A Lapis Lazuli Medallion of Cosimo I de’ Medici

KARLA LANGEDIJK

A medallion of Grand Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici (Figure 1),¹ the only one in lapis lazuli among six surviving gems that bear his portrait, entered the Museum as part of the Milton Weil Collection, a gift of Ethel Weil Worgelt in 1938.² The identity of the sitter is ascertained by comparison with the medal by Pietro Paolo Galeotti (Figure 2), which served the gem-cutter as model. Galeotti’s medal cannot be dated before 1567 nor after 1569.³ The uniqueness of this gem made possible its identification in four inventories of collections of the Medici, the earliest 1588, the last 1628.

“Una testa del G. D. Cosimo di Lapislazzeri con ornamento quadro di ebano alto e largo ½ braccio” (a head of the Grand Duke Cosimo in lapis lazuli with ebony frame 7.25 cm. in both height and width)⁴

2. Ernst Kris, Catalogue of Postclassical Cameos in the Milton Weil Collection (Vienna, 1932) no. 25, fig. 25.
3. Galeotti made a set of 12 medals, using two different effigies of Cosimo for obverses. One of these effigies, after Domenico Poggiini, is dated 1567; the other, presumably by Galeotti himself and upon which the lapis lazuli is based, is undated, but since Cosimo is not referred to as Grand Duke, it cannot be later than September 1569. In January 1567 (common style), Galeotti received gold to cast the medals (Karl and Herman Walther Frey, Der literarische Nachlass Giorgio Vasari II [Munich, 1930] p. 288). Vasari mentions in 1568 that Galeotti did the set recently (Vasari-Milanesi 5, p. 390; 7, pp. 542–543). I. B. Supino, Il Medagliere Mediceo nel R. Museo Nazionale di Firenze (secoli XV–XVI) (Florence, 1899) nos. 385–399. Georg Habich, Die Medaillen der italienischen Renaissance (Stuttgart–Berlin, 1922) pl. lxxxii–lxxxv, gives Galeotti’s reverse mistakenely as by Domenico di Polo.
4. The braccio fiorentino = 58 cm.

FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2

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FIGURE 3
Anonymous, after 1569. Cosimo I de' Medici. Chalcedony, 3 × 2 cm. without frame, actual size. Museo degli Argenti, Florence (Soprintendenza alle Gallerie)

is listed in the inventory of Don Antonio’s possessions at the Casino di San Marco in Florence, compiled March 8, 1588. The gem reappears May 1621 in the estate of Don Antonio and is described as “Un bassorilievo in lapislazzoli con la testa del Granduca Cosimo alto ½ braccio.” On November 30 of the same year, it is listed among Don Antonio’s properties admitted into the grand-ducal Guardaroba: “Uno quadro in asse d’una testa del Duca Cosimo P° di lapislazzero di bassorilievo con adornamento debano alto ½ braccio” (a wooden panel with a head of the Duke Cosimo in lapis lazuli in bas-relief with a frame of ebony, 7.25 cm. high). It is mentioned again September 27, 1628, as acquired from the estate of Don Antonio: “Un quadrattino duna testa del Duca Cosimo P° di lapislazzero di bassorilievo con adornamento debano” (a small panel of a head of the Duke Cosimo I in lapis lazuli in bas-relief, with an ebony frame). It was consigned that day to Bastiano Bianchi Buonavita, the keeper of the Guardaroba, to be included among the treasures of the Tribuna of the Uffizi. What happened to the stone in the next three centuries eludes us for the moment. It was no longer listed in the inventory of the Tribuna of 1704, and may have left the grand-ducal collections by that time, perhaps as a gift.

The inventories provide interesting information concerning the mounting of the stone. Apparently it was fixed to a panel only slightly larger and furnished with a narrow ebony frame about half a centimeter wide. The blue stone must have been very striking against the dark ebony, an effect often achieved in Florentine furniture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Only one of the six cameos of Cosimo I has what might be a contemporary frame, in gold and enamel (Figure 3). The well-known large gem in agate by Giovanni Antonio de’ Rossi (Figure 4) was kept in a box together with other cameos.

Because of the completeness of the Florentine inventories, there is every reason to assume that this group of six cameos represents the complete production of gems with the likeness of Cosimo I, the New York gem alone having ever left Florence. We will quickly review these other cameos.

Apparently, the artists who cut the gems with Cosimo’s profile quite naturally turned to the existing medals for models. The same medal by Galeotti that served as model for the piece in New York was used for the larger cameo in chalcedony in the Museo degli Argenti in Florence (Figure 5). That the size of the medal did not necessarily determine the size of the cameo is proved also by the framed chalcedony piece in Florence (Figure 3), which copied a medal by Domenico Poggini (Figure 6). The inscription on the medal, giving Cosimo’s title of Grand Duke, provides the earliest date possible for the

5. Archivio di Stato, Florence, Guardaroba Medicea 156, c. 157 verso.
7. Guardaroba Medicea 375, c. 283 right.
8. Guardaroba Medicea 435, c. 152 right.

