

# ART AT ITS APEX

## The Medals of Italy

Ulrich Pfisterer

The Italian medal reached its zenith as an artistic medium around the turn of the year 1560/61. Fifteen years earlier, Michelangelo had allegedly remarked, in relation to Alessandro Cesati's medal of Paul III, that art had reached its apex, and indeed its endpoint, and that one "could not see anything better."<sup>1</sup> In terms of the number of medals produced, there was also clearly an especially intense interest in medals in Italy from the 1550s on.<sup>2</sup> But now Il Divino himself, who had brought all the arts of *disegno* to perfection, received a portrait medal—a medal that, despite his otherwise critical regard for portraits, evidently satisfied him.<sup>3</sup> Michelangelo indeed appears to have been involved in its conception. Few other circumstances would explain the presence of his personal emblem on the reverse of the medal (no. 171). It shows a blind, heroic, half-naked pilgrim with a staff and a dog. The inscription surrounding the image quotes a verse from Psalm 51:13 (Vulgate 50:15), which bears the promise to redeem sins on the proper path.<sup>4</sup> If Michelangelo, as a young man, already had the audacity to compare himself to the Old Testament shepherd boy David in the monumental statue of 1501–4, now in old age he appears to recognize in himself the sins of the aged King David.<sup>5</sup> With a Christian gesture of submission by an artist anticipating death, the potential of the emblem is not yet exhausted: the pilgrim, decked in his antique nakedness in only a coat and accompanied by a dog, could, alongside the biblical interpretation, also evoke a pagan image of exemplary virtue implicitly compared to the ascetic Michelangelo: the philosopher Diogenes, the epitome of modest living, to whom the Cynics reportedly gave the nickname *kyon* (Greek: "dog"). After all, fifteenth-century Italy connected the concept of "pilgrimage" and the related adjective *pellegrino* to notions of the unknown, the surprising, and the new—all qualities that Michelangelo the artist prized.<sup>6</sup>

It is no coincidence that it was Leone Leoni's medal of Michelangelo (no. 171) that stirred the interest of Stephen K. Scher. Steve has not merely tried to assemble as many pieces or complete series (such as the papal medals) as possible. Rather, he seems to have approached medal acquisition with an interest in the artistic quality and the particular execution of each individual work—in a certain sense, he cultivated a Michelangelo-like perspective, an approach that strives toward an art of the medal in which one "could not

see anything better." It is against that backdrop that this introduction to the Italian medals breaks from the master narrative about the medal in Italy and focuses instead on the question of the artistic challenge of the medium and the medalist's (self)representational possibilities.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

The Leoni medal testifies to Michelangelo's endeavor to secure his reputation for posterity. To that end, after the 1540s, his portrait played an increasing role. After 1545, Giulio Bonasone published multiple printed portraits of the master (Michelangelo's competitor Raphael had already received such a reproducible portrait from Bonasone about ten years earlier).<sup>7</sup>

Not only did the medal function as a conduit for self-promotion, it also reflected a growing interest in portraiture. People were increasingly dissatisfied with learning about the lives of famous historical men and women from texts alone: they also wanted images. Paolo Giovio, who began to collect portraits about 1512, quickly amassed about five hundred such works for a "musaeum" on Lake Como built between 1537 and 1543, which is regarded as the foremost example of the new demand for portraiture.<sup>8</sup> Collections of portraits nevertheless only became a "mass phenomenon" through the new reproductive media of print and medals. Admittedly, the printed portrait did not enjoy the same success or wide proliferation in sixteenth-century Italy as it did north of the Alps. In Italy, the medal was far more preferred as a portrait medium. This did not, however, diminish the success of the new genre of the illustrated book of lives, which combined printed portrait with biographical text.<sup>9</sup> Tellingly, a publication on the ancient caesars with pseudo-antique coin portraits, published by Andrea Fulvio with the title *Illustrium Imagines* (Rome, 1517), stands at the beginning of this genre. Yet historical works also increasingly attested, through their illustrations, to the power of coins and medals.

