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Benvenuto Cellini – is this the face of the sculptor and murderer?

A new BBC Radio series tells the remarkable story of the Renaissance artist's life and investigates claims behind an alleged self-portrait



The 'self-portrait' of Cellini was bought in a French flea market by a Russian businessman © Tamoikin Art Fund

Jerry Brotton 4 HOURS AGO



Think of a badly behaved Renaissance artist and the one who usually comes to mind is Caravaggio, famed as much for his murderous conduct and colourful



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sex life as for his spectacular paintings. But Caravaggio looks almost like a choirboy when compared with the Florentine goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini, who died in 1571, the year Caravaggio was born. Not just an artist, Cellini, the subject of my new BBC Radio series, was a poet, soldier, musician and priest. He murdered three times, was convicted of sodomy twice — with men and women — and was poisoned (but survived) while in prison accused of stealing the Pope's jewels. Cellini worked for some of the greatest rulers of the time, in Florence, Rome, Mantua and Paris, where he inherited Leonardo's role as paid artist to the French king, Francis I.

Most of this remarkable life is now forgotten because, unlike Caravaggio, Cellini was not a painter, and many of his exquisite works in gold and silver were subsequently melted down for bullion. Those that did survive are some of the most iconic art works of the Renaissance, including the towering bronze statue of "Perseus with the Head of Medusa" that still stands in Florence, a worthy rival to Michelangelo's "David". But in the past few years, a Russian businessman turned art historian claims to have discovered a Cellini self-portrait that if authentic would turn everything we know about Cellini as an artist on its head (so to speak).

Cellini also wrote one of the first, and perhaps the greatest artist's autobiography, the *Vita* (or *My Life*): an egotistical, outrageous, often scurrilous attempt to convince posterity of his genius. Oscar Wilde loved Cellini's *Vita*, discreetly reclaiming Cellini as a gay icon in describing "that autobiography in which the supreme scoundrel of the Renaissance relates the story of his splendour and his shame". Art historians have mined it for descriptions of life in Renaissance Italy but remain wary of the depiction of the man behind it as too extreme and conceited to be reliable.



Cellini's 'Perseus with the Head of Medusa' in Florence © Getty

All autobiography treads a thin line between fact and fiction, and in the

competitive, hyper-masculine world of 16th-century Italy, Cellini's embellishments captured the violent, creative tenor of the times. It is difficult to assess his boastfulness when the historical record is often silent about it. But what emerges from piecing together his claims alongside surviving accounts is an even more complex and disturbing figure.

From the autobiography's beginning, in 1500 when he was born, Cellini lies. He writes of taking "enormous pride in tracing my origin back to men of exceptional ability" — in fact, his father was a humble instrument maker. He was also economical with the truth in describing his youthful violent and sexual escapades in Florence. He recounts repeatedly wounding a rival goldsmith in 1523 and being exiled from the city. What he doesn't say is that he was sentenced to death for repeatedly offending; nor does he mention that he and a friend were found guilty of sodomy with a younger man.



Cleopatra, Fragment of an inkwell, school of Benvenuto Cellini © Sepia Times/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

The accusation recurred throughout his life. Working in France in the 1540s, he admits that one of his models accused him of having "relations with her in the Italian fashion — that is to say, against nature, like a sodomite". He got away with it, describing in some of the book's most awful passages how he beat his model (if true, it is bad enough; if invented, almost worse). But he omits to mention that in 1557 he was found guilty again of sodomy with another man and sentenced to four years in prison (commuted to house arrest). Yet he also married a servant, slept with various models and had several children. It is unlikely that Cellini was gay in the modern sense; for him the act, regardless of gender or identity, was what drove him, and the power it gave him over men, and women.

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When he was falsely

Cellini fought in the Sack of Rome in 1527, claiming to have shot dead the leader of

imprisoned for stealing the Pope's jewellery, he concocted one of the great accounts of incarceration

the invading Spanish army (records reveal it was a canon shot, not Cellini's arquebus, that killed him). He was ordered to melt down the Pope's regalia, escaped and roamed the courts of Renaissance Italy, making art for its rulers and murdering

his brother's killer, bragging that the Pope forgave him because "men like Benvenuto, unique in their profession, need not be subject to the law." The autobiography veers from vivid reportage of artists and patrons to wild picaresque accounts of murdering rival goldsmiths and conjuring "several legions of devils" in the Roman Colosseum. The former was true; the latter was straight out of medieval novella. It was all part of Cellini's fashioning himself as a genius.



