

MICHELE TOSINI, CALLED MICHELE DI RIDOLFO DEL GHIRLANDAIO

(Florence 1503 - Florence 1577)

An Allegory of Fortitude

oil on panel
73 x 54.7 cm (28¾ x 21½ in)

Provenance: John Giles, Albion Street, London;
his sale, London, Christie's, February 2, 1881,
lot 635 (as Andrea del Sarto), for 3,312 pounds, where acquired by the great-grandfather of a private collector;
by whom sold ('The Property of a Gentleman'), London, Sotheby's, December 11, 1996, lot 34 (where the image was reversed in the catalogue);
anonymous sale, New York, Sotheby's, January 22, 2004, lot 15.

THIS COMPELLINGLY BEAUTIFUL BUST-LENGTH painting of a woman in classical costume is most likely an allegory of Fortitude, one of the four cardinal virtues as defined in Greek philosophy. She is identified by her two most common attributes, the column which she grasps with both hands, and the lion, whose head is emblazoned on a decorative clasp at her chest. The figure's strength of character is evident and her monumentality is heightened by the manner in which she dominates the space within the panel.

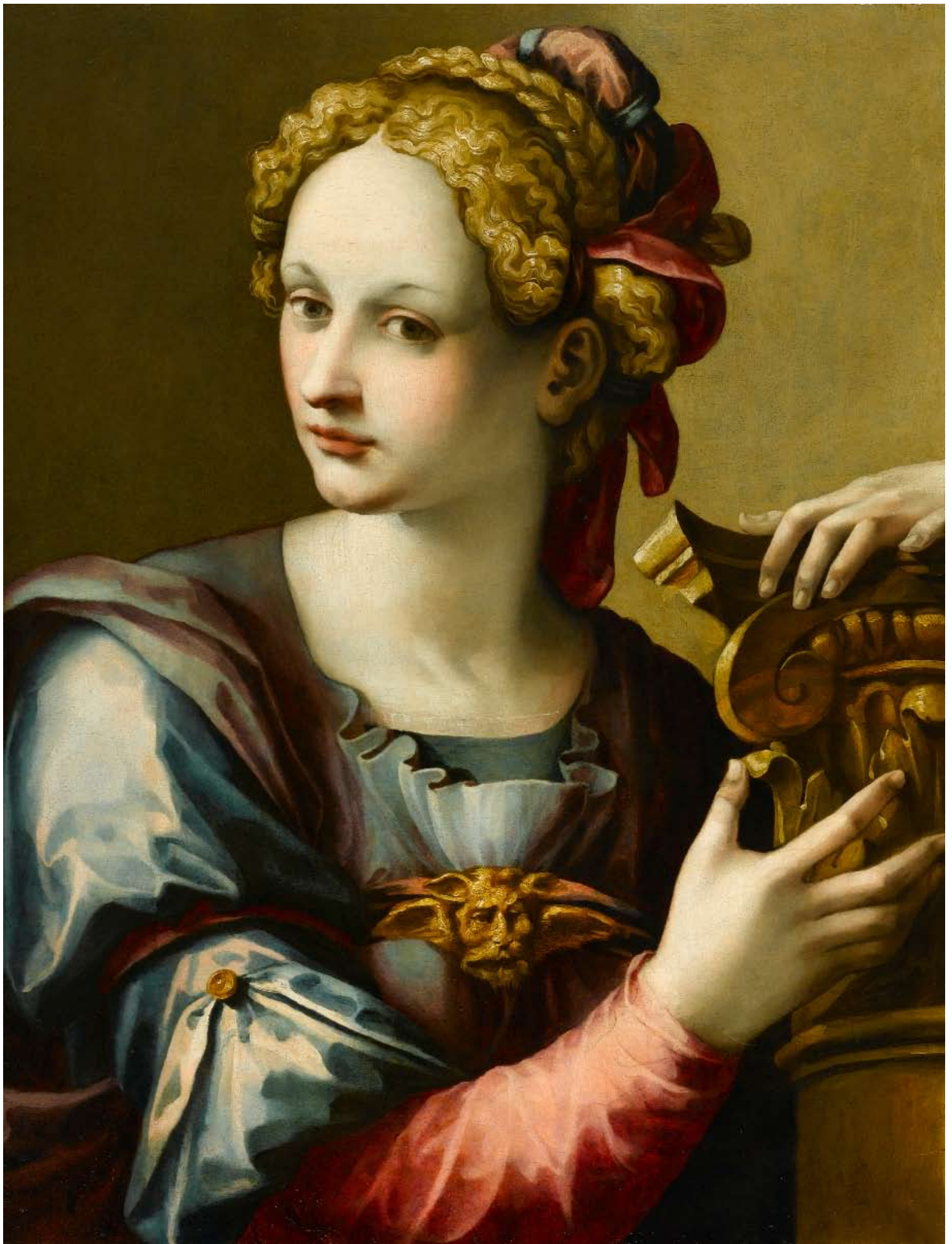
In his representation of Fortitude, Michele Tosini, called Michele di Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, followed the Renaissance iconography developed by artists such as Paolo Uccello (c.1397-1475) and Sandro Botticelli (1444/5-1510) in depicting her as a woman holding a fragment of a column. Botticelli's *Allegory of Fortitude* painted in 1469 for the Court of the Mercanzia in Florence, showing Fortitude enthroned and grasping a miniature column, was much praised and no doubt would have influenced generations of Florentine artists such as Tosini. The seven virtues, comprised of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, were a popular theme in Christian art and were most often personified by female figures. Around 1570, Tosini painted *Charity*, the most significant of the theological virtues, as a mother nursing and caring for her children, a work that is now housed in the National Gallery, London (fig. 1).