Compensatory medals, which served to fill the holes in a genealogical line or collection, began to appear after about 1500. Entire medal series that conveyed coherent historical narratives, or *histoires métalliques*, were produced in Florence and papal Bologna as early as the second half of the sixteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The popes recognized the potential for the new medium of the medal quite early and wielded it on every front: Paul II appears to have instituted the "indulgence penny." Sixtus IV issued the first architectural medals.<sup>11</sup> In the seventeenth century, the printed papal biographies received sophisticated illustrations with synoptic anthologies of medals, which presented, at a glance, something akin to the whole spectrum of papal architectural patronage (fig. 9).<sup>12</sup> The new contexts of collecting and seriality were in part responsible for this, for after the middle of the sixteenth century, a significant number of medals were produced with only one decorated side, as in medals by Pastorino de' Pastorini (no.102).

A wide spectrum of materials was employed in the production of medals; alongside gold and other metals, including lead, media as diverse as plaster, papier-mâché, and leather were also used. If one considers that in a collection of cast portraits, the materials and optical differences between contemporary medals, antique coins, works of goldsmithing, and glyptic portraits were equalized, then the reasons why the early modern period did not draw stark terminological distinctions between these categories makes more sense.<sup>13</sup> The diversity of materials also allowed for the medals to be employed in myriad contexts: from the representative "state gift" that might be worn on a chain, to inclusion in the *studiolo*



Fig. 9 Medals for the building projects of Pope Alexander VII. From Alfonso Chacón, *Vitae et res gestae pontificum Romanorum*, vol. 4, cols. 719–20 (Rome 1677)

of a scholar, to the devotional collection of a pious person, to the architectural medal, to the cheap embellishment of an everyday object. This is why Pietro Aretino, feigning indignation, complained in 1545 that his portrait medal, like those of Caesar and Alexander, now also appeared on comb boxes.<sup>14</sup> All in all, it is clear that while Jacob Burckhardt struck an important point with his characterization of the medal as the “currency of fame,” when it comes to medals, far more than reputation mattered. As signs of social relationships, historical witnesses, decoration pieces, and demonstrative artistic objects, medals were the “social currency” of the early modern period—a social medium *avant la lettre*.<sup>15</sup>



To what extent Michelangelo already appreciated this is impossible to determine. The history of reception is, then, all the more informative. It was, after all, to medals, not engravings, that Vasari referred when he said that so many examples were produced that he had seen specimens in many places in Italy.<sup>16</sup> And while the printed Italian portrait types of Michelangelo proliferated outside of Italy only in the years around 1600,<sup>17</sup> Leoni's medal immediately provoked a reaction: indeed, in the very year of its production, 1561, Lambert Suavius printed a portrait of Michelangelo in the form of a medal—which is clearly based on Leoni's likeness of 1560–61—falsely listing, as does the medal, Michelangelo's age as "88" (fig. 10).<sup>18</sup> This print was likely accompanied by two other paper medals: one of Suavius's brother-in-law Lambert Lombard (fig. 11) and one of Dürer (fig. 12). Suavius does not merely present Lombard as a representative of the Netherlandish school of painters in relation to the two "stars" of the Italian and German schools, though a "face-off" does occur in the right-facing position of Lombard's portrait relative to the left-facing Michelangelo and Dürer. More important, what we see here is the earliest known printed series of artists' portraits, produced even before the appearance of those of Vasari (1568) and Lampsonius (1572). Ultimately, it is clear that the medal was appreciated as the ennobling portrait form *par excellence*—even in the case of "mere paper medals."<sup>19</sup>

### ARTISTIC PROMOTION

Michelangelo received the Leoni medal as a gift from Leoni, who was a Milan-based goldsmith and sculptor. In the letter of March 14, 1561, that accompanied the gift, Leoni divulged his motivations: it was given "out of love," in honor of and in gratitude to Michelangelo, who served as an artistic model and mentor and who had also recommended Leoni for a papal commission.<sup>20</sup> In order to prove this visually to Michelangelo, Leoni had re-worked the silver medal especially carefully. Evidently, this was an absolute exception; Leoni otherwise had no scruples about admitting freely to those who commissioned his works that the medals were not perfect in terms of their execution.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the medal that Leoni conveyed to the older artist as a token of *amicitia*, examples of the Michelangelo medal sent to Spain and Flanders and prominently marked with "LEO" he gave primarily "out of ambition." These objects served as tokens of Leoni's artistic generosity and talent and signaled his claim to be Michelangelo's successor in the field of sculpture.

