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Pierino di Bartolomeo di ser Piero d'Antonio da Vinci, called Pierino da Vinci (Vinci, 1530–1553, Pisa)

Two Putti Playing with a Fish c.1545
marble carved in the round
67.7 x 31.2 x 32.6 cm;
26 ½ x 12 ¼ x 12 ¾ in

Provenance

Cosimo I de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany (1519–1574), Villa Medici dell'Olmo at Castello, near Florence;

Private collection, France, 1980s, by whom sold to Private collection, Switzerland.

Literature

G. Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, 11 vols, Florence, 1966–97, vol. 5, 1984, p. 231.



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Works by Pierino da Vinci, the son of one of the great Leonardo's half-brothers, are very rare, in terms of both quality and quantity. His, in fact, was an unjustly brief life, but one marked by an extraordinary gift for sculpture. In the biography that Giorgio Vasari dedicated to him in the 1568 edition of his *Lives*, a few years after Pierino's death in 1553, the richest and most reliable source of information on him, the double destiny of fugacity and talent provides, from the beginning, an effective leitmotif to the narration – both, according to the author, having been predicted to the three-year-old child by two religious men who were visiting his father's house.¹

In spite of all the caution that such factors of tyrant time and great quality would advise, studies of the last century have been very optimistic in augmenting Pierino's catalogue, compared with the one compiled by Vasari. It therefore happens that one of the few books on him (a collection of papers given at a 1990 study day in Vinci devoted to the artist and published in 1995) is full of spurious sculptures ranging from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century. Amongst the attributions to which more space is given, there are two that have, in the meantime, been definitely resolved in favour of Giovanfrancesco Susini (1585–1653), active almost a century after Pierino: the marble *Saint John the Baptist*, formerly in the collection of the dealer Piero Tozzi in New York and now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., and two small bronzes of *Bacchus* and *Venus* in the Ca' d'Oro, Venice.

It is therefore important for the knowledge of Pierino's *oeuvre* to be able to present in this entry a rediscovered work that is not only a manifesto of the artist's style and quality, but is also identifiable with one of those pieces mentioned by Vasari that has since gone unnoticed – that is, the 'due putti che s'abbracciano l'un l'altro e, strignendo pesci, gli fanno schizzare acqua per bocca' (two children who are embracing each other and squeezing fish, causing water to spout from their mouths). They were sculpted by Pierino almost at the beginning of his brief career, in the

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workshop of marbles over which his second master, Niccolò Tribolo (1497–1550; the first was Baccio Bandinelli, 1488–1560), presided at Castello, near Florence, where fountains and other spectacular garden decorations were created for this celebrated villa belonging to Duke Cosimo I de' Medici.⁵

While *Two Putti Playing with a Fish* remains today in optimal and commendably extraordinary condition when compared with most sculptures intended for outdoor display, a careful examination of the marble reveals that it has paid a legitimate price to the weather – a fact that confirms its antiquity. In the first place, the overall surface of the group is abraded. Moreover, the heads of both figures have been re-attached (that of the little girl only at the base of the neck, that of the little boy also below the chin), as well as both noses and the right leg of the boy (at the knee and just above the foot). Last, the left side of the sculpture's base displays an area of restoration of about 5 cm wide extending from the front edge towards the back, so as almost to reach the boy's right foot.

The group represents two children of about two years of age, almost naked, standing on a low rocky base and embracing each other while squeezing a large fish with an open mouth, through which water would once have spouted (in the centre of the underside of the base is the circular hole of a pipe, now blocked with metal). The young girl, on the viewer's right, is securely rooted to the ground, although, with the hint of a smile on her face, appears to be about to move a step forward with her left foot; the young boy, also smiling, is almost blocking her since, through a considerable torsion in her direction, he puts both hands upon her shoulders while forcefully resting his left foot on a tree stump, and turns his face towards the centre of the composition. The upper part of his bent leg, almost contorted above the stump, is employed to allow the body of the fish, sliding downwards, adhere to it; the fish's tail is held by the boy's right hand, while the girl's right hand gently squeezes

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its head, almost helping it to spout water. The twining of the bodies, skilfully studied in their immaturity and tenderly modelled, is rendered even more wonderful by the interplay of the long, thin strips of drapery that apparently have no purpose other than an ornamental one, coiling round the two bodies like a sash, before reaching the ground at the front, to the left and right sides of the fish and the leg supporting it. It would be entirely idle to follow the precise course of the drapery, which is possibly meant to represent a single length of fabric and to bind the figures still closer together.

