

DONATELLO'S SCIATTIATO RELIEF OF CONTESSINA DE BARDI PORTRAYED AS ST CECELIA IN THE GUISE OF ARTEMIS.



This bust relief was created 1412 AD, while Contessina de Bardi, wife of the Duke Cosimo de Medici was still young. Early Donatello books in the University of New South Wales and The State Library of New South Wales note that this bust is missing.

My objective is, because of the horrible death that this fictitious saint of the Roman Catholic Church was sentenced to endure for being a Christian, Contessina wanted nothing to do with it. It remained in Donatello's possession until he died, as did the Mona Lisa with Leonardo da Vinci. It was inherited by his apprentice, Verocchio and was studied intensely by Leonardo da Vinci. I consider Bellini inherited it next, and so influenced Michelangelo. Donatello's apprentice, Desiderio da Settignano made a marble copy as a student exercise, which is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In 1450, the Florentine sculptor and medallist Pisanello made an almost exact replica to use the sciattiato technique in designing a new currency issue for the Duke of Ferrara. This version is lost now, but does exist in the eastern part of the USA. Copies of it are for sale on the internet.

During the period 1490-1520, plaquettes became an invogue furnishing touch, and this item instead of being hung as a votive piece in the bedroom (it still has intact the metal hanging ring soldered to its reverse.) has been nailed to a column base. It is readily recognised in Vasari's Lives when he describes it as a Donatello Madonna with a curious headdress belonging to a gentleman of Florence whom he names.

It has remained lost but was used by an Italian engraver to design the first coinage issue of Victoria Regina, London. It surfaced again in 1850 when copied by an Italian art forger. This forgery, noted in the Christies' Year Book of 1854 and accompanied by a wood cut, sold in London to the Earl of Wemyss, who subsequently inherited the title Lord Elcho. It remained in his possession up until 1914, according to a personal contact with the present Lord Elcho in Gosford House, Scotland.

Photographs of art studio interiors of the late 1800's often have a plaster version, one of which is in the Italian State Museum for Sculpture, the Bargello, in Florence. This particular piece was photographed by the Alinari Bros. of Florence in the late 1800's and their photograph was made available for inclusion in Donatello books of the period. It was usually called marble, because it was white, or pietra serena which the "real" forgery was chopped from. In 1939, this forgery was passed as genuine by Sir Joseph Duveen, recognised even then as the world's greatest art dealer, and sold to become the foundation piece in the Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio, USA. John Pope-Hennessy in his 'Italian Sculpture' of 1975 denounced it as a Donatello because the headdress was definitely not quattrocento. Well, it isn't, but it's not entirely a headdress either.

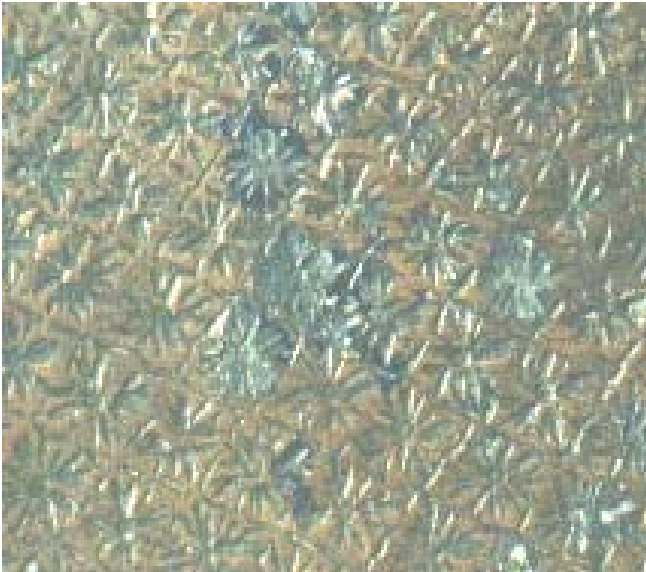
Donatello's colleagues and contemporaries, especially, Massacio who stands beside Donatello as a founder of the Italian Renaissance art movement, wanted to remove the pictorial restrictions of Byzantine type halos by showing them in cross section rather than a head wearing a gigantic helmet. This early artistic stylisation obviously met with disapproval and the church stipulated that halos (or auras) had to look like halos. Massacio's hand has also rendered the decorative punched relief on the saint's costume, which adds considerable interest. He and Donatello did collaborate.

