

The *Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici*
by Frans Pourbus the Younger
or, the Habsburg temptation at the French court



Blaise Ducos

**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

Testu hau Creative Commons lizentziapean (mota: Aitortu–EzKomertziala-LanEratorririkGabe) argitaratu da (by-nc-nd) 4.0 international. Beraz, berau banatu, kopiatu eta erreproduzitu daiteke (edukian aldaketarik egin gabe), betiere, irakaskuntza edo ikerketarako helburuekin, eta egilea eta jatorria aitortuta. Ezin da merkataritza helburuetarako erabili. Lizentzia honen baldintzak <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-ncnd/4.0/legalcode> webgunean kontsultatu daitezke.



Ezin dira irudiak erabili eta erreproduzitu, argazkien eta/edo lanen egile-eskubideen jabeek berriazko baimena eman ezean.

© of the texts: Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa Fundazioa-Fundación Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao

Photography credits

- © Bibliothèque nationale de France: figs. 6 and 7
- © Bilboko Arte Ederren Museoa Fundazioa-Fundación Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao: figs. 1, 3 and 4
- © Kunsthistorisches Museum mit MVK und ÖTM: fig. 2
- © Museo Nacional del Prado: fig. 8
- © RMN / Thierry Le Mage: fig. 5
- © RMN / Hervé Lewandowski: figs. 12 and 13
- © Sistema Museale Civico della città di Vicenza: fig. 10
- © 2010. Photo Scala, Florence - courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali: fig. 9

Text published in:

B'09 : *Buletina* = *Boletín* = *Bulletin*. Bilbao : Bilboko Arte Eder Museoa = Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao = Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, no. 5, 2010, pp. 109-137.

A Flemish portrait painted in Italy

Until now, the *Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici* in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum [fig. 1] has apparently been the object of some confusion¹. And by this I am not referring to the old attribution of the work to Gheeraerts, with which it came onto the art market in the mid-1950s, but rather to a more difficult question²: the date it was actually painted. Traditionally dated to artist Frans Pourbus the Younger's (1569-1622) French period (Pourbus was a court portrait painter of Flemish origin who became a naturalized Frenchman after a European career), the painting should in fact be linked to the years the artist spent in Italy (1600-1609). In this essay I suggest, as far as I know for the first time, that the work in Bilbao should be dated to that (previous) phase in Pourbus the Younger's career and that, in line with this revised date, the painting in question should be seen as the masterwork that gave the artist his entry to the French court; so the portrait of the second Medici queen of France is clearly not just another royal portrait. It is the key, the formula that allowed the artist to get away from the Habsburg sphere of influence and, in a career of remarkable plasticity, come into the orbit of the Bourbons. The fact that Pourbus has remained in France's collective memory as the painter of the early 17th-century royal family is due above all to this fully Italianate production imbued with the Habsburg spirit. How this paradox should come to be I seek to explain in what follows here.

1 It was part of the Gustave Rothan Collection, auctioned 29 - 31 May 1890 at the Georges Petit gallery, where it was given the number 88 (Lugt 49176). There, according to an annotated copy kept at the RKD, The Hague, it was acquired by Donaldson for a sum of 17,200 francs. It subsequently became part of the Duke of Roxburghe's Collection until, on 1 June 1956, it was auctioned as a work by M. Gheeraerts at Christie's (lot no. 32), where it was bought by Halsborough. Ana Sánchez-Lassa, keeper at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, informed me the painting was on the Madrid art market in the 1970s (Antigüedades Eutiquiano, in the plaza de Santa Ana in Madrid), where it was acquired by Lorenzo Hurtado de Saracho, who deposited it in the Museum in 1976, finally bequeathing it to the institution in 1984. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Ana Sánchez-Lassa for asking me to write this article. Our discussion while standing before Pourbus's work was a memorable moment.

2 As already stated, at Christie's 1956 auction it was acquired by Halsborough, which explains the comment made by Federico Zeri on the back of a reproduction of the painting: «Halsborough?» (documentation from the Fondazione Federico Zeri, Villa la Mentana, University of Bologna).



1. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici, 1606-1607
Oil on canvas, 214.7 x 124.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 84/86

Pourbus's Italian years were essentially spent on the move. At the instigation of his patrons, the Gonzaga ducal family, the Flemish artist had to travel all over the country, to Naples or to Rome. But he was also obliged to cover territory in the Empire, through the Austrian Tyrol; finally he was sent to the kingdom of France. It was during this last journey, in 1606, that the official portrait painter of the court of Mantua had to paint the solemn and splendid image of the Queen of France, Maria de' Medici. This, so far, was established exclusively through correspondence published in the late 19th century. The actual painting had never come to light:

The many occupations I have had without cease since Your Excellency left Mantua, and those that I still have, in the service of My Most Serene Lord, have not permitted me until now sufficient time to attend to the service Y. E. wishes. [...]. Thus it is that the original portrait of the Queen, owing to the impediments stated, remains unfinished, with only the face completed, with all adornments still to be done, viz. the collar and the robes, for which reason to extract a copy properly the original would need to be completely finished, and to the present no copy has been made; I have to make one for my Most Serene Lady which means I must first finish everything by my own hand; it not being possible for the young apprentices to begin without having a completed portrait, so some 20 days must pass before the copy may be delivered, because it has yet to be begun, and then we may begin on the copies; but if Y. E. is happy with a copy in the state that the original is now in, if you let me know a copy may be produced that much faster, and given that I am not master of my self as I am in the service of the Most Serene Lord Duke, I cannot act with the same promptness as I would if I were free of duties [...] finding myself at the orders of H. S. H., who in any case should be made aware of this, and seeing myself obliged to render account of all the works that pass through my hands and having this order from H. Most Ser. H. For my part I shall not neglect my service of Y. E. working with all the diligence and speed that is possible and finally with all due reverence, I humbly bow before Y.E. and kiss your hand. From Y.E. most hum. and most dev. servant, Francesco Purbis³.

Dating from January 1607, this letter, written to justify the delay in the execution of the portrait of the Queen of France, makes sufficiently clear that Pourbus had to paint Maria de' Medici and even produce replicas of the original work. The Queen, we recall, was sister to the Duchess of Mantua and, therefore, sister-in-law of the Duke Vincenzo and aunt of the Gonzaga princes and princesses. It is not hard to imagine the commission from the court of the city of Mantua for several copies of the portrait of such an illustrious and close member of the family. However, and I must insist on this point, to date it had not been possible to connect any surviving work with the text that proves such a commission was made.

At this point we need to return briefly to chronology. Pourbus had joined the retinue of Eleonora de' Medici, Duchess of Mantua, in France on the occasion of the baptism of the Dauphin, the future Louis XIII, in 1606; we know the painter passed through Villers-Cotterêts. On 20 August 1606 he started work on a portrait of Maria de' Medici⁴. Back in Mantua he was to work on a portrait of the Queen, without doubt the one he had

3 «Le molte occupationi che di continuo ho havuto dopo che V. E. si è partita di Mantova, et quelle che tuttavia tengo, per servizio del Serenissimo mio signore non m'hanno permesso fino a quest'hora tempo in comodità di poter attendere al servizio desiderato da V. E. [...] Oltra che il retratto originale della Regina per detti impedimenti è rimasto imperfetto non essendovi finito altro che solo la faccia mancandovi tutti li adornamenti cioè il colaro et l'habito, si che per estraere bene una copia, bisognerebbe che l'originale fosse del tutto fornito, et sin ora non si è ancora cavato alcuna copia, io ne ho da far una per Madama Serenissima mia Signora la quale bisogna che io finisca tutta di mia mano non potendo; giovani lavorarvi attorno senza havere un retratto finito inanzi, sarà bene 20 giorni avanti che detta copia si fornita, perchè è ancora da cominciare, et allora se potranno cavar le copie, però se V. E. se contentasse d'una copia in la maniera che esta di presente originale, avisandomi se potria fare assai più presto, et perciò che io non sono patrono di me stesso essendo obligato al Serenissimo Signor Duca, non posso eseguire con quella prontezza quel tanto che io faria se fosse in libertà [...] essendomi anco comandato di S. A. S. il quale ni ogni modo bisogna che lo sappia, essendo io obligato di darli conto di tutte le opere, che mi passano per le mani et havendo questo ordine di S. A. Sereness. Non mancaro del canto mio di servire V. E. con ogni diligenza e prontezza a me possibile et qui per fine con ogni debita reverenza humilmente a V. E. m'inchino e bacio le mani. Di V. E. Humiliss. et devottiss. servitore, Francesco Purbis». Letter from Frans Pourbus the Younger to Ferdinando Gonzaga, Mantua, 15 January 1607. The letter mentions a portrait of Maria de' Medici painted after the artist's visit to France, and the replicas. Published by Baschet 1868, pp. 439-440.