Fig. 10 Lambert Suavius, Paper Medal of Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1561  
Engraving, 100 mm  
British Museum, London

Fig. 11 Lambert Suavius, Paper Medal of Lambert Lombard, not dated  
Engraving, 98 mm  
Université de Liège, Belgium;  
Collections artistiques

Fig. 12 Lambert Suavius, Paper Medal of Albrecht Dürer, not dated  
Engraving, 97 mm  
Université de Liège, Belgium;  
Collections artistiques

The history of the medal in Italy can largely be understood in terms of artistic test-pieces and self-representation. This is true at the inception of the genre, for alongside the famous medals made for the Carraras in Padua and the two examples of Constantine and Heraclius in the collection of the Duke of Berry (nos. 504, 505), Lorenzo and Marco Sesto struck, at the beginning of their engagement with coins in Venice in 1393, two small pieces showing antique emperors' busts on one side and the personification of Venice on the other. The relevance of antique coins, which Italians began studying again in the age of Petrarch (at the very latest), is evident for all of these early specimens. Both pieces by the Sestos are signed, and the work by Marco is moreover marked with the family sign, the circle (*sesto*) (fig. 13). These medals were less about following antique models as precisely as possible than about staging a demonstrative performance of the artist's own abilities in comparison to the skill of ancient masters.<sup>22</sup>

The origins of the cast medal are controversial. Most researchers indicate Pisanello's medal of John VIII Paleologus (no. 1), produced in commemoration of the Council of Ferrara/Florence in 1438–39, as the beginning of the form. Nevertheless, it is possible that Pisanello already completed his first medal, for Filippo Maria Visconti, in Rome, in 1431–32, all the more so because a particularly fruitful context for the new forms of antique-style self-fashioning existed there.<sup>23</sup> It was no coincidence that at the same time (in connection with his appointment as *scriptor apostolicus*) Leon Battista Alberti executed his famous self-portrait plaquette. Alberti also experimented with a small pendant, which showed his image on both sides—one all'antica and one in contemporary dress—which likely functioned as a gift of friendship.<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of the 1440s, Filarete signed his bronze doors for old St. Peter's with a pseudo-medal and moreover appears from this time on to have produced medals all'antica, which—unlike the pieces of Pisanello—took antique *sestercii* as models.<sup>25</sup>

When Filarete made an actual self-portrait medal in 1460, he found himself in the company of the enigmatic Giovanni Boldù. Pisanello had, by this point, been immortalized in two medals that surprisingly stem not from the artist himself but from his students—there is no other explanation for the diminished quality and the stylistic departure of the works. There followed a full line of other artists' medals, which were in part executed by masters other than those they depicted: Lysippus, also known as Hermes Flavius de Bonis (1473), Candida (ca. 1470), the Bellinis (1480s–90s), Bramante (ca. 1506), Vittore Gambello (1508; no. 44), Valerio Belli (mid-16th century; no. 140), Andrea Riccio (1530s?), and others.<sup>26</sup> If the challenge of these works is often that the precise context of their creation is unknown, Alessandro Vittoria's medals—among which is a self-portrait medal with the likeness of his painter friend Bernardino India on the reverse—can at least be shown to have arisen as showpieces at the beginning of his career.<sup>27</sup>

Leone Leoni, meanwhile, produced medals for at least two and half decades.<sup>28</sup> From earlier pieces, such as the works for Pietro Aretino and Titian, it is possible to confirm that Leoni likewise strove for self-promotion. This is also present in the medals that Leoni allegedly produced as a token of gratitude to Andrea Doria after his release from the galleys in 1540–41. On the reverse of one version (no. 166), he seems to show his likeness surrounded by the shackles of the former prisoner. This surprising commemoration of the punishment can be explained in light of the new social position of the exceptional



artist: the “artist as criminal” stands, on the basis of his outstanding abilities, outside of the norm.<sup>29</sup> The medal of Baccio Bandinelli (no. 168) likewise belongs to this early period: that Bandinelli’s quote of choice on the reverse of the medal should be CHANDOR ILLESVS (Unimpaired radiance), the former motto of Clement VII, is best explained by the fact that, in 1536, Bandinelli finally managed to wrest the commission for the epitaph of his former patron from his competitor Alfonso Lombardi. Bandinelli’s artistic “radiance” countered all who stood in his way.<sup>30</sup>

As rich as this series of artist medals may be, Leoni’s Michelangelo medal appears to have made an extraordinary impression on its 1561 debut. Not only was it the reason that Vasari also wanted his own portrait medal from Leoni; in Milan, other artists such as Girolamo Figino (1562; no. 120) and Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo (1561–62 [?] and 1562) added to this tradition of medals.