The motif depicted in this group has been known in the literature on Pierino and Tribolo for over a century thanks to a terracotta in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (since 1910; inv. no. A.72-1910; fig. 1), whose main difference with the marble – of very close but not exact dimensions (the terracotta being 65.1 cm high, that is, around 2.5 cm shorter) – is the inversion of the two children's heads.⁶ Comparison between the two works reveals it is the marble heads that are rendered in the most coherent and functional way (the girl directing her gaze towards the boy, rather than both children looking at the ground); moreover, when in 1932 the terracotta was published in the first illustrated catalogue of the V&A's sculptures, the heads were inverted (fig. 2), precisely as we find them in the marble (the registered height was 65.5 cm).⁷ Confirmation of this revealing connection comes from at least two other examples, both in bronze (65.8/66 and 66.2 cm high), which are especially close to the terracotta as it appeared in the 1932 photograph: the first was sold at auction in London in 1996 (fig. 3) and again in 1999, and the second in 2005.⁸

Additional significant discrepancies exist between the marble and the terracotta (fig. 1) – the majority of which are due to the diversity of materials and the respective techniques employed – such as, in the terracotta, the less detailed fish, the more agile working of the drapery and the heels of both right feet, which do not touch the

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ground. But further differences, starting with the simple disparity between their dimensions, prove that the V&A terracotta cannot have been the direct model for the marble under discussion: both the children in the London pair are male, and the one on the viewer's right wears an additional piece of fabric that entirely wraps round his torso above the navel; other differences are discernible in the faces and hair, the latter much thicker in the terracotta. Finally, the bases are dissimilar: although inspired by the same sort of rocky invention, the terracotta is not shaped with the same breadth and rhythm as the marble.

Much closer, as noted, are the terracotta and the twin bronzes (fig. 1 and fig. 3), the only clearly visible modification being between their draperies, which in the bronzes modestly cover the two children's genitals, thus prescribing to a very late fashion reminiscent of the second half of the nineteenth century in France.

Having for a long time, in twentieth-century studies, been considered an autograph model by Pierino, in recent decades the London terracotta has been discussed on the basis of purely technical examinations and consequently considered a product of the nineteenth century, although one whose invention dates back to the sixteenth.⁹ This may well be, since, as I have mentioned, the two bronze versions are nineteenth century and would have certainly been preceded and accompanied by examples in softer materials. All the variations that may be remarked in the terracotta when compared with the marble, however, also relate not only to the style of the sixteenth century but, more specifically, to the world of Florentine fountains created towards the middle of that century by the great sculptors at the Medici court, especially the *capomaestro* Tribolo and his most able collaborator, Pierino.

The same conclusion may be drawn about a second pair of terracotta children, close in terms of invention and size to the marble sculpture addressed in the present entry

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– with the inversion of the gender roles between the two figures and the introduction of a goose in place of the fish – also in the Victoria and Albert Museum (since 1863; inv. no. 8527-1863; fig. 4). This group was repeatedly attributed to either Tribolo or Pierino, 10 before being declassified in the same way as the terracotta *Two Boys with a Fish* (fig. 1). 11 But the existence of at least one similar marble version from the XVIth century, attributable to the workshop of Tribolo (Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, inv. no. 2021; 70 cm high, with the variation of a turtle instead of the tree stump), reassures us about the real origin of this composition. 12