4 Ibid., pp. 298-299.



2. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of the Archduchess Eleonora of Austria
1603-1604
Oil on canvas, 111.5 x 92 cm
Ambras Castle, Deposit by
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
Inv. no. GG 3070

started in France. On 15 January 1607, as we have already seen, he explained to Prince Ferdinando Gonzaga why he needed so much time to execute the work the Prince had commissioned from him. Pourbus left Paris in September 1606; he did not actually complete the original canvas until he returned to Mantua, this being sent later to France; the replica Ferdinando demanded was to come as a sequel of this first creation. So, as the known facts stand, we are looking for a painting executed in the winter of 1606-1607 of the Queen of France, several years younger than she was in other (known) portraits Pourbus executed in Paris in the decade beginning in 1610.

In the painting in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, we have a perfectly recognizable Maria de' Medici, visibly younger than in the portraits Pourbus painted once he had settled in the *faubourg* Saint-Germain. This is our first datum. Above all, the composition, the manner of executing the sumptuous crimson drapes against which the royal frame is set (a bravura passage that places the work directly in a regal context) and the pose that highlights the hands, inevitably suggest the portraits series at Ambras Castle, dating from 1603-1604, which show the young archduchesses of the House of Habsburg, painted by Frans Pourbus the Younger⁵. There are similarities in particular between our portrait and the *Portrait of the Archduchess Eleonora of Austria* [fig. 2]: the hands, texture of the drapes, pose, the low angle and the execution of the flesh tones. The exceptional measurements of the Bilbao painting (where the Queen is shown life-size) allow the artist to achieve an amplitude and majesty not found in the medium-sized Austrian portraits. This comparison, which I believe has never previously been suggested, is the second datum in the identification of the Bilbao painting as the portrait of Maria de' Medici Pourbus painted in 1606-1607.

5 See Heinz/Schütz 1976, cats. 100, 105 and 106.



3. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici, 1606-1607
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail



4. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici, 1606-1607
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail

A major feature of this finely conserved canvas is its quality. It is certainly not the work of a novice (Pourbus was 37). Far from it, in fact: it is from the hand of a master of court portraiture. Indeed, behind the apparent economy of means, the work abounds in detail and boasts a genuine science of visual manipulation. The diamonds in the sitter's hair, including the "Beau Sancy", one of the foremost pieces of the Crown jewels [fig. 3], the freshwater baroque pearls that fascinated this Medici and which are just one example, in the shape of earrings, of the incredible amount of pearls the young lady is wearing (bracelets, long necklaces and broaches), diamonds carved "in table form", to which Pourbus devotes their muffled sheen (pins, signet ring), a sheen markedly different from the sparkle of diamonds known since the introduction, in the 19th century, of innovations in the art of cutting precious stones, and finally the lace [fig. 4]. All this finery alerts us to the fact that the sitter is not of the common run of mortals. Without using the French regalia, Pourbus suggests regal presence. The beauty of the actual paint handling has much to do with this, as has the contrast between black and red that structures the entire portrait (with the play of the scarlet fabric visible between the gaps left by the black)⁶; but the role of perspective also needs to be emphasized. Although the subject is seen from a high angle, she dominates and gives the impression of being naturally elevated with regard to anyone viewing the work. The two contradictory perspectives that coexist here give the work a surprising vibration. Perspective enables the eye to penetrate the composition, situating it above the chair and the table; but we have to lift our gaze towards the queen, because of the low angle from which she has been painted. The science of space is clear throughout the work: one gets the feeling the air revolves around Maria de' Medici, and this is where we get a glimpse of what Pourbus would be capable of as a painter of great religious compositions packed with numerous characters [fig. 5].

⁶ Black here is not an indication of mourning. The combination with red would be incomprehensible if associated with some funereal meaning. The colours cannot be used as an argument for dating the execution of the painting after the murder of Henry IV of France.



5. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
The Last Supper, 1618
Oil on canvas, 287 x 370 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Inv. no. 1704

Last, in painting Maria de' Medici, Pourbus focuses on a distinctive beauty. The finely curled hair, the oval face, the hazel eyes, the broad forehead, in particular the pale flesh tones: everything flows together to imbue the queen with nobility, in keeping with the Flemish craft that his commissioners could expect from a painter whose roots were in Bruges and Antwerp. The traditional Habsburg approach to the portrait of majesty appears in the haughty pose and the austere but nonetheless rich accessories: the studded chair gives the impression of having been upholstered in red velvet; the pilasters and marble floor denote a palatial setting. The beauty is inseparable from the accompanying *mise-en-scène*, particularly spectacular in this case, with the opulent red drapery recalling the canopies that, from the Middle Ages on, covered the French monarchs during their public appearances [figs. 6 and 7], and which also echoes the great portraits of the Habsburg dynasty [fig. 8]. It would be fair to describe the visual culture of the painting as mainly Spanish, although the artist has not neglected the French milieu to which it is addressed.

To sum up, the argument of style is what allows us to fill the gap the sources left. The painting in Bilbao fulfils perfectly the conditions for us to consider it the portrait of Maria de' Medici Frans Pourbus the Younger painted after his sojourn in France in 1606.

One final observation: there is a smaller, bust-only variation of the painting in Florence's Pitti Palace [fig. 9], with substantial modifications in the queen's dress and general finery. In earlier times, the painting was attributed to Scipione Pulzone⁷, but here again we come across the Bilbao face. Furthermore, American philanthropist Mrs Phoebe Apperson Hearst (1842-1919) had what must have been a rather mediocre copy in her collection (presented in San Francisco in 1917), with variations that merely simplified the Bilbao composition⁸.

7 See Venturi 1934, vol. IX, part VII, p. 778.

8 Judging by the reproduction in the Frick Art Reference Library, New York. See Laurvik 1917.



6. Jean Bourdichon (c. 1457-1521)
*Jean Marot offers his book to Anne of Brittany,
Queen of France*
Folio No. 1 from Jean Marot. *Le Voyage de Gênes-Tours*, 1508
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Inv. no. Fr. 5091



7. Jean Bourdichon (c. 1457-1521)
Louis XII's entry into Genoa
Folio No. 22v from Jean Marot. *Le Voyage de Gênes-Tours*, 1508
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Inv. no. Fr. 5091



8. Alonso Sánchez Coello (1531/1532-1588)
The infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia and Magdalena Ruiz, c. 1586
 Oil on canvas, 207 cm x 129 cm
 Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
 Inv. no. P00861



9. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici, 1606-1607
 Oil on canvas, 83 x 62.7 cm
 Palazzo Pitti, Florence
 Inv. no. 1912

Some questions of the earlier provenance of the painting in the museum in Bilbao apparently require delicate handling. In truth, no one knows where the *Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici* was before the late 19th century. Like a fine *Portrait of Isabelle of France*, the picture was at that time in the Paris collection of plenipotentiary minister Gustave Rothan (1822-1890)⁹. By then the work was properly attributed, as is clear from the note in H. Vion's engraving (1883-1890): "F. Pourbus pinx. H. Vion sc."; corroboration is to be found in the catalogue of the auction held on Rothan's death, and which attributes the painting to "Porbus (Frans), the Younger". Among the objects dispersed on the occasion of the auction, was a bust portrait of the French queen, now lost¹⁰. The character of Gustave Rothan, an ardent patriot of Alsatian origin and a leading diplomat in the Second Empire, surely explains his marked predilection for sitters from the French royal family¹¹.

Another point of interest is that the composition of the work now in Bilbao is comparable to a little known portrait of Margarita Gonzaga [fig. 10]¹². Pourbus painted the princess Gonzaga in 1606, the year she married

9 The *Portrait of Isabella of France* was lot 91 in the auction held on the death of Rothan (Lugt no. 49176), where it was described as a portrait of Queen Anna of Austria. It is in fact a portrait of Louis XIII's sister, Isabella of France, the future Queen of Spain. Anna of Austria is often confused with her sister-in-law Isabelle of France (on this issue, see Ost 2000). The basic reason for the confusion, which Ost does not stress, is the fact that Maria de' Medici, who directed what Pourbus produced, was trying to discredit the *infanta* of Spain, Louis XIII's young wife and an obvious rival in the French court, in the field of regal imagery, while favouring the dissemination of her daughter Isabella's image in preparation for the «Spanish marriages» of 1615.