10. Inventory Gemme 1921, no. 114; Cristina Piacenti Aschengreen, Il Museo degli Argenti a Firenze, (Florence, 1967) no. 971.
12. Rev. in: · DE GALLIS · ET · TVRCIS · Winged Victory crowning Cosimo dressed in antique armor, enemy kneeling, Historia-Victoria writing. A. Armand, Les Médailleurs italiens des quinzième et seizième siècles I (Paris, 1889) p. 174, no. 3 (attr. to Cesare da Bagno); Habich, pl. lxxxi-1; Warburg Institute photo-list, British Museum 531, 607/46.
cameo: 1569. In these three instances of gems based upon medals, the gems are fairly exact though somewhat abbreviated copies. A rock crystal representing Cosimo as a beardless youth, made soon after his accession in 1537, cannot be regarded as the copy of a medal, although the head closely resembles another medal by Domenico di Polo.

This situation is reversed in the case of Giovanni Antonio de’ Rossi’s large cameo in agate (Figure 4), representing Cosimo and Eleonora of Toledo with their five sons, and Galeotti’s medal. We know that de’ Rossi worked at it from 1559 to 1562. Therefore,

13. Oval, 3.3 x 2.8 cm. Florence, Museo degli Argenti, Inv. Gemme 1921, no. 332; Piacenti Aschengreen, cat. no. 1189 (as Francesco I).

F I G U R E 4
Giovanni Antonio de’ Rossi, 1559–62. Cosimo I de’ Medici and Eleonora di Toledo with their sons. Agate, 18.5 x 16.5 cm. Museo degli Argenti, Florence (Soprintendenza alle Gallerie)

F I G U R E 5
Anonymous, after 1567. Cosimo I de’ Medici. Chalcedony, 6.9 x 5.3 cm. without frame. Museo degli Argenti, Florence (Soprintendenza alle Gallerie)

F I G U R E 6
Domenico Poggini, after 1569. Medal of Cosimo I de’ Medici. D. 7.8 cm., actual size (photo: Warburg Institute, London, copyright)
the medallist took his inspiration from the cameo. The agate family portrait represents the largest cameo cut since classical antiquity. The paragone, or contest with antiquity, always played a part in gem-cutting, especially in Cosimo’s time. A cameo in onyx in the Museo degli Argenti, representing in profile Eleonora and Cosimo with radiating crown facing one another, was based on an ancient model, of the type represented by no. 79 in the same museum.16

The choice of lapis lazuli for the gem in New York reflects in a special way this frame of mind that takes antiquity for measure. Significant in this respect is the appearance of a book closely connected with the artistic activities of the court of Francesco I de’ Medici, the Nova Reperta, a set of engravings made by Theodoor Galle and Johan Collaert after drawings by Giovanni Stradano. The date of its publication in Antwerp by Philip Galle,17 is unknown; Borghini does not mention it in his 1584 list of sets of engravings after Stradano.18 The engravings of the Nova Reperta illustrate features of modern times unknown to antiquity: inventions such as printing, horseshoes, eyeglasses and olive-pressing methods, as well as events such as the discovery of America.

I think that it is against this background that we should view the use of lapis lazuli for carving in Florence under Cosimo’s successor Francesco I. Pliny had written in Historia Naturalis (37.39) that lapis lazuli was useless for sculpture, because of its hard cores (“sappiri ... inutiles sculpturis intervenientibus crystallinis centris”). The relative infrequency of its use in glyptics throughout the centuries confirms this observation. Pliny’s text must, however, have been a challenge to Francesco de’ Medici, who was well aware of the origins of the Naturalia (the marvels of nature) and highly knowledgeable in the field of manufacturing the Artificialia (the marvels of art): witness the Studiolo in the Palazzo Vecchio as well as the Nova Reperta. In 1572 he inaugurated the artistic activities at the Casino di San Marco by installing there the Caroni brothers from Milan.20 Their workshop produced such masterpieces as the lapis lazuli vases in Vienna (early 1570s) and the chain-vase in Florence (1583), both made after designs of Francesco’s favorite architect, Bernardo Buontalenti.21 The working of lapis lazuli on this scale became and remained a Florentine specialty. Lapis lazuli vases were displayed among the showpieces of the Tribuna in the Uffizi.22 What a triumph, for the Medici prince, to be successful in a branch of art which had defeated the Ancients!

The workshop of the Casino di San Marco moved to the Uffizi in 1586. The mention of the New York gem at the Casino in 1588 suggests that it was made and simply remained there. In that case it would be logical to date it after 1572. Work in lapis lazuli was, however, already done for the Medici in the 1560s,23 so the possibility cannot be excluded that the stone was cut earlier, perhaps for Cosimo I himself as a trial example.

The only gem in lapis lazuli comparable in size to the Cosimo I in New York, though smaller, is the bust of the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria (1466–1560) in antique dress, 5 × 4.1 cm., including a small frame in gold and enamel, in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.24 As a gem in lapis lazuli, the portrait of Cosimo I de’ Medici is almost unique in sixteenth-century glyptics.


16. Piacenti Aschegreen, cat. no. 936. See also A. F. Gori, Museum Florentinum ... Gemmae antiquae tresauro medico et privatorum dactylotheosis Florentiae exhibita tab. CC, I (Florence, 1731) pls. 8–x, 14-x.


19. Sappirus = lapis lazuli, as both words were used in the twelfth century. Early sources indicate lapis lazuli only as sappirus, which in later sources means sapphire. For the terminology, see Miner and Edelstein, p. 84.


