The following study concerns one of the most beloved but least investigated artistic productions of the early Renaissance: sculpted busts of young children (Figures 1, 3, 5, 7, 15, 16). The sculptures form a homogeneous group—exclusively male, always depicted bust-length, usually in marble, and often portrayed as the young St. John the Baptist. The boys are characterized individually, and no two are exactly alike in either form or expression. They first appear in Florence in the mid-fifteenth century and center on the workshops of Desiderio da Settignano, Antonio Rossellino, and Mino da Fiesole. There are no comparable painted counterparts, and the genre has a production span of only about fifty years. The busts thereby constitute an extraordinary genre of sculptural production and of childhood representation whose striking yet brief existence has always been enjoyed but never adequately explained.

These portrait busts are unique to the Renaissance. Antique busts of children do exist but are of a nature contrary to those created in Quattrocento Florence. Roman busts of children normally exhibit none of the liveliness that makes the Renaissance examples so distinctive and charming. The ancient busts are usually filled with sober dignity, without the spontaneity and vivaciousness of childhood itself. As once characterized by Anton Hekler, the Roman busts “show us no blooming, healthy little boys, no merry putti with fat cheeks and delicious snub-noses; the atmosphere of the Roman boy in portraits is not a sunny one; it is oppressive, and full of somber gravity.” The Metropolitan Museum possesses three important examples of these classical busts of children. A marble bust of a young boy (Figure 2) shows the typical austerity of most classical portrait busts and is an example of the type that would have been most familiar to Renaissance artists. A unique bronze bust in the Museum (Figure 4) exhibits more vitality as a result of the expressive eyes inlaid with silver and its more subtle facial expression. It is clear from its base that the head was to be mounted on a herm pillar and was probably placed in an area of a Roman house reserved for commemorative displays. Indeed the most common sculptural representations of children in classical art appear either in funerary contexts or as part of the cult of ancestor worship, which partly explains their sobriety. Pliny specifically indicates the display of portrait busts in the atria of Roman houses. Both he and Polybius also describe the use of effigies in funeral processions. Classical commemorative portraits celebrating living children, however, are virtually nonexistent. One may compare the Quattrocento example by Desiderio from the Mellon Collection in the National Gallery of Art (Figure 5) to the Metropolitan bust of a Roman infant (Figure 6) to see the stark contrast between the Renaissance celebrations of life and the Roman commemorations of death. Furthermore, an example such as Desiderio’s Laughing Child in Vienna (Figure 7) has no precedent, classical or otherwise, and marks the changing conception of the Renaissance child—indeed of the modern child. For the Renaissance busts ultimately embody the future promise of the male child and therefore concentrate on the living vitality of his person as it was never before represented in this art form.

With few exceptions, medieval sculptures of children depict either the Christ child or child saints. In both cases the youths display the proportions and physical characteristics of adults rather than children. In Italy, independent sculptures of the Christ child normally show him either in the act of benediction or swaddled as the infant of the nativity. An early-fourteenth-century example (Figure 8) offers a typical depiction of the former portrayal and shows little attempt to portray correct infantile form. During the Renaissance these medieval images of children evolved as a new emphasis began to be placed on the corporeality of the child—particularly the Christ child. The change is most clearly manifested in Desiderio’s Blessing Christ, from the
Figure 1. Desiderio da Settignano (ca. 1430–1464), *Bust of a Young Boy*, ca. 1460–64. Marble. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Kress Collection (photo: National Gallery of Art)

Figure 2. Roman, *Bust of a Young Boy*. Marble. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931, 32.100.471

Figure 3. Antonio Rossellino (1427–1479), *Bust of the Young St. John the Baptist*, 3rd quarter 15th century. Marble. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, Kress Collection (photo: National Gallery of Art)

Figure 4. Roman, *Bust of a Young Boy*. Bronze. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Funds from various donors, 1966, 66.11.5
tabernacle of the sacrament in San Lorenzo (Figure 9). The Renaissance Christ retains the adult prescience of the earlier image but gains the realistic body of an actual child and offers a compelling contrast to the medieval depiction.

Yet the most remarkable aspect of these Renaissance images is the powerful effect they were believed to have on those who beheld them. For example, related effigies of the young Christ appeared in the form of a private and portable image, more accurately, a “holy doll.” They were exclusively associated with young women, and one such doll appears in 1466 in the wedding trousseau of Nannina de’ Medici, sister of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Though the dolls served mainly as devotional images, in certain cases women may have held the dolls during pregnancy to influence the character of the unborn child. As explained by Klapisch-Zuber, this engagement with the image involved “a magical transfer of virtues and forces from the effigy to its user.” Through the mother’s spiritual contemplation of the doll and the doll’s physical presence near the child, it was presumed that the effigy could inspire virtuous behavior in the unborn child.

