

Pastorino Pastorini (c.1508-1592) and the material significance of wax and stucco in his medal making process

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This paper is a preliminary attempt to consider the ways in which the materials used to make models for portrait medals in sixteenth-century Italy were meaningful agents in the act of portrayal. It will explore this theme through the example of Pastorino Pastorini, whose medallic oeuvre warrants a reinterpretation based on what is known of his artistic practice. The ideas presented here are under development and will be explored more fully in my doctoral thesis on the artist.

Pastorino was born in Castelnuovo Berardenga in the Republic of Siena around 1508, and his career took him across the Italian peninsula working for some of the most important patrons of the period until his death in Florence in 1592.¹ Originally trained in the art of stained-glass under the French artist Guillaume de Marcillat, Pastorino was a multifaceted artist who worked variously as a die-engraver, a stuccoist, a maker of arms, and of courtly

ephemera. Pastorino is, however, best known as the most prolific portrait medallist of sixteenth-century Italy, with more than 250 medals currently attributed to him (fig. 1).² His reputation is not so much concerned with the extent of his medallic oeuvre, but rather with the form his medals typically take. The vast majority of his portrait medals do not have reverse images, resulting in a largely negative critical reception of the artist where it is commonly held that their absence hinders our ability to learn something more of his subjects' character or qualities (fig. 2).³

The artist's proficiency in modelling the portraits themselves is, however, widely acknowledged. Pastorino's naturalistic and pictorial style of representation is exemplified by his attention to the decorative elements of his subjects' bodies, as seen especially in the collection of medals produced in and around Ferrara where the artist spent some twenty years in the orbit of the court(s) of the Este family. Pastorino's choice to meticulously detail the clothing, jewellery, and hair of his subjects over making reverses for most of his medals has been said to signal 'his preoccupation with surfaces,' a perspective which frames Pastorino's oeuvre as a series of hollow exterior appearances (fig. 3).

To find meaning in these medals, they need to be approached differently. Given that Pastorino was a popular and accomplished portrait artist, an appropriate starting



Fig 1. *Camillo Castiglione*, 1561
Pastorino Pastorini
Bronze, 69.5 mm

Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1957.14.914
Photo: courtesy National Gallery of Art



Fig 2. *Girolama Farnese*, 1556
Pastorino Pastorini
Bronze, 64 mm

Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1957.14.925
Photo: courtesy National Gallery of Art



Fig 3. *Lucrezia de' Medici*, 1558
Pastorino Pastorini

Gilded Bronze, 67.7 mm

Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1957.14.918

Photo: courtesy National Gallery of Art

point is the act of portrayal itself, where the modelling materials used by the artist played an active role in giving his subjects form.⁵ The basis for this particular approach is that in the mid-sixteenth century, medallists experimented with the transitory materials used in the medal making process to create finished pieces in themselves.⁶ Thus, their preparatory models made for casting in metal often became medals in their own right. An example of this can be seen in Agnolo Bronzino's painting of the young Florentine aristocrat Lodovico Capponi, where the subject holds what appears to be a wax portrait moulded directly onto black slate. Framed, and presumably without a reverse design, this model is now a medal.⁷

The potential of models as independent medals must have been realised, in the first instance, through the medallists' experience of working with wax, thinking from and with the material to recognise the suitability of its properties for the depiction of the face and body. A malleable material, wax not only lent itself well to modelling intricate details, but its luminosity and warmth meant that it simultaneously served to mimic the appearance of flesh, thereby achieving a strong sense of realism. Furthermore, the material had long-standing classical and ecclesiastical associations; these would not be lost on either makers or viewers, who would have understood the implicit dialogue between material, memory, and commemoration.⁸ The fleshy wax portrait medal, imbued with material meaning, appealed especially to the courtly milieu whose increasing interest for novelties and curiosities in this period must have propelled the phenomena of the model as medal.

Pigments were increasingly added to these small wax portraits to achieve a further sense of realism. Writing to the Burgundian cardinal and art collector Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, the sculptor and medallist Leone Leoni, a contemporary of Pastorino, described the wax

portrait medal he had made of a courtesan, which he was sending with the letter, encouraging the cardinal to pay close attention to the aesthetics of its colour, with its black eye, vermillion mouth, and golden hair.⁹ Leoni appears to have intended this model to be a finished piece but it is known to us in a cast uniface example, which suggests that some surviving cast medals do preserve independent coloured wax portraits.¹⁰

