

Bronzino's Panciatichi and the Petrarchan Ideal

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Fig 1. Portrait of Lucrezia Panciatichi (Bronzino 1545, oil on panel, 102 x 85cm). Uffizi, Florence. Wikimedia Commons. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Panciatichi.jpg?fbclid=IwAR1wbC6R-On5V-7Rks5RINnov7aPv_Rf1BDp4CaopvB8FoxRxiuXh7EJ7X0> accessed 14 June 2021.

The Petrarchan ideal of beauty runs as a fortified vein through art history's marble foundation. In his sonnets, the poet Petrarch idealises and idolises his object of desire, the beautiful and moral Laura. It is precisely here, in our reading of Petrarchan poetry, that we find the root of the blond and milky-white female sitter—a European standard of beauty that haunts us to this day. In his 1548 treatise *On the Beauty of Women*, Agnolo Firenzuola endorses this narrowly particular vision of the 'beautiful woman'. Firenzuola's writing stems from and contributes to the apparatus of canonical art history, where our ideals and standards are ratified in male-centric European societies and codified by male-centric European institutions. Agnolo di Cosimo, known to us by his sobriquet Bronzino, paints a strikingly distinguished portrait of a female sitter in his *Lucrezia Panciatichi* (c 1540). As I assess Bronzino's *Panciatichi*, I am convinced that the painter is under the influence of *Petrarchismo*. I am equally convinced, however, that while Bronzino may not break the conventions of ideal beauty, Panciatichi holds a firm command over her viewership and rejects the role in which she has been cast: object of desire.

In his dialogue, Firenzuola brandishes six essential qualities of ideal beauty. He asserts: 'When a woman is tall, well-shaped, carries herself well, sits with grandeur, speaks with gravity, laughs with modesty, and finally exudes the aura of a queen, then we say, "That woman seems majestic; she has majesty."¹ Although majesty is a moral quality, rather than a bodily comportment, I am nevertheless able to picture Panciatichi fulfilling these majestic criteria. Bronzino paints Panciatichi centred and symmetrically upright—evenly lit as she refuses to be swallowed up by her shadowed surroundings. Along the balanced plane, to the sitter's left and right, stand Roman columns, a nod to the order and rationality of antiquity. Within this grand setting, there is a certain grandeur in her posture and the symbols of wealth she wears. Panciatichi is draped in rose satin and burgundy velvet. The artist's careful use of shadow creates delicate textural folds and shapes a delightfully luxurious puff and a fashionably ruffled sleeve. The manner in which she is dressed reflects not only Panciatichi's social status but also her moral virtue. We gaze at an elegant, charming, and graceful sitter, imagining that she does indeed speak with gravity and laugh with modesty.

Bronzino's smooth brushstrokes lend a balance and clarity to Panciatichi's face. Her hair, tightly pulled back, is coloured in step with Firenzuola's decree that 'the proper and true color of hair should be blonde ... tan, tending toward a darker hue, and two brush-strokes of this will be enough for us.'² The artist also matches the litterateur's colour palette in Panciatichi's lips. Her mouth is symmetrical, proportioned to the rest of her face and 'hemmed by Nature with two lips that seem to be of the finest coral, like the edges of a most beautiful fountain.'³ Below stretches her ivory neck. It is almost unimaginably long: 'one likes a throat with very delicate skin, slender, long rather than short.'⁴ Here, Bronzino inhabits Firenzuola's 'one', further universalising the arbitrary female ideal.

We travel down the rounded slope of Panciatichi's shoulders, along the contoured pleats of her dress, and our eyes rest finally on her hands. Her left hand sits lightly at the rounded edge of the armrest and discloses a wedding ring. Bronzino's care in painting his sitter's

fingers meets Firenzuola's criteria: 'Fingers are beautiful when they are long, straight, delicate, and slightly tapering toward the end, but so little as to be scarcely perceptible.'⁵ Panciatichi's right hand keeps her spot in a book, a gesture which reminds me of Sofonisba Anguissola's *Self-Portrait*, where Anguissola too paints herself holding an open book. I am all too aware that Bronzino's Panciatichi is likely in the midst of reading a prayer book, and the painter wishes to signal her religious piety. Still, I am happy for my Anguissola association. For just a moment, the unintended Bronzino is excluded from a secret that I hold with Anguissola and Panciatichi.

I keep returning to Panciatichi's eyes. Bronzino opts to paint her facing the viewer, instead of in profile. Painting in profile is a common tool with which artists emphasise the female sitter's modesty. Thus, Bronzino initiates our intense and intimate relationship with Panciatichi. There is a severity to her expression, an unflinching stillness that demands our attention and respect. Although the painting is a closed composition—Bronzino hems in his sitter on the canvas—I have the unshakable feeling that she is gazing out from the strictures of the ornate gold frame beyond me. In his privileging of sight, Firenzuola unsurprisingly prizes the eyes above all else. He writes that through the eyes 'in which the noblest and most perfect of all the sense resides, through which our intellect gathers, as through windows of transparent glass, everything is visible.'⁶ Panciatichi's eyes are alert but she glazes past us viewers. If Bronzino's goal is to render his sitter's eyes 'windows of transparent glass' where 'everything is visible', he falls short. The beautiful Panciatichi does not shirk our judgemental attention. Rather, she subtly eludes her viewership all together. Her gaze incites a brief moment of insecurity: in our innate introversion as viewers, we are left feeling uneasy.

1 Agnolo Firenzuola, *On the Beauty of Women* (first published 1548; Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray trs, University of Pennsylvania Press 1992) 41.

2 *ibid* 41.

3 *ibid* 28.

4 *ibid* 60.

5 *ibid* 67.

6 *ibid* 26.