An Allegory of Fortitude relates to a number of bust-length female portraits that Tosini executed, all of which are on panels of a similar size, and are indebted to the example of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574). The idealised women in each are generally posed turned to the right against a plain background and take up most of the panel, giving them an imposing immediacy. Particularly notable paintings in this group are *Lucretia* and *Leda* in the Galleria Borghese, Rome, and other examples can be found in private collections. *Venus Victrix* in the National Museum in Krakow (fig. 2), another version of which is titled *Portrait of a Young Woman* in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence, is presented in a slightly different manner to the rest of the group but nevertheless



Michele Tosini, *Charity*, c. 1570, National Gallery, London (Figure 1)

maintains striking parallels with the present work. *Venus Victrix*, or 'Venus the Victorious', depicts a military aspect of the goddess, which was adopted from the eastern concept of a goddess of war and translated from Greek to Roman mythology. She is bare-breasted and turned almost in full profile with a richly decorated fanciful costume and an ornate headdress. Although her classicised features, pale complexion touched with pink and golden ringlets suggest idealised beauty, her proud and resolute pose, her exotic headdress and





Michele Tosini, *Venus Victrix*, National Museum, Krakow (Figure 2)

the emblems depicting fantastical creatures at her shoulder give her the air of a warrior. In this blending of physical charm with a bold and resolute manner, the *Venus Victrix*, like Fortitude, asserts herself as a powerful and intimidating presence. Both paintings have a strikingly enigmatic quality, accentuated in the colouring, distinctive dress and imperious expressions of the female figures.

The embellishment of Fortitude's costume and hair style in the present work and that of *Venus Victrix* recurs in Tosini's images of women, whether allegorical, mythological or religious in subject matter. His painting of *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* in a private collection, see fig. 3 reveals the great care taken in portraying the Virgin's intricately bound hair adorned with jewels and the decorative shoulders of her dress, giving her a more fashionable air than would normally be associated with depictions of the mother of Christ. This preoccupation with ornamentation is similarly evident in Tosini's painting of *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, whose garments and headdress are of exceptional quality and rich in detail (fig. 4). The metalwork details in the clasp of Saint Catherine's cloak and her armband, headpiece and necklace are striking and reminiscent of the ornament depicting a lion's head that is prominently positioned at Fortitude's breast in the present work.

The headdresses that Tosini chose for his female subjects were very likely inspired by Michelangelo's (1475-1564) studies of fantastically decorated heads, designs which Tosini may have had first-hand knowledge of, or seen in engravings. *Ideal Head of a Woman* in The British Museum, see fig. 5, is an example of a head study by Michelangelo that displays an ostentatious and peculiarly complex hairstyle, which has much in common with those worn by *Venus Victrix* and *Charity*. The woman's braids in Michelangelo's study resemble those of Fortitude in the present painting, the Virgin in *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* and *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*.

