

Louise Wheeler

‘His Bizarre and Fantastic Brain’: The Secret Life of Pontormo

Despite being included in Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*, and for being the teacher of Agnolo Bronzino, Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557) has been eclipsed in the grand narrative of art history.

Pontormo, *Deposition of Christ*, 1525/26-1528, oil on wood, 315 x 192 cm, Santa Felicità, Capella Capponi, Florence.

<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/jacopo-da-pontormo-the-deposition>

The *Deposition of Christ* by the Florentine painter Pontormo is arguably his most recognisable work, with the exception of his equally luminescent and subtly powerful *The Visitation*, 1528-29, which captures the emotional meeting of Mary and Elisabeth, both pregnant with Christ and John the Baptist respectively. In both paintings, Pontormo conveys emotional intensity by his distinctive and unusual handling of colour, with a preference for sharp pinks, mellow turquoise blues, and a bold assertion of cadmium orange; these colours nonetheless coalesce into a soft symphony of complex movement. Indeed, it is these works

that have differentiated Pontormo as a Mannerist *par excellence*. Mannerism has been perceived as a form of anti-classicism, a distortion or exaggeration of the naturalistic impulse of the Renaissance. Corresponding with the beginning of Mannerism was the elevation of the identity of the artist from that of a craftsman, towards an individual capable of transmitting new, independent ideas; in this respect the period has been linked to Modernism, with its concept of the artist as a creator forging their own unique path. Pontormo too has been seen in this sense as 'modern', and his *Deposition* in particular suggests the work of such Modernists as Tamara de Lempicka, for the similarity in the concentration of colour through clothing, and the idealisation of the human form. If this comparison can be extended further, it can be argued that Pontormo and de Lempicka emphasise the human figure through their evident passion for the properties of cloth, which both artists express in a refined control of paint combined with a respect for material texture. The bodies they represent are thus dominated by their clothing, which in turn evokes through concealment, creating a paradoxical relationship between the overt physicality of the human form, with its hidden mystery. Pontormo's *Deposition of Christ* enacts this paradox of body with cloth, seen particularly by the lower centre figure balancing Christ in an unconvincing manner, (in keeping with the exaggerated style of Mannerism) of whom wears a vividly pink tunic; on first glance it could be mistaken for skin. Similarly, the female figure floating above Mary embodies a tightly green dress, so at odds with the folds of drapery below her. In this, the suggested outlines of bodies concealed by clothing seek to highlight the vulnerable nakedness of Christ further, to assert that it is his body to which the viewer must pay reverence.

That Pontormo's art is an art of controlled suggestion can be seen in his fresco cycle of Christ's Passion, executed for the cloister of Certosa del Galluzzo in 1523-25. In 1523, Pontormo escaped to the monastery outside of Florence from the plague that was spreading in the city; the purpose of his fresco cycle was thus to prepare the monks for prayer, in an aid to devotion. The present ruinous state of the frescoes is lamentable, yet affords the opportunity to see these works as visionary fragments, simultaneously communicating and concealing, with their transitions between abstracted shapes of colour contrasted against sharp details such as Christ's face, or the hands of the woman in the lower right of the *Lamentation*, her face barely distinguished by her head-covering as she looks away from the harrowing scene.

Pontormo, *Christ Standing Before Pilate*, 1523-25, Fresco, 300 x 292 cm, displayed in the chapterhouse of Certosa del Galluzzo, Florence. Image from ARTSTOR.

https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/#/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_1039778998

Pontormo, *Lamentation*, 1523-25, Fresco, 300 x 292 cm, displayed in the chapterhouse of Certosa del Galluzzo, Florence. Image from ARTSTOR.

It has been noted that Vasari, in his *Life* of Pontormo advocated an influence to the prints of Albrecht Dürer in his fresco cycle at Certosa del Galluzzo. Vasari accredits this influence as Pontormo's attempt to please the Florentine craftsmen who were enamoured with the prints of Dürer; Vasari continued that the influence of Dürer upon Pontormo's style was detrimental in comparison with his earlier works. However, Pontormo's changes in style, evident in the contrast of his works, suggests an artist intent to explore the possibilities of form. Indeed, Vasari also conveys Pontormo as a solitary genius, hidden away and creating almost as if for himself. Vasari's rhetoric of mythologizing the artist into a superhuman creator is succinctly expressed in his statements concerning the figures of the angel and Mary of Pontormo's *Annunciation*:

'But they are both so contorted that they demonstrate that, as I said, his bizarre and fantastic brain never rested content with anything; and so as to do this work in his own way, and allow no one to be a nuisance to him, he would never, when he was busy on it, want even the patron himself to see it.'

Giorgio Vasari, *Life of Jacopo Pontormo* (translated by George Bull).

Pontormo, *Annunciation*, 1527-28, Fresco, 368 x 168 cm, Santa Felicità, Capella Capponi, Florence. Image from ARTSTOR.

An earlier transition in Pontormo's style from the works in the Capponi Chapel and the frescoes of Certosa del Galluzzo, can be seen in his *Vertumnus and Pomona*, a majestic fresco commissioned by Giulio de' Medici for the Medici villa in Poggio a Caiano, and painted by Pontormo between 1519-21. The fresco has thus been interpreted as an allegory of the strength and constancy of Medici rule. The four figures depicted seated at the lowest edge each symbolise a god and a season: from left to right are portrayed 'Winter' as the old man Vertumnus; the younger man is 'Autumn' and also Saturn; the goddess Diana is 'Spring', with the remaining figure personifying 'Summer' as the goddess Venus. In capturing the revolution of the changing seasons, Pontormo embodied the humanist ideal of man at the centre of all nature, ultimately channelling the world around him and his experience of it. Pontormo's work as an artist escapes definition by his many developments of style, which may be why his work is the more captivating to explore.

Pontormo, *Vertumnus and Pomona*, 1519-1521, Fresco, 461 x 990 cm, Villa Medicea, Poggio a Caiano. Image from ARTSTOR.

https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.st-andrews.ac.uk/#/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_10310197806

Bibliography

Krystof, Doris. *Pontormo*. Masters of Italian Art Series. Köln: Könemann, 1998.

Vasari, Giorgio. 'Life of Jacopo Pontormo.' In *Lives of the Artists: Volume II*. Translated by George Bull, London: Penguin Books, 1987, pp.235-272.

Wyld, Helen. 'Medici Tapestries by Bronzino and Pontormo.' *The Burlington Magazine* 157, no.1352 (November 2015): 807-809.