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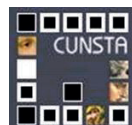
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Benedetto Luti and the Autonomy of Pastel

Rodolfo Maffei*

Abstract

Mostly unrelated to official portraiture, Benedetto Luti's pastel heads achieved fame and circulation in early 18th century Europe. In ancient sources they were described as endowed with «tanta forza e bellezza» as to equal oil painting. Pastel was thus not praised for its palpable and inherent delicacy, but instead for the vivid intensity that made it akin to painting.

The present contribution explores this aspect by offering a historical reconstruction of pastel as an intermediate stage in the making of a painting, from the seminal example of Barocci on to the Florentine *Seicento*, where the pastel accompanied the gestation of pictorial works aimed at rendering the *naturale* and expressing *affetti*.

In keeping with this heritage, Luti's pastels often show connections with single details of major oil paintings. However, departing from this tradition, they did not remain at the

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preparatory stage: they entailed a remarkable degree of formal detail, a rich palette, a preference for lively strokes, and were inserted in individual frames, suggesting that they may have been regarded as complete and autonomous artifacts.

Per lo più estranee alla ritrattistica ufficiale, le teste a pastello di Benedetto Luti ottennero riconoscimento e diffusione nell'Europa del primo Settecento. Le fonti antiche le descrivono come dotate di «tanta forza e bellezza» da eguagliare la pittura a olio. Il pastello non era dunque lodato per la sua impalpabile e peculiare delicatezza, ma invece per una vivida intensità che lo rendeva simile alla pittura.

Il presente contributo approfondisce questo aspetto offrendo una ricostruzione storica del pastello come fase intermedia nella realizzazione di un dipinto, dall'esempio seminale di Barocci fino al Seicento fiorentino, dove il pastello accompagnava la gestazione di opere pittoriche volte alla resa del “naturale” e ad esprimere gli “affetti”.

In linea con questa eredità, i pastelli di Luti mostrano spesso legami con singoli dettagli di grandi dipinti a olio. Tuttavia, discostandosi da questa tradizione, non rimasero allo stadio preparatorio: implicarono un notevole livello di dettaglio formale, una tavolozza ricca, una preferenza per il tratto vivace, e furono inseriti in cornici individuali, configurandosi come manufatti artistici in sé completi e autonomi.

1. *Introduction*

Benedetto Luti's pastels were among the earliest examples of autonomous works drafted in this technique, and they achieved European fame and circulation in the first decade of the 18th century¹. In ancient sources they were described as endowed with «tanta forza e bellezza» as to equal oil painting. Pastel was thus not praised for its impalpable and inherent delicacy, but instead for the vivid intensity that made it akin to painting.

The present contribution examines this aspect by offering a historical reconstruction of pastel as an intermediate step in the making of a painting, from the seminal example of Barocci on to the centuries-old tradition in Florence, where pastel works accompanied the gestation of pictorial works aimed at rendering the *naturale* and expressing *affetti*.

We shall then consider the specific role Benedetto Luti played in this context and the distinctive features of his pastel production. Focusing on the *Investiture of St. Ranieri* in the cathedral of Pisa – a major work, and a milestone in the development of the artist's broader representational strategies – this article seeks to situate Luti's use of pastel in relation to the time-honoured

¹ For a broad overview of the technique and history of pastel, which falls beyond the scope of the present contribution, see the comprehensive works by: Stratis, Salvesen 2002; Burns 2007; Baetjer, Shelley 2011; Rinaldi 2021. Particularly on the origins of pastel in Renaissance Italy, see: Bambach 2010; Nova 2010; and the doctoral dissertation of Da Rin Bettina 2016. On Barocci, Cigoli, Luti and their *milieu*, references can be found in the notes below.

Florentine tradition within which he was trained, while also gesturing to his pioneering role as creator of autonomous pastels that retained the force of a painterly approach.

2. Federico Barocci and the differentiation of pastel practice

With an unprecedented expansion and diversification of the creative process, Federico Barocci broadened the traditional gap between drawing and painting by envisaging a range of passages where the pastel is but one of the means, or moments, in the construction of the final work: others include clay and wax models (which, incidentally, Vasari also called pastels)², gouache *cartoncini*, oil sketches on paper, colored *tempera* and so forth³.

Barocci's pastels did not originate as independent works of art. However, their inherent connection to the master's creative process did not prevent them from becoming artistic objects in their own right, thanks to the added value of color. Indeed, they would eventually lose their ephemeral and subsidiary nature both in the awareness of the painter himself (who was notoriously jealous of his works, including drawings and pastels) and in the eyes of subsequent collectors⁴.

² In Vasari's *Lives* the term *pastello* identifies a mixture of wax, grease, tar and turpentine first melted and then cooled down to be used in modeling by hand; Vasari thus seems thus to refer only to a sculptural practice only: Vasari 1550 (Edizione Torrentiniana), cap. IX, p. 22; Vasari 1568 (Edizione Giuntina), cap. IX, p. 27. Moreover, although he does not use the term, Vasari describes the practice of many painters as follows: «Usano ancora molti maestri, innanzi che facciano la storia nel cartone, fare un modello di terra in su un piano, con situare tonde tutte le figure per vedere li sbattimenti, cioè l'ombra, che da un lume si causano addosso alle figure», Vasari 1550, cap. XVI, p. 30. This is similar to what we read in Bellori's biography of Federico Barocci, where the author states that once the compositional drawing was finished, the painter used to make clay or wax models of the different figures to adjust the shadows cast on the characters: Bellori 1672, p. 195. In a passage about the spreading of Ludovico Cigoli's painting style in Florence, Luigi Lanzi recalls: «Così a poco a poco tornò in uso il modellare in creta ed in cera; si lavorò in pastelli; si osservarono con più diligenza gli effetti della luce e dell'ombra; si deferì meno alla pratica e più alla natura», Lanzi 1795-1796, p. 207. It seems therefore that this clay or wax *pastello* – far from being a prerogative of sculptors – belonged to a broader set of artistic practices that included the craftsmanship of painters. Instead, it is due to Benvenuto Cellini in his *Discorso sopra l'arte del disegno* the first mention of pastel as a dry mark-making technique, as identified by Tordella 2009, p. 114.

³ On the variety of drawing techniques employed by Barocci, see Prospero Valenti 2009, pp. 66-75; with explicit regard to pastel and its relations with liminar technical experimentations see Dempsey 1987; McGrath 1998; Sani 2009. The issue is complex and multifaceted, and has been carefully investigated by Bohn B. (2012) to whom we refer for a comprehensive discussion and further bibliography. Marciari 2013 openly questions the reliability of Bellori's account of Barocci's technical procedures.

