

SCIPIONE PULZONE

(Gaeta 1544 - Rome 1598)

Portrait of Bianca Capello (1548 - 1587)

oil on canvas
121 x 86.5 cm (47³/₈ x 34 in)

THIS STRIKING THREE-QUARTER-LENGTH portrait most likely depicts Bianca Capello, the second wife of Grand Duke Francesco de' Medici (1541-1587). Sartorially elegant, she rests her right arm on a wooden chair, whilst in her left hand she holds a fringed white handkerchief embroidered with small tassels. Her full dress is intricately stitched with an elaborate repeating floral motif and the hems are lined with pearls and other jewels. Her sleeves are cream with gold stitching, and she wears a choker and two long strings of pearls around her neck. The sitter's hair is simply braided with a long delicate blackwork embroidered headdress flowing out behind. Tucked into her breast is a red flower, possibly signifying her noble ancestry.

Previously thought to be by Alessandro Allori (1535-1607), the present work is now attributed to the Roman artist Scipione Pulzone (1544-1598). There is an almost identical portrait of Bianca Capello by Pulzone, held in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (fig. 1).

Bianca Capello de' Medici (1548-1587) was a Venetian noblewoman, famed for her great beauty and intellect. At the age of seventeen she eloped with and married Piero Buonaventura, an impoverished Florentine suitor. The couple escaped to Florence where Bianca attracted the attention of Francesco de' Medici, the eldest son of Cosimo I, the Grand Duke of Tuscany (1519-1574). Although he was married at the time to Johanna (1547-1578), a daughter of Emperor Ferdinand of Austria (1503-1564), Bianca became his mistress and Piero was employed in the Florentine public office, though he was later murdered in a street attack. When Johanna died in 1578, Bianca and Francesco, now Grand Duke of Tuscany, were married a few days later. In somewhat suspicious circumstances they both died on the same day in 1587 in



Scipione Pulzone, *Portrait of Bianca Capello, Grand Duchess*, 1584, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Figure 1)

their Villa at Poggio a Caiano following a banquet, possibly as a result of arsenic poisoning.¹ The celebrated romance - and subsequent tragedy - of Bianca and Francesco was notorious and the subject appropriated by artists and playwrights of the nineteenth century. The French artist

¹ For further discussion see Francesco Mari, Aldo Poletini, Donatella Lippi and Elisabetta Berto, "The mysterious death of Francesco I de' Medici and Bianca Cappello: an arsenic murder?" *British Medical Journal*, 333 (23-30 June 2006) pp. 1299-1301. The story of the couple's marriage and death was also used by Thomas Middleton for his tragedy, *Women Beware Women*, published in 1657.



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Louis Ducis (1775-1847), for instance, painted the couple escaping together in the neo-Classical spirit of the time while the American poet Laughton Osborn (1809-1878) published his play, *Bianca Capello - A Tragedy*, in 1868.

Bianca Capello, as the wife and consort of Francesco de' Medici, was frequently painted and there are numerous extant portraits known today. The present work - now attributed to Scipione Pulzone - was previously thought to have come from the workshop of Alessandro Allori (1535-1607).

Allori is considered to be one of the last Florentine artists who exemplified the Mannerist style before the rise of the Baroque. He was the pupil of, and after the death of his father in 1540, adopted son of, Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572), the pre-eminent portraitist of his time. Allori's close relationship with the Medici afforded him several commissions to paint Bianca Capello while she was Duchess of Tuscany.² One likely example, now in the Uffizi, shows her facing the viewer directly, and although she is evidently younger than in the present work, her hair is pinned in the same way and she wears a similar pearl choker and droplet earrings (fig. 2).

Prior to the accession of Francesco to Grand Duke in 1574 (though his regency had begun in 1564); Allori painted both his father, Cosimo de' Medici (1519-1574) (c.1560, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and his mother, Eleanor of Toledo (1522-1562). Allori's painting of Eleanor of Toledo, now in the Hermitage, is an exceptional example of Florentine portraiture from the sixteenth century and a precursor to the stateliness of pose and exquisite detailing of the dress seen in the present portrait (fig. 3).



