

Cast from the life

The inventions, sculptures, masks – and charm – of Leonardo's master

NICHOLAS PENNY

Andrew Butterfield

THE SCULPTURES OF ANDREA
DEL VERROCCHIO
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Andrea del Verrocchio died in Venice in the summer of 1488. When the news – and, soon after, the corpse itself – reached his native Florence, many of his fellow citizens must have recalled the life-size wax votive statues that he made after Lorenzo de' Medici escaped assassination, more lifelike than any which had ever been seen before, and the putto on the clock of the Mercato Nuovo which moved its arm to strike the hour. These creations, of which no trace has survived, must have seemed magical. They were seen by every Florentine. So, too, was an object which can still be seen in most parts of Florence and from afar, but which now excites much less wonder than it did when first fashioned by Verrocchio: the gilt copper orb on the lantern of the Cathedral dome. For the people of Florence, this sculptor, who described himself as a goldsmith, was probably first and foremost an inventor and engineer.

Verrocchio also probably made one work that would have been heard by everyone in Florence – the great bell for the convent church of San Marco, which in the years after his death summoned the ardent followers of Fra Savonarola to his sermons. After the Friar's execution in 1498, the bell was taken down, and flogged by the public executioner as it was carted through the streets. This bell, unlike the waxes and the mechanical putto, features prominently in Andrew Butterfield's book, which is chiefly devoted to Verrocchio's surviving figure sculptures. The most important of these were, like the bell, cast in bronze and were either designed for, or soon transferred to, prominent public locations. In reviewing Verrocchio's achievements, many of his more cultivated contemporaries would have been able to list them, and in doing so they may have been struck, as we are today, by the apparent programmatic contrast between the boy with a dolphin and the David, between the group of the Doubting Thomas made for a niche in Orsanmichele and the colossal, free-standing equestrian statue of the mercenary commander Bartolomeo Colleoni that Verrocchio was working on when he died in Venice. It is no exaggeration to claim that our understanding of each of these masterpieces is transformed by Butterfield.

He has examined the details of all these sculptures with exceptional care, and he is able, in the case of the statue of Colleoni, to discriminate with conviction between the many elements (accessories such as harness and saddle, ornament such as the borders of the plate armour) which must have been invented as well as chiselled by Alessandro Leopardi, who is known to have finished the model and cast it in bronze, and the parts (the horse's head traversed with veins, the rippling curls of the mane, for example) which must have been completely finished in the model by Verrocchio himself. The publishers provide just the right photographs in just the right place to support his argument. This is not simply a question of attribution. Verrocchio's genius is present in the horse's mane; Butterfield helps us to focus on it.

New thought has been given here to how Verrocchio's sculptures are composed – new thought to exactly what action is portrayed and what viewpoint they anticipate. Butterfield's analysis of the David's movement is a delight to

follow in the beautiful colour plates on the opposite page. He observes how the "sense of motion is increased by the disposition of the shoulders in contrast to the hips", how the tips of the V-neck of the cuirass and of the V-shaped belt point in slightly different directions, how "even his hair seems to swing slightly in response to his step". Our understanding of this movement is impeded by the separately cast head of Goliath which is placed between the boy's feet (where Donatello placed it in his bronze and where it usually appears in marble sculpture, to provide extra support for the legs) – and Butterfield reproduces a nineteenth-century photograph showing the head in another position, which liberates the boy's pose to remarkable effect and strongly supports the argument.

Butterfield has been no less zealous and no less analytical in libraries and archives. He is able to transform our understanding of the significance of the subject of the young, victorious David, so popular in Renaissance Florence. He draws attention to the importance of the psalm "Benedictus Dominus", in which David thanks God for his assistance in defending the fatherland and for the peace, prosperity and fertility of good government. He is careful not only to cite contemporary exegesis of this psalm but to demonstrate how familiar that exegesis would have been. If David was so widely acknowledged as a model of pious kingship, it seems improbable that he would have served as an effective emblem of republican liberty, as previous scholars have repeatedly proposed. But this general meaning does not preclude the possibility that David may also have had a special meaning for the Medici – patrons of Verrocchio's statue, as also of Donatello's earlier one – and Butterfield suggests, with a careful reading of Platina's dialogue *De Optimo Cive*, that this was so.

The religious significance and Medician resonance that Butterfield detects in the figure of David need not exclude, as a possible secondary (or even primary) motive for commissioning a sculpture of this subject, the desire to see one

great artist compete with another. The charming bronze statuette of David by Donatello's Paduan pupil Bartolomeo Bellano (in the Metropolitan Museum, New York) is a respectful homage to Donatello's prototype. Verrocchio's bronze is a challenge, entirely independent in conception. The comparison is one which is made by all modern surveys of Florentine Renaissance sculpture – it was made by Burckhardt even before the two sculptures were displayed together in the Bargello, and it must surely have been made in the last decades of the fifteenth century. Indeed, there is an unusually large bronze statuette in the Frick Collection in New York, once attributed to Verrocchio himself, which is best explained as an academic synthesis of features from both works, presumably made not long after Verrocchio's bronze (unless, that is, it was concocted in the last century).