The prototype for this sculpture was the Greco-Roman statue of Artemis, now in the Louvre. Artemis' emblem was the crescent moon, and the shape, flexed so as to form a base about its inner arc, forms a diadem. The 'headdress' in its entirety, is based on the open palm of the human right hand. The slight overlap of the little finger gives rise to the tilt modelled into the diadem. God permitted the Hebrews in exile to celebrate their moon festivals, Exodus. So much for the commandment 'Thou shalt have no other Gods but me'.

She wears a caul, a cloth cap covering her head, which is shaved well above low ear-level at back and caught into a tight ponytail, whose tresses and ribbons fell freely and aerially. This has given rise to the loincloth in Titian's 'Nole Me Tangere' and the Louvre's ancient Greek Venus de Milo has a similar hairstyle. (maybe she should be renamed the Artemis de Milo.)

Cecelia's face has the contour of a classic Greek profile whereby the forehead and nose continue as the one line. Her eyes, closed, her head, lowered-this is the moment she recognises that death is imminent. Her husband, St Sebastian, has been a highly popular figure of this era's art, also. His body, resurrected for sacred conversation pieces is riddled by arrows, a privileged death for a condemned Roman Patrician.

Numerous St. Cecilia copies flooded Europe in the 1890 - 1905 period-plaster, pressed metal, marble and even velvet. Her outline does appear in paintings by Verocchio and Pisanello, and there is one popular version in our assembled works that go with the piece.



Our only knowledge of St. Cecilia is entirely derived from the Second Nonne's tale in Geoffrey Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales", (itself copied after Dante Aleghieri) the first book ever to be press printed in English. Only the original has a background, one that puzzled us until we saw the conclusion to the Second Nonne's prologue - "and the starres are set in their places all aronde her". And so they are, engraved within the cells of a masterly freehand diaper pattern.

Only the original has incorporated the emblem of sacredness, the middle ear. Not even Jesus Christ has been given that accreditation, although it was accorded the gods of Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece and Rome. Those Greeks also bestowed it upon gifted men - Socrates, for instance. It was taken by Napoleon as well as the Kings and Queens of England.

St. Cecelia also wears a Greek victory ribbon, a diadem too, an emblem from the middle ages and up to Leonardo denoting feminine purity. Altogether, there are 3 tiaras on her head, the crescent moon, the caul and the ribbon, rendering a simple but clear flattery: "Behold the Mother of a Pope". None of Contessina's sons ever aspired to the papacy but her great grandson Leo X known as one of the bad popes did. He said, "Since God saw fit to burden me I might as well enjoy it." Papal friends now experienced an extremely libertine life- style, peppered with outstanding courtesans and some rather wild, as we would say, orgies in the Vatican.

The reverse side of the piece is nothing less than another original Donatello sculpture, for it shows the original clay form developed with the fingers. Molten wax has been thinly coated over this and the final contours rendered into that medium. The wax, ever so thin, has been deftly scraped with a sure hand to take off as much as feasible so as the finished cire dure casting would only involve as much metal as absolutely necessary. Michaelango has been influenced by this feature from our Donatello sculpture in portraying the spaces between the figures of the danmed in his great mural behind the high altar in the Sistine Chapel. The wax mold has been prepared for casting - by Donatello himself. This we gauge from the shrinkage in its top right hand comer, a problem when molten lead is overheated. In his book, Cellini of the mid 1500's described how he was able to overcome the problems beset by the great Donatello by making the clay of Florence fatty with pulped-up rags. Again, we have exposed on this piece precisely what Cellini spoke about.

The overheated metal pour fractured the clay moulds, creating break lines and bubbles that infilled and protrude from surface. These would need all to be removed by filing and polishing the work. Donatello's Nude David, the first life size casting since antiquity, also has a gaping hole in the top of its head, not visible under ordinary viewing. The cleaned lead would be steeped in ground water from a copper mine. The dissolved copper has formed a relatively thick matte of liquid microcrystalline crystals. When polished, the minute air pockets formed between crystals give his work an extraordinary soft silky sheen. All books, simply copying one from another, call it bronze. Of course some of his work would have to be bronze such as the

life-size equestrian monument of Gattamelatta. Most of his metal works would be lead, so treated. In fact whether bronze or copper, their distinctive finish has been achieved by this copper matte process. This is another point, which no singular Donatello reference can give, but one derived from alchemy.

