

LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

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GIOVANNI BOLDINI

1842 Ferrara – Paris 1931

Bust of Francesco I d'Este, after Bernini

Brown and blue wash on paper; c.1890-1900.

Signed lower right: *Boldini*

455 x 304 mm

PROVENANCE: Private collection, Italy [until ca. 1985] – Thence by descent

Giovanni Boldini was born in Ferrara, and in 1862 went to Florence for six years to study and practise painting. He attended classes at the Academy of Fine Arts only infrequently but nevertheless came into contact there with a group of young Florentine painters known as the 'Macchiaioli'¹. Their influence is seen in Boldini's landscapes which show his spontaneous response to nature, although it is for his portraits that he became best known. Moving to London, he attained considerable success as a portraitist. From 1872 he lived in Paris, where in the late 19th century he became the city's most fashionable portrait painter, with a dashing style of painting which shows some Macchiaioli influence and a brio reminiscent of the work of younger artists.

Boldini held the work of the great sculptor and architect Bernini (1598-1680) in high regard. His admiration for Bernini almost certainly sprang from a spiritual rapprochement spontaneously triggered by a gift he received from the Uffizi in 1892 at the pinnacle of his international success. The museum had requested a self-portrait from him and in exchange he was offered a cast of Bernini's portrait bust of Leopold de' Medici.

Bernini's posthumous reputation was then at a turning point. While eighteenth-century opinion had attempted to discredit his name, branding him an 'unbridled corrupter of art', prominent late nineteenth-century art historians emphasized the revolutionary ingenuity and prodigious technical facility of the Baroque master. Bernini pushed the resources of marble sculpture to their extremity with his representation of yielding flesh and the textures of skin, making marble resemble a living organism. The inventiveness of his artistic vision undoubtedly appealed strongly to Boldini, whose own art focused on elegance, theatricality and originality.

Bernini's *Portrait Bust of Francesco I d'Este* [Fig. 1] is today housed at the Palazzo dei Musei in Modena, seat of the Galleria Estense. The transferral of the ducal collections to the Palazzo dei Musei was overseen by Adolfo Venturi (1856-1941), one of Italy's most celebrated art historians. Venturi was also the first

¹ The 'Macchiaioli' were a group of young Italian painters active in Tuscany in the second half of the nineteenth century, who, breaking with the antiquated conventions taught by the Italian academies of art, did much of their painting outdoors in order to capture natural light, shade and colour.

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curator of the Galleria Estense.² He singled out the “grand and imposing” portrait bust from other important objects in the collection, reproducing it as the frontispiece to his catalogue, *La Regia Galleria Estense in Modena* (Modena, 1882) [Fig. 2].³

Francesco I d’Este (1610-58) became reigning Duke of Modena and Reggio in 1629 [Fig. 2]. He was perhaps the most influential of all Modenese rulers. A popular patron of the arts, he significantly shaped and enlarged the holdings of the Galleria Estense. Among important additions were works by leading artists of the period. Through him, the ducal collection advanced to be one of the finest and most richly endowed art collections in Europe.

In the present watercolour Boldini’s carefully considered choice of a reduced palette was calculated to highlight the extraordinary modernity of his artistic approach. Rapid, brown-gold brushstrokes elegantly convey the swirl and swagger of free-floating drapery over and around the Duke’s left arm, yet motion itself seems frozen in time. Images of arrested motion recur in Boldini’s work – he used them as a compositional device to “lighten” forms and lend them grace and vivacity. The Duke’s averted head is shown in profile, while the *contrapposto* motion of his shoulders creates a dramatic torsion. This is echoed in the sharp folds of the mantle, the gleam of the taut drapery over the truncated chest and the fierce strokes of dark wash in the background.

We wish to thank Francesca Dini for her invaluable assistance with the cataloguing of this drawing. She has confirmed the authenticity of the work. It has been allocated the registration number 002679.

² The collections of the House of Este [la Regia Galleria Estense] were housed in the historic rooms of the ducal palace in Modena until 1879, when they were transferred to a palace erected in the eighteenth century under Francesco III. The building is now known as the Palazzo dei Musei.

³ A visit by Boldini to Modena is not documented but he had ample opportunity to visit the city on his trips to Bologna, for example in October 1893, when he may have wished to satisfy his curiosity about the transferral of the Galleria Regia Estense to its new location in the Palazzo dei Musei.

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Fig. 1: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Portrait Bust of Francesco I d'Este*, 1651, marble, 106 x 98 x 50 cm. Galleria Estense, Modena



Fig. 2: Adolfo Venturi, frontispiece to *La Regia Galleria Estense in Modena*, Modena, 1882.



Fig. 3: Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, *Portrait of Francesco I d'Este*, 1638-9, oil on canvas, 68 x 51 cm. Galleria Estense, Modena