⁴ On the significance Barocci ascribed to his own works, as exemplified by the lawsuit he filed in the Pesaro court in 1590 for the return of a single sheet, as well as his insistence on

Of the hundreds of pastels left to us by Barocci, many are studies of heads, where – according to Bellori (*Le Vite*, 1672) – he drew inspiration from Correggio’s alleged «teste divinissime à pastelli»⁵ brought to him by an unknown painter from Parma. Barocci, in his turn, «ne formava le sue bellissime arie di teste [...] e frequentemente ancora si valeva de’ pastelli, nelli quali riuscì unico, sfumandoli con pochi tratti»⁶.

Bellori’s choice of the term *arie* in connection with the technique of pastel deserves to be emphasized: the *aria* (lit. “air”) is “in” the pastel, it is its defining feature, more than that of any other technique. The airiness and swiftness of pastel becomes one with the vital pulse of the model and the changing luministic conditions in a way that is nearly impressionistic.

The delicate but substantial imitative implementation of color is meant to capture the spontaneity of the faces. Colors convey the physical presence of the sitter – as opposed to the intellectualistic abstraction of the drawing – and the texture of pastels is light, blurred, evanescent, thus allowing this medium to evoke impalpable subtleties and almost the breath of the model.

In essence, the unique nature of pastel resides in its ability to combine rapid and porous sign qualities with the warm and vivid radiation of color – which had long been considered by art theorists as capable of infusing vibrancy into drawing. As highlighted by Lomazzo in the *Trattato dell’Arte della Pittura, Scoltura, et Architettura* (1585): «dà come a dir lo spirito a tutte le cose diseguate»⁷.

Color has definitely to do with the pulse of life, or pneuma. Similarly, Alessandro Allori in the *Ragionamenti delle regole del disegno*, assigns to *disegno colorato* an intermediate status between drawing and painting, useful for imitating countenances and skin hues⁸.

regaining possession of preparatory drawings for works even for prestigious commissions, see: Baroni 2020, esp. pp. 210-211. Bohn notes that «Barocci’s colored, detailed head drawings helped to finalize facial expressions and were also intended for sale to private collectors» (Bohn 2012, p. 48).

⁵ Bellori 1672, p. 173. On the debated topic of Correggio’s pastels, see: Da Rin Bettina 2016, pp. 94-99, 329-331.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁷ Lomazzo 1585, p. 190. The full quotation is as follows: «Ma per venire alla necessità del colorire (il che è mio principale scopo in questo capitolo) dico che senza esso la pittura non si può adempire né ricevere la sua perfezione; perciò che egli è quello ch’esprime perfettamente, & dà come a dir lo spirito a tutte le cose diseguate con la forza de gl’altri generi, è tanto più esse acquisteranno di gratia, & di perfezione, quanto più eccellentemente e con maggior arte saranno colorite». For an thorough examination of the relationship between drawing and color in art treatises from the 16th to the 18th century, see Tordella 2009, pp. 39-43.

⁸ For this reference I rely on what is cited in Sani 2009, p. 236.

3. *Florentine Seicento pastel*

It is well known that the “revelation” experienced in front of Barocci’s *Madonna del Popolo* altarpiece, unveiled in Arezzo in 1579, was the turning point in Lodovico Cigoli’s reform of Florentine painting. According to Baldinucci, after Barocci’s example, Cigoli also discovered the «meravigliose opere del Correggio», which appealed to him especially for the potential of color⁹. Following in their footsteps, he introduced to Florence a revolutionary painting manner capable of expressing the *affetti* through the practice of drawing from life and the emphasis on color, thus achieving in his works a new, soft and natural appeal that met the aesthetic demands of the new century.

Cigoli’s activity as a pastel painter also seems to be a direct consequence of his fascination with Barocci and Correggio, and as Baldinucci maintained: «Tutti coloro che uscirono dalla scuola del Cigoli, o furono suoi compagni di studi, o suoi imitatori, usarono operare di pastelli»¹⁰. Indeed, Cristofano Allori, Giovanni da San Giovanni, Andrea Comodi, Francesco Curradi, Francesco Furini and others all worked, and not infrequently, in this medium.

A pastel by Curradi (fig. 1) now at the Louvre comes from Baldinucci’s own collection, where it was listed under Barocci’s name. The work has subsequently been attributed to its legitimate creator thanks to its clear preparatory function for the *Allegory of Fame* in the Casa Buonarroti (1616-1617)¹¹. This work appears consistent with the statement of Alessandro Allori, quoted above: only the face is indeed drafted in pastel, and not the hair and robe (where the

⁹ Baldinucci reports on Cigoli’s and Gregorio Pagani’s visit to Arezzo in order to see and study Barocci’s altarpiece (now in the Uffizi), and connects Cigoli’s interest in Barocci with his interest in Correggio, whom Cigoli called: «singolare maestro del colorito», Baldinucci 1681-1728, III, pp. 240-241. On the subject of colored drawing techniques in late 16th century Florence, see: Faietti 2015.

¹⁰ Baldinucci 1681-1728, III, p. 663. The biographer says that this technique had been practiced regularly by Cigoli following the example of Barocci. Among his followers he then explicitly mentions Cristofano Allori and Andrea Comodi, the quoted sentence can be found in the *Notizie* on the latter. On Cigoli’s activity as a pastelist and on the use of this and other hybrid techniques between drawing and painting in the Florentine milieu at the turn of the century there is a substantial tradition of studies that includes pioneering contributions by Thiem 1977 and Miles Chappell (Chappell *et al.* 1979; Chappell 1992, 2005), later investigations by Prosperi Valenti 1997, Loisel 2010 and especially Catherine Monbeig Goguel 2001 and 2006, esp. pp. 78-89, 108-109, 144-145; *Eadem* 2020 and lastly the contribution of Barbolani di Montauto 2009 esp. pp. 116-123, to which we also refer for further bibliography.

¹¹ *Female head seen from below, leaning to the left*, pastel and strokes of black chalk on grey paper, 306 x 252 mm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, inv. 2905. The work had been extracted from Barocci’s oeuvre and tentatively directed toward Cigoli by Conti 1995, p. 172; it was then recognized as by Curradi and connected with the *Allegory* of Casa Buonarroti (1616-1617) by Goguel in *Dessins toscans* 2005, II, p. 196, no. 220; republished in Barbolani di Montauto 2009, p. 120, fig. 78.

drawing stops), precisely because of the ability of this medium to imitate the translucent effects of skin.