From the second quarter of the fifteenth century, in the wake of ancient models, which would have been admired in Rome by artists and patrons alike, Tuscan sculpture intended for outdoor spaces rediscovered the infinite resources of the theme of the naked putto (with or without wings) playing with an animal, usually a fish or bird. Soon enough, fish imposed themselves on fountains as elements specifically suited to spouting water. In this context, as usual, the role of primus inventor belongs surely to Donatello: the Victoria and Albert Museum houses a bronze spiritello or putto with great wings and a large fish on his shoulders (inv. 475-1864) which, whilst it may not be autograph, was certainly created in his workshop and is his invention (c.1435–40; fig. 5).¹³ During the early Rinascimento, the most famous creation within this genre was undoubtedly the one achieved by Andrea del Verrocchio in the so-called *Spiritello with a Dolphin* for a fountain at the Medici villa at Careggi near Florence (c.1470–75; today in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence), in which the theme of play produced by spouting water becomes one with that of the small, running winged figure, balanced only on one foot (fig. 6).¹⁴ In the meantime, also for the Medici, Antonio Rossellino had realised, according to Vasari, 'alcuni fanciulli che sbarrano delfini che gettano acqua' (some children opening the mouths of dolphins spouting water) for the marble fountain in the centre of the garden of their

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town palace in the Via Larga (today Palazzo Medici Riccardi). The ensemble, now in the Palazzo Pitti, has been severely altered in the middle to high part and therefore lacks those children intent on opening the dolphins' mouths, which may have been made in marble or perhaps bronze.¹⁵

When this tradition was once more picked up in the sixteenth century by the Medici, who became first dukes and then grand dukes of Tuscany, the sculptors at their court started to experiment also with compositions that were formed of more than one figure, such as those seen in the two groups with a fish or a goose, discussed above. By the end of the nineteenth century it was already noted that the motif of an embrace between two putti focused on a common object dates back once more to Donatello:16 above the *Annunciation* in pietra serena in Santa Croce, Florence (formerly an altar reredos for the Cavalcanti family, c.1433-5), the master added a few extremely lively terracotta spiritelli, comprised of two couples embracing each other and standing at the two corners in the guise of acroteria; here we find the source of inspiration both for an object held up by children while it is in the process of slipping down between them (a great festoon in this case) and for the raised, twisted and protruding legs (fig. 7). For sixteenth-century sculptors, including Tribolo and Pierino, it was, however, impossible not to return to these models in light of the great renewal of the *Maniera moderna*, or modern Italian style, which had, meanwhile, affirmed itself in Rome. Recent texts have correctly, therefore, invoked the Michelangelesque series of couples of naked, playing putti in faux marble inserted behind the seated *Prophets* and *Sybils* in the frescoed vault of the Sistine Chapel (1508–12).¹⁷ Even though none of these pairs, crafted twice for each seat from the same cartoon reversed, is playing with an animal or another mobile object, it is useful to observe that they already explore the male-female alternation and rotation of extended legs (a motif very dear to Michelangelo). Particularly significant in this respect are the couples flanking the Prophets Zechariah and Isaiah.

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Although the attribution to Pierino of the London terracotta *Two Boys with a Fish* was evidently favoured by the possibility of a relationship with the marble group by the adolescent sculptor at the Villa di Castello that was described by Vasari as 'two children who are embracing each other and squeezing fish, causing water to spout from their mouths', doubts have been raised concerning the allusion to more than one fish. Such accuracy, requiring Vasari not only to have carefully examined the sculpture as well as the thousands of other artworks he mentions, but also to have before him a precise reference image of it at the moment of writing, is lacking in common sense twice over. With great difficulty, in fact, could the two fountain putti be able to embrace each other while squeezing more than one fish of a size substantial enough to be able to hold a sufficient amount of water. Furthermore, over the whole of the sixteenth century, no such groups are known by the hand of other sculptors, not even within the vast landscape of possibilities offered by the fountains and other garden ornaments at Castello and Boboli. 19