Vasari tells us that when a crucifix was brought to Verrocchio's sickbed, the fastidious artist rejected it on account of its crudity and called for a finer one made by Donatello instead. This is one of the few anecdotes which have survived about Verrocchio. If it is true, we may wonder whether in this extremity he refrained from reflecting on how differently he might have treated the same subject. In any case, Verrocchio may have been the first modern European artist who defined himself by contrast with a major predecessor. His final great work in bronze, the equestrian Colleoni, must have been made in the certain knowledge that it would be compared with Donatello's bronze statue of another great military commander, Gattamelata, erected outside the basilica of the Santo in Padua. (That work was inevitably in the mind of the Venetian officials supervising the commission, which is presumably why Donatello's pupil Bellano seems to have been invited to compete for the job.) When Verrocchio's nimble adolescent giant-slayer and his heavily armoured commander are compared with Donatello's equivalents, we find his surfaces more ornamental, silhouettes busier, bodies more in movement, and features more alert. They have less inner life but more nervous vitality.

Only two narrative relief sculptures by Verrocchio survive: a boldly modelled treatment of the Resurrection in terracotta and the extraordinary silver panel of the beheading of John the Baptist, incorporated into the shrine of the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence. Both these works include remarkably expressive figures, but neither is wholly successful in its representation of space. In the terracotta, which must have been placed above a door, the soldiers all seem compressed into the front plane, although they overlap each other, and so too do the trees behind them to either side, and even the lid of the sarcophagus. Perhaps effects of aerial perspective were considered pointless, because of the height at which the relief was displayed. The silver relief, on the other hand, was displayed rather low and does include some intricately calculated recession, but the daring use of separately wrought, three-dimensional figures to obtain extreme effects of high relief nevertheless precludes the subtle gradation between high and low relief that we find in the reliefs of Ghiberti or Donatello.

The obvious comparison is with Donatello's "Feast of Herod" in the Baptistery in Siena, a



Detail of Verrocchio's "David", c 1460s

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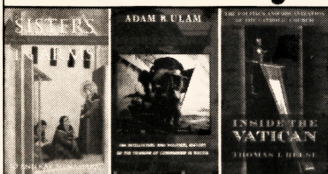
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similarly dramatic scene which also uses insistent linear perspective as a foil and a complement to the action. Butterfield's analysis of Verrocchio's composition is masterly—he notes how each arch is related to one of the soldiers, how the "spiral of soldiers around St John combines with the downward thrust of the architecture behind the Saint" with dynamic effect... and yet, compared with Donatello, Verrocchio appears to have little feeling for tense interval. Moreover, since every actor is equally expressive and richly textured, our attention is too easily divided.

The sculptures by Verrocchio which have been discussed so far seem to have been continuously available for public admiration, with the exception of the "Resurrection" (discovered in fragments in about 1900) and the "David". The latter had strayed from the Palazzo Vecchio by the seventeenth century. It then became detached from the separately cast head of Goliath, thus losing its identity both as a David and as a Verrocchio. In the last century, it was recognized as the "figura d'un Davit" mentioned by Vasari, and when it was installed in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, it became, as it has since remained, one of the half-dozen most-loved sculptures there.

It also achieved a new significance, for more than any other sculpture it came to embody the spirit of the Florentine quattrocento—perhaps above all in its interpretation of sweet and eager early adolescence, an age of man which had seldom been represented in earlier periods (the Greek *ephebe* being, by contrast, a young adult, the *spinario* a boy). The subject must have seemed especially suited to the late early Renaissance, itself seen as the end of the boyhood of art. Our own sensitivity to the phases of the Renaissance was much enhanced by the creation of the Museo Nazionale, the National Museum of Sculpture, in imitation of "quelli di Cluny e di Kensington", by royal decree in 1865, when Italy itself felt, or at least tried to feel, rejuvenated. Butterfield notes that the David was transferred to the Bargello "before 1880", but it was certainly there by January 13, 1873, the date of Augusto Galletti's catalogue of the collection.

Eloquent testimony to the influence of the Bargello is found in much Florentine sculpture created in the 1870s—for instance, the youthful sentinels who surround the pedestal of Pio Fedi's monument to General Fanti erected in Piazza San Marco, Florence, in 1872, and now abused by vandals and ignored by art-lovers hastening to Fra Angelico or Michelangelo. The urge to imitate Verrocchio and his contemporaries was no more disreputable than the attraction that Chatterton felt towards ancient ballads, or

indeed Keats for Shakespearean English, but it manifested itself in many sculptures which were passed off as his work, and some which were made to deceive. Every "Verrocchio" to have been "discovered" since 1840 should be approached with caution—and those first recorded between 1870 and 1900 with special scepticism. With the exception of the terracotta bust of Giuliano de' Medici in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, dubious or merely puzzling works are simply excluded from this book (more are illustrated in the 1969 monograph by Gunther Passavant), and we are spared such salutary reminders of the errors of yesterday's connoisseurs as the terracotta bust of a lady in the Pierpont Morgan Library.