It is safe to assume that interest in pastels grew in Florence at the beginning of the 17th century in the wake of a new attention to the *naturale*. Experimentation with a range of new media was aimed at portraying delicate skin tones and fleeting emotions, and the success of pastel in the Florentine *Seicento* was part of a broader set of pictorial strategies marked by a new contact with and a sensory feeling for nature¹². One might therefore argue that the *pastello* was the other side of the coin of the new aesthetic relevance achieved by the *bozzetto* – a soft and tender core seeking its definite form on canvas – regularly employed by Cristofano Allori and his circle.

For his frescoes in Palazzo Pitti, Francesco Furini created compositional sketches in pen, gouache and white lead, studies of individual subjects (full-figure or details such as heads, hands or limbs) in black and red natural chalk on paper, as well as pastels. It took him three years to complete the work (1639-1642), and the importance of a large public commission for the development of preparatory studies, including pastels, cannot be emphasized enough (we shall come back to this shortly with regard to Luti).

The face of the *Allegory of Poetry* (fig. 2) reveals the presence of pastel and the painter also made some tests with colored chalks on the right edge of the sheet¹³. Pastel was used for the soft application of light pink on the cheeks, where it stands out against the brown background of the paper and merges with the touches in red chalk. Despite its evident preparatory function, it seems that in this case the pastel succeeds in reproducing the skin tones of the model better than the final fresco version, whose opaque surface does not preserve the freshness and delicacy of the original work.

Actually, pastels were specifically meant to imitate the chromatic effect of frescoes, which they evoked thanks to their dry and fair surface. This feature is recorded by Armenini. The author explains that the pastel's function as a chromatic complement was particularly important in the case of frescoes, where the colors were applied to damp plaster and could fade once dry: «per non averl[i] a mendicar sul muro, prima le imitano con i pastelli benissimo»¹⁴.

The entry drafted by Baldinucci for the *Vocabolario toscano dell'arte del disegno* (1681) includes a brief but explicit reference to this similarity:

¹² An additional technique explored with great subtlety by Florentine baroque artists was the use of combined red and black pencils, with which draughtsmen achieved effects of skin mimesis that were very close to those obtained with pastels. See Goguel 2001, *passim*.

¹³ *Female head resting on her right hand, study for the Allegory of Poetry*, black and red chalk, pastels, white chalk on gray paper, 253×202 mm, Firenze, Gli Uffizi, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, n. 2470 S. For a discussion of the work in relation to the frescoes, see: Gregori, Maffeis 2007, pp. 244-245, no. 44.

¹⁴ Armenini 1586, pp. 114-115.

Pastelli. Diversi colori di terre e altro, macinati e mescolati insieme, e con gomma e zucchero candito condensati e assodati in forma di tenere pietruzze appuntate; de' quali servonsi i Pittori a disegnare e colorire figure sopra carta, senza adropnar materia liquida, lavoro che molto s'assomiglia al colorito a tempera e a fresco¹⁵.

Such detailed description also demonstrates the popularity that pastel has gained among Baroque Florentine artists. In the second half of the century pastel was used both for preparatory studies and for portraiture – as can be seen in works by Carlo Dolci and Baldassarre Franceschini, also called il Volterrano.

In a Louvre sheet portraying a young female head, Volterrano adds to the black and red chalk some delicate touches of blue and pink pastel, and recreates his “eternal feminine” derived from the style of Cortona, embedded with a somewhat pre-Raphaelite dreamy melancholy¹⁶ (fig. 3). Scholars think that the drawing is a study from life, but in fact its quite idealized physiognomy will become typical of the artist’s repertoire, as can be seen by comparing it with the oval fresco representing *Venus Embracing Cupid* in the Museo Bardini, Florence (c. 1650)¹⁷.

We shall not dwell here on those Florentine pastelists who devoted themselves exclusively to portraiture: namely Domenico Tempesti, who was sent to Paris in 1676 by Grand Duke Cosimo III so that he could train and improve his mastery of pastel painting under Robert Nanteuil, and his pupil Giovanna Fratellini.

Indeed, this study is not concerned with the French-derived fashion of pastel portraiture for the aristocracy as encouraged and supported by the Medici court during the late Baroque period. Rather, our focus is on the relationship that this technique established with painting in the artists’ workshops, where the gradual transition of the pastel from individual moment in the artistic process to autonomous work was achieved.

However, it is well worth noting that Giovanna Fratellini, having trained as a pastel portraitist under Tempesti, then moved to Anton Domenico Gabbiani’s workshop at the time the young Benedetto Luti was doing his apprenticeship there – the two were exactly the same age.

¹⁵ Baldinucci 1681, p. 119.

¹⁶ *Head of a woman*, black and red chalk, pastel on beige paper, 144×128 mm, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, inv. 1174. See: the catalogue entry by C. Monbeig Goguel, in *Dessins toscans* 2005, II, p. 436, no. 649.

¹⁷ See the catalogue entry by M.C. Fabbri, in Fabbri 2013, pp. 147-151.

4. *Benedetto Luti's pastel heads*

Luti's activity as a pastelist is documented as early as 1703-1704. At that time some of his pastels were already circulating in European collections¹⁸.

These early works were heads of women and children whose physiognomies can be traced back to secondary characters in his paintings of the same period. Once severed from their original context, they lose the connection with their iconographic subject and acquire a purely aesthetic value, largely as a result of the transposition into the pastel technique.

Some of these works are known to have been presented to patrons of particular prestige, as a token of personal esteem and valuable addition – precisely because they were crafted in a rare medium – to the recipient's collection. A notable example is represented by the *Half-length bust of young woman* given by Luti to Thomas Coke¹⁹ (fig. 4). The “drawing” – as the artist calls it in his own dedication – is embellished with touches of pink and teal pastels. It takes the form of a semi-finished variant of another female head attested since 1708 in the possessions of Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici at Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Entirely made with pastels, the latter is called «quadretto di pastelli» in the inventory, where it is listed among oil paintings²⁰.

Major commissions stimulated the development of representational types that later became repertoire images, which were used by Luti across different iconographies and media. In this sense, many of the artist's pastels are highly representative visual “excerpts” of his most captivating physiognomies.

Among the earliest pastel heads by Luti is the half-bust of a young woman seen from behind, her chignon tied by a blue ribbon, in the picture gallery of Palazzo Corsini alla Lungara in Rome²¹ (fig. 5). This anti-portrait – a beautiful invention, natural and fresh – is ultimately an extrapolation of a pose typical of maidens in Luti's paintings: that of female figures looking into the painting and showing us the nape of the neck with their hair up.

¹⁸ These dates are inscribed along the edge of two pastels in the royal collections at Fredensborg Castle, near Copenhagen. For this and many other notes on Luti's activity as pastelist, the reference text is Bowron 1980. I am grateful to Elisabeth von Buchwald, Head of the private royal collections, and Anne Duer, Statens Museum for Kunst, for providing high-quality images that allow the original inscription with the date “1704” to be read.

