Raphael, Cellini & A Renaissance Banker

The Patronage of Bindo Altoviti

Edited by Alan Chong, Donatella Pagazzano, Dimitrios Zikos

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ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

BOSTON
Published in conjunction with the exhibition held at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, 8 October 2003–12 January 2004.

Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker: The Patronage of Bindo Altoviti is a publication and exhibition organized by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in collaboration with the Museo Nazionale del Bargello (Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Fiorentino).

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The exhibition and catalogue have been made possible by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Sponsored by the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Soprintendenza Speciale per il Polo Museale Fiorentino, and FIRENZE MUSEI.

Additional funding in Boston has been provided by UBS, the global financial services firm.

An indemnity has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

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ISBN 0-914460-20-9

Produced by Museum Publishing Partners
Designer: Carl Zahn, Editor: Cynthia Pervis

Translations into English are by: Mario Perce, Dimitrios Zikos, Giovanna de Appollonia, Alan Chong, Valentine Talian, Janet Cocc-Rearick

Type set in Monotype Bembo and Poetica by Carl Zahn and Frances Pretti-Fazio

Contents

Lenders, vi
Foreword, vii
Acknowledgments, ix
Introduction, xi
Chronology, xix

Il Gran Bindo Huomo Raro e Singolare: The Life of Bindo Altoviti
Donatella Pegazzano 3

Bindo Altoviti, Renaissance Banker and Papal Financier
Melissa Meriam Bullard 21

A Banker as Patron
Donatella Pegazzano 39

Raphael's Portrait of Bindo Altoviti
David Alan Brown 93

Desire and Gravity in Bindo's Portraits
Jodi Cranston 115

Benvenuto Cellini's Bindo Altoviti and His Predecessors
Dimitrios Zikos 133

Faenza Maiolica Services of the 1520s for the Florentine Nobility
Timothy Wilson 175

Vasari’s Decorations for Bindo Altoviti's Palazzo and Villa
Donatella Pegazzano 187

Bindo Altoviti and Music
Jane A. Bernstein 207

Italy, Germany, America: The Migration of a Raphael Portrait
Jane Van Nimmen 214

The Afterlife of Cellini's Bust of Bindo Altoviti
Alan Chong 237

Decoration and Preservation: The History of the Frescoes and Stucchi from Palazzo Altoviti
Paola Nicita Misiani 265

Florentine Fuoresiti at the Time of Bindo Altoviti
Paolo Simoncelli 285

Portraits of Florentine Exiles
Philippe Costamagna 329

Catalogue of works associated with Bindo Altoviti

Bindo Altoviti's Ancient Sculpture
Donatella Pegazzano 352

Ancient sculpture, 365
Works owned or commissioned by Bindo Altoviti, 375
Associated objects, 437
Works incorrectly connected with Bindo Altoviti, 445

Documents, 446

Appendices

Dilectus filius bindus de altovitis: The Farnese and Bindo Altoviti
Antonio Ernesto Denunzio 451

Between Bindo Altoviti and Cosimo I: Ariosto Serirossi, Medici Ambassador in Rome
Emanuela Ferrari 456

Bibliography, 462
Index, 481
Between Bindo Altoviti and Cosimo I: Averardo Serristori, Medici Ambassador in Rome

EMANUELA TIRRETTI

As much as Your Excellency writes to me about observing the Florentines, strenuous efforts are not needed to persuade me, since this business is as dear to my heart as it is to yours. Nonetheless, being universally despised by them, I can penetrate their secrets only with difficulty. Nevertheless I will do what I can, and you can be certain of knowing what will come of it in my communications, without any reservations whatsoever.

In this letter of 21 March 1535, Averardo di Antonio Serristori (1497–1566), the Medici ambassador in Rome, explained to Cosimo I his role as a spy on the Florentine exiles in the wake of Cosimo’s victory over the fiorentini in the War of Siena. A member of a Florentine aristocratic family long close to the Medici, Averardo Serristori served three terms as ambassador to Rome: 1541–45, 1547–55, and 1561–69. Apart from his success in previous assignments, Averardo was well qualified to be ambassador when he first arrived in Rome in 1541. Although Pope Paul III was hostile to the Medici, Averardo’s father, Antonio, had been a friend of both the pope and Piero Ridolfi, the father of Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi, a leader of the political exiles in Rome.