Butterfield includes among Verrocchio's works two marble busts. One is the famous one of a lady holding flowers, first recorded in 1822, and by 1873 to be seen in the Bargello. Bode attributed it to Verrocchio in 1882, and since then all serious scholars have either agreed, or proposed, that it was at least partly the work of Leonardo when he was a member of Verrocchio's workshop. No one has better described the subtle movement created by extending the bust to the waist, thereby implying the rest of the body, her stance, and indeed a narrative context, than Butterfield. He traces this innovation in Renaissance sculptural portraiture to the half-length virgins of Luca della Robbia and to paintings by Botticelli, and the contemporary poetic ideals to which it responds, with a rare combination of erudition and common sense. Here again he deepens our appreciation of one of the artist's masterpieces.

More of a surprise is Butterfield's acceptance as "highly probable" of the marble bust in the Frick Collection. This has a beguiling "expression of shy interrogation, charmingly appropriate to the youth of the lady", as Maud Crutwell phrases it in her monograph of 1904. The lips just hinting at a slight smile, the head both turned and tilted, and—most telling—the chin slightly pressed into the neck, reveal an interest in evanescent effects which is much more characteristic of Verrocchio's competitors in Florence—those masters of the lowest relief, of "the passing of a smile over the face of a child, the ripple of the air on a still day over the curtain of a window ajar", as Walter Pater put it in his essay on Luca della Robbia of 1872. The use of the drill not only where it would be expected, in the hollows of the ringlets, but for tiny points of shadow by their side is found in the work of other Florentine sculptors (it was especially favoured in Desiderio da Settignano's workshop) but in no

other marble associated with Verrocchio.

Butterfield's discussions of the antecedents which conditioned Verrocchio's work—and the traditions which he often transformed—are invariably enlightening, but we may sometimes feel the need for more consideration of the achievements of his rivals. Moreover, there are techniques and approaches to sculpture that can be associated with Verrocchio which merit discussion of a more speculative kind than Butterfield is disposed to give. Vasari claimed that Verrocchio was partial to making plaster casts from life. Presumably the success of his wax effigies mentioned in the opening of this review relates to this, and so too, according to Vasari, did the fashion for taking death masks which had a strong influence on Florentine portrait busts in general. Again according to Vasari, Verrocchio's studio contained numerous casts of hands and feet and knees and so on. They have not survived, but it is likely that the drawings of such parts that were made in his workshop record them—or at the very least reflect the priorities that prompted their creation. Also relevant is the practice of dipping linen in slip or plaster and allowing it to set. These were models which nature (or at least accident) had helped to create and which also had an enhanced plasticity (and convenient durability) for both painting and sculpture.

These are topics of much importance for Verrocchio's paintings, which Butterfield reviews in an appendix. The sculptor evidently designed two altarpieces of importance, one "The Baptism of Christ" for San Salvi in Florence, the other "The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints" for the Duomo in Pistoia. The second of these was clearly painted entirely by Lorenzo di Credi, the first was painted by three artists (four, if we include the deplorable hands of God dispatching the dove from Heaven), one of whom was certainly Leonardo. Smaller paintings from his workshop are beautifully executed—none more so than the Virgin and Child with two angels in the National Gallery, London. But as a composition this work is manifestly compiled from separately studied parts, without any of the coherence of Verrocchio's terracotta relief of the Virgin and Child in the Bargello. The National Gallery's "Tobias and the Angel" is superior in composition, but could the creator of the putto with a dolphin, who runs and laughs with such eagerness and freedom, have arranged the legs of Tobias in the conventional ideogram for walking? Who among the many talented artists in Verrocchio's workshop was responsible for these works is, as Butterfield observes, a question we may never be able to answer. But it does seem clear that Verrocchio regarded their production as being of secondary importance.

Among the artists in Verrocchio's workshop was Leonardo. His fascination with rippling hair and naturalistic ornament, his types of grace and virility, were derived from those of Verrocchio, but he was also sensitive to what was missing in the workshop's paintings—what Verrocchio's rivals had achieved in landscape distance and aerial perspective generally, for instance. He was surely also struck by the deficiencies of workshop methods which encouraged the study of parts at the expense of the whole—hence his pursuit of an organic unity in his pictures. If Leonardo too failed to produce the paintings which might have been expected of him, this was partly because he was diverted by other ambitions, by problems of casting technology, for example, and of engineering which, as his contemporaries were well aware but we tend to forget, had also detained his master, the creator and raiser of the great copper orb crowning the Duomo, and inventor of the infant automaton that told Florentines the time.

Nicholas Penny is the Clore Curator of Renaissance Painting at the National Gallery, London.

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