In a complementary manner, the portrait busts of children in Quattrocento Florence reflect a related belief in the ability of images to affect the beholder.
Ultimately, these busts were intended to influence the child already born by providing a model of individual character for him to emulate. It was hoped that the daily actions and developing personality of the child would eventually reflect the character portrayed in the sculpted bust. Thereby a new perception of childhood was given a unique and tangible artistic form.

The appearance of these busts in the Quattrocento derives from an increased sensitivity toward the child, and in particular the male child. Contemporary sources indicate that the male child was seen specifically as the embodiment of the future of both family and state. Matteo Palmieri, writing in his treatise on civic life, declares, "A useful thing it is to have fostered children, [thereby] having increased the population and given citizens to the homeland." \(^{18}\) Producing children to perpetuate the Florentine republic thus satisfied a civic obligation. Such sentiments are not new; indeed they can be traced back to ancient Rome. Yet their unique articulation in civic humanist philosophy—and artistic creation—became one of the hallmarks of Renaissance Florence.

The public expression of this new perception of children is seen in the foundation of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, prompted by concerns for the welfare of children as a responsibility of the state.\(^{19}\) Not coincidentally, Palmieri was one of its principal benefactors.\(^{20}\) Its façade by Brunelleschi (Figure 10) was one of the first manifestations of Renaissance architecture, and its decorative roundels, by Andrea della Robbia, display some of the most veristic images of infants during the period (Figure 11).\(^{21}\) In the churches, one finds an increased interest in the childhood of saints or their miracles involving children. A particularly revealing example is the fresco from the Sassetti Chapel in Santa Trinità in which St. Francis helps revive a young boy who had fallen from a window (Figure 12).\(^{22}\) The thirteenth-

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Figure 8. Workshop of Nicola Pisano, *Blessing Christ Child*, 1st quarter 14th century. Marble with traces of polychromy. Florence, private collection (photo: author)

Figure 9. Desiderio da Settignano, *Blessing Christ Child*, ca. 1460-64, from Tabernacle of the Sacrament in San Lorenzo. Marble. Florence, San Lorenzo (photo: Kunsthistorisches Institut, Florence)
century event that took place in Rome is here set in fifteenth-century Florence, which gives it a contemporary pertinence. Furthermore, the fresco, with its theme of childhood resurrection, was painted shortly after the birth of Teodoro II Sassetti, who was named after his recently deceased sibling.23

Portrait busts of children thus emerged in a cultural context of increasing civic and personal sensitivity toward the nature of the child as a sentient and consequential being. Children represented the promise and continuity of both the republic and its families, and the consequences of a child’s degradation or premature death took on added tragic significance.24 The Ospedale was established precisely
as one of the means through which the state could exercise its moral and practical obligations to care for its orphaned children. Children in fact became the physical guarantors of lineal succession and civic prosperity. Giannozzo Manetti, a patron of the Ospedale, wrote a lengthy Consolateria on the loss of one of his sons in 1438, in which loss of earthly immortality is a primary theme. Likewise, on the death of her son Matteo in 1459, Alessandra Strozzi wrote to her remaining children of her grief for the loss of his life as well as for the family’s having been reduced in number.

The child literally embodied the future, and the character of that future would essentially be determined by the child’s development. In contemporary humanistic and civic literature one finds increasing discourse on the idea that the fate of both family and state rests upon the moral integrity of its citizens, with special emphasis on its children. Moreover, since the character of the child would ultimately determine the nature of his family and country, the parent was newly obliged to instruct the child accordingly. In I libri della famiglia, Leon Battista Alberti, speaking through Adovardo, states:

...[the father] must attempt to make his children moral and upright. Thus may they serve the advantage of the family—moral character being no less precious in a young man than wealth—and be an ornament and credit to their family, their country, and themselves.

He then adds succinctly:

It is generally thought better for a country...to have virtuous and upright citizens rather than many rich and powerful ones. And surely children whose character is poor must be a terrible sorrow to any father who is not insensible and utterly foolish.

Alberti’s sentiments are echoed in the writings of Giovanni Rucellai, who, in his Vita civile, urges his own children not to take part in formal politics but to be good citizens through their good character and thereby bring prosperity to their city. In fact, this whole genre of civic writings, such as Rucellai’s and Palmieri’s, is predicated on the theory that familial and civic virtues are better promoted through personal behavior than through laws or governance. As such, instruction began in the home at the child’s birth.