Alessandro Allori, *Portrait of a Woman (most likely Bianca Capello)*, c.1570-1590, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (Figure 2)



Alessandro Allori, *Portrait of Eleanor of Toledo*, 1560s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 3)

Dated to 1584, Pulzone's Kunsthistorisches portrait of Bianca Capello shows the Grand Duchess several years before her death in 1587 (fig.1). Although the position of her head, rounded facial features, delicate hair dressing and the red flower tucked into the neckline of her dress are almost identically represented in both works, there are some differences in the dress she is shown wearing. The Kunsthistorisches version shows her wearing three strands of pearls - whereas in the present work she wears only two - and the embroidered pattern and colour of the fabric of her dress, as well as the lacework around her collar, also differs. Finally, the Kunsthistorisches portrait focuses solely on the upper body of Bianca Capello whereas the present portrait is a three-quarter length version. Yet despite the subtle differences between the two works, the portraits are undoubtedly very closely connected and a dating of around the 1580s is therefore plausible for the present work.

The attribution of the sitter as Bianca Capello is further supported by a comparison of the present work to another portrait of the Grand Duchess by the female Bolognese artist Lavinia Fontana (1552-1614) now in the Dallas Museum of Art (fig. 4). One can immediately identify the sitter to be the same noblewoman: In both Pulzone's and Fontana's portraits, Bianca Capello is presented with a rounded plump face, inquisitive eyes and neatly dressed hair with a lace veil falling down her back. Furthermore, the three-quarter length pose and posture in the Fontana portrait is very similar to the present work, her left arm falls softly while her right arm is slightly raised, suggesting that this was a

² In 2007 Christie's, New York sold a portrait by Allori (c.1580s), assumed to be of Bianca Capello, for \$110,000.

personal preference of Bianca Capello's. Fontana, like Pulzone, was best known for her portraits and her female sitters are often shown in elaborate dress, with particular attention paid to details of embroidery and jewels.

Scipione Pulzone (also known as 'Il Gaetano' due to his place of birth in Gaeta) is thought to have been a pupil of Jacopino del Conte (c.1515-1598) in Rome. An exceptionally talented portraitist, his evident flair for producing highly characterized, yet elegant portraits are seen as early as the 1570s; for example in *Portrait of Cardinal Granvelle*, 1576, Courtauld Institute. He was influenced by Italian court portraiture, particularly that of Raphael, but also drew inspiration from Flemish art having possibly seen works left in Rome by Antonis Mor (c.1517-1577). Unlike the Mannerist ideals explored by his contemporaries, Pulzone's portraits chose to focus on the naturalistic details he could detect. To Pulzone, the minute detailing on the sitter's dress and rendering of physiognomy was just as important, if not more so, than the expression



Scipione Pulzone, *Portrait of Bianca Capello* (Detail)

of personality. Pulzone's portraits, therefore, often display a very high attention to detail in the representation of fabrics and surfaces and utilise a vibrant palette evidencing his contact with Venetian painting and Titian.

Portrait of a Lady is another outstanding example of Pulzone's capabilities for portraiture (fig. 5). The pose of the unidentified noblewoman is almost identical to Bianca Capello as she rests her right hand on a keyboard instrument, while the left hand clutches a white handkerchief. Pulzone has focused on the varying textures of her luxurious dress, including the refined lace of her cuffs and collar and the embroidery of the black dress.

Though Pulzone primarily worked in Rome, he is known to have been summoned to the Aragonese court in Naples in 1584 on the strength of his reputation as a portraitist. A visit to the Medici court in Florence followed soon after and it was undoubtedly during this stay that Pulzone would have had access to paint Bianca Capello, further supporting the dating of the present work to the 1580s.



Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of Bianca Capello de' Medici with her Son*, c.1580-1614, Dallas Museum of Art (Figure 4)



Scipione Pulzone, *Portrait of a Lady*, c.1580-1598, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (Figure 5)