Artists were not the only ones who occupied themselves with the medium and its formal possibilities. Contact with coins and medals evidently had a decisive impact on the “education of the eye.” Even if one only had the means to possess a modest collection, it was easy to compare the pieces and order them in a new way.<sup>31</sup> The combination of different coins and medals moreover allowed stylistic and qualitative differences to come to the fore. The fact that ever more effective imitations and indeed deliberate fakes of antique coins were put in circulation over the course of the sixteenth century—with Giovanni da Cavino as the most ingenious interpreter and Padua as the center of production—led to a new sharpness of critical assessment (fig. 14). These qualities, combined with the ubiquity of coins and medals on the writing desks of scholars, literary figures, and artists, made the objects among the most preferred subjects of literary, historical, and art-theoretical reflections: individuals investigated the *paragone* between coins and medals and painting, sculpture or text, as well as the evocative power of portraits, whose invention and composition were compared to those of emblems in terms of the interplay between their images and inscriptions.<sup>32</sup>

The interest in artists’ portraits on Italian medals continued all the way up to the time of Antonio Canova (nos. 252 and 253), Italy’s most important neoclassical artist. This is telling in another regard: between 1813 and 1818, Leopoldo Cicognara published his *Storia della Scultura dal suo risorgimento in Italia sino al secolo di Napoleone*, beginning with Donatello and ending with Canova. In this first-ever history of sculpture, medals are a component. A chapter is dedicated to medalists and gem-cutters, as was already the case in Vasari’s 1568

Fig. 13 Marco Sesto, *Galba*, 1393  
Bronze, 33 mm  
American Numismatic Society, New York

Fig. 14 Giovanni da Cavino, *Faustina Junior*, early-mid-16th century  
Bronze, 35 mm  
National Gallery of Art, Washington; Kress Collection

