

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

THE BIRTH OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE ART

On until August 18th in Florence at the Palazzo Strozzi is the blockbuster exhibition, *The Springtime of the Renaissance: Sculpture and the Arts in Florence 1400-60*. From September 26 until January 6, 2014, it will be at the Louvre in Paris.

Primarily through sculpture, the branch of figurative art that generated this “new season,” the exhibition illustrates the origin and development of Renaissance art in Florence. Specifically it traces the influence of ancient sarcophagi on Renaissance sculpture, that of Renaissance sculpture on Renaissance painting, the rebirth of equestrian monuments and carved marble portraits, and the passage from civic commissions for art and architecture to private sponsorship.

This first joint venture between the Fondazione Palazzo Strozzi and the Louvre Museum included an extensive restoration campaign. Its most significant project was the conservation of Donatello's imposing bronze statue depicting St. Louis of Toulouse (1425 A.D.), from the Museo dell'Opera di Santa Croce and on display in Section III. Another 16 works of art underwent significant restoration and conservation specifically for this exhibition.

The exhibition's 133 Renaissance masterpieces have been loaned from numerous leading museums in Europe and the United States, particularly London's Victoria and Albert Museum, the Louvre, Berlin's Bode Museum, The Metropolitan, and Washington's National Gallery of Art as well as the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, the Opera e Museo di Maria del Fiore, the Opera di Santa Croce and the Museo di Orsanmichele in Florence.

The exhibition's itinerary is as follows: Section I, “Legacy of the Fathers,” opens with an overview of the rediscovery of the ancient Classical world. It illustrates how the new sculptural style of the Renaissance is rooted in the work of Nicola Pisano (1220/25-c.1284). Born in Puglia, he moved to Prato in Tuscany in 1245 and then to Pisa where his son Giovanni, also a talented sculptor, was born. Sometimes considered to be



Brunelleschi's Wooden Model for the Dome of Florence Cathedral (Antonio Quattrone photo).

Below, Brunelleschi's door panel of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (Lorenzo Mennonna photo). Bottom, Ghiberti's door panel depicting the Sacrifice of Isaac (Antonio Quattrone photo)



the founder of modern sculpture, Nicola drew his inspiration from the rediscovery of sarcophagi and other ancient sculpture he saw in Pisa's *Camposanto*. In his most famous work, the pulpit in Pisa's baptistery, Nicola successfully created a synthesis of the French Gothic with ancient Rome's Classical style. For comparison, the first-century AD marble *Talento Crater* (with its Bacchic scene) is shown here alongside sculpture by Nicola and Giovanni Pisano (1248 to before 1319), Arnolfo di Cambio (c.1240-c.1310), Tino di Camaino (c.1280-c.1337) and their successors, who also assimilated the expressive richness of the Gothic style, particularly from France.

In 1401, in a competition with five other contestants, two young goldsmiths, Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378 or 1381-1455) and Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446), submitted a panel each depicting the *Sacrifice of Isaac* to win the commission for a second set of doors for the baptistery in Florence. The judges voted a draw between Ghiberti and Brunelleschi, but Brunelleschi refused to collaborate, so Ghiberti won. The two competing panels, the only ones preserved, are displayed side by side in Section II, “The Dawn of the Renaissance,” together with Brunelleschi's *Wooden Model of the Dome* for Florence's then-new *Duomo*, or cathedral, a project he worked on from 1420 until the dome's completion in 1436.

While imbued with the spirit of international Gothic, the two panels show that both artists, who remained lifetime rivals, were also familiar with ancient Roman sculpture. The *Boy with the Thorn* was the inspiration for Brunelleschi's panel, the *Torso of the Centaur* for Ghiberti's. Similarly in Section III, “Civic and Christian Romanitas,” the two parchment manuscripts of the *History of Florence*, one by the humanist historian/statesman Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444), the other by humanist scholar, writer, papal secretary, and book hunter Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), both sing the praises of the Florentine Republic's political achievements, its economic power, and its social harmony, and sparked the legend that Florence was

a new Athens, the heir to the Roman Republic, but with a strongly Christian vein.

The monumental public sculpture by Donatello (c.1386-1466), Ghiberti, Nanni di Banco and Michelozzi (1396-1472), created for the city's major construction sites, the cathedral, baptistery, and *Orsanmichele*, reports the impressive 50-page press kit, "marked the rediscovery of classical models while reflecting updated ideals and a quest for innovation..."