¹⁹ *Half-length bust of young woman, facing left*, black and traces of red chalk, white chalk, pastels on gray paper, 354×278 mm, Norfolk, Holkham Hall. The whole inscription says: «Il Cavl. Luti prend'ardimento regalare del presente suo Disegno l'Ill.mo Sig.re Cont. Cuch, come l'amantiss.mo e diletta.mo de' nostri studi acciò esso, abbi l'onore di essere posto nella Sua Nobiliss.ma l raccolta, e La [...] riverenza». See Maffeis 2012, p. 341.

²⁰ *Half-length bust of young woman, turning left*, polychrome pastels on paper, 330×275 mm, Firenze, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, Sala delle Allegorie, Inv. 1890, n. 819. For information and replicas after this prototype, *ivi*, pp. 326-327.

²¹ *Half-length bust of young woman from behind, holding a painting or mirror*, polychrome pastels on paper, 455×350 mm, Roma, Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Galleria Corsini, inv. 575.

We have examples of this in the Magdalene kneeling at the feet of *Christ in the Pharisee's House* in Kedleston Hall (1691), in the Angelica of *Angelica and Medoro* witnessed by Pascoli in the villa of Marquess Giovan Paolo Torri and recently rediscovered in a private collection (c. 1700), and in the girl at the foot of the altar, with clasped hands, in the *Investiture of St. Ranieri* (1703-1712).

The isolation of the detail results in individualization, so that the pastel appears self-sufficient, unencumbered by debts of meaning to its matrix. Indeed, even in its iconographic elusiveness, the pastel presents itself as a piece of art in its own right.

Also on the same wall in Palazzo Corsini is a half-bust of a young woman dressed in red, with blue ribbons in her blond hair, who turns spontaneously and looks the viewer in the eye, smiling²² (fig. 6).

In terms of features, hairstyle and foreshortening of the face, she appears related to the female protagonist of the *Investiture of St. Ranieri*, who stands in the center of the crowd, emphasized by a beam of light, and addresses the man kneeling beside her. Yet the same feminine type also appears in other paintings, elusively smiling around, as the unfinished canvas depicting the *Golden Age*, formerly in the Apolloni collection in Rome, or the large oval with the *Allegory with Diana, nymphs, Zephyrs and cupids (The Night)* on the ceiling of Palazzo De Carolis al Corso, both around 1720.

On account of their direct and confidential attitude, the Corsini pastels seems to be variations on a single theme, as if both sought to convey the same meaning in two complementary ways. What exactly are these gentle maidens trying to express?

They are both accompanied by a framed object that is not mentioned in 18th century inventories, and that is also absent from the paintings from which they roughly derive their compositional setting. This is a typically female attribute: it recurs in other pastel heads of young girls by Luti, while it is not found in depictions of their male companions, as seen in the pair of children in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, signed and dated on the back "1717"²³.

The framed object might be a painting, or perhaps even a pastel, and thus the two girls could be interpreted as Allegories of Painting, or even Pastel Painting. But it might also be a mirror, which since Renaissance times was an

²² *Half-length bust of a young woman in red, holding a painting or mirror*, polychrome pastels on paper, 455×350 mm, Roma, Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Galleria Corsini, inv. 579. For a close exemplar, see pastel no. KMSB14 from the Danish royal collections at Fredensborg Castle.

²³ *Half-length bust of a boy in a blue jacket*, polychrome pastels on paper, 406×330 mm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gwynne Andrews Fund, 2007 (2007.360); *Half-length bust of a girl in red, holding a painting or mirror*, polychrome pastels on paper, 419×340 mm, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gwynne Andrews Fund, 2007 (2007.361). On this pair of pastels see Baetjer, Shelley 2011, pp. 6-7.

attribute of young women allegorized in the form of Prudence, Modesty or Vanitas. Although the frame is particularly thick for a mirror, this appears to be the most likely identification: on close inspection, the surface of the object appears to reflect the colors of the maidens' garments²⁴.

The Academy of Arcadia developed a taste for the representation of children as images of purity, which should be read as a reaction to the excesses of Baroque rethoric. Tales with kids as main characters were much favored, as were episodes from the childhood of the Virgin Mary and stories of the infancy of Christ, often based on apocryphal gospels. Additionally, new passions that were not overpowering but only intermediate or average found their way into the repertoire of the subjects of "good taste": think of Francesco Lorenzi's depictions of *simpatia* and *antipatia* as overdoors in Palazzo San Giorgio, Casale Monferrato, and Pietro Rotari's *teste di fantasia* and *pose sentimentali* portrayed in cabinet-size canvases, as opposed to the great virtues and vices celebrated in Baroque fresco cycles²⁵. This is the context in which these pastels by Luti should be discussed, and their significance lies mostly in their emotional resonance.

5. *The investiture of St. Ranieri and its legacy in pastels*

The Investiture of St. Ranieri was one of the most important achievements in Luti's career. It is an enormous canvas (roughly 4 and a half by 5 and a half meters) destined for the Cathedral of Pisa, where it was placed in late Spring 1712 and where it can still be seen on the south transept wall (fig. 7). Luti worked on this crucial commission for nearly ten years, from 1703 to 1712, and it is not surprising that such long-term commitment led to the development of a set of representational strategies which will become typical of his later production. His activity as a pastelist was also greatly influenced by it.

Since he chose to depict a considerable number of bystanders, Luti must have studied several models from life and certainly made many preparatory drawings. Due to its vastness and complexity, the work is indeed comparable

²⁴ The caption of the pastel from Palazzo Corsini in the article by Bowron 1980, p. 443, fig. 10 is «Young Girl with a Mirror».

²⁵ For this information and on the topic in general, see: Mangili, Pavanello 2006, and Magani, Marini, Tomezzoli. 2011, esp. Tomezzoli 2011 and the entries for Rotari's works edited by P. De Lorenzi on pp. 208-213. Additionally, thanks are due to colleague Paolo De Lorenzi of Ca' Foscari University for informing me that the first occurrence of the definition *teste di fantasia* seems to appear in Jacques Lacombe's *Dizionario portatile delle Belle Arti* (Venice, Remondini, 1758, a translation of the work published in Paris in 1752) under the entry devoted to the painter Jean-Baptiste Santerre.

to a fresco commission. Some oil sketches on canvas for the entire composition have survived, but no drawings nor studies of individual details on paper are known.