The composition and motif of the marble carving under discussion, its execution, and its quality not only agree with Pierino's *oeuvre*, but relate in particular to his early phase, to which Vasari attributes the *Two Putti with a Fish* at Castello that has long since disappeared from its original location. In particular, the idea of a monolithic group for a fountain comprising more than one figure standing on a rock, with the purpose of conveying a single spout of water, thrust forward from the centre of the ensemble, would later be developed to its maximum degree in the *Young River God* (*c*.1548–9; now at the Louvre) for the villa at Pozzuoli belonging to Don Pedro de Toledo, viceroy of Naples and Duke Cosimo I's father-in-law (fig. 8).²⁰ Here, amongst the three children helping the main subject to lift and spill his vase, two are female, according to that gender alternation that we have already verified. Pierino's predilection for thin drapery lines that run along youthful bodies and then, having achieved their purpose, fall perpendicularly to the ground, announced itself in early

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work (as testified by Vasari), such as the *puer mingens* with a mask, sculpted for Cristofano Rinieri and today in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna, Arezzo (fig. 9).²¹ The sensitive treatment of the rocky base of the *Two Putti with a Fish*, with visible traces of tooth chisel and open drilling, finds a suitable point of comparison in another early work, not mentioned by Vasari but accepted in all modern studies: the *Pan and Daphne* relief in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.²²

The very young and exceptionally talented sculptor exhibits in our group his ambitious programme as a virtuoso marble-carver, diversifying the plastic consistency and the surface of things with the greatest appearance of naturalness, while at the same time revealing the culture and experience of an artist who has clearly studied some of the noblest models of fifteenth-century child sculpture, first and foremost amongst them those by Desiderio da Settignano (*c*.1430–1464) and Mino da Fiesole (1429–1484) (fig. 10). From such masters, in fact, Pierino took inspiration not only for the puffy and cheery faces but especially for the serpentine and sparse locks of hair, very close to the skull, which, in his slightly later and almost last works, became thicker and embedded in *chiaroscuro*. The shape of the heads by the sixteenth-century sculptor, however, could never be assimilated to those of Desiderio or Mino, since Pierino always, and from the start, remained faithful to the new, Michelangelesque, anatomical and aesthetic canon, one that sought to expand the upper and rear part of the head, thus almost creating, when seen in profile, a perfect triangulation between this, the forelock and the chin.

It is impossible at this stage to say at which point *Two Putti with a Fish,* noticed by Vasari at Castello, left its original seat for good, but, since the Medici dynasty kept and used the villa until its extinction in 1737, there is no reason to doubt that the group remained in place until then. This conclusion is reinforced by the state of the

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marble, which implies its presence in the grounds, in a functioning state, for several generations. It is known, however, that with the arrival in Tuscany of the new Habsburg–Lorraine dynasty, great transformations and later decay befell Castello – a state that did not change until the twentieth century – and brought about the loss of many furnishings.²³ This leads us to believe that the disappearance of *Two Putti with a Fish* from their original site and their arrival on the market would have taken place between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Francesco Caglioti



Figure 1. Pierino da Vinci (or after him), *Two Putti Playing with a Fish.* Terracotta, 16th century. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 2. Pierino da Vinci (or after him), *Two Putti Playing with a Fish* (fig. 1 prior to 1964). Terracotta, 19th century. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 3. After Pierino da Vinci, *Two Putti Playing with a Fish.*Bronze, 19th century. Sold at Christie's London, 2 July 1996, lot 190.
© Christie's



Figure 4. Niccolò Tribolo (or after him), *Two Putti Playing with a Goose*. Terracotta, 16th century. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