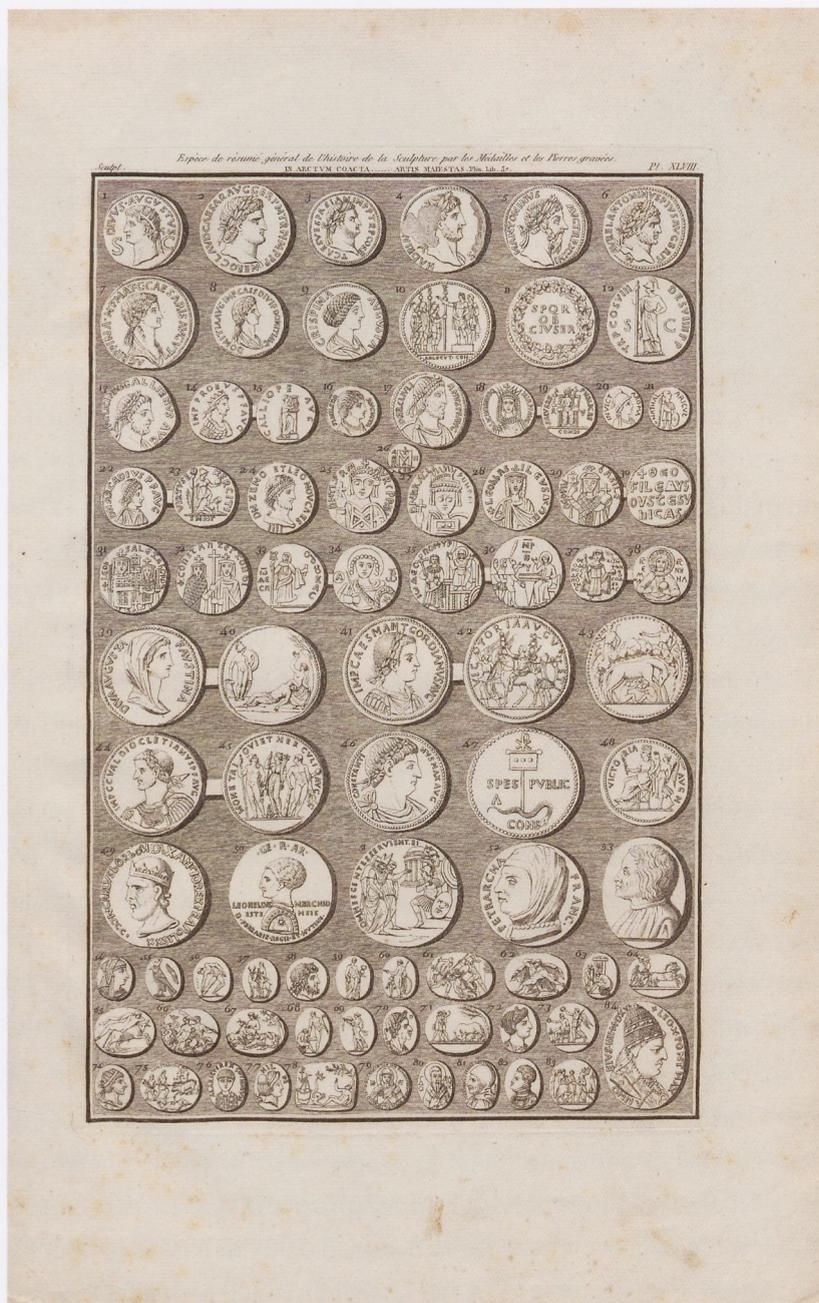


Fig. 15 The historical development of sculpture as demonstrated by medals and gems. From Jean Baptiste Louis Georges Seroux d'Agincourt, *Histoire de l'art par les monumens, depuis sa décadence au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XVI<sup>e</sup>* vol. 4, pl. XLVIII (Paris 1810–23)

second edition of the *Vite*. Jean B.L.G. Seroux d'Agincourt's contemporaneous *Histoire de l'art par les monumens, depuis sa décadence au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XVI<sup>e</sup>* (1810–23) expanded on Cicognara's contribution with the first synoptic table of seventy-three coins, medals, and cut stones used to visualize the stylistic development of art from the time of Augustus to that of Leo X (fig. 15). With this work, the artistic pretensions of the medal from the Renaissance up to the early nineteenth century were regarded as a significant component of art history's collective horizons. Afterward, medals nevertheless increasingly disappeared from the narrative of the emerging discipline of art history and were, for two hundred years, more or less exclusively a subject of numismatic studies—and then only as objects of iconographic interest. A changed appreciation for these works has come about in the last two decades. The challenge remains this: to integrate medals of the early modern period into art history in the sense in which Michelangelo saw them—that is, as an “apex of art.”

