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MASTERPIECE

A World of Emotion in Two Hands

Verrocchio's "Lady With Flowers" is a revolutionary work in its composition and captures both the sitter's appearance and her inner life.



'Lady With Flowers' (c. 1475/1480), by Andrea del Verrocchio PHOTO: NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART/MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL BARGELLO, FLORENCE

By [Eric Gibson](#)

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“Verrocchio: Sculptor and Painter of Renaissance Florence,” at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, has been widely acclaimed for having brought a great master out from the shadow of his renowned onetime apprentice Leonardo da Vinci. Nowhere is Verrocchio’s extraordinary talent more in evidence than in the marble “Lady With Flowers” (c. 1475/1480). So fresh, animated and lifelike is it that you feel you are sharing space not with a sculpture but with an actual presence. In part this is because, instead of creating a static, remote figure, he has depicted her caught in the flux of time. Before it returns to the Bargello Museum in Florence after the show closes on Jan. 12, 2020, anyone who can should make an effort to see it, and anyone who already has should see it again.

Verrocchio gives us a young woman in casual, contemporary dress seen from the waist up with, at her breast, a small bouquet of flowers wrapped in part of her sash, and turning slightly to one side. The level of verisimilitude is astonishing. Look, for example, at the light undergarment visible just below her neck, where a starburst of folds radiates from the fastening: brute stone transfigured into gossamer-thin fabric.

“Lady With Flowers” has long been recognized as a revolutionary work of Renaissance sculpture. It is the only bust to fully show the sitter’s arms and hands, to break with the symmetry inherited from Roman prototypes and to suggest movement. But I would argue that it is revolutionary in one further respect: as the first interior portrait of the Renaissance and possibly all of Western art, a work in which the artist has endeavored to capture not just the subject’s character and appearance but the workings of her consciousness. And it all starts with the hands.

Verrocchio was the great sculptor of hands in the 15th century. That may sound like a matter of little consequence until you realize that in Renaissance Florence every advance in naturalism represented a further beachhead in the culture's campaign to understand and master the world around it. Where hands in art had always functioned as appendages that merely grip, point, strike and bless, Verrocchio made them windows into the mind and heart of their owner. Nowhere more so than in "Lady With Flowers," where he has shifted the psychological center of gravity from the face, where it usually resides in portraiture, down to the hands.

And what hands they are—graceful, delicate, highly individualized and filled with character. The slightly fleshy backs contrast with the bony structure of the long fingers. Nor is Verrocchio blind to the imperfections of nature. Witness the slight inward curve of the left ring finger.

That the hands are central to Verrocchio's scheme here we can deduce from the emphasis he places on them. They break out of the nearly monolithic mass of the bust, resting on the surface as quasi-independent, three-dimensional objects in their own right. And they dominate the visual field. The area defined horizontally from wrist to wrist and vertically from right pinkie to left thumb is the largest of the entire work, bigger even than that defined by the boundaries of hair and face.

In the literature the sitter is sometimes said to be "holding" her flowers. Though technically accurate, the word is potentially misleading; it suggests fingers and thumbs closed around the stems. But there's no gripping here. Instead, her left thumb and forefinger rest precisely yet gently on the outer edges of the bouquet, points on a pair of dividers charting some emotional landscape. The thumb is relaxed but the forefinger is slightly flexed, in response to which the folds of the encircling sash have angled sharply inward. In other words, her actions are centered on the sense of touch. She's fingering her bouquet, a meditative, contemplative gesture in which the movements of the fingers are catalysts for those of the mind.

How can we be sure? For one thing, as scholar-dealer Andrew Butterfield (who curated the National Gallery show) writes in his *catalogue raisonné* of Verrocchio's sculpture, in Florentine art of the period, "the placement of a hand over the chest almost always signifies a state of the soul of deep emotion."

Then there is her head. Hands and head in "Lady With Flowers" have tended to be discussed separately. But they need to be considered as an organic unity because they are bound together in a relationship of cause and effect. Were it otherwise, the sitter might be staring straight out at us impassively, head erect. Instead, in the subtlest yet most resonant of actions, it tilts ever so slightly to the right while turning just a little to the left, the classic pose of reflection.

What message is being transmitted northward from that finger and thumb? We cannot know, of course. Given the flowers, one's reflex is to imagine that she is meditating on some lost love. Perhaps not, though. At the left corner of her mouth a smile is beginning to form.

—Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Arts in Review editor.