Moreover, Averardo understood the Florentine merchant community in Rome, since he had been apprenticed to his family’s silk and gold firms, and his father and uncle had ties to some of the most important Florentine merchant-bankers in Rome.

Averardo Serristori was an especially effective ambassador because he became an intimate participant in the intellectual and artistic circles in Rome. His friendships with leading humanists and patrons allowed him to monitor the activities of both the papacy and the community of Florentines. Medici ambassadors of the sixteenth century were widely noted for their culture and education, and Averardo was no exception. In the 1540s, his ties to the courts of Cardinal Ridolfi and Cardinal Alessandro Farnese facilitated his spying on the Florentine exiles, who were generally opposed to Medici rule. Averardo also frequented the papal Curia to promote the clerical career of his son Bartolomeo, who he hoped would be created cardinal. His intimacy with Farnese circles was considered so dangerous by Cosimo I, who accused him of being “too free with the papal entourage” (troppo largo con i papali), that the embassy secretary, Bartolomeo Concini, was charged with keeping an eye on Averardo himself. When in 1545 the duke re-assigned Averardo as ambassador to Charles V in Germany, he was replaced in Rome by Alessandro del Caccia, whom the pope did not favor. Because Averardo had been so close to the Farnese, he was sent back to Rome when del Caccia was recalled because of a quarrel between Cosimo and the pope concerning the Dominican order in Florence.

A reconciliation between Cosimo and the moderate political exiles took place only after the Battle of Montemurro (31 July–2 August 1537), a defeat that had destroyed the hopes of the exiles. However, Cosimo’s relations with Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi were still strained, and Averardo therefore focused his attention on the cardinal, as well as on the unyielding Roberto and Piero Strozzi. Far from accepting defeat, the cardinal continued a tenacious struggle consisting only of diplomatic intrigue, but this was no less annoying to the duke. Ridolfi’s aim was to disgrace Cosimo I in the eyes of the emperor. Cleverly exploiting the ill will of others, he succeeded in getting the pope and the imperial ambassador himself to help him in his endeavors.

Cardinal Ridolfi gathered around him a circle of talented artists and intellectuals that included Michelangelo, Annibale Caro, and the printer Francesco Priscanese. Priscanese was an especially important figure in this group, in part due to his close ties with the cardinal, which Pietro Aretino tried to exploit. Priscanese was connected with the writer Claudio Tolomei, but above all with Donato Giannotti and Pier Vettori. Giannotti, for example, set the second Dialogo di I giorni de’ Danti (1571) in the Inferno and Purgatorio between Michelangelo, Luigi del Riccio, and Antonio Petrucci in Priscanese’s house. A friend of Averardo Serristori, Priscanese was a native of Pieve a Presciano (a village near Montauro, Arezzo), where the Serristori family possessed land. Averardo gave Priscanese a large number of gifts beginning in July 1541, and Priscanese in turn helped Averardo’s son Bartolomeo. Priscanese held republican sentiments, and he took part in the
The cultural lineage of the Academia della Virtù was described in a letter Raphael and Baldesar Castiglione wrote to Leo X. Among those who took part in the academy in Rome between 1541 and 1545 were Tolomei, Molza, Cesano, and Giovio, who had all enlivened both the Florentine and Roman circles of Ippolito de' Medici. It should also be stressed that Ippolito first founded an academy called Academia della Virtù:

In Rome the Academia della Virtù was founded under the magnanimous authority of Ippolito Medici Grand Cardinal; this enterprise did not have a motto because these famous academies, splendor of our century, argued about how virtù should be depicted; in the meantime the same generous Cardinal died, and no further attempts were made, since some were of the opinion that virtù had died with the death of this prelate, a true contemporary Maccenas of virtuosi.

Giovio remarked on the ideal continuity between the patronage of Ippolito and that of Alessandro Farnese: "I then exhort master Giorgio Vasari of Arezzo to make his art to the same level, with the promise he will find that [the Cardinal Farnese] is no less generous than the Cardinal de' Medici." These academies therefore encompassed a group of relationships, rather than the cultural program of one individual. Moreover, these academies promoted friendships, as well as the prestige that such connections could bring.

Averardo Serristori played a crucial role as a mediator between Cosimo and Paul III in a dispute over ecclesiastical titles in 1544. Bindo Altoviti's bank (with 8000 scudi) and a consortium of Florentine bankers made up by Cavalcanti, Giraldi, and della Stufa (9000 scudi) handled the transactions. Among the other urgent issues the ambassador was concerned with in the mid-1540s was the control of the alum mines of the Appia and the argument between Paul III and Cosimo about Benedetto Accolti, cardinal of Ravenna, who was portrayed by Benedetto Cellini. Averardo's handling of this last dispute gained him the respect and friendship of the cardinal.