Documentary evidence attests to Pastorino's renown as a wax modeller. Ulisse Aldrovandi, the Bolognese naturalist and antiquarian, whom Pastorino was briefly in the service of, documented the artist as 'among the primary wax workers.'¹¹ Writing in the early seventeenth-century, Giulio Mancini, the Siennese art writer, collector and physician wrote that Pastorino had in fact been one of the first to make small and fragile wax portraits.¹² And the painter Francesco Cavazzoni recalled how he had asked his friend Pastorino to observe his beloved during mass and make a portrait of her in wax.¹³ The most vivid description of Pastorino's portraits can be found in Giorgio Vasari's *Vite* where he writes: 'Pastorino from Siena found a hard stucco to make portraits which were coloured in the likeness of nature, with tinted beards, hair, and the colour of flesh, which made them seem alive.'¹⁴

Stucco, a type of plaster, was another material Pastorino had an extended engagement with, primarily through decorative architectural work.¹⁵ His close working knowledge and experience of the material must have creatively inspired the artist to experiment with it on a much smaller scale. Pastorino's stucco medals are documented in letters, such as in that sent to Ottavio Farnese, Duke of Parma and Piacenza, in which the artist referred to *una medaglia di stucco* he had made.¹⁶ Their visual appeal is suggested by a letter to Grand Duke Francesco I de' Medici from the Florentine ambassador to Ferrara, who

praised the accompanying coloured stucco medal made by Pastorino, presented in a small walnut box, adorned with small pieces of gold, silver, and amber.¹⁷ In another letter, the same ambassador wrote again of having seen several of Pastorino's coloured stucco portraits, of which the artist was said to have imitated everything very well.¹⁸

Vasari's emphasis on Pastorino having found a type of hard stucco to make these portraits suggests that the artist used a novel formulation of the material. It seems likely that this would have been a mixture composed of varied materials, somewhat different to those used for architectural decoration. A recent project at Columbia University has seen scholars recreate technical recipes from a French artisanal manual of an author-practitioner, compiled in the late sixteenth-century.¹⁹ The manual contains an entry for making 'stucco for molding' which, according to the author, is versatile and cheap to make.²⁰ The recipe itself results in a type of stucco which is plastic rather than liquid, a material characteristic consistent with comparative historical recipes. The mixture of stucco used by Pastorino to fashion his portraits must have therefore been malleable and, like wax, suitable for depiction and representation.

This is aptly demonstrated by a vignette in Vasari's *Life of Alfonso Lombardi* where the sculptor, taking up a small round box in the shape of a medal, fashioned inside it a portrait of the emperor Charles V in stucco.²¹ Lombardi, who, according to Vasari was the first to make stucco portrait medals, apparently kept them white, which would have emphasised the material's marble-like qualities and antique connotations. Given that Pastorino applied colour to his stucco portraits, it may be that he sought to mask their materiality, stucco being low in the hierarchy



Fig 4. *Madonna and Child* (detail), c. 1440-1450
Workshop of Jacopo della Quercia
Painted stucco, 99 x 66 cm
Fondazione Salvatore Romano, Florence
Photo: © Una D'Elia



Fig 5. *Archduke Ernst of Austria*, c. 1575-1591
Antonio Abondio
Wax, 82 x 64 mm, without frame
The Wallace Collection, London, S434
Photo: © Trustees of the Wallace Collection

of materials. The descriptions of them being lifelike suggests, though, that his intention was to achieve greater verisimilitude.

A hardened, textured stucco surface could be painted, achieving an alternative chromatic effect to waxes coloured with pigments. Viewers of coloured stucco portrait medals would have perhaps experienced them in the same way as polychrome sculpture more broadly. The ubiquitous stucco reliefs of the Madonna and Child were, for example, believed to have a real living presence (fig. 4). To achieve a further sense of realism, additional materials could be set in a stucco, or indeed wax, surface, as is seen in several wax portraits by the medallist Antonio Abondio (fig. 5). Pastorino's interest in the transformation of materials included the imitation of pearls and precious stones, and it is possible that he embedded these fake gemstones directly into the models.²² This may account for some of the more ornate and decorative elements seen in the artist's cast medals (fig. 6).