10 Lot 89 (oil on canvas. 62 x 49 cm), Rothan sale (see note 1). The work in question is not reproduced in the catalogue. Identifying it is still problematic.

11 See the entry «Rothan, Gustave» in Sitzmann 1909-1910.

12 See Ballarin 1982, p. 52.



10. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of Margarita Gonzaga, 1606-1607
 Oil on canvas, 124.5 x 100 cm
 Pinacoteca Civica, Vicenza, Italy
 Inv. no. A 81



11. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici, 1606-1607
 Oil on copper, 5.4 x 4.2 cm
 Private collection, United States

the Duke of Bar and Lorraine. Although this other painting shows the princess only to the knee, the affinities with the portrait discussed here are evident: the same pose, a background entirely taken up by heavy crimson drapes and identical flesh tones. Frans Pourbus the Younger's first sojourn in France has left us works basically datable to 1606-1607 and, until now, poorly situated in their creative context: the artist's long, rich Italian period, marked by several decisive European journeys.

To end, some mention is required of a beautiful miniature, now privately owned, of Maria de' Medici, and which is quite clearly linked to the Bilbao painting [fig. 11]¹³. In the catalogue of a 1983 exhibition in Worcester (Massachusetts) featuring this small portrait, James Welu pointed out how close the two works were, without situating them in the context of Pourbus the Younger's first period in France. The idea that the Bilbao painting may be considered a mould for a number of replicas and autograph reductions (including the miniatures) fits the known facts, not only about Pourbus the Younger's art, but also the requirements of the court portrait in the first years of the Seicento.

13 Auctioned at Christie's, New York, 27 January 2009, lot 38: «The Scholar's Eye: Property from the Julius Held Collection» (I).

Italian prestige and Habsburg temptation

In my opinion, contrary to what might be thought a priori, the importance of the *Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici* by Frans Pourbus the Younger is not to be explained by any arrogant Italianism supposedly dominant at the French court in the decade after 1600. Links between the kingdom of France and its neighbouring country were certainly strong and longstanding, going back at the very least to the wars of Italy and the French monarchy's dream of expansion, and more tangibly to the late 16th century: in 1579, Henri Estienne published his *Deux dialogues du nouveau langage françois. Italianisé et autrement desguizé, principalement entre les courtisans de ce temps...* (*Two dialogues of the new French language, Italianized and disguised in other ways, principally between the courtiers of the time ...*), a satire on the Italianate pedantry in vogue at the Valois court; in 1580, an exasperated Montaigne complained that only French people were to be found in Rome; in 1589, also in Rome, cardinal de Joyeuse promoted the architectural formalization of Saint Louis des Français; and, to give another example, Honoré d'Urfé's *L'Astrée*, begun in 1607, was inspired by Italian models that he reworked. In short, the French elites knew Italy, and tended either to mock the country or fall in love with it. Italy, cradle of the arts, exercised a powerful fascination in France that is difficult to overestimate¹⁴.