When he returned to Rome in 1547, Averardo found a much calmer political situation. Cosimo I no longer feared the Farnese, having overcome most of his quarrels with Paul III. The election of Julius III in 1550, achieved in part through Averardo's diplomacy-
Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker: The Patronage of Bindo Altoviti

organized by the Nation's consul to celebrate Saint John's Day, at which time he seized the letter from the king, which requested financial assistance from the Florentine merchant-bankers. In spite of requests from the French ambassador that Serriorti be replaced, and the protests lodged by the anti-Medicians (led by Giovanni Battista Alloviti), Julius III remained neutral, and relations between the pope and the ambassador soon improved. On this occasion Cosimo decided to retain the man he had called his protégé during the negotiations started by Julius III in June 1533 to "arrange the affairs of Sienna" and granted Averardo great autonomy.

Following the confiscation of Bindo's Tuscan holdings in 1534, Averardo made great efforts to seize the banker's Roman properties as well. However, Julius III was a friend of Bindo and refused to allow the confiscation. By March 1535, the situation had become very difficult for the ambassador: "I find myself here engulfed by that hatred which Your Excellency knows, and even more, that if I leave my post, God forbid, it will be with much danger and suspicion." In 1535, Cosimo I recalled Averardo to Florence because the ambassador had been accused of being involved in the murder of Giovan Francesco Giungi, one of the most active Florentine political exiles. However, in September 1536, Averardo returned to Rome, where he died in 1569, a few months before Pius V made Cosimo grand duke of Tuscany.

This essay is a part of a study of the patronage of Averardo Serriorti that will be published shortly. I am grateful to Vanna Arrighi, Mario Bevilacqua, and Dimitrios Zikes for their valuable advice.

1. ASF, Med Princ, 3273, fol. 913 bis.
2. Quanto a quello che l'Esellenza Vostra mi scrive dell'osservare i fiorentini, non è bisogno che la duri fatica in persuadercioco, per esserni questo negozio a cuore parimenti che a lei. Non di meno sendo io così universalmente odito da loro, difficilmente posso penetrare i segreti loro. Tuttavia farò quello che potrò et sì renda certa d'haver a sapere quanto verrà sempre in mia notizia senza riserve alcuna, ASF, Med Princ, 3273, fol. 915 bis.
3. The diplomatic career of Averardo Serriorti is similar to that of other members of the Florentine aristocracy who supported the Medici before 1530 (for example, the Niccolini, Guicciardini, and Rucellai), and thus "anticipated the court before in
creation.” (Litchfield 1986, p. 50). For Serristori’s family relationships with the Medici, see Tognetti 2003, pp. 139–33.

3. In 1537 Serristori was an extraordinary ambassador to Charles V; in 1538 he was sent to Contino to supervise building of the fortifications at Arezzo and Bargo Sansepolcro (required because of the tensions with the papacy resulting from Ottavio Farnese’s war against the city of Camerino); in 1539–40 he was captain of Prizzano; in 1540 Cosimo I made him a senator.


5. Averardo refers to the friendship between his father and Piero Ridolfi in a letter of 18 April 1542, quoted in Ferrai 1882, p. 176. Averardo also recalled the familiarity between his father and Paul III, from the year when Paul was at the court of Piero de’ Medici; Serristori 1853, p. 151 (22 May 1543).

6. The election of Paul III did not displace Florentine financiers from their crucial role in the finances of the papacy. The importance of the firms of Averardo di Salvestro Serristori’s sons has been pointed out by Tognetti 2003, pp. 154–66. The firm’s books testify to commercial or financial relations with many Florentine banker families in Rome in the 1520s: ASF, Serristori, Famiglia, 711–14. Averardo’s sister married the banker Giovanni Pandolfini. In 1536 his second cousin, Costanza di Giovanni di Battista Serristori, married Alamanno di Jacopo Salvati, the eldest brother of the cardinals Giovanni and Bernardo Salvati.

Averardo also had associations in his youth with the papal court, especially during the reign of Clement VII. He was a friend of the Florentine Giovanni Bandini in Rome: ASF, Serristori, Famiglia, 711. There were also financial connections between Averardo’s cousin, Giovani Battista di Francesco di Averardo Serristori and the court of Clement VII; ibid., 610.