The near absence of surviving stucco and wax portrait medals by the artist complicates any discussion of what appears to have been one of his principal preoccupations. If his stucco portraits were freely composed of perishable materials, their poor survival is not surprising. A signed portrait relief in so-called Medici porcelain of Grand Duke Francesco I de' Medici does, however, survive in the Bargello Museum collection.²³ It is one of Pastorino's last medals (in the broadest sense), made during his employment at the Tuscan court as, notably, master of



Fig 6. *Eleonora of Austria*, 1561
Pastorino Pastorini
Bronze, 68.3 mm
Samuel H. Kress
Collection, National
Gallery of Art,
Washington, 1957.14.919
Photo: courtesy National
Gallery of Art

stucco. The survival of wax portraits is similarly low, the material being easily susceptible to heat. A rectangular wax portrait, again of Francesco I, and also in the Bargello collection, has been attributed to Pastorino on stylistic grounds, though this attribution is not entirely solid.²⁴

Whether our knowledge of Pastorino's portrait medals in stucco and wax can be reconciled with the large number of surviving cast medals is an open question. As seen in the case of Leoni's wax portrait medal of a courtesan, casts were taken from coloured waxes, and the same will surely be true of some of Pastorino's plastic portrait medals.²⁵ Being fragile and unique pieces, they were ephemeral by nature. To preserve them, the artist may have taken copies of them himself, as perhaps suggested by the fine lead examples in the British Museum's collection,²⁶ from which further casts could be made if desired.

In any case, given that Pastorino and other medallists experimented with transitory materials such as wax and stucco to make independent portrait medals, their material agency, as understood by contemporaries, merits further investigation. These materials had a meaningful role to play in how portraits were fashioned, imagined, and appreciated in their time. Approaching Pastorino's cast medals in this way not only brings us a little closer to the artist's original intentions, but also demonstrates the significance of materiality to the evolution of the medal in sixteenth-century Italy and beyond.

NOTES

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2. Toderi, G. and Vannel, F.: *Le medaglie italiane del XVI secolo*, vol. 2, Florence, 2000, pp. 581–634.

3. For Stephen K. Scher, '[Pastorino's] portraits tell us nothing about the character and personality of his sitters, and the lack of reverses deprives us of any further insight into their natures', in Scher, S. K.: *The Currency of Fame: Portrait Medals of the Renaissance*, New York, 1994, p. 22.

4. Waddington, R. B.: Graven Images: Sixteenth-Century Portrait Medals of Jews, *The Medal*, no. 23, 1993, pp. 13–21.

5. Lucidi, D.: Terracotta, stucco e cera. Appunti sul ritratto in medaglia e in scultura nel Cinquecento emiliano, in *La collezione di Mario Scaglia* (ed. Lucia Simonato), vol. 1, Milan, 2000, pp. 85–99.

6. Lightbown, R.: Le cere artistiche del Cinquecento, *Arte illustrata*, no. 30/33, 1970, pp. 46–55. See also Attwood, 2003, pp. 41–42.

7. The painting is in The Frick Collection. See <https://collections.frick.org/objects/141/lodovico-capponi>, [accessed 23-11-2023].

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9. Quoted in Lightbown, 1970, p. 50.

10. See, for example, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1987-0612-1, [accessed 23-11-23].

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12. Mancini, G.: *Breve ragguaglio delle cose di Siena*, 1618–1625, Siena, Biblioteca Comunale, ms. C.IV.18, transcription by Beatrice Buozzi, https://www.memofonte.it/home/files/pdf/MS_Mancini.pdf, [accessed 23-11-2023].

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14. Vasari, G.: *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori con nuove annotazioni e commenti di Gaetano Milanesi* (ed. Gaetano Milanesi), Florence, 1878–1885, vol. 5, 1880, p. 390.

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16. Ronchini, A.: Il Pastorino da Siena, *Atti e memorie delle RR. deputazioni di storia patria per le provincie Modenesi e Parmensi*, no. 5, 1870, pp. 39–44.

17. Milanesi, G.: *Documenti per la storia dell'arte senese*, vol. 3, Siena, 1856, p. 568.

18. Cited in Vasari, 1878–1885, vol. 4, 1879, p. 438.

19. <https://www.makingandknowing.org/>, [accessed 23-11-2023].

20. On the reconstruction of the recipe, see Elizondo-Garza, N.: *Making and Knowing Project*, <https://www.doi.org/10.7916/1n6h-5f69>, [accessed 23-11-2023].

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23. Langedijk, K.: *The Portraits of the Medici, 15th–18th centuries*, vol. 1, Florence, 1981, p. 123.

24. Langedijk, 1981, p. 123.

25. On the replication of Pastorino's stucco medals, see Cupperi, W.: Beyond the notion of German medals. Some cases of transnational patronage, in *Wettstreit in Erz: Porträtmedaillen der deutschen Renaissance* (ed. W. Cupperi, M. Hirsch, A. Kranz and U. Pfisterer), Berlin, 2013, p. 84.

26. See Attwood, 2003, pp. 242–279.