While the importance of this Italian influence on the French court in the early 17th century cannot be overlooked (an influence favoured by the arrival on the French throne of an Italian princess, in the person of Maria de' Medici), we need however to look at another power, a different influence, one might say. I refer of course to the Habsburgs. Briefly, at the time France was caught between Spanish influence and Italian influence. As we have seen, the latter had a powerful attraction for French artists and intellectuals, French taste and French fashion. Although the Spanish ascendancy, ambivalent in the aftermath of 1560 and the wars of religion, threatened anew with the creation in France of a particularly active Spanish Catholic party and the Spanish crown's designs on the French crown, it was given an unexpected uplift after the death of Henry IV of France in 1610, thanks to his widow Maria de' Medici. We know the queen mother was the promoter of the political and diplomatic rapprochement with Spain, which materialized in the "Spanish marriages" of 1615, when the future Louis XIII of France wed the *infanta* Anna of Austria, while the Prince of Asturias, the future Philip IV of Spain, married Isabelle of Bourbon. In 1606, in the festivities at Fontainebleau held to celebrate the baptism of the Dauphin (the occasion that would determine Pourbus's visit to France in the Duchess of Mantua Eleonora de' Medici's entourage), Henry IV was alive and the situation was very different: the king was fighting vigorously against Spanish influence. There has even been talk of French "hispanophobia" in the decade starting in 1600¹⁵. This attitude, it should be added, was above all political: the house of France sought to reaffirm its position against its feared Spanish rival. Even so, Spanish cultural influence continued pretty much unabated and a host of Spanish literary masterpieces were translated into French in the space of just a few years. Royal interpreter César Oudin set the tone with the 1607 publication of his *Treasure of the Spanish and French Languages*, a work designed to bridge the linguistic and cultural divide between the two countries¹⁶. When Maria de' Medici posed for Frans Pourbus the Younger in 1606, the influence of Spanish things in France was suspect and at the same time undeniable.

The House of Habsburg ruled in Spain. Without going into detail here about the dynastic networks that vivified and structured the courtly Europe of the early 17th century, I would like to make a few observations about Maria de' Medici. The Queen of France was the daughter of Joanna, Archduchess of Austria (1547-1578);

14 These lines are based on the «Italie et France» entry by Jean-François Dubost in Bély 2003, pp. 679-681.

15 See entry «Espagne et France» by Bartolomé Benassar in Bély 2003, p. 503.

16 Oudin 1607.



12. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of Henry IV, King of France, in black, c. 1610
Oil on panel, 39 x 25 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Inv. no. 1708



13. Frans Pourbus the Younger (1569-1622)
Portrait of Henry IV, King of France, c. 1610 or later
Oil on panel, 43 x 28 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Inv. no. 1707

so she had Habsburg blood and descended directly from the Imperial branch reigning in Vienna (and Prague with Rudolf II, who died in 1612). Her sister, Eleonora, married the Duke of Mantua, Vincenzo Gonzaga, who, it is sometimes forgotten, was the great-nephew of Charles I of Spain and V of Germany by his mother, Eleonor of Austria (1534-1594). In short, we are perfectly justified in considering Maria de' Medici as belonging to the Habsburg lineage.

It happened that, in 1606, the artist for whom Maria de' Medici posed, Frans Pourbus the Younger, was particularly well familiarized with the spirit of the Habsburg princes. A few years previously (1603-1604), he had journeyed to Austria to portray the Archduchesses promised to the European aristocratic matrimony market; he was the Duchy of Mantua's official painter, Mantua being an Imperial domain (although the Duke of Mantua tried to relax the bond, by maintaining, in one of Europe's most sophisticated courts, a relation of symbolic rivalry with the Imperial court); above all, Pourbus had begun his career in the southern Low Countries, in the service of the Archdukes Albert and Isabella Clara Eugenia in Brussels, leaving images of them in the purest tradition of Sánchez Coello. By virtue of his training, his patrons, commissioners, protectors and professional career, Frans Pourbus the Younger was the embodiment, in the early 17th century, of the great tradition of the Habsburg court portrait. This is the artist Maria de' Medici discovered in 1606.

In a word, to send for Pourbus meant introducing the art of the Habsburg courts in the Musée du Louvre and Fontainebleau. The Bilbao painting crystallized this fundamental diplomatic and artistic shift at the turn of the century. The consequences are startling: the *Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici* now on view at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum needs to be put alongside the small likenesses of Henry IV in the Musée du Louvre. These two precious panels are usually considered the foundation stones of Frans Pourbus the Younger's French edifice, which saw him change his name to "François" Pourbus in his naturalization papers in 1618¹⁷. Much more revealing is the interpretation of these works as the necessary continuation of the artist's first contact with the French court, in 1606. When he settled in Paris, probably in late 1609, the first commission Pourbus received was, of course, to paint the king the way he had portrayed the queen a few years before. The result is Henry IV in black, but also Henry IV in armour [figs. 12 and 13]. This way one feels the chain of logic has been respected and chronology clarified. In the last instance, one can only marvel at Maria de' Medici's determination to unite French art and the politics of the kingdom of France with Habsburg taste and inflections.

