

# Forged in the Florentine furnace

Rediscovering a Renaissance sculptor whose art most resembled Dante's

For any visitor to Florence today, the sublime beauty and supreme importance of Lorenzo Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise seem obvious. After a difficult but triumphant restoration that was completed in 2012 after more than thirty years of work, the monumental gilded brass doors shine in all their majesty and splendour at the centre of the recently reopened Museo dell'Opera del Duomo. Now, for the first time in a generation, one can see what every Florentine in the Renaissance knew: that the Gates of Paradise, installed in 1452 on the east side of Baptistery and facing the main door of the cathedral, held pride of place at the spiritual and artistic heart of the city. Gazing at the newly cleaned reliefs of the Gates, with their glowing surfaces, and their powerful narratives drawn from the Old Testament and overflowing with penetrating depictions of both natural detail and human emotion, it is easy to understand why for some 200 years Renaissance painters and sculptors looked to Ghiberti as a founding father of their art. No less an expert witness than Leon Battista Alberti ranked him in importance with Donatello, Masaccio and Brunelleschi, and Michelangelo called the Gates of Paradise a work of divine beauty.

Yet before their recent cleaning, the high reputation in the Renaissance of the Gates and of Ghiberti seemed something of a mystery to many art historians. The basic reason for this was the sculptures' degraded condition. In the late eighteenth century, the gilded magnificence of the Gates was deemed offensive to neoclassical taste. They were painted over with a dark varnish; several more coatings were applied in the course of the next hundred years. By the early twentieth century, the crust of grime was so dense that no one could see the gold on their surfaces; the clear projection of space and the exact description of psychology and anatomy in the reliefs had become wholly unintelligible. The Gates were cleaned in 1948 to great acclaim, but five panels were dislodged in the flood of 1966, and not reinstalled for three years. Modern air pollution quickly covered all the sculptures with a filthy and scabrous patina. As a result, it was for less than twenty years in the past two centuries that the doors resembled their original appearance.

The cleaning of the Gates of the Paradise is possibly the most important restoration of Italian sculpture ever undertaken, comparable in significance for the understanding of Renaissance art to the restoration of the Sistine Ceiling. The story of the cleaning of the Gates is told in exhaustive detail in a new and lavishly illustrated book, *Il Paradiso ritrovato*, edited by Annamaria Giusti. This relates every phase in their conservation from the first tentative efforts to treat one panel in 1979 to the installation of the doors last year in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, where they are housed in a gigantic vitrine made of nearly invisible glass and filled with nitrogen, an inert gas, in order to prevent future corrosive oxidation of the metal. As the book explains, the innovation that made the restoration so extraordinarily successful was the development by a team of physicists and

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IL PARADISO RITROVATO

Il restauro della Porta del Ghiberti

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Amy R. Bloch

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Humanism, history, and artistic philosophy in the Italian Renaissance

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restorers in Florence of a new technology for cleaning sculpture with the use of lasers. Whereas before dirt had to be removed either chemically or mechanically, in either case risking potential damage to the surface of the sculpture, now it became possible simply to aim a pinpoint beam of intense light at each spot of grime on the work. Under the impact of the laser, the dirt vaporizes instantly without harming the sculpture. Although full of technical information, the essays in this book are lively throughout, and the illustrations, principally by Aurelio Amendola and Antonio Quattrone, two of the greatest photographers of art working in Italy today, are exquisite and revelatory.



Detail from the Gates of Paradise, by Lorenzo Ghiberti

The removal of the muck befouling the Gates has not only disclosed their astonishing beauty; it has also prompted a new view of Ghiberti. For much of the twentieth century, it was common for art historians to judge the sculptor in harsh and pejorative terms. For example, writing in this paper in 1957, John Pope-Hennessy called him "priggish" and not a "visual innovator"; elsewhere he said that the

sculptor's work lacked "the fully rational thought process of Renaissance art". Richard Krautheimer's 1956 study of Ghiberti is widely considered one of the finest monographs on an Italian artist; and yet Krautheimer routinely played down the sculptor's achievement, stating that he was not a "genius" like Donatello, "not a decisive figure" like Brunelleschi and Masaccio, and "no scholar" like Alberti. In Krautheimer's view, for much of his career Ghiberti was a "Gothic craftsman", and the greatness of the Gates of Paradise was due in no small part to the supposed intervention of humanist advisers, especially Alberti, and the learned monk Ambrogio Traversari.