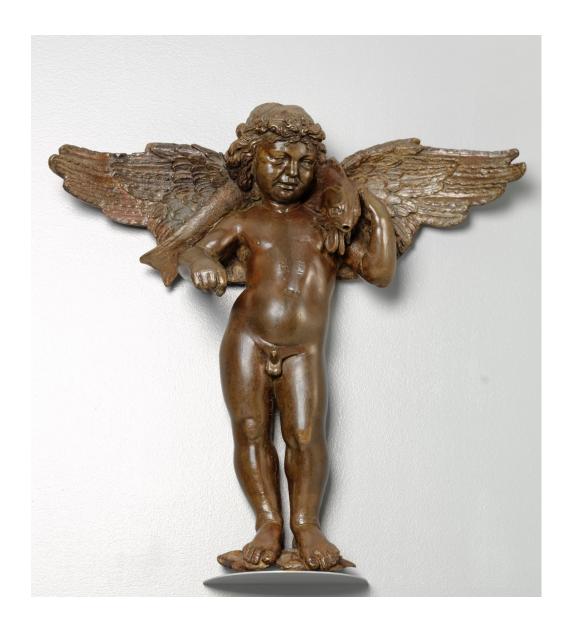


Figure 5. Workshop of Donatello (?), *Spiritello with a Fish.* Bronze, c.1435-40. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Figure 6. Andrea del Verrocchio, *Spiritello with a Dolphin*. Bronze, *c*.1470–75. Palazzo Vecchio, Florence © Photo Library of the Florentine Civic Museums

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Figure 7. Donatello, *Two Spiritelli*.

Terracotta, partially gilded, *c*.1433–5. Santa Croce, Florence (above the Cavalcanti *Annunciation*)

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Figure 8. Pierino da Vinci, *Young River God.* Marble, *c*.1548–9. Musée du Louvre, Paris © RMN-Grand Palais / Hervé Lewandowski



Figure 9. Pierino da Vinci, *Puer mingens with a mask*.

Marble, shortly before 1545. Museo Nazionale d'Arte Medievale e Moderna, Arezzo

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Figure 10. Mino da Fiesole, *Young Saint John the Baptist*. Marble, *c*.1474. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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Footnotes