Conclusion

In my view, the *Portrait of doña Maria de' Medici*, an undoubted success at the court of Mantua judging by the highly positive sequels it had there, is the cause of Pourbus the Younger's arrival in France. What decided the Queen—a real Medici, connoisseur and patron out of taste, family tradition and political intelligence—to secure Pourbus's services was the contemplation of the Flemish artist's portrait of her. The fact that in his art the painter combined all the characteristics of the portrait in majesty capable of magnifying the royal model made her want to have him at her side. What other explanation is there for her not resorting to a Florentine painter? It would however seem clear that the rather provincial atmosphere of Florence could not match the cosmopolitan experience of an artist who had begun in the Coudenberg, the palace in Brussels of the governors of the House of Habsburg. Well aware of this, Vincenzo Gonzaga insisted on taking Pourbus—and Rubens—with him from Brussels, and was obviously unhappy at letting his portrait painter go. His reluctance can be seen in a letter to him from the Duchess of Mantua on 28 August 1607:

17 *Nouvelles Archives de l'Art Français...* 1873 (pp. 232-235) published Pourbus's naturalization papers.

I forgot to tell Y. H. that the Queen [of France, Maria de' Medici] requests you send her the painter Francesco for two or three months, promising Y. H. to return him in due time; I pray that Y. H. will be pleased to give her this satisfaction... LIONORA¹⁸.

Frans Pourbus the Younger did not leave for France until late 1609. The murder of the King in 1610 put him in a situation that no one could have foreseen. A painter active at the court of the queen mother (rather than just *one* court, there were in fact *several*, and it is their juxtaposition which is called, somewhat unsuitably, *the court*), he was commissioned by her to propagate the image of a young, dominated Louis XIII, and the image of a queen extolled as it were by the death of the king, with an obscure power tinged with exile: Pourbus was also entrusted with extracting from a sorrow assimilated and overcome, and from the duty accepted of serving the kingdom, the unique ring of a woman ascended to the rank of absolute monarch. Very few paintings contain the seeds of so many artistic and historical developments as the one in the museum in Bilbao.

¹⁸ «Mi scordai di scrivere a V.A. che la Regina la prega a mandarli Francesco pittore per due o tre mesi, prometendo a V.A. di rimandarlo al suo tempo; io supplico V.A. a compiacersi di darli questa satisfatione... Lionora». Luzio 1913, p. 278.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ballarin 1982

Andreina Ballarin [a cura di]. *Pinacoteca di Vicenza*. Vicenza : Palazzo Chiericati, 1982.

Baschet 1868

Armand Baschet. "François Porbus, peintre de portraits à la cour de Mantoue", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol. 25, October 1868, pp. 277-298., November 1868, pp. 438-456.

Bély 2003

Lucien Bély (ed.). *Dictionnaire de l'Ancien régime : royaume de France, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*. (2nd ed.), Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2003 (1st ed., 1996).

Heinz/Schütz 1976

Günther Heinz ; Karl Schütz. *Porträtgalerie zur Geschichte Österreichs von 1400 bis 1800 : Katalog der Gemäldegalerie*. Wien : Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1976 (Führer durch das Kunsthistorische Museum, 22).

Laurvik 1917

Nilsen Laurvik (ed.). *Catalogue Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst Loan collection*. San Francisco : The San Francisco Art Association, 1917.

Luzio 1913

Alessandro Luzio. *La Galleria dei Gonzaga venduta all'Inghilterra nel 1627-28 : documenti degli archivi di Mantova e Londra*. Milano : L. F. Cogliati, 1913.

Nouvelles Archives de l'Art Français... 1873

Nouvelles Archives de l'Art Français : recueil de documents inédits publiés par la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art Français. 1873. Paris : J. Baur, 1872-1875.

Oudin 1607

César Oudin. *Thresor des deux langues françoise et espagnolle*. Paris : Marc Orry, 1607.

Sitzmann 1909-1910

Fr. Édouard Sitzmann. *Dictionnaire de biographie des hommes célèbres de l'Alsace depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à nos jours*. Rixheim : F. Sutter, 1909-1910.

Venturi 1934

Adolfo Venturi. *Storia dell'arte italiana*. Milano : U. Hoepli, 1901-1940, 11 vols. in 25 books (reprint., Millwood, New York: Kraus Reprint, 1983).