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Conservation of Famous Medici Bust Reveals Original Colors and Startling Naturalism; Sculpture Back on View at National Gallery of Art, Washington July 28, 2006



Image of bust before and after conservation treatment

Florentine 15th or 16th century, probably after a model by Andrea del Verrocchio and Orsino Benintendi

Lorenzo de' Medici, 1478/1521

painted terracotta, 65.8 x 59.1 x 32.7 cm (25 7/8 x 23 1/4 x 12 7/8 in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1943.4.92

National Gallery of Art, Washington

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Washington, DC—The National Gallery of Art's terracotta bust of Lorenzo de' Medici, known as Lorenzo the Magnificent when he ruled 15th-century Florence, will be returned to public view after undergoing a remarkable transformation. Research begun more

than ten years ago by Gallery conservators and curators led to a painstaking conservation treatment over the past two years, which has revealed vibrant shades of red, dark purple, and flesh tones in the bust. These colors had been buried beneath layers of dirt and over-paint that had left the sculpture a monochromatic brown. The research also resulted several years ago in an attribution change for the bust, from Andrea del Verrocchio to a Florentine Renaissance artist based on a Verrocchio model. *Lorenzo de' Medici* (15th or 16th century) will be back on view in the Italian galleries on the Main Floor, West Building, beginning July 28, 2006.

"This terracotta sculpture is one of the great treasures of the National Gallery of Art," said Earl A. Powell III, director National Gallery of Art. "Its charisma and historic importance have made it the most requested work in the sculpture collection for reproduction. We are excited to be able to present this bust to the public in the wonderful condition brought to light through the dedicated effort of the Gallery's conservation department."

Among the features revealed by the cleaning and conservation effort are the carefully rendered and lifelike facial details of the bust. Lorenzo's cheeks and lips have rosy pink touches, his eyebrows are dark, and there are delicate traces of beard stubble painted around his mouth. All of these were hidden, and in fact preserved, by the layers of dirt and over-paint that built up over the centuries. The bust's garments, which had appeared a somber blue and brown, now consist of a purple-blue tunic and brilliant red headdress, with the same red on a scarf-like strip of cloth encircling the neck. The strip had been part of the headdress until a connecting section on Lorenzo's right broke off at an unknown date. An old plaster repair in the form of an odd-shaped knob on Lorenzo's right shoulder, based on a misunderstanding of the headdress, has been removed. Other old repairs discovered by the Gallery's conservators include the completion in plaster of the back and lower parts of the arms. These plaster sections, added at an unknown date between the mid-16th and early 19th centuries, either as alterations or repairs of damage, have been preserved. Selective in-painting in a few areas of paint loss has helped to unify the surface.

The conservation also confirmed that the National Gallery bust was the model for a small portrait of Lorenzo made in Agnolo Bronzino's workshop in Florence in the early

1550s. Among the many similarities evident earlier, the cleaning revealed a white collar painted above Lorenzo's tunic that is similar to the collar in the painting. The conservation process also exposed unexpected hints of a fur lining on Lorenzo's tunic, indicated by freely applied white brushstrokes along its front closure and sleeves.

The treatment of the Lorenzo bust is part of an effort begun more than ten years ago by the National Gallery's department of object conservation, to study the Renaissance painted terracotta sculptures in the collection and to clean them in cases where substantial elements of their original appearance can be recovered without sacrificing important elements of their later history. The treatment of the Lorenzo bust was carried out by Michael Belman, a Gallery Mellon Fellow in object conservation, under the direction of Shelley Sturman, head of object conservation, National Gallery of Art. Preparations for the work began in 1996, in connection with a curatorial and conservation colloquy sponsored by the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art. The scholars focused on the Lorenzo bust and a terracotta bust of Lorenzo's brother, Giuliano de' Medici. Both busts at the time were attributed to a favorite Medici sculptor, Andrea del Verrocchio (c. 1435-1488).

One result of the colloquy was a 1997 attribution change for the Lorenzo bust. It is now believed to be the creation of an unknown Florentine artist probably working in the first third of the 16th century, based upon a wax model made by Orsino Benintendi under Verrocchio's guidance. Benintendi, a specialist in wax images, and Verrocchio had been commissioned to make wax portrait statues, none of which have survived, to celebrate Lorenzo's escape from an assassination attempt by the Pazzi family in 1478. These wax images were placed in churches throughout Florence and one version was dressed in the very garments Lorenzo was wearing on the day he was attacked. Peculiarities in the headdress of the Lorenzo bust suggest that it may be a replica of this specific, late 15th-century wax portrait.

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit www.nga.gov/renovation (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and on Twitter at twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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