However, on January 14, 1987 twelve pastels by Luti, each one portraying a man's head, came up at Sotheby's New York and were sold individually²⁶. Because of their appearance, and because they were twelve, the catalogue entries referred to them as the twelve Apostles, but of course they might also be Prophets, or philosophers, or none of the above. The pastels were framed, protected by glass and mounted on wooden panels, with inscriptions in 18th century handwriting bearing the signature of Benedetto Luti, as well as an indication of the place and date of execution: Rome, 1712.

The original inscriptions are invariably written on the panel, rather than on the back of the sheet, indicating that the whole ensemble – the pastel, as well as its wooden support, glass and frame – is original. This sheds important light on the author's attitudes towards these artifacts, and, by extension, on the broader status of pastels at the time.

What is most relevant for us is that these heads are related, in at least eight cases, to the faces of the onlookers in the *Investiture of St. Ranieri* (figs. 8-9). Compared to the heads in the painting, they show greater detail, their lighting is much brighter, and a book has been added to each of them. Some of the postures are similar to those in the painting, while others display variations.

A pastel in the Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence²⁷, shows perfect resemblance with the man cloaked in yellow, with long hair and a hand to his chest (fig. 10). Both in the pastel and in the painting, the man is looking in the same direction; he is also dressed identically in the two specimens.

To mention another significant example, the imposing figure of a bearded old man in a green coat that occupies the space next to the man described above, also appears in a pastel of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art²⁸: there, he is rendered in a frontal position, whereas in the painting he turns his back to us (fig. 11).

In terms of quality, this pastel is also one of the best in the series, for the nobility and intensity of the head, for its palette of mint green tones, and for the crisp strokes of black and white chalk of the hair over the soft texture of

²⁶ Sotheby's, New York, 7 January 1987, lots 120-131. The pastels were regrettably dispersed and each one reached a different destination; for the locations known at the time and further information see Maffei 2012, pp. 330-339.

²⁷ *Male head with a book (Prophet or Apostle?)*, polychrome pastels on gray paper, 410×335 mm, Lawrence, Kans., University of Kansas, Spencer Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. Crosby Kemper, Jr., 1991.0025.

²⁸ *Old bearded man with a book (Prophet or Apostle?)*, polychrome pastels on gray paper, 410×330 mm, Los Angeles, Calif., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Prints and Drawings Department, Gift of the 1996 Collectors Committee (AC1996.29.1).

the beard, where the painter seems to have stumped the surface or spread the pastel powder with his fingertips.

As we let our gaze browse the crowd, we discover that a mirror image of the man clad in blue, who leans forward with his head, appears in a pastel formerly in New York, Margot Gordon Fine Art²⁹ (fig. 12). Here, the man is also equipped with a pink cloak draped on his shoulders. The intensity of his gaze remains the same, were it not for the poor conservation conditions.

Among the most vigorous pieces in this series is a classicizing head – a Marcus Aurelius of sorts – formerly London, Stephen Ongpin Fine Art³⁰ (fig. 13). The figure in the pastel is visually consistent with that of a man standing in the shadow next to the man clad in blue (see above), in an attitude of wonder. The pastel allows us to appreciate details that are not fully detectable in that shaded area of the painting: one might say that the pastel elaborates on a scarcely visible element of the larger work by placing it in full light.

The pink hues of the skin are translucent, and mixed with a warm yellow that makes them brighter. From the technical point of view, once again we see the superimposition of vigorous touches over the chromatic amalgam of the background (on lips, cheeks, hair): this is a distinctive trait of almost all Luti's pastels, and it reveals a sort of "pictorial" approach.

Looking at these images, the words of 18th-century sources about Luti's pastels become easy to understand. Nicola Pio wrote in 1724: «Nelli pastelli poi è singolarissimo facendoli di tanta forza e bellezza che sono più che dipinti non havendo in ciò havuto alcun pittore huguale»³¹; Lione Pascoli in 1730: «Lavorava eccellentemente di pastelli di tanta forza, e di tanta bellezza, che pajon dipinti»³². Matthew Pilkington: «In painting with crayons he had an uncommon degree of excellence, and in that kind of colouring he executed several designs with a force and delicacy equal to his paintings in oil»³³.

One cannot fail to underline the comparison between pastel and painting, which in Pio's first and most reliable account relies on the hendiadys «force and beauty», whereas in the English *Connoisseur's Dictionary* it becomes an oxymoron, «force and delicacy». Luti imbued his pastels with vibrant pictorial effects, and with rich and brilliant colors: in doing so, he pushed the pastel beyond the limits of drawing practice towards the creation of a genuine "pastel painting".

²⁹ *Male head with a book (Prophet or Apostle?)*, polychrome pastels on gray paper, 406×329 mm, present whereabouts unknown. See Maffei 2012, p. 335.

³⁰ *Male head with a book (Prophet or Apostle?)*, polychrome pastels on gray paper, 410×332 mm, present whereabouts unknown. See <<https://www.stephenongpin.com/object/790713/0/the-head-of-an-apostle>>, 14.09.2023.

³¹ Pio 1724, p. 24.

³² Pascoli 1730-1736, p. 318.

³³ Pilkington 1770, p. 378.

At the same time he did not explore the whole spectrum of this technique and its unique features – the extreme polish of the surfaces and the porcelain-like refinement – which will instead be fully exploited and enhanced by Rosalba and the French pastelists³⁴.

From the stylistic point of view, the legacy of Correggio is evident and programmatic: all sources agree on this point and the painter himself subscribes to it in his letters. This naturally makes us think again of Barocci and his reference to the emotional and chromatic values of Allegri, but it also brings to mind Rosalba and the frequent connection between her and Correggio established by Crozat, Mariette and other sources which intended to praise her. In short, Correggio was for pastel what Raphael was for drawing, or Titian for color. And a male head like the one in fig. 13 – with large eyes, sensual lips and curly ash-blonde hair – shows that Luti's reference to the Emilian master was both conscious and deliberate.

How to categorize this series? Do the pastels derive from preparatory drawings for the *Investiture of St. Ranieri*, then transposed into another technique and “ennobled” to become works of art in their own right? Do they therefore represent an emancipation of preparatory studies through the use of pastel? Or were they made after the painting, by extracting details and duplicating them in a different, “virtuoso” technique, perhaps in order to emphasize some passages to the author's liking, isolate them, and perhaps reuse them for commercial purposes? The answer to these questions remains elusive.

Nonetheless, the autonomy of these pastels – in the sense that they are complete works of art in themselves – becomes evident when one compares them with Florentine Seicento pastels and those within the “Barocci tradition”, which were less finished and retained their connotation as preliminary studies. In addition, they are all signed and dated on the back, which made them “identifiable” and guaranteed. Finally, it bears recalling that the great painting of the *Investiture of St. Ranieri* was destined to leave Rome and find its place in the Cathedral of Pisa: this was an illustrious location, but also one hidden from the eyes of the large Roman public and of Grand Tourists in Rome.