## Notes

- 1 Vasari 1966–87, 4: 628; nevertheless, Vasari also writes in his *Life of Leone Leoni* (6: 201) that Leoni has moved from medals to “more important works.”
- 2 On this phenomenon, see Attwood 2003, 1: 17; see also Hill 1930; Toderi and Vannel 2000; and Vannel and Toderi 2003–7.
- 3 Most recently, Attwood 2003, 1: 111–12, no. 61; A. Schumacher 2004, 169–94; Helas 2007; Fenichel 2016.
- 4 Because Paolo Giovio’s treatment of *impresa* in *Dialogo delle imprese militari et amoroze* first appeared in 1555 (Lyon 1559), it is not possible to speak of a concrete theory of the genre as already existing in 1560. Michelangelo’s emblem would not have fulfilled Giovio’s five fundamental rules for a good *impresa*. Giovio gives as a fourth criterion that the body should not be used under any circumstances.
- 5 I. Lavin 1993.
- 6 See, above all, Helas 2007; interestingly, it appears that the medals of the young Lomazzo (see below) show this nude with a knotted coat in the style of Cynical philosophers.
- 7 Steinmann 1913, 42–43, pls. 37–39; Emison 2004, 189–92.
- 8 Klinger 1998; Cannata 2014.
- 9 Cunnally 1999; Pelc 2002; Casini 2004.
- 10 C. Johnson 1976; R. Tuttle 1987; Kagan 1999.
- 11 On Paul II, see Pfisterer 2008, 240–44; on the popes in general, see Modesti 2002–4; Alteri 2004.
- 12 The model for this was the illuminated lives of antique Caesars from the later fifteenth century onward, whose coin impressions were imagined as a kind of “table of contents” of their deeds; on the seventeenth century, see Simonato 2008.
- 13 McCrory 1999.
- 14 Aretino 1957–60, 2: 234. See Syson and Thornton 2001; Collareta 2014.
- 15 Burckhardt speaks of the “Scheidemünze des Ruhmes” in the posthumously published *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte von Italien* (1898); see J. Burckhardt 2000, 361. See also Scher 1994.
- 16 Vasari 1966–87, 4: 101.
- 17 The two early northern portrait prints of Michelangelo do not reproduce printed Italian prototypes; see Léon Davent’s *Portrait of Michelangelo Aged 23* and Reusner 1589, fol. R4<sup>r</sup>. It was only with Leonard Gaultier’s print from between 1600 and 1630, made after Martino Rota’s reproduction of the *Last Judgment* with a portrait medallion of Michelangelo, that a print explicitly reproduced a graphic model from Italy.
- 18 On the symbolism of the age of eighty-eight, see Schumacher 2004; on Suavius and his prints, see Steinmann 1913, 52–53; Boon 1984, 185–87, nos. 75, 76, and 78. Unfortunately, Hollstein only describes another iteration of the print, where Michelangelo’s age is given as “LXXI.” For these copies of Michelangelo’s, as well as Dürer’s, paper medals by the Wierix family, see Van der Stock and Leesberg 2004, pt. 9, 232 (no. 2079) and pt. 10, 234 (no. R54). While partly based on the medal of Hans Schwarz (1519–20), the paper medal of Dürer also incorporates elements from the engraving of Melchior Lorck (1550). The next “paper medal” of Michelangelo in *Promptuaire des médailles des plus renommées personnes—Seconde Partie* (1577; 2nd ed., Lyon: Guillaume Rouillé, 1581, 211) differs substantially from Leoni’s model.
- 19 Viljoen 2003, 203–26.
- 20 Gotti 1875, 1: 346: “Mando a V.S. [Michelangelo] . . . quattro medaglie de la vostra efiggie: le due saranno d’argento e l’altre due di bronzo . . . Quella che è nel bossolo è tutta rinettata et la guarderà e conservarà per amor mio. L’altre tre ne farà ciò che gli parerà; perciochè, sendo ch’io per ambitione ne ho mandate in Spagna et in Fiandra, così per amore ne terò mandate a Roma et in altre parte. Dissi ambitione, per ciò che mi par haver troppo aquistato ad haver guadagnato la gratia di V. S. ch’io estimo molto” [sic] (I send Your Excellency [Michelangelo] . . . four medals with your portrait: two in silver, and the other two in bronze . . . The one in the small round box is perfectly finished and I beg you to look at it and keep it [as a token of] my love. With the other three you may do what seems best to you; similarly, I have sent [specimens] to Spain and Flanders out of ambition [for artistic recognition and fame], and have also sent others to Rome and elsewhere out of love [for you]. I said “ambition,” because I have the feeling that I have reached too much [as an artist] by earning the grace [i.e., the graceful appreciation] of Your Excellency whom I esteem [so] much).
- 21 Attwood 1997, esp. 8.
- 22 Stahl and Waldman 1993–94.
- 23 In a letter of June 28, 1431, to the Visconti duke, Pisanello promised to finish the “bronze portrait” as soon as possible; the evidence for the identification of this image with the medal is discussed by Ruggero Rugolo in Puppi 1996, 138–43.
- 24 Pfisterer 2008, 316–18.
- 25 Spencer 1979; on the medals of his assistant, see Waldman 1992.
- 26 Hill 1912b.
- 27 K. H. Lanzoni 2010.
- 28 Cupperi 2006; Di Dio 2011.
- 29 On this topic, see Bredekamp 2008, 38–49; nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the identification of the prisoner as Leoni, which Eugène Plon (1887, 256–57) first suggested, cannot be proved with absolute certainty. See Cupperi 2006, 26–27.
- 30 See Hegener 2008, 222–42 and 421–25.
- 31 It is possible that already in the second half of the fifteenth century, different states and rulers of Italy consciously employed different and easily identifiable stylistic idioms in their medals; see Syson 2004. It appears that the worth of the Medici coins experienced an upswing as a result of their increased artistic quality; see Cole 2004.
- 32 See Scher 2000; Fontana 2009; Stahl 2009; Pfisterer 2013a. On the “education of the eye,” see Syson and Thornton 2001.