Another Donatello feature in his sciattato treatment is his constant use of the rampant arch. In ours, it is the line formed by sweeping up and across the breast over the shoulder and down her back. Such a line is a distinctive feature of all palm tree fronds.

By 1904, Lord Balcarres in his book "Titian" commented that the Elcho version would be by some other hand than Donatello's, (the first note of dissension). But still, he comments it was one of the greatest plastic works of Italian Renaissance art. Neither he nor Pope-Hennessy knew enough about the basic ingredients of great art descended into Europe from the Ancient Egyptians. By simple geometric means the ancients were able to determine a golden section: the ability to divide a straight line into two parts such that the longer divided by the shorter is equal to the whole line divided by the larger portion. The answer to 3 decimal places is 1.618. Interestingly, the square of 1.618 is 2.618, no more, no less. It is the geometry of life. I challenge you to take your calculator and add any two numbers together, such that $a + b = c$. Repeat, so that b and c become the new a and b and their sum becomes the new c. Do this again 11 more times and divide the last c by the last b. The answer to 3 decimal places is 1.618. c and b are in golden proportion. If you want to repeat the program on your computer 10 to the power of a thousand times, your result to 3 decimal places is still 1.618. It is the number that defines infinity and life everlasting as in the Bible, and something that university art courses deliberately choose to ignore in its entirety while searching for the essence of renaissance art. Our Donatello, small as it is (149 x 220 mm) is a giant in creative genius and absolutely riddled with golden mean or phi proportions. There is no misinterpreting the names of the Pharaoh Kuphi and his portrait on the great sphinx. Four thousand five hundred years ago this symbol of eternity was built into the Great Pyramid and simply by following it out to the point of infinity I can show where Egyptologists can expect to find his undisturbed tomb and intact mummy. That's another story.

Our St. Cecilia plaque has the phi proportions in Donatello's original presentation most excellently put in the top right hand corner and this simple anecdote has been an influential source to all of the great renaissance artists.

One final mention is Donatello's own emblem, three very short straight lines meeting at a point to denote depth. His low relief of Salome being presented with the face of John the Baptist depicts a brick wall behind the banqueters with two bricks missing; a rudimentary part of the discovery of the vanishing point. So Donatello uses this to put depth between St. Cecilia's forearm and breast, as does Leonardo da Vinci to give the breast of his Madonna and Carnation a firm roundness, which protrudes out beyond the paint plane.

This is an original Donatello.

Should anyone disagree please do so but with his/her fully reasoned account.

This is not a piece of stolen art, but rediscovered in Florence during the clean up prior to the American destruction of the Arno east bank to ensure that any mines that may have been planted by the retreating Nazis were destroyed before causing alliance casualties. It was brought by an Australian antique dealer, legally exported from Italy because the original was believed to be in the USA as testified by Bargello black and white postcards featuring their own plaster version.

In 1986, the Bargello staged a 600th Anniversary Donatello Exhibition and the handbook to this event definitely features their copy, and the original from which it was designed is our Donatello.

Here is the original! She is the sculptured equivalent of the Mona Lisa and even influenced Leonardo in his painting of St Anne and St Mary with the babies, Jesus Christ and St John the Baptist.

Bibliography:

Balcarres, Lord. 1904, Titian, London.

Bargello, 1986, 600th Donatello Exhibition Handbook, Florence. Cellini, 1555 Autobiography, Florence.

Pope-Hennessy, J., 1975, Italian Renaissance Sculpture. London. Toledo Museum of Art. Ohio-St Cecilia file.

Vasari G. 1556, Lives of the artists, second edition, Florence. No other works are worth noting.

Accessories:

-Gilded tabernacle

-1850-English mahogany side-board in Italian Renaissance style -Antique Artemis statuette

-Neoclassical sphinx

-Small plaster bust of Socrates after Greek original -Bronze reproduction of Zeus on antique pedestal -
Antique bronze copy of the God Augustus' cult figure on antique pedestal -Framed coins and medals
showing sciacciato influences -Framed Victorian high bust relief after Leonardo's Antique Warrior -Donatello
Library

-Production version of Dirk Hartog's plate in opening frame 1988 -Silver plated copper electrotype Christ
figure 1838, in opening frame -Modern Italian paste cameo of our St Cecilia silver set with pearls, framed -
Large French plaster version of the Elcho forgery with bronze finish, tabernacle style -Frame 1890