Etruscan chimera, 5th-4th century BC, partially restored by Cellini © Granger/Shutterstock

When he was falsely imprisoned for stealing the Pope's jewellery, he concocted one of the great accounts of incarceration — including poisoning — and his apparent religious conversion. Yet despite his newfound piety, upon his release he immediately killed a postmaster.

The casting of his bronze statue of Perseus, unveiled in Florence in 1554 — which also stands at the heart of [Berlioz's 19th-century opera](#) about Cellini — is a *tour de force*. It depicts a solitary genius battling against everyone and everything to turn blood into bronze in creating a statue to rival Michelangelo's "David". Yet, in reality, he created it using a huge team of craftsmen. Perhaps the greatest irony is that the stories he omitted, culminating in the sodomy charge of 1557, curtailed his artistic career, and led him to write the *Vita*. If his art could no longer imitate life, his autobiography was an artful recreation of a life and became his lasting testament.



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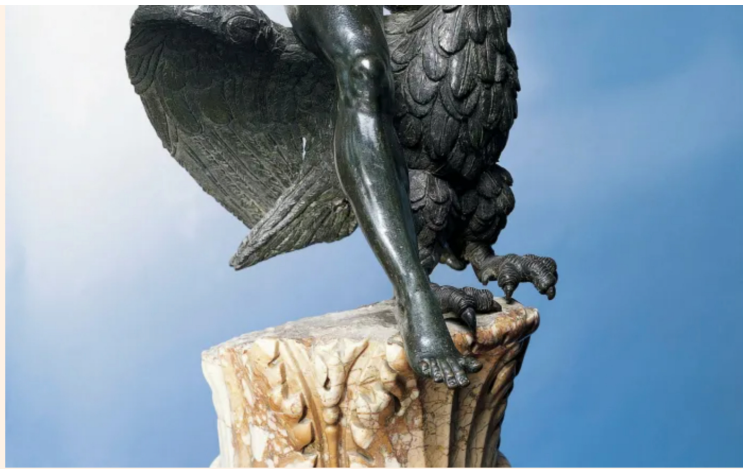
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Cellini's 'Ganymede' (1548-50) © De Agostini via Getty Images

But there is a sting in Cellini's tail. There are few verifiable likenesses of the artist, and no record of him ever painting. Yet in 2004, Russian businessman Oleg Nasobin claimed to have bought a self-portrait by Cellini in a flea market in the south of France for €3,200. Over the next 14 years, Nasobin tried to authenticate the picture. He retrained as an art historian, identifying various art works he believed contained portraits of Cellini to compare with his find. He hired conservators, curators and even anthropologists to assess the painting, many agreeing it was late 16th-century. The date might be right, but attributing it to Cellini is much harder. (When contacted recently, none of the experts were prepared to definitively attribute the portrait to Cellini.) Undaunted, Nasobin published a thriller called *Benvenuto: The Mystery of One Picture* and exhibited the painting in Moscow, with Russian press valuing it at \$110m.



Statue of Cellini on the Ponte Vecchio, Florence © Alamy

In 2018, Nasobin appointed the Tamoikin Art Fund and its president Dmitry Tamoikin to sell the picture. A subsequent press release claimed — incorrectly

— that the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had acquired it for €107m. Despite Nasobin and Tamoikin ending their contractual agreement, both were eager to talk to me. Tamoikin was adamant that the portrait was authentic, conceding that the story was straight out of a baroque episode from Cellini's life. Nasobin revealed that the picture is in a bank vault in Monaco.

He says he is prepared to bring it to London, once lockdown ends, for further scientific analysis, claiming that “what matters most is that Cellini's face is brought back into public view.” Is it “real”? Until we can see it, who knows? The story mixes as much fact and fiction as Cellini's autobiography. How Benvenuto would laugh.

'Blood and Bronze' begins this evening at 10.45pm on BBC Radio 3 and will be available to stream on BBC Sounds from April 3

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