8. Born in 1523, he was designated bishop of Todi in 1551. He died in Rome in 1555.


10. ASF, Med Princ, 1264, fol. 519. Cosimo I frequently recalled the ambassador.


15. Roberto Ridolfi, Opuscoli di storia letteraria e di erudizione (Florence, 1942), p. 112.


17. Arezzo and Priscianese met in Venice, where Francesco had gone to print his works Della lingua romana et De primis principis della lingua romanica; Arezzo 1928, vol. 1, letter 106, p. 352 note. At a dinner at Tittian’s house, Priscianese met Jacopo Nardi, a poet, and Jacopo Sansovino; G. Padovani, Monumenti del Rinascimento Veneziano (Padua, 1928), pp. 77–74.


20. Strummann 1932: Deocelecio Redig de Campos, ed., Dialoghi di Donato Giannetti de’ signori che Dante Consumò nel cerere l’Inferno e il purgatorio (Florence, 1939). Redig de Campos 1938, p. 168, thought that Priscianese was the printer chosen for the edition of the Canzoniere by Michelangelo, but Giannetti and del Riccio had been engaged on that work since 1543. For Petretti, see: Roberto Ridolfi, Antonio Prisco umanista e bibilografo del Cinquecento (Florence, 1941); Bratt 1983, pp. 91–95.

21. The first acquisitions were made by Averardo’s uncle, Lorenzo, beginning in 1498: ASF, Serristori, Famiglia, 735. Before he arrived in Rome in 1540, he had been rector of the Collegiata di Fighine Valdarno. For Priscianese’s relations with Camillo Tolomei, Giovambattista Alemani, and Paolo del Rosso, see Simocellii 1990, p. 33.

22. ASF, Serristori, Famiglia, 733.

23. Ibid. Priscianese found someone to produce a copy of a codex for Averardo’s son, Bartolomeo, and also procured other books to teach the young prelate who had come with his father to Rome.


25. ASF, Serristori, Famiglia, 733 (February 1543).


27. On 8 July 1542, Serristori wrote to Cosimo I, “Con la presente mandò a V.E. la bolla del Concilio la quale per ancora non è stata pubblicata, ma per essere amico di quello che Pia stampata [Blanda], mi ha dato questa anchora che ebbi espresso comandamento di non mostrarla né darla a persona alcuna.” (With the present letter, I send to Your Excellency the bull of the Council which is not yet promulgat-
Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker: The Banquet of Bindo Altoviti

ed. but because I am a friend of the printer [Blade], he has given it to me, although I have been expressly ordered not to show nor give it to anyone.) ASF, Med Princ, 3204, fol. 452.


29. Documented participants include Iacopo Vignola and Francesco Paciotto, and the painter/architect Antonio da Sangallo the Younger and Iacopo Meldrichino. Pagliara 1986, p. 72, note 24; Daly Davis 1989, pp. 188-89.

On the academy, see: Daly Davis 1989; Frédérique Lemerle, ed., Les anatomistes de Guillaume Philibert sur le De Architectura de Vitruvio, Livres I à IV (Paris, 2000), pp. 14-17; Brothers 2001, Günther 2002, pp. 120-27. For example, Paolo Giovio relied on members of the academy to develop his Vitruvian interests, exactly when he was placing ancient ruins in his Museo; Maffei 1900, pp. 132. Guillaume Philibert argued with Giovio about the truth in Vitruvius; Daly Davis 1989, p. 98.


31. On Ippolito, see Michele D'Esco, Il Cardinale Ippolito de'Medici (Telfizzi, 1997). Ippolito was in Florence between July 1524 and May 1527. The importance of the young Ippolito for the study of Vitruvius in these years in Florence is the subject of a forthcoming article by the author.


For the relief of the villa of Poggio a Caiano: ASF, Med Princ, 3204, fol. 452; Serristori to Cosimo I, from Camerino, on 22 October 1541.

On Cervini's villa at Vivo d'Oltira (Siena), designed by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger (together with the cardinal), see Rusci 2002, pp. 175-76.


