

# Sacred furor: Riccio & antiquity

*by Andrew Butterfield*

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This past winter, the Frick Collection in New York held a small but captivating exhibition about the Renaissance sculptor Andrea Riccio. The show was a revelation, not only because it presented the works of a celebrated but little-studied artist. More importantly, the exhibition raised fundamental questions about the nature of the classical revival during the Renaissance. Active in Venice and Padua at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Riccio chiefly represented subjects drawn from ancient literature, and he worked almost exclusively for a group of erudite scholars, writers, and intellectuals who were at the forefront of the creation and dissemination of humanist learning. Riccio personifies the period's intense regard for Greco-Roman antiquity, and yet, for the modern viewer, what he treasured about classical art is completely unexpected.

According to standard art-historical opinion, Renaissance classicism is typified by its esteem for reason, restraint, order, and clarity. But Riccio's sculpture, made for the greatest authorities on classical culture of the time, is of a wholly different character. He emphasized intensity of emotion in the depiction of expression; he felt a keen fascination for representing moments of poetic or religious inspiration; and he often made sculptures that entailed the promise of magical or miraculous power. To be sure, Riccio, on occasion, portrayed classical civilization as a preserve of great learning and

rational discourse, but he also depicted it as a time of mystery cults and blood sacrifice, ecstasy and rapture. Dionysus as well as Apollo beckoned to Riccio and his clientele.

Another surprise lies in his attitude to classical models. Art historians often imagine Renaissance painters and sculptors seeking the perfect imitation of the forms of ancient art, but Riccio displays a free and inventive approach to classical sources and antique subject matter. He sought to recapture the energy and pathos of classical art rather than merely to imitate its surfaces and shapes. In Riccio's view, the classical world was a realm of the mind and the imagination; he turned to it as a fount of inspiration, a source of creativity, not merely as an assemblage of rules to be followed. The revival of antiquity was liberating, not enslaving.

Riccio was based in Padua throughout his life, from his birth in 1470 until his death in 1532. Initially trained by his father as a goldsmith, he became a sculptor in the 1490s and practiced this art for the remainder of his career. He made several large public commissions, such as the Easter Candlestick in the basilica of Saint Anthony of Padua, but he is best remembered today for the small bronze statuettes he made for private collectors. In the fifteenth century, statuettes had been exceptionally rare, and it was only around 1500—and only in Padua and Venice—that sculptors began to make bronze statuettes in larger numbers. Riccio



was one of the first artists to do so; he was also one of the first for whom it represented a central rather than secondary part of his artistic production.

This change in production was related to a change in patronage. In the fifteenth century, only a few princely rulers such as the Gonzaga and the Medici collected small bronzes. But in Padua, Venice, and elsewhere in the Veneto in the sixteenth century, bronze statuettes were popular with a wider spectrum of the wealthy, and especially with the professional classes, such as lawyers, doctors, and professors. The audience for Riccio's statuary was not composed of educated rulers, such as Lorenzo de' Medici and Isabella d'Este, for whom art and learning were inevitably concerns of secondary importance. Instead, Riccio's clients were people whose success, status, and self-worth were based on their professional involvement with what they called the *studia humanitatis* and what modern scholars call humanism.

Padua and Venice are only twenty-some miles apart, and, in terms of their intellectual life in the Renaissance, they formed essentially one community. Around 1500, this community of scholars and intellectuals was fundamental for turning the new learning and new methods of humanism into an international movement. The University of Padua was one of the leading centers in the world for humanist scholarship in Greek and Latin literature, rhetoric, and philosophy; young men from all over Europe went there to be trained. Humanism was exported from Italy to England, France, and Germany in no small part by the professors at the University of Padua. Moreover, Venice was the European capital of book publishing, which was, at that point, still a new technology. About one-seventh of all the books in print around 1500 were issued there. Venice was especially distinguished as a site of humanist printing, most notably by Aldus Manutius, who published complete editions of the Greek and Latin classics as well as works by the modern masters of humanist learning such as Erasmus and Angelo Poliziano.

All of which is to say, Riccio made his art in the midst of an extremely sophisticated community, one composed of some of the most learned men and women in the world. The humanists of Padua and Venice were profoundly knowledgeable about Greek and Roman literature, art and culture, and they were actively engaged in the attempt to recover, restore, and transmit the wisdom and beauty of ancient civilization. Furthermore, Riccio's friends, associates, and patrons were among the key figures of this group. They included Giovambattista de Leone, the author of the symbolic program of the Easter Candlestick and a professor of philosophy in Padua; Niccolò Leonico Tomeo, the leading expert on Aristotle and the first in Italy to teach the works of the philosopher on the basis of the original Greek texts; and Raffaello Reggio, a world authority on Ovid and on Quintilian, the Latin author whose book *The Orator's Education* was a fundamental text for the humanist movement. In addition, Riccio was good friends with Pomponius Gauricus, the author of one of the first Renaissance commentaries on Horace. Gauricus also wrote *On Sculpture*, published in Latin in 1504. We have no proof that Riccio himself was friends with a scholar of Erasmus's renown, but there is no doubt that Riccio's patrons were closely associated with all the greatest humanists and writers of the time, including Erasmus, Aldus, and Poliziano.

