Desiderio da Settignano
Sculptor of the Florentine Renaissance

At the height of the Florentine Quattrocento, the artistic output of Desiderio da Settignano stands as one of the greatest creative achievements in the field of sculpture during the Italian Renaissance. The Louvre, in association with the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., has organized the first exhibition devoted to this little-known artist, to bring long overdue recognition to Desiderio’s exquisite marble work.

Although he died young (in 1464, at the age of about 35), Desiderio’s work is particularly representative of Florentine artistic production in the years 1450-60, the period following Donatello’s departure for Padua. Along with other sculptors, such as Antonio Rossellino, Desiderio was instrumental in the development of the tradition known as stil dolce or the “sweet style”, combining subtlety of treatment, gracefulness of figures, and expressive force, through an astonishing body of work, mainly executed in marble. On a par with Donatello, Desiderio brought marble carving to a degree of perfection rarely attained before or since.

Consisting of sculptures from the collections of all three museums, while also benefiting from exceptional loans of major works from other European and North American institutions, the exhibition is organized into thematic sections, each of which focuses on different types of sculpture or subjects in which Desiderio excelled: religious or portrait busts, notably including a group of busts of children illustrating the sensitivity and delicacy characteristic of his finest work; freestanding sculpture, with the imposing Martelli Saint John the Baptist; devotional relief, with a series of especially lyrical renditions of the Madonna and Child; as well as decorative sculpture.

The exceptional presentation of these twenty-five selected works from the artist’s limited production (a total of only about forty works are now attributed to Desiderio) encompasses all of the key artistic currents shaping Tuscan sculpture in the 15th century. The exhibition also spurs fruitful confrontations enabling the visitor to gain insights into the work of Desiderio and his contemporaries, thanks to numerous comparisons and the presence of several works whose attribution has often been a matter of debate, highlighting among other issues the complex and controversial relations between the artist and Donatello. The exhibition should therefore help to solidify several attributions while permitting a clearer, more comprehensive appreciation of the work of Desiderio.

Exhibition curators: Marc Bormand, curator, Department of Sculptures, Musée du Louvre, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, director, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, and Nicholas Penny, chief curator, Department of Sculptures and Decorative Arts, National Gallery of Art.

Following its run at the Louvre, this exhibition will travel first to Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, February 22-June 3, 2007 and then to Washington, National Gallery of Art, July 1-October 8, 2007.
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Edited by Marc Bormand, Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi and Nicholas Penny.
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Desiderio da Settignano, Laughing child, inv. no. KK 9104, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna © 2006 Kunsthistorisches Museum with MVK and ÖTM

Desiderio was born in Settignano near Florence around 1430, into an environment devoted almost exclusively to stone carving. Historians are not certain where he might have acquired his skills, but it is most often suggested that he trained in the studio of Bernardo Rossellino. In 1453, he enrolled in the guild of stone and wood masters, thus of sculptors, which entitled him to found his own studio as an established practitioner of this art.

With Antonio Rossellino and Mino da Fiesole, Desiderio belongs to the second generation of Florentine sculptors, who were to develop and transform the discoveries of the early Renaissance masters Ghiberti, Brunelleschi, Luca della Robbia and Donatello. It is important to remember that sculpture played an essential role in the establishment of Renaissance style, characterized by the natural treatment of the human figure and by the revival of interest in the works of classical antiquity.

Desiderio achieved initial fame at an early age, which was to continue unabated throughout the remainder of his short career (barely fifteen years) brought to an end by his untimely death. Already in 1453, he was commissioned to execute the tomb of the chancellor Carlo Marsuppini, located in the church of Santa Croce. Taking as his inspiration the funerary monument created by Bernardo Rossellino for the preceding chancellor Leonardo Bruni, considered as the prototype of Renaissance funerary art, Desiderio’s own humanistic interpretation leaves behind the grandeur and monumentality of the earlier work in favor of greater richness and elegance in decoration and a technique that seemed to achieve the impossible in marble. The other major commission for a public work received less than ten years later was for the Altar of the Sacrament in San Lorenzo, the Medici family parish church. This work is the most conspicuous proof of his subtle mastery of stiacciato technique (the flattest relief).

Desiderio’s other works are the result of private or religious commissions, especially for busts of noble Florentine men and women (Young woman, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence), and of saints such as Lawrence or John the Baptist. However, it is the busts of children sculpted by Desiderio that set him apart as an artist. These works give full rein to his delicate portrait technique and his ability to capture the most fleeting of facial expressions.

Showing the influence of Donatello, Desiderio’s low reliefs bear witness to an exceptional dexterity, allowing him to carve the marble in a subtle, nearly pictorial manner. In the narrative reliefs (Saint Jerome in the Desert, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Christ and Saint John the Baptist as Children in a medallion, Musée du Louvre) or the reliefs devoted to the theme of “Madonna and Child” (Foulc Madonna, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Panciatichi Madonna, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence), he seeks to convey humanity’s most profound emotions through the psychological relationships uniting the figures.

If according to Vasari he was above all the sculptor of “grace and simplicity”, Desiderio also created works radiating confident power and dynamic energy, such as the Bust of a man in profile with laurel wreath (Musée du Louvre) or the Martelli Saint John the Baptist (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence). This last work, which has been attributed by some to Donatello, by others to Desiderio, was most likely begun by the former and completed by the latter. This controversy does no disservice to Desiderio and pays tribute to the excellence of his work.

Related events

in the Auditorium du Louvre:

- Friday, October 27, Presentation of the exhibition by Marc Bormand and Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi

- Wednesday, December 13 at 12:30 p.m., Art on Stage: “Santa Costanza, a ‘Beautiful Florentine’?”

- January 10-26, Series of six lectures at 12:30 p.m.
  January 10: “Florence around 1450: The Patronage of Cosimo de’ Medici”
  January 12: “Approaches to Children in 15th Century Florentine Sculpture”
  January 19: “New Presentation at the Bode Museum in Berlin”
  January 26: “New Presentation at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London”