>29</sup> Bellesi, 1996 (see n. 11), p. 196, fig. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Lecoq, 2000 (see n. 2).

<sup>31</sup> On Rosso Fiorentino's composition see the entry in *Rosso Fiorentino: Drawings, Prints, and Decorative Arts*, exhibition catalogue ed. by E.A. Carroll, Washington 1987, cat. no. 86.

<sup>32</sup> The print is unmentioned in S. Appuhn-Radtke, *Visuelle Medien im Dienst der Gesellschaft Jesu: Johann Christoph Storer (1620-1671) als Maler der Katholischen Reform*, Regensburg 2000, and can thus be considered *inedita*.

pomegranate, a laurel wreath and the fasces that Ripa prescribed for *Concordia*.<sup>33</sup>

When interpreting Lippi's Angers allegory (fig. 1), therefore, the notion of Concord or Unity remains an important option. In the light of the iconographic parallels just cited, an interpretation of this painting as an allegory of imitation (symbolised by the mask) as a common or unifying principle of the arts (concord being symbolised by the pomegranate) should be preferred. This concept of *Imitatione* included literature or poetry and thus extended to all the *artes*. It was clearly not by chance that Cesare Dandini (fig. 7) saw no problem in attributing the mask to Poetry or Comedy rather than just to her sister, *Pittura*.

Having made this point, we can turn from the economics of meaning to the economics of painting. A close observation of this aspect will eventually lead back to questions of artistic intention and meaning. Allegorical half-length figures represented before a dark background were a novelty in Florentine painting of the 1630s and 40s. Apart from portraits and an occasional Evangelist or Saint, there are virtually no examples in the Cinquecento or at the turn of the century. In contrast to Venice and Lombardy (Luini, Cariani, Titian, Dosso etc.), Florence did not have a tradition of this kind of allegorical imagery. Even in the early illustrated editions of Ripa's *Iconologia* and related international publications such as Philip Galle's *Prosopographia*, personifications are always represented in full size. It has already been pointed out that the new way in which single allegorical figures were painted in Florence was influenced by the *mezza figura* pictures of Caravaggio and his school.<sup>34</sup> Caravaggio's innovative approach to the depiction of single mythological figures or an entire *storia* being enacted by half-length figures instrumentalised the reduction of distance between the persons represented and the space of the beholder. While the aesthetic reasons responsible for the choice of the new picture format can be identified in the artists' desire to create pictures that convincingly conveyed emotional values, it should not be overlooked that Caravaggio was also catering to an expanding market of private patrons

<sup>33</sup> Pier Dandini: oil on canvas (oval), 72 x 55 cm; see *Palazzo degli Alberti*, 2004 (see n. 10), p. 146, no. 67.

<sup>34</sup> S. Gianfreda, *Caravaggio, Guercino, Mattia Preti: das halbfigurige Historienbild und die Sammler des Seicento*, Emsdetten/Berlin 2005.

whose financial means were more limited than those of the most affluent Cardinal collectors. Picture size clearly was an economic issue (it is known that painters as Guercino priced their paintings according to the size of the canvas<sup>35</sup>). It would be totally mistaken, however, to conclude that *mezza figura* paintings were a kind of middle-class art.

Florence in the 1640s saw an unprecedented number of half-length allegories; one can even speak of the creation of an entirely new type of pictures. Prior to this date, painters of full length-figures such as Furini were apparently able to fully satisfy the (much smaller) demand for allegorical compositions – and working in such formats, Furini even included elements derived from the styles of Caravaggio and Guido Reni. The introduction of the *mezza figura*, however, appears to have coincided with the rising request for imagery that was both ‘intellectual’ and ‘modern’, i.e. for pictures in which the allegorical mode was connected with a reduction of distance between pictorial and real space in an almost paradoxical way. From the artists’ point of view, the half-length had certain other attractions – namely the fact that they were not obliged to paint the lower part of the body represented. And the scheme was extremely flexible, as it enabled the painters to create a new allegory by simply adding or removing certain attributes and thus to use the same model in different contexts, not to mention that no effort was needed to construct sumptuous backgrounds.<sup>36</sup> It would come as no surprise to learn that templates were used. The *mezza figura* painters of the 1630s and 40s owed much of their metier’s conveniences to the routine of older Caravaggisti such as Orazio Gentileschi, an artist who – as Ward Bissell has demonstrated – in his half-length *storie* did not hesitate to re-employ entire figures from previous compositions.<sup>37</sup>

The half-length pictures of the Italian Seicento have not received much scholarly attention. What little there has been written in the field, most

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, the *St. Catherine in meditation* by Cesare Dandini in Bellesi, 1996 (see n. 11), pp. 161-162, no. 105, which is a depiction of the same model in the same pose as the painter’s *Commedia*, cat. no. 104.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. R.W. Bissell’s discussion of an example by Gentileschi in *The Detroit Institute of Arts: Masters of Italian Baroque Painting*, ed. by R.W. Bissell, A. Derstine & D. Miller, London 2005, pp. 88-93.