One of the most striking features of Riccio as an artist is his concentration on the vivid expression of heightened states of feeling or being. He frequently sought to depict the satyrs, soldiers, shepherds, poets, and nymphs that populate his sculpture as figures captivated by the intensity of their needs or emotions. While other Renaissance artists often used characters from antique myth and literature to represent ideal types and paragons of virtue, Riccio instead wanted his bronzes to show the breadth of human life. For example, his sculpture of a satyr caressing a satyress quivers with lust; and his statuette of a shouting soldier on



horseback radiates anger and fear. Riccio shows *Saint Jerome*, kneeling in prayer, to burn with spiritual thirst; and he depicts a *Drinking Satyr*, greedily sucking at a cup, glowing with physical thirst. Such images are portraits of expression, studies in sentiment and affect, where the investigation of experience, rather than the specific subject depicted, seems to be the main interest.

Riccio's great concern for strong expressivity was exceptional in the sculpture and painting of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. In much of early Renaissance art, there was considerable restraint in the depiction of emotion. In general, only two kinds of scenes permitted the representation of vivid feelings: images from the Passion of Christ and narratives of mortals imploring or receiving the miraculous intercession of saints. Other subjects were treated primarily as exempla of moral or spiritual virtue; saints and heroes were valued as figures beyond the passions and vicissitudes of daily life. Riccio's interest in sentiment and affect was so unusual that there are almost no points of comparison at all for some of the states he depicts. For example, so far as I am aware, no other sculptor of the time sought to characterize the experience of thirst. Similarly, Riccio's small bronze *Orpheus* conveys the ecstasy of poetic inspiration, whereas in most other images of Orpheus or the Art of Poetry the act of composing seems dull and earthbound.

Riccio was also deeply fascinated by inspiration as a subject. A surprising number of his sculptures show figures seeking or receiving either poetic inspiration, such as Orpheus and Pan, or religious inspiration, such as St. Jerome and Moses. In the exhibition at the Frick, perhaps the most telling expression of this fascination was a bronze relief from the tomb of Girolamo and Marcantonio della Torre, showing the victory of Fame over mortality. At the left in this allegorical image, we see Pegasus pawing the earth with his hoof to discover and reveal the fountain of the Muses on Mount Helicon. It is from the banks of this spring

that the Muses first arose, and it is from its shores that the Muses plucked a reed to serve as a channel of inspiration to Hesiod, one of the earliest poets. At the beginning of the *Theogony*, first printed by Aldus in Venice around 1500, Hesiod says,

The Muses plucked and gave me a shoot of sturdy laurel and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were aforetime; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally.

For Riccio as for Hesiod, inspiration was a kind of visitation of the soul or transformation of the self by an outside power—god or the muses—and it drew forth from within the recipient the higher mental and spiritual faculties of mankind. Such inspiration, too, represented a model of communication between man and god, poet and the muses, and scholar and antiquity, and, thus, it allowed for a more perfect understanding between the artist and his audience.

It is impossible to understand Riccio's art without recognizing that it comes from a world where belief in magic was common, even among the most educated and enlightened. Indeed, everyone in Renaissance Europe believed that sculptures, paintings, and other sacred things had the potential to be infused with a spiritual presence or a divine force capable of healing the sick, saving the imperiled, or performing other miracles. The desire to harness such power was fundamental to several of the most important projects in Riccio's career. For example, one of his earliest commissions was to make a tabernacle for a relic of the True Cross, and this was clad with reliefs celebrating the Cross's superhuman efficacy, such as its capacity to win battles and raise the dead. Another of his early reliefs depicts the Ark of the Covenant, an object of extraordinary vitality, capable of vanquishing enemies and bringing down the walls of hostile cities. Riccio also made an unexecuted design for the miracle-working



burial chapel of St. Anthony of Padua, a place so holy that it was then among the most popular pilgrimage sites in Europe and, even now, every day continues to draw thousands of believers seeking help or giving thanks for aid already granted. For the basilica of St. Anthony, Riccio also made his masterpiece, a thirteen-foot-tall bronze Easter Candlestick, covered with a great many figures and reliefs. This candlestick was made to be used only once a year, during Holy Week, when at the end of the ceremony of *Tenebrae*, it was lit to celebrate the inextinguishable sacred fire and the miracle of the victory of life over death.

On some of the reliefs on the candlestick, Riccio depicts living statues. The sense that sculptures might be alive with mysterious power is found in all of Riccio's works, and it is this aura of force and energy that gives them their enduring and enigmatic allure. In the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville refers to the "ungraspable phantom of life." When I look at Riccio's statues, this phrase often comes to mind, for I feel it is the specter of living presence that—in sculpture after sculpture—Riccio offers us to consider. There was one bronze in the exhibition, a *Strigil Bearer* from a New York private collection, which I have had the pleasure to hold in my hands on many occasions during the last twenty years. The pose of this striding male nude is somewhat stiff, the expression is enigmatic, and the detailing of the musculature is inexact, yet the sculpture vibrates with the magical pulse of life, so much so that when you touch it you think it might even move in response to your hand.