And what about the iconography? These are “ideal” heads, but they all look different, each one set apart from the others by its own distinctive traits. There is therefore an element of formal selection and one of portraiture. But, on the other hand, it is also evident that the pastels are not portraits of specific people, but rather works “without a subject”, or very loosely related, if at all, with a potential identification as the twelve apostles: an iconography which is not applicable to the characters in the altarpiece and that makes sense only when the number twelve is reached.

Perhaps such an idea results from the perpetual suggestion of Leonardo's

³⁴ On the relations between Rosalba and Luti, see Sani 1988, p. 13; Oberer 2020, p. 98.

Last Supper and the well-known studies of the heads of the apostles, including the controversial “pastel” in Brera³⁵.

Let’s recall what Lomazzo famously wrote about them in the *Trattato*:

Non tacerò anco d’un altro certo modo di colorare, che si dice a pastello [...] e molto fu usato da Leonardo Vinci, il qual fece le teste di Christo, e de gl’apostoli, a questo modo eccellenti, e miracolose in carta. Ma quanto è difficile il colorire in questo nuovo modo tanto è egli facile a guastarsi³⁶.

If Luti knew this passage or if he heard, by word of mouth within the artistic workshops, that Leonardo had drawn pastel heads from the Christ and the apostles of the *Last Supper*, this may have influenced his choice to do the same with his *St. Ranieri*.

As for Lomazzo’s allusion to vulnerability, Luti’s pastels have kept very well, but that doesn’t mean they were not delicate. Rather it means that, due to their delicacy, they were set up right from the start in a way that would protect them. Pastels, it seems, gained strength from their own fragility.

We have already mentioned the circumstances of the original montage. We can add that, in the inventory of the painter’s studio in 1724, several pastels are included in the paintings section because they were framed and hung on walls. While, according to the same document, the drawings were preserved in bundles, portfolios, folders and boxes³⁷.

This difference in handling and conservation, which also becomes a matter of display and therefore of fruition, clearly separates drawings from pastels, with the latter attaining a status comparable to that of oil paintings.

6. Conclusions

Benedetto Luti’s pastels gained considerable recognition in early Settecento Rome. While they had roots in a tradition that the painter was familiar with, having trained in Florence where this medium had long been practiced, these artifacts were also innovative.

In keeping with this heritage, Luti’s pastels often show connections with single details of major oil paintings. However, departing from this tradition,

³⁵ On the vexed questions concerning the sheet in Brera (inv. Reg. Cron. 862) see the thorough discussion by C. Marani in Marani 2001, pp. 150-151, no. 40; Bambach 2010, esp. pp. 193-197. In-depth analysis of the origin of pastel technique, whether in Renaissance France or within the Leonardesque circle, can be found in: McGrath 1995, pp. 62-65; Nova 2010; Oderzo Gabrieli 2015.

³⁶ Lomazzo 1585, p. 193.

³⁷ See Guerrieri Borsoi 2009.

they did not remain at the preparatory stage: they entailed a remarkable degree of formal detail and were inserted in individual frames, suggesting that they may have been regarded as complete and autonomous artifacts.

Furthermore, Luti approached his pastels “pictorially” – that is, his palette is rich, the hues intense, and colors are generally saturated, with a preference for lively strokes. As such, they were praised by coeval sources for their exceptional «force and beauty», and compared to oil paintings. Indeed they played a relevant role in the 18th century positioning of pastel art beyond the realm of drawing practice and alongside that of “pure” painting.

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Appendix

Fig. 1. F. Curradi, *Female head seen from below, leaning to the left*, 1616-17, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, inv. 2905



Fig. 2. F. Furini, *Female head resting on her right hand*, study for the *Allegory of Poetry*, c. 1640, Firenze, Gli Uffizi, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, n. 2470 S



Fig. 3. Baldassarre Franceschini, *Head of a woman*, c. 1650, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Arts Graphiques, inv. 1174



Fig. 4. Benedetto Luti, *Half-length bust of young woman, facing left*, c. 1716, Norfolk, Holkham Hall



Fig. 5. Benedetto Luti, *Half-length bust of young woman from behind, holding a painting or mirror*, c. 1704, Rome, Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Galleria Corsini, inv. 575



Fig. 6. Benedetto Luti, *Half-length bust of a young woman in red, holding a painting or mirror*, c. 1704, Rome, Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Galleria Corsini, inv. 579



Fig. 7. Benedetto Luti, *The Investiture of St. Ranieri*, 1703-1712, Pisa, Duomo



Fig. 8. Benedetto Luti, *The Investiture of St. Ranieri*, 1703-1712, Pisa, Duomo, detail



Fig. 9. Benedetto Luti, *The Investiture of St. Ranieri*, 1703-1712, Pisa, Duomo, detail