Again similarly, Section IV, "Spirits, Both Sacred and Profane" and Section V, "The Rebirth of the Condottieri" illustrate the influence of Classical art on Renaissance iconography and the transition from paganism to Christianity. The Renaissance "spirits," childlike figures based on the Cupid figurines of Classical Rome, a favorite theme of Donatello's work, were easily identifiable with the angels of Christian tradition. For easy comparison, naked winged *putti* by Donatello and Andrea del Castagno (before 1419-1457) are displayed together with *putti* on ancient Roman reliefs and sarcophagi. Instead of *putti*, in "Rebirth of the Condottieri," the comparison is between ancient and Renaissance equestrian statues. The lone survivor of ancient Roman equestrian statues is that of *Marcus Aurelius*, which wasn't melted down because believed to be of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, and today in Rome's Capitoline Museums. Here it's echoed in Filarete's (c. 1400-1469) small bronze replica.

These themes of Classical antiquity, assimilated and transformed through contemporary sculpture, are witness, the press kit reminds us, "not only to the city's creative fervor, but also to its spiritual and intellectual mood."

In Section VI: "Sculpture in Paint," this assimilation/transformation of ancient Roman *gravitas* is reproduced in painting, as can be seen in Andrea del Castagno's series of *Famous Men and Women* and the paintings by Masaccio (1401-1428), Filippo Lippi (1406-1469), Paolo Uccello (1397-1475), and Donatello's painted terracotta *Madonna and Child*. For "just as sculptors often used color to increase their work's expressiveness," the press kit explains, "many of the greatest Florentine painters... strove to achieve a heroic, almost 'statuesque,' tone in their depiction of the human figure, aiming to recreate an illusion of the three-dimensional aspect of contemporary sculpture."

Both sculptures (for example, Donatello's predella of *St. George and the Dragon*) and paintings (Uccello's several drawings from the *Uffizi*) in Section VII, "History 'in Perspective,'" mirror the major impact of Brunelleschi's implementation of perspective. From the 1420s onwards, the new standards of sculpture were perfected, as can be seen in Donatello's *Pazzi Madonna* from Berlin's Bode Museum, the *Kress Madonna* from Washington's National Gallery, and the *Madonna*, earlier attributed to Brunelleschi but now to Nanni di Banco, from the

Diocesan Museum of Fiesole, in Section VIII: "The Spread of Beauty."

The success of this new style in sculpture was no longer restricted to large public works; rather a seemingly endless output of bas-reliefs for private devotion (in marble, stucco, polychrome terracotta and glazed or "Della Robbia" terracotta, two of which are on display here from The Metropolitan and Detroit's Institute of Arts, a technique Della Robbia invented shortly before 1440) fostered the widespread desire for this "new" beauty at every level of society.

At the same time, as demonstrated in Section IX: "Beauty and Charity, Hospitals, Orphanages, and Confraternities," the most prestigious artistic commissions in Florence, still almost always from public entities, began to focus on venues of solidarity and prayer: confraternities, hospitals, and orphanages.

"The importance of this tie between the cult of beauty and the spirit of Christianity," the press kit explains, "also came to the fore in works of art inspired by the Council of Florence in 1439. Attended by Pope Eugene IV, Patriarch Joseph II of Constantinople, and Byzantine John VIII Palaeologus along with dignitaries, Humanists and theologians from the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, these talks embodied Florence's aspiration to be considered the 'City of God.' But at the very moment that this major event sanctioned Florence's political and moral primacy, it also marked the rise of Medici power."

In fact, the carved portraits in the final Section X: "From City to Palace, the New Patrons of the Arts," "heralds the transition from the *fiorentia libertas*, represented by public patrons, to the private patronage that already bore the mark of the Medici family's impending hegemony."

Appropriately, as it opened with Brunelleschi's *Wooden Model of the Dome of Florence's Cathedral* (c.1420-40), one of the Renaissance's most impressive public projects, the exhibition closes with Giuliano da Sangallo (1445-1516) or Benedetto da Maiano's (1442-1497) *Model of Palazzo Strozzi*, Florence's most sumptuous private Renaissance