The interests of Riccio's fellow humanists help elucidate key features of his art, especially his fascination with expressivity and inspiration. For example, Pomponius Gauricus makes emotional force a central topic of his book *On Sculpture*. He says that the fact both literature and sculpture aspire to graphic vividness in description is proof that they are sister arts. He states that an indispensable characteristic of a good sculptor

is to be *euphantasiotos*, a Greek word that he defines to mean capable of "imagining in the mind an infinite range [of states], such as suffering, laughing, anguish, dying, looking ill, and so on." Furthermore, Gauricus says that the modeling of sculpture consists of two fundamental parts: one is design and the other is animation or expression. One of Gauricus's term for this latter quality is interesting, for he uses a Greek word seemingly of his own invention, *psychike*, based on the Greek word "psyche," which means life, soul, or heart. For Gauricus, it is the manifest display of feeling that gives sculpture its vitality and makes it both compelling and credible.

The emphasis in Gauricus's book on expressivity was new in writing about visual arts. No earlier theoretical text had ever presented such a lengthy and detailed discussion of the topic. For example, in *On Painting*, written around 1435, Leon Battista Alberti gives only one paragraph to the subject, and he does not discuss the depiction of emotion at all in his book *On Sculpture*, from about 1450. Among Renaissance theorists, the most important precedent for Gauricus is Leonardo da Vinci, who had praised the representation of the "motions of the mind" as a goal in art. Yet for all their pithy brilliance, Leonardo's comments on this subject are brief and scattered through his unpublished notebooks; they do not have the sustained focus, the structured argument, or the range of references of Gauricus's *On Sculpture*.

Gauricus's book was a new departure in writing about the visual arts. Nonetheless, his arguments, terminology, and evidence would have been instantly recognizable to humanist readers. His discussion of vividness in art is based on Quintilian's laudatory account of the same quality in rhetoric and poetry, and Gauricus's technical vocabulary consists of classical Greek terms, such as *euphantasiotos*, *enargeia* (vividness), and mimesis, that he borrowed from Quintilian. Gauricus, who structured *On Sculpture* as a dialogue, even makes Raffaele Reggio, the Quintilian authority, appear as one of the



speakers in the book. Moreover, nearly every example of artistic excellence and ideal expressiveness that Gauricus gives is not taken from sculpture and painting, but instead from Greek and Latin literature, and especially Homer and Virgil. Gauricus thought sculpture should aspire to the power of classical poetry and that vividness would help it reach this goal.

The point is not that Gauricus influenced Riccio. In fact, we can be fairly certain that he did not, since Gauricus was ten years junior to the sculptor and only about twenty years old when he wrote the book. Rather, *On Sculpture* shows how Riccio's achievement might have been understood, described, and valued by humanists in the artist's circle, and perhaps even by the sculptor himself.

Humanist ideas also cast light on Riccio's fascination with inspiration as a subject for his statuary. Renaissance intellectuals believed that there were set rules for eloquence that had to be studied and imitated. Indeed, a chief goal of humanism was the promulgation of these rules. But they also thought that the greatest works of artistic genius were beyond rational explanation; they could only be produced through a flash of divine insight. To quote Shakespeare, it was only "a Muse of fire, that would ascend/ the brightest heaven of invention." The masters of ancient literature, such as Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, were thought to have composed their works in a state of sacred furor, an ecstatic rapture that came from an eternal source such as god or the muses. In his poem "Nutricia," Poliziano describes this experience in ecstatic terms:

In a surge of frenzy the mind [of a poet] is first overwhelmed; then the god, shut up in the depths of his heart, seethes, arousing frenzied feelings in his breast . . . and instills his song in the human heart.

The greatest art and poetry was inspired, vivid, exalted, and magical. To write like these oracles of wisdom and beauty, the modern author too had to enter into an elevated state of the soul and the mind. Indeed, part of the appeal of antiquity was the hope that, as the muses once did, the ancient masters would serve as a channel to the sacred fount of inspiration at the heart of classical civilization.

The classicism of Renaissance art was originally inspired by a literary dream, one that esteemed vivid expression and divine inspiration as well as the learned imitation of ideal models from a golden past. It combined ever greater knowledge about the details of ancient culture with ever greater freedom in the use of this knowledge. The scenes and figures from classical literature lived on in the mind, and they did so through acts of imagination as well as memory.

Living and working among the humanists, Riccio shared these attitudes. In his sculptures, he displays his knowledge of Greco-Roman culture in countless ways, such as by draping Moses in a toga or showing an equestrian soldier riding in the ancient manner without spurs. Yet the classicism of Riccio is not derivative or pedantic, for it also gave him the license to imagine and to dream. He felt free to adapt and invent as he borrowed: In its loose rhythms and exaggerated forms, the toga Moses wears is nothing like those in Roman art; the equestrian soldier's armor is covered with all manner of fanciful decoration. What makes Riccio's sculpture so compelling is not his ability to copy exterior forms, but rather the search for vitality and the mystery that, in the beginning, had animated classical art. It is this vigor that gave his sculptures their value in the sixteenth century, and it is this energy that continues to excite us five hundred years later.