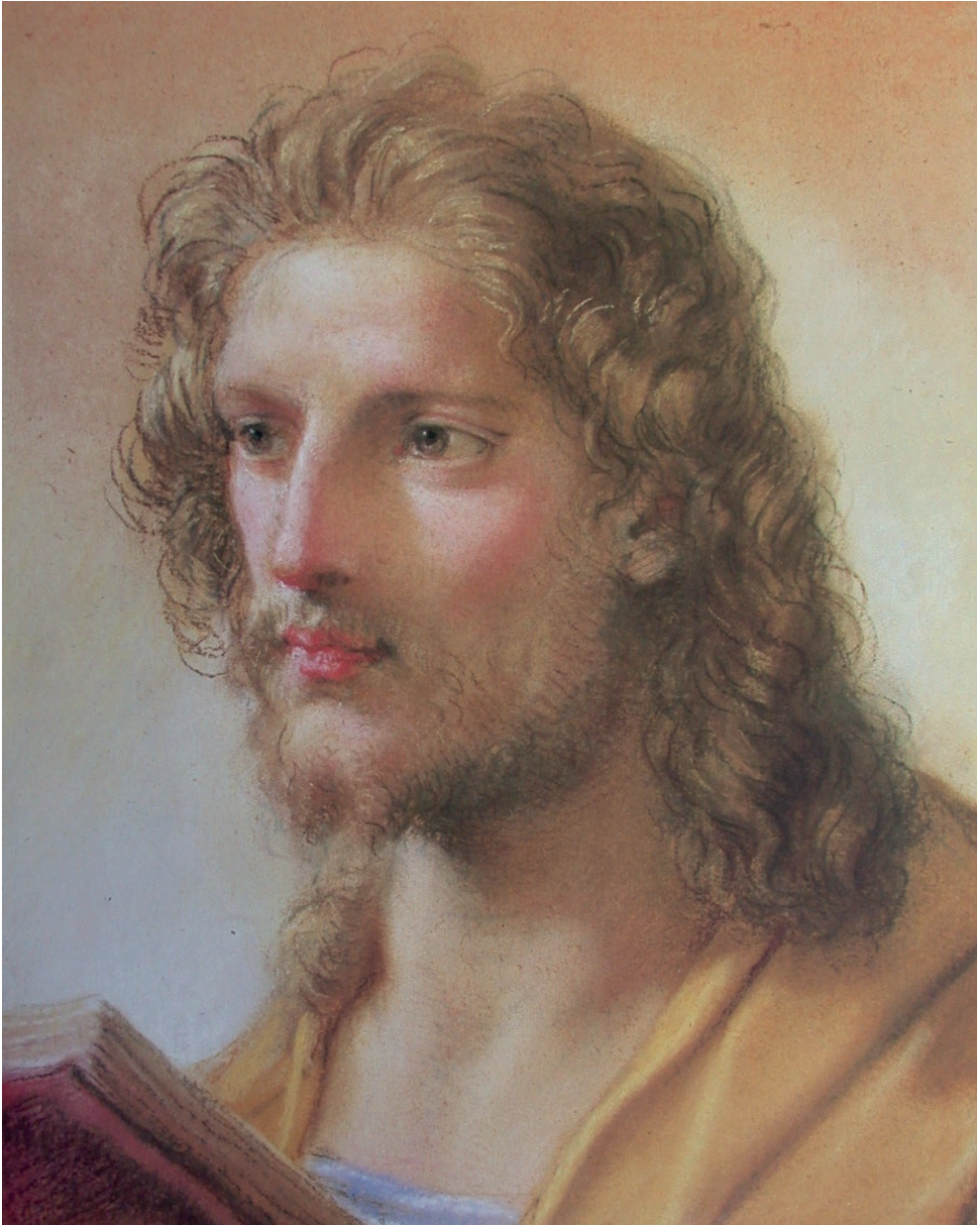


Fig. 10. Benedetto Luti, *Male head with a book (Prophet or Apostle?)*, 1712, Lawrence, KS, University of Kansas, Spencer Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. Crosby Kemper, Jr., 1991.0025

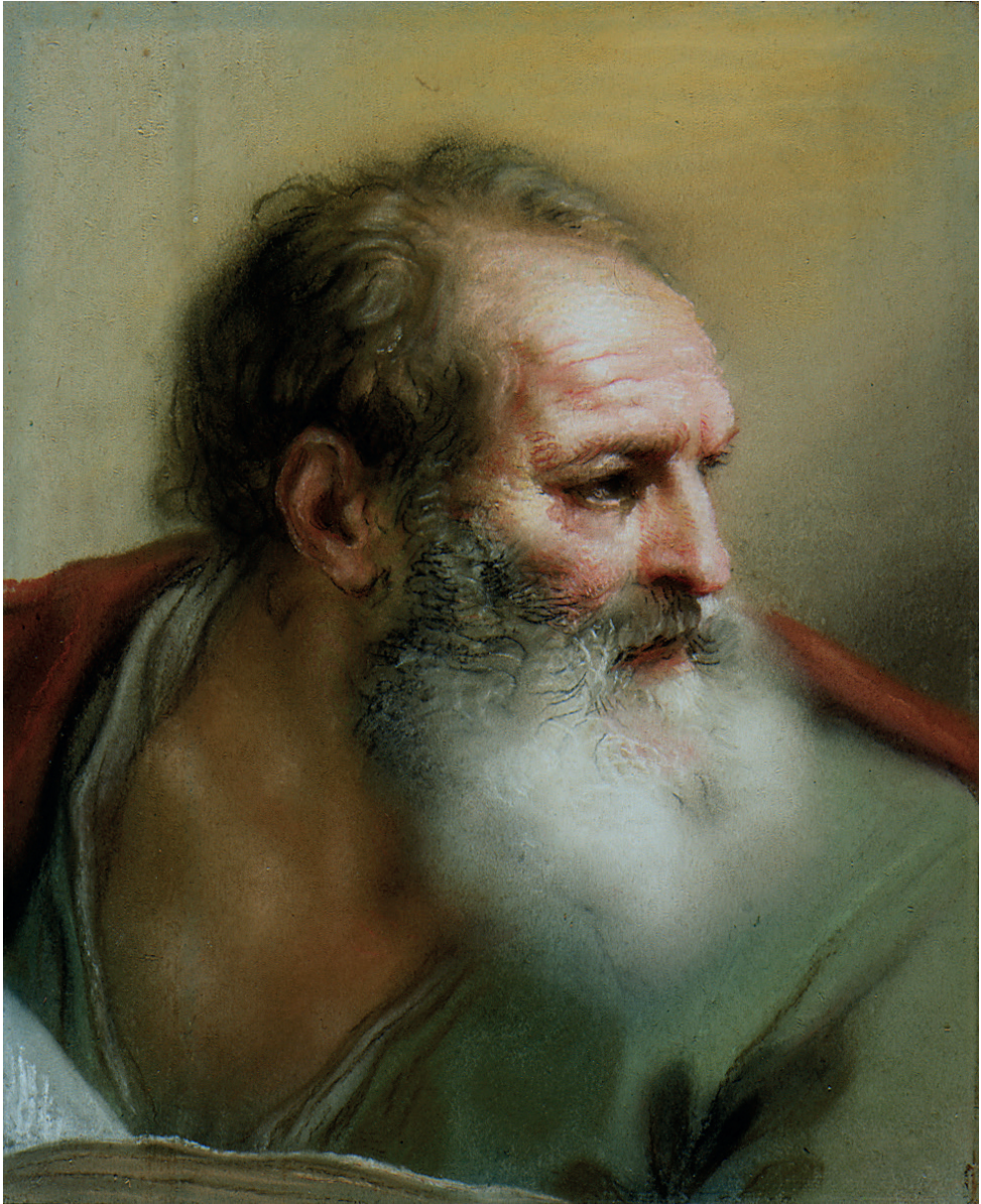


Fig. 11. Benedetto Luti, *Old bearded man with a book (Prophet or Apostle?)*, 1712, Los Angeles, CA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Prints and Drawings Department, Gift of the 1996 Collectors Committee (AC1996.29.1)