34. Daly Davis 1994, p. 98; Maffei 1900, p. 132.

35. "In Roma fu fondata l'Accademia della Virtù sotto la magnanimità autorità d'Hippolito Medici gran Cardinale: questa impresa fu senza motivo perché fra quei famosi accademici, splendor di questo nostro secolo, fu contrasto in qual veglia si dovesse dipingere la virtù, in quel mezzo venne lo stesso generoso Cardinale a morire, non si cercò altro perché volesse alcuni che la virtù fosse morta per la morte di quel prelato vero mecenato di virtuosi a noti giorni." Registrazione di Luca Contile sopra le proprietà dei Farnese con particolari de gli accademici affiliati e con interpretazioni e correzioni (Pavia, 1574), p. 47, quoted in Daly Davis 1989, p. 197, note 31; Zimmerman 1995, p. 115.


37. The bank of Bindo Altoviti was involved in the first payment (4 July 1544), and the group of Florentine bankers in the following (4 August 1544): ASF, Serristori, Famiglia, 733. The negotiations concerning the decision about the size and the formalities of the tithes payment began in October 1543; the letters to ASF, Med Princ, 3205 and 3206, certify to the complex negotiations between Cardinal Ricci and the ambassador. About the tithes payments of 1538 and 1540, see Spini 1980, pp. 160, 176, 191.

38. Lupo Gentile 1906, pp. 87-89.


40. As indicated by correspondence: ASF, Carte Accolti, 2, 11, 16-17; ASF, Serristori, Famiglia, 31-34.


42. Serristori 1851, p. 257; Pastor 1955, vol. 6, p. 22.

43. After all it was a very inconstant situation in December 1550, Averardo, on behalf of the duke, negotiated with the Nation's merchant-bankers about the financial matters connected with the succession of the cardinal of Ravenna: ASF, Med Princ, 3269, fol. 334. In 1552, at the festival of Candelora, the governor of the Pietà's brotherhood could not find anyone willing to take the holy symbol and give it to Serristori. Only after some negotiations and compromises were Francesco Pandolfini and Francesco Ubaldini available; Polverai Fosi 1994, p. 415. Moreover, in spring of that year, the strict su-
veillance of Paolo del Rosso begin; see Simoncelli 1990, p. 74.


45. Although letters from Averardo to Cosimo in the early 1550s show indications of interest in ancient Roman marbles, it was only after 1560 that Serristori’s help became important for acquiring objects for the ducal collections; Cristofani 1979, p. 8.

46. Daly Davis 1989, p. 189.

47. ASF, Med Princ. 3272, fol. 704; quoted in Cristofani 1979, p. 12. Both Vasari and Cellini wrote about the discovery of the Chimera. As letters addressed to Bernardino Maffei testify, Pier-Vettori was also interested in the iconography of the Chimera; Carrara 1969, p. 526.

48. The matters dealt with were various; for example, the demand of exemption from the title’s payment that Averardo showed the duke on behalf of Giov. Battista Galletti (Julius III’s steward and altar boy); ASF, Med Princ. 3269, fol. 527.


50. Within the Florentine community, Serristori could count on his friendship with Pier Antonio Bandini, Roberto Ubaldini (his son Camillo worked in his bank), and Giovanni Pandolfini (his brother-in-law and moreover “provveditore del Consolato” in 1554). He had also had friendly relations with Francesco Del Nero; ASF, Med Princ. 3273, fol. 519.

51. Ibid., 3272, fol. 512 (1 February 1554).

52. Carracci 1902, p. 278. Polverini Fossi 1904, pp. 465–9. Although in the middle of July, Serristori’s stay in Rome seemed to have come to an end, on 31 July, Baldovino del Monte, the pope’s brother, invited him to lunch at the Villa Giulia. In August, Serristori boasted to Cosimo I of being “tenuto dal papal sempre per buon rispetto, all’eser conosciuta la dimostrazione di lunga mano avanti il suo pontificato.” ASF, Med Princ. 3273, fol. 572.

53. With regard to the letter of the French king, Cosimo believed Serristori’s version of the event, in which he said he had not snatched the letter from the consul and reported he had been unfairly assailed (ASF, Med Princ. 3273, fol. 425). The original of Cosimo’s proxy concerning Averardo and the negotiations that took place in June 1553 (“accomodare le cose di Sicia”) is in ASF, Serristori, Famiglia, 305.

54. Ibid., 3273, fos. 304, 309 (30 May 1554).

55. “Io ti trovo qui con quell’udito a dozio che l’E.V. si et poi ancora in modo che vacando la sede, che il Dio non voglia, stare con molto pericolo et sospetto...” Ibid., 3273, fol. 915 bis.