importantly the doctoral thesis of Sandra Gianfreda, implies that the Florentine *mezza figura* allegories were appropriations of a mode of representation created by Caravaggio that was generally considered to be rather 'low'. The key source is in the *Trattato di pittura* written by the Bolognese scholar Orazio Zamboni in cooperation with Francesco Albani in 1635 (a text that Malvasia published in his *Felsina Pittrice*<sup>38</sup>). Zamboni wrote: «Essendosi introdotto una mezza figura in scena, si fa passare per un'opera intiera, io dirò che questa viene disubligata (mentre è sola del mezzo in su) dalle coscie, libera è dalle gambe, dal piano, ove posa, libera dalla prospettiva, da i concetti, e dall'espressioni, e quello dovevo dire prima dall'inventioni.» Further on Zamboni and Albani compare the buyers of such paintings with those who buy a book for its beautiful cover rather than – as the *sapienti* do – for its written content: «Ma dico io? Non vi essendo nelle mezze figure ne coscie ne gambe, ne i piani che danno a conoscere qual sia il pittore, come ei s'intenda di prospettiva, chi ha operato; sono molto disobligati.» Malvasia also mentions that Albani accused Caravaggio of having ruined the art of painting, saying that even though Caravaggio's «semplice imitatione» was worthy of praise, the artist had been responsible for all the negative developments in painting during the last 40 years.

One wonders what painter first made the *mezza figura* allegory popular in Florence. Lorenzo Lippi is a likely candidate, but so is Salvator Rosa. At a closer inspection, quite a number of Rosa's pictures appear to be inspired by Caravaggio. Even the so-called *Menzogna* is a good example of Rosa's skilled adaptation of Merisi's artistic solutions – because the bearded man with the pointing gesture in the *Calling of st. Matthew* appears to be the true model of the now famous painting in the palazzo Pitti, while the ancient Menander relief usually cited as Rosa's main source of inspiration may have served as a kind of 'official' point of reference.<sup>39</sup> Even the strong chiaroscuro in the *Menzogna* was directly or indirectly derived from the picture in S. Luigi dei Francesi.<sup>40</sup> If this observation is correct, it is ironic

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Gianfreda, 2005 (see n. 34), p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> For the state of research on this painting cf. C. Volpi in: *Salvator Rosa tra mito e magia*, exhibition catalogue, Napoli 2008, p. 106.

<sup>40</sup> It should be mentioned that certain paintings attributed to the young Jusepe de Ribera such as the *Apostle Thomas* (Florence, Fondazione di Studi di storia dell'arte Roberto Longhi) exhibit a similar format and closely related light effects: see G. Papi,

that Rosa used details from Caravaggio's first large scale painting to produce one of his closest analogies to a Florentine *mezza figura* allegory, thus demonstrating how precisely he had understood that the *Calling of st. Matthew* basically is an enlarged version of Caravaggio's previous half-length pictures.

Might it have been the intention of artists as Lippi and Rosa to remodel and 'raise' the previously despised artistic mode of the *mezza figura* that had not yet received appreciation as 'high art' (just as Lippi as a poet tried to 'raise' the Florentine Vernacular to epic quality in the *Malmantile racquistato*<sup>41</sup>)? Further research is needed on this picture type in Seicento Florence, a pictorial mode that was more innovative than has previously been assumed. A lot of new information could be gained from a data base on picture formats in connection with provenance, subject matter and individual styles in which the contributions of a new artistic mode such as the *mezza figura* to the visual culture of Seicento Florence in general can be understood and appreciated. We are only just beginning to work on *Firenze milleseicentoquaranta*.

*Ribera a Roma*, Soncino 2007, pp. 140-141, cat. no. 17. This implies that Rosa may have learnt the *mise-en-scène* he used in his *Menzogna* from Ribera rather than directly from looking at works by Caravaggio.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. E. Struhal, "La semplice imitazione del naturale". *Lorenzo Lippi's Poetics of Naturalism in Seventeenth-Century Florence* (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore 2007), Ann Arbor/Mi 2008. See also Cabani's essay in this volume.

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Lorenzo Lippi,  
*Allegoria  
dell'imitazione  
platonica*, ca. 1640-45,  
Londra, Musée des  
Beaux-Arts

Cesare Dandini,  
*Mezza figura  
allegorica femminile*,  
ca. 1645-55, Prato,  
Collezione della  
Banca di Risparmio  
di Prato

Cesare Dandini,  
*Mezza figura  
allegorica femminile*,  
ca. 1645-55,  
Collezione privata

Ambito di Cesare  
Dandini, *Mezza  
figura allegorica  
femminile*, 1650-60,  
Collezione privata





5. Cesare Dandini,  
*Mezza figura  
allegorica femminile*,  
ca. 1645-55,  
collezione privata



6. Giovanni  
Martinelli, *Mezza  
figura allegorica  
femminile*, ca. 1640-  
50, Firenze,  
collezione  
Gianfranco Luzzetti

7. Cesare Dandini,  
*Due figure allegoriche  
femminili*, ca. 1640-  
50, collezione privata

8. attr. a Francesco  
Furini, *Tre figure  
femminili allegoriche*,  
collezione privata





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Giovanni Paolo  
Pannini, *Allegoria della  
Concordia matrimoniale*,  
Engraving, ca. 1640-50

Pier Dandini,  
*Allegoria della  
Concordia*, ca. 1685-95,  
Engraving, collezione della  
Biblioteca di Risparmio  
Prato