- ¹ G. Vasari, *Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, 11 vols, Florence, 1966–97, vol. 5, 1984, pp. 229–37. For an updated biography of Pierino, and the essential bibliography, see A. Giannotti, *Pier Francesco di Bartolomeo, detto Pierino da Vinci*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 83, Rome, 2015, pp. 312–17; also online http://www.treccani.it.
- ² M. Cianchi (ed.), *Pierino da Vinci: atti della giornata di studio, Vinci, Biblioteca Leonardiana, 26 maggio 1990*, Florence, 1995.
- ³ Re-attributed to Susini in F. Caglioti. 'Il 'San Giovannino' mediceo di Michelangelo, da Firenze a Ubeda', *Prospettiva*, 145, 2012, pp. 2–81: pp. 5–6 and notes 34–9 (pp. 58–60), and pp. 34–7, figs 30–33. It was acquired by the NGA in 2005, as a consequence of my attribution to that sculptor via written expertise.
- ⁴ Re-attributed to Susini in J. D. Draper, 'Two Bronze Statuettes by Giovanni Francesco Susini, not Pierino da Vinci', *Burlington Magazine*, 158, 2016, pp. 879–84.
- ⁵ Vasari, *Le Vite*, vol. 5, p. 231.
- ⁶ J. Pope-Hennessy and R. Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, 3 vols, London, 1964, vol. 2, pp. 442–3, no. 471, and vol. 3, p. 276, fig. 466. See also the online museum catalogue: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16273/two-boys-with-a-fish-group-da-vinci-pierino/.
- ⁷ E. Maclagan and M. H. Longhurst, *Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Architecture and Sculpture: Catalogue of Italian Sculpture,* 2 vols, London, 1932, *Text*, p. 142, and *Plates*, p. 104, pl. (a).
- ⁸ Christie's, London, *Important European Sculpture and Works of Art* [...], *Tuesday 2 July 1996*, London, 1996, p. 68, no. 190 (65.8 cm); Christie's, London, *The Secret Courtyard: The SEAGO Collection, Wednesday 9 June 1999*, London, 1999, p. 155, no. 290 (66 cm); Christie's, London, *A View over Eaton Square: a Private Collection ..., Thursday 10 November 2005–Friday 11 November 2005*, London, 2005, p. 63, no. 353 (62.2 cm).
- ⁹ http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16273/two-boys-with-a-fish-group-da-vinci-pierino/.
- ¹⁰ Maclagan and Longhurst, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture*, *Text*, pp. 142–3, and *Plates*, p. 104, pl. (c); and Pope-Hennessy and Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture*, vol. 2, pp. 437–8, no. 467, and vol. 3, p. 276, fig. 465. ¹¹ http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O17210/sculpture-tribolo-niccolo/.
- ¹² M. D'Orsi, 'Doni alle gallerie e ai musei dello Stato (1945–1954) . . . Gallerie di Roma. Galleria Nazionale Romana', *Bollettino d'arte*, s. 4, 39, 1954, pp. 365–6: p. 365; B. Kusch-Arnhold, *Pierino da Vinci*, Münster, 2008, p. 256, note 708.
- ¹³ Pope-Hennessy and Lightbown, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture*, vol. 1, pp. 78–80, no. 65, and vol. 3, pp. 56–7, figs 82–3. But also: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16283/winged-putto-with-a-fantastic-statuette-donatello/.
- ¹⁴ Most recently F. Caglioti, 'Il 'Putto col delfino'/The 'Winged Boy with Dolphin', in A. Galansino (ed.), *Verrocchio Lab. Il restauro del 'Putto col delfino' e nuove indagini sulla 'Madonna di Piazza'/Restoring the 'Winged Boy with Dolphin' and New Analyses of the 'Madonna di Piazza'*, Venice, 2019, pp. 16–19.
- ¹⁵ F. Caglioti, *Donatello e i Medici: Storia del* David *e della* Giuditta, 2 vols, Florence, 2000, vol. 1, pp. 359–79, and vol. 2, figs 311–44; F. Caglioti, *Dal giardino mediceo di Via Larga: la fontana marmorea in cima allo Scalone del Moro*, in G. Capecchi, A. Fara, D. Heikamp and V. Saladino (eds), *Palazzo Pitti: la reggia rivelata*, exh. cat., Florence, 2003, pp. 164–83.
- ¹⁶ W. Bode, 'Versuche der Ausbildung des Genre in der florentiner Plastik des Quattrocento', in *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, 11, 1890, pp. 95–107: p. 105, reproduced p. 106 (related to the London group with a goose, attributed on that occasion to the 'Master of the Unruly Children').
- ¹⁷ Kusch-Arnhold, *Pierino da Vinci*, p. 258 and note 715.
- ¹⁸ Most recently, ibid., p. 256.
- ¹⁹ For an overall and updated view, see A. Giannotti, *Il teatro di natura: Niccolò Tribolo e le origini di un genere. La scultura di animali nella Firenze del Cinquecento*, Florence, 2007.
- ²⁰ See, especially, S. Musella Guida, 'Don Pedro Alvarez de Toledo: ritratto di un principe nell'Europa rinascimentale', *Samnium*, 81–2 (n.s. 21–2), 2008–9, pp. 239–353: pp. 251–2 and notes 35–6; and F. Loffredo,

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'La villa di Pedro de Toledo a Pozzuoli e una sicura provenienza per il Fiume di Pierino da Vinci al Louvre', *Rinascimento meridionale*, 2, 2011, pp. 93–113.

- ²¹ Vasari, *Le Vite*, vol. 5, p. 231; U. Middeldorf, 'Additions to the Work of Pierino da Vinci', *Burlington Magazine*, 53, 1928, pp. 298–301 and 304–6: p. [301], pl. II.B, and p. 305; Kusch-Arnhold, *Pierino da Vinci*, esp. pp. 105–12, no. 4, and notes, and figs 4–5.
- ²² Middeldorf, 'Additions to the Work of Pierino da Vinci', p. [301], pl. II.A, and p. 305; Kusch-Arnhold, *Pierino da Vinci*, esp. pp. 97–102, no. 2, and notes, and fig. 2.
- ²³ The most complete history of this site has been reconstructed in D. R. Wright, 'The Medici Villa at Olmo a Castello: Its History and Iconography', 2 vols, Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. 1976.

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