Tosini's paintings are indebted to Michelangelo's example, not only in the hairstyles of his female figures but also in their classicised and slightly masculinised facial features. *Lucretia*, see fig. 6, which has parallels to the present work in its size and idealised female type, has facial features that, like those of Fortitude, closely resemble Michelangelo's *Ideal Head of a Woman*. Lucretia's appearance also reveals the effects of Mannerism, a movement that Tosini was initially slow to accept but began experimenting with in his paintings of the 1540s. Late in his career, Tosini drew particular inspiration



Michele Tosini, *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, Private Collection (Figure 3)

from the works of the Roman Mannerist Francesco Salviati (1510-1563), renowned for his painterly fluidity and elegance, artificiality and complexity. These aspects are evident in Tosini's paintings of long-necked and tranquil beauties, among which *An Allegory of Fortitude* is particularly striking in its harmonious colouring and the other-worldly grace and serenity of the female figure. The painting can be seen to unite the influences that contributed to Tosini's artistic success, borrowing elements from Michelangelo, Salviati and Raphael (1483-1520), whom Tosini would have known through his



Michele Tosini, *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, Private Collection (Figure 4)



Michelangelo, *Ideal Head of a Woman*, c.1525-1528, The British Museum, London (Figure 5)

teacher Ridolfo Ghirlandaio (1483-1561), once a student of the Umbrian master. There is, however, also a marked originality in composition and costume detail in the present work that is unique to Tosini.

Tosini's *Saint Mary Magdalene*, see fig. 7, is a further fine example in the group of bust-length paintings of female figures that *An Allegory of Fortitude* belongs to. As in *Saint Catherine of Alexandria* and the present work, the attribute most associated with the woman is displayed on the right of the painting, in this case an ointment jar signifies the Magdalene. Her hair, centrally



Michele Tosini, *Lucretia*, Private Collection (Figure 6)



Michele Tosini, *Saint Mary Magdalene*, Private Collection (Figure 7)

parted and bound in a red cloth, is much like that of Fortitude and her facial features are almost identical. Her tranquillity of expression is typical of Tosini's female types regardless of their situation; even Lucretia, in preparing to stab herself, appears cool and unruffled by the dramatic tension of the moment. Despite their apparent inertness, each woman displays a powerful presence and self-confidence, nowhere more exemplified than in *An Allegory of Fortitude*, an exceptionally refined example of Tosini's painterly style.

Tosini studied initially with Lorenzo di Credi (1459-1537) and Antonio del Ceraiolo (fl. 1520-1538) before entering the workshop of the prominent Florentine painter Ghirlandaio, whose name he adopted. By 1525, the two artists had developed a close relationship and collaborated frequently.¹ Tosini was an accomplished portraitist as well as a religious and allegorical painter, and his portraits have on occasion been mistaken for those of Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572), the master of sixteenth-century Florentine portraiture. Tosini achieved renown in his time and worked at the centre of Medician culture, evidenced by his commission to paint a portrait of Cosimo de' Medici. In 1563, he assisted Vasari with the formation of the Accademia del Disegno and subsequently worked with him in decorating the frescos for the Salone dei Cinquecento in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. Through Vasari's example, Tosini began adopting elements of Michelangelo's work as has been revealed in the paintings discussed here. Tosini's major commissions in his later years included the fresco decoration of three city gates of Florence, the altar in the Chapel at the Villa Caserotta, near San Casciano Val di Pesa, and the paintings on the back and sides of the tabernacle of the high altar of Santa Maria della Quercia, Viterbo. After Ghirlandaio's retirement, Tosini became head of his workshop, which was one of the largest and most productive in Florence.² Tosini's students included Stoldo Lorenzi (1534-1583), Girolamo Macchietti (1535-1592) and Bernardino Poccetti (1548-1612).

¹ For the relationship between Tosini and Ghirlandaio, see David Franklin, 'Towards a New Chronology for Ridolfo Ghirlandaio and Michele Tosini', *Burlington Magazine* 140 (1998), pp. 445-56.

² H. J. Hornik: 'Michele Tosini: The Artist, The Oeuvre and The Testament', *Continuity, Innovation and Connoisseurship: Old Master Paintings at the Palmer Museum of Art* (exh. cat., ed. M. J. Harris; University Park, PA, 2003), pp. 22-37