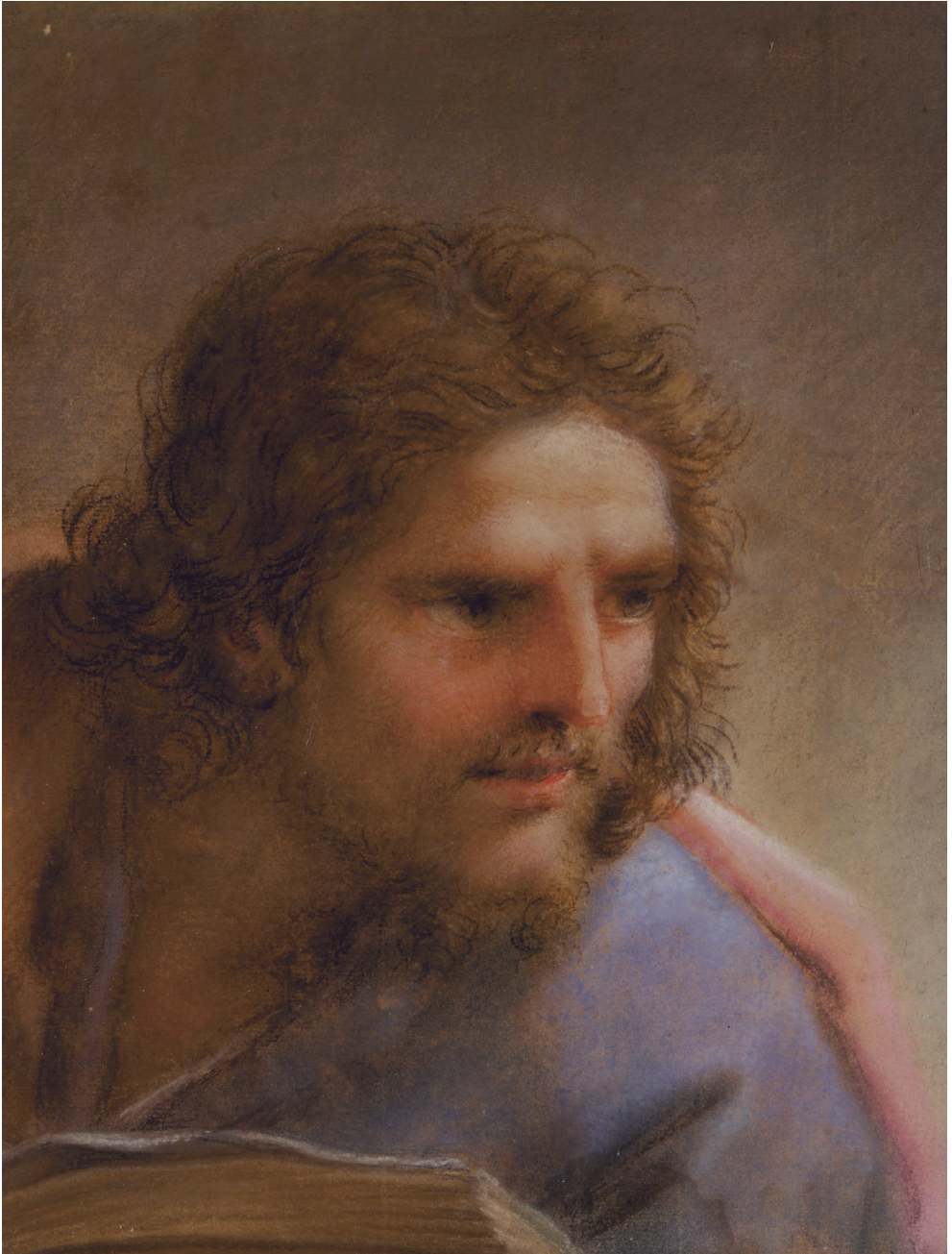


Fig. 12. Benedetto Luti, *Male head with a book (Prophet or Apostle?)*, 1712, formerly New York, NY, Margot Gordon Fine Art

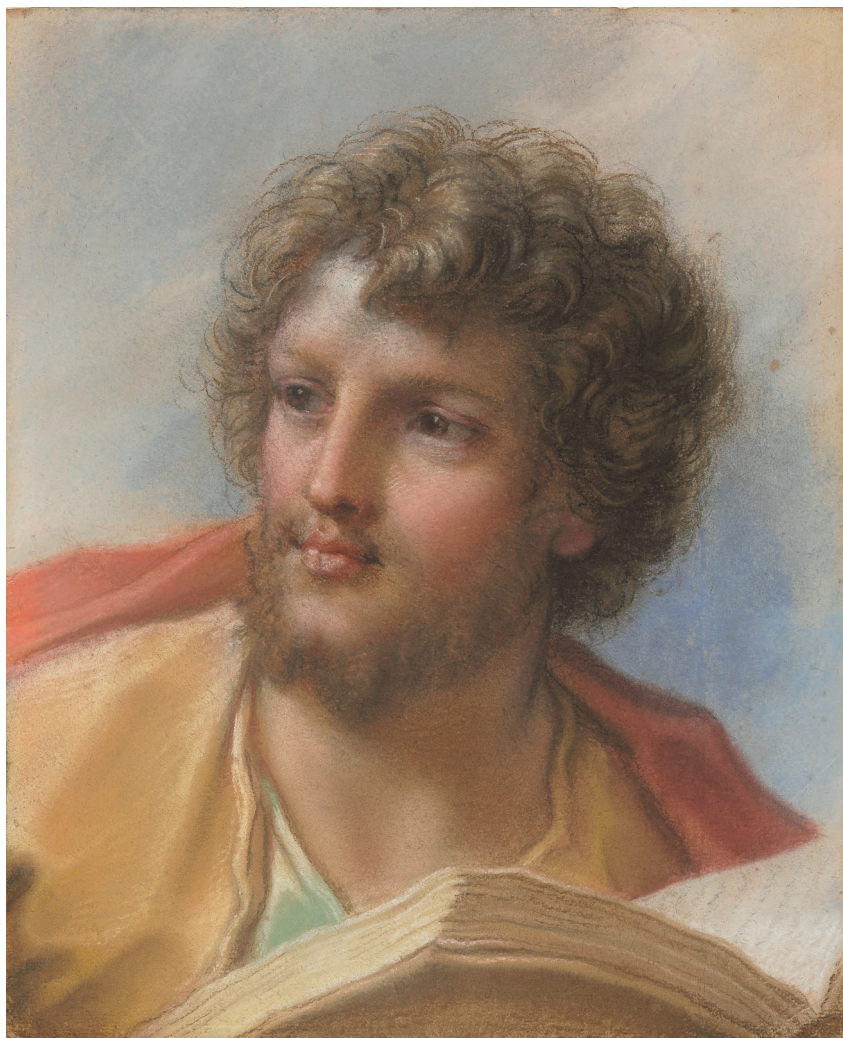


Fig. 13. Benedetto Luti, *Male head with a book (Prophet or Apostle?)*, 1712, formerly London, Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

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