In light of the recent cleaning, such judgments now appear absurd. The new estimation of the artist is expressed in the opening sentence of Dora Liscia Bemporad's essay in *Paradiso ritrovato* where she observes, rightly, that for fifty years Ghiberti's workshop was the "furnace" in which so many progressive Florentine artists, from Donatello to Antonio Pollaiuolo, were formed. What did they learn there? We shall never know for sure, but possibly one thing was a new attitude towards modelling and drawing. Ghiberti was the first artist to write that modelling was the "mother of sculpture" and the first to say that "disegno" was the foundation of both painting and sculpture, an idea that soon became standard in Renaissance art theory. An expert Latinist who kept a library of books in his studio,

on the Gates of Paradise is the first in English to embrace the new understanding of Ghiberti. In her view he was fundamentally "an artist interested in books and ideas, fascinated by the science of vision and deeply engaged in the period's revival of classical learning". She attempts to show that the Gates are a kind of *summa* of late medieval and early Renaissance knowledge and give "a comprehensive vision of civilization". She argues that this is true in two senses: the Gates illustrate both the historical evolution of human culture, and the range of activities that comprise human society. To make the first point, she observes the change in the building types through the course of the ten reliefs; the earliest structures depicted are primitive huts, whereas the later are magnificent public edifices. The development follows in exact detail the history of architecture as described by Vitruvius, an ancient author Ghiberti is known to have read. Similarly, Bloch suggests, the clothing of the figures and the sculptural ornament of the buildings and armour in the ten reliefs show progression towards ever greater refinement. Even the development of writing is indicated, since a Latin inscription appears for the first time in the *David* panel, in accordance with the widespread belief that Latin letters were invented sometime after the life of Joshua and before that of David.

Ghiberti, she suggests, wanted the Gates to portray all the fundamental activities of human society, from agriculture to government, as outlined in Aristotle's *Politics*. This is a striking hypothesis, and one that is quite possible. But in pursuit of this idea she oddly cites Marsilius of Padua, an early fourteenth-century theorist, and leaves out evidence that would have been much more pertinent to her argument, namely the great revival of interest in the *Politics* in Florence in the 1420s and 30s. Indeed, this revival was prompted in part by a new translation of the book from Greek into Latin by Leonardo Bruni, the humanist who is documented to have written the first, although subsequently superseded, draft for the iconographical programme of the "Gates of Paradise". (We don't know if he had any hand in planning the actual programme of the doors.) Bloch's attractive proposal needs closer investigation.

In Bloch's view, the earlier artist Ghiberti most resembles is not a painter or sculptor, but Dante, an author he is known to have read and admired. The Gates of Paradise are a kind of epic, into which the sculptor poured everything he could draw from both Judaeo-Christian and classical sources. Although at times fanciful in the analysis of iconographic details, Amy Bloch's book nonetheless makes an indispensable contribution to the study of Lorenzo Ghiberti. Unfortunately, however, it is physically a poor specimen, printed with pale ink on thin paper; this is one case where the ebook might be the better option.

Ghiberti wrote that he made the Gates of Paradise "with the greatest diligence and the greatest love". Thanks to the recent cleaning and new research, we are closer to grasping the outcome of his imagination, learning, industry and passion.

Ghiberti was also among the first to proclaim that an artist should be a master of all branches of knowledge, including history, medicine and philosophy. He wrote that one goal of art was to investigate "in what way nature functions". The ideal of the artist as a Renaissance man, today commonly associated with Leonardo da Vinci, was initially embodied by Ghiberti.

Amy Bloch's stimulating and erudite book