Principally out of concern for the child’s developing character, all three aristocrats cited above advocate infant nursing by their natural mother instead of by a wet nurse. Their primary rationale is their belief that the positive qualities of the mother would be passed to the child through nursing. In essence, they believed in a physical transfer of character traits from mother to child through her milk. This process obviously necessitated a virtuous mother, and the fact that busts of secular young women of childbearing age appear at the same time as those of children underscores the woman’s new importance both in society and in art.

Once the child reached adolescence, the theoretical notions of Palmieri, Rucellai, and Alberti were put into practice in a number of innovative ways to prepare the boys for their future civic service. Confraternities exclusively for young boys became one method of harnessing youthful energies into productive actions. By 1451 there were about seven such groups, which provided Christian outlets without pressuring the boys to take religious vows or holy orders. Among their varied activities, the confraternity boys marched in processions, preached sermons, and engaged in theatrical productions of sacre rappresentazioni, or holy plays.

In processions and preaching the boys directly mimicked or emulated their elders. During a procession of 1428 one observer wrote that the sons had put on their fathers’ clothes, learned all of their gestures, and “cop[ied] each and every one of their actions and habits in an admirable way.” This account of a fifteenth-century parade stands in stark contrast to a Roman funeral procession described by Polybius in which the role of the younger family members was to commemorate the dead.

Through their dramatic performances the boys literally played more sacred roles. For example, one of the most famous and popular of these plays, written by Feo Belcari around midcentury, dramatized the meeting between Christ and St. John in the desert. In presentations of Belcari’s play children took the parts of Christ and St. John, and while performing the play the boys were perceived as the embodiments of the same goodness and virtue.

Whereas plays offered a physically active method for the children to emulate Christ and St. John, images offered a cognitive route. In an important treatise regarding child rearing composed early in the Quattrocento, Fra Giovanni Dominici explains the educational and edifying role of images. Dominici’s first piece of advice under home training is “to have pictures of saintly children or young virgins in the home, in which your child, still in swaddling clothes, may take delight and thereby be gladdened by acts and signs pleasing to childhood.” Images
of virgins, he explains, were for contemplation by young girls. For boys, he specifically advises representations of Christ and St. John the Baptist. A relief such as the Louvre Arconati–Visconti tondo by Desiderio (Figure 13) may be precisely intended when Dominici says of the child, “It will not be amiss if he should see Jesus and the Baptist pictured together.”40 Likewise, a bust similar to the Kress Baptist by Antonio Rossellino in the National Gallery of Art (Figure 3) may be intended when Dominici advises, “. . . So let the child see himself mirrored in the Holy Baptist clothed in camel’s skin.”41 This mode of self-identification by the child with the image must be seen in the context of the adult perceptions described above. After all, the parents were those responsible for commissioning the works. Through such art forms as sacred images, holy plays, and holy dolls, Florentines demonstrated their understanding that images of children could have tangible influence over their young. The child not only emulated but could also approximate (by association with virtue and piety) that which was depicted. In this context the emergence of portrait busts of children takes on a new significance. These new depictions of children represented much more than just actual or sacred childhood. They were both real and ideal images of the future family and state. Only partly intended for the child, they also served the parent by giving visual promise of virtuous offspring and assuring the continuity of lineage through a worthy male line.

But the busts are never exact likenesses of any actual child. They are based on natural form and expression, yet all are idealized images. No child bears a physical flaw or displays a blemish. None looks anything other than the very personification of young virtue and innocence. They look similar precisely because what they represent are ideals rather than appearances. This idealizing tendency is also manifested in the convention of giving the busts of boys indeterminate ages. The presumed ages vary from infancy to adolescence but are intentionally vague, since the busts are embodiments of youth and not depictions of a single specific child at a certain time.42 This point is demonstrated by the only independent child portrait of the period in which we know both the age of the child depicted and the probable date of production—a medal depicting

Figure 13. Desiderio da Settignano, Relief Tondo of the Young Christ and St. John the Baptist, ca. 1460–64. Marble. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Arconati-Visconti Collection (photo: Giraudon/Art Resource)

Figure 14. Medal of Alfonso I d’Este, Ferrarese, 1477. Bronze. Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art (photo: National Gallery of Art)
Alfonso I d'Este (Figure 14). The obverse shows the child bust-length in profile, wearing a robelike garment. The reverse replicates an antique composition, depicting Alfonso as the young Hercules holding two snakes, in reference to the name of his father, Ercole. Alfonso was born in 1476, and the medal bears the date 1477. Therefore the child was only one year old when the medal was most likely issued, despite the fact that the representation is of an older boy. The medal thus explicitly commemorates the child for his future promise—as what he will become rather than what he is.

The idealization of physical form is rooted in the concept that external appearance mirrors internal character, and therefore the busts, like the medal, represented both an actual child and the boy his parents wanted him to be. Ultimately it is the appearance of childhood rather than the actuality of the child that becomes the subject of the busts; and that, in turn, qualifies the terms by which they can be considered portraits at all.

Another notable feature is the fact that these busts so commonly take the form of the young St. John the Baptist. The frequency of representations of the child Baptist should come as no surprise since the major center of production was Florence, whose patron saint is the Baptist. The young St. John offered the perfect embodiment of unassailable childhood virtue with both sacred and civic connotations.45

The busts of the young St. John by Mino da Fiesole serve particularly well to illustrate the increasing popularity of the theme and the extent to which the Quattrocento sculptor was challenged to invent unique depictions of this popular subject.46 Five busts of children have been attributed to Mino, and each depicts a different and dynamic interpretation of the young St. John.47 The two finest and most elegant representations are the examples in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 15) and the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris (Figure 16). The two busts are extremely similar in form, yet each conveys a different expression of childhood vitality. Each is as much a portrait of childhood character as a representation of the youthful saint. The bust in the Musée Jacquemart-André bears a sympathetic expression and the head subtly tilts toward the viewer. The work in The Metropolitan Museum of Art is the most actively engaging of all Mino's busts of the young Baptist, as the figure boldly turns his head to the viewer and tilts his body slightly toward the viewer in an active, youthful gesture.

Figure 15. Mino da Fiesole (1429–1484), Bust of the Young St. John the Baptist, ca. 1480. Marble. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913, 14.40.688

Figure 16. Mino da Fiesole, Bust of the Young St. John the Baptist, ca. 1480. Marble. Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André (photo: Musée Jacquemart-André)
head to his left in a dynamic and purposeful manner. His expression, moreover, conveys confidence and assurance, while his wavy locks of ruffled hair energize the unusually animated portrayal. In Florence Mino was instrumental in creating portrait busts of adults, and he later exported the type to Rome and Naples. He may have played a similar role in the dissemination of these busts of the young St. John. Documents from 1455–56 show that while Mino was in Naples he was paid for an image of the Baptist, which was probably a bust similar to the Paris and New York examples. Thus, through Mino, an artistic form that emerged in and centered on Florence extended its cultural impact to other regions of Renaissance Italy.

The portrait busts of children had originally served the needs of a Florentine populace increasingly concerned with the idea that their male offspring would determine the character of the future family and state. Familial and civic well-being therefore depended on instilling personal and civic virtues in the young child. A humanist like Palmieri, who had his own portrait carved by Antonio Rossellino (Figure 17), must have been acutely aware of the significance of these busts of young boys when he stated, “The father to whom a son is born, before every other consideration, must have perfect hope for him and inspire him to succeed in being virtuous and worthy among men.” The portrait busts of children were unique conduits for such personal and civic virtue.

Ultimately, these busts proved a short-lived phenomenon. In fact, they virtually disappeared with the fall of the Florentine republic. The busts were artistic expressions of a civic humanism based on democratic ideals of the future of the state and its citizens. Once that future was fated to be autocratic rather than democratic, these manifestations of Republican civic promise ceased to have much relevance, and the genre came to an end.

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NOTES


2. This study concentrates on examples in marble since it is by far the most common medium. Several beautiful examples exist in glazed terracotta from the della Robbia shop as well as various works in other media by anonymous masters.

3. Vasari particularly praises Desiderio for his representations of women and children, and indeed the sculptor seems to be the leading producer of these portrait busts. See G. Vasari, Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori, G. Milanesi, ed. (Florence, 1966) III, p. 107.

4. The first painted portraits of secular children appear either in fresco groups or paired with their elders in panel paintings. Examples include Ghirlandaio’s portraits of Francesco Sassetti with Teobaldo and the unidentified double portrait in the Louvre featuring an older man with rhinophyma. A non-Florentine ex-
ample is the portrait in Urbino by Joost van Ghent showing Fed-erigo da Montefeltro with his son Guidobaldo. Though of a different genre, the themes conveyed by the paintings, of lineal continuity and dynastic succession, complement the portrait busts as discussed below.


10. Polybius, 6.53 as cited in Pollitt, Art of Rome, p. 53. For various classical sources referring to portrait busts, see Pollitt, Art of Rome, esp. pp. 53–57 and 91–95.

11. Exceptions exist, such as representations on coins, but there is no antique sculptural tradition comparable to that which produced the vivacious Renaissance busts.

12. Richter, Roman Portraits, no. 33. Also see the publication by the MMA, Augustan Art (New York, 1939) p. 26, in which the Roman head of an infant is described as follows, “The baby’s head and features are carefully recorded, but the portrait style of the period did not make allowance for the actualities which make infancy attractive.”


15. In this context see the discussion in L. Steinberg, The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Obsession (New York, 1983).


17. This idea derives from Giuseppe Marcotti, Un mercante fiorentino e la sua famiglia nel secolo XV (Florence, 1881) p. 121 n.43. See discussion by Klapisch-Zuber, “Holy Dolls,” p. 319.


20. On his death in 1475, Palmieri became the only individual actually commemorated by the institution. See Gavitt, Charity and Children, p. 275.

21. In 1487 Antonio di Marco della Robbia was paid for his help installing the roundels, yet they were probably modeled and fired by Andrea della Robbia. See G. Morozzi and A. Piccini, Il restauro dello spedale di Santa Maria degli Innocenti, 1666–1970 (Florence, 1971) p. 38.


23. Teodoro I was born in 1460 and died in 1478 or 1479. Teodoro II was born May 12, 1479, and the frescoes were begun shortly thereafter. See Borsook and Offerhaus, pp. 10ff. On the practice of reusing the names of deceased relatives see Klapisch-Zuber, “The Name ‘Remade’: The Transmission of Given Names in Florence in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” in Women, pp. 283–309.

24. This occurred despite a certain amount of conditioning to loss of young life due to high infant mortality rates, which at times reached fifty percent. See Arias, Centuries of Childhood, pp. 38–43, and Gavitt, Charity and Children, pp. 211ff.


29. Ibid.


32. Allowance is made by Alberti (I libri, p. 53) for the mother to forgo breast-feeding if she is "weakened by some accident," while Rucellai (Il zibaldone, p. 13) states, "And first, that one's own mother should nurse when she can do so without danger or offense to her person." Recognition of the mother-child relationship is noted by Palmieri (*Della vita*, p. 28), following the classical authors, who are generally more responsive to this emotional bond than the Renaissance men of letters. See Ross, "The Middle-Class Child," p. 185.

33. This topic will be expanded upon in my forthcoming study on portrait busts of women in Quattrocento Florence.


36. Polybius, 6.53 as cited in Pollitt, *Art of Rome*, p. 53. Pliny also describes the use of portraits in this context, as found in Pollitt, *Art of Rome*, p. 54. I thank John Kenfield for bringing this reference to my attention.


38. The treatise was written for Bartolomeo degli Alberti, whose husband, Antonio degli Alberti, was exiled from Florence at the time. An English translation with discussion appears as G. Dominici, *On the Education of Children*, A. B. Coté, trans. (Baltimore, 1947).

39. Ibid., p. 34.

40. Ibid.


42. Note the discussion of the Italian terms bambolina and fanciullo in Klapisch-Zuber, "Childhood in Tuscany at the Beginning of the Fifteenth Century," in *Women*, p. 96.

43. G. F. Hill, *A Corpus of Italian Medals before Cellini* (London, 1930) nos. 118; and G. F. Hill and G. Pollard, *Renaissance Medals* (London, 1967) no. 41. The medal of Alfonso forms a companion to one that shows the child's parents, Ercole I and Eleonora, one on each side, as illustrated in Hill, *Corpus of Italian Medals*, no. 117. Also see the medal of Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, by Francesco di Giorgio, in which the sitter is depicted as a somewhat older child. Guidobaldo was born in 1472 and the medal was probably made about 1482 upon his accession to the dukedom. See Hill, *Corpus of Italian Medals*, no. 308.


45. The rise in sculptural productions of the Baptist culminated in Desiderio's full-length Martelli Baptist in the Bargello and coincided with St. John's increased portrayal as a child in painting. See M. A. Lavin, "Giovannino Battista," pp. 91ff.


47. The five busts are in New York, MMA; Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts; Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André; and two busts in Paris, the Louvre. These attributions, all of which have been questioned at one time or another, are discussed by Zuraw, "Sculpture of Mino," cat. nos. 37–41.

48. In fact, the earliest datable Renaissance portrait bust is Mino's depiction of Piero de' Medici in the Bargello, from 1453. Busts executed in the course of Mino's travels include those of Niccolo Strozzi, carved in Rome, and Astorgio Manfredi in Naples. Additional portrait busts depict Luca Mini, Giovanni de' Medici, Rinaldo della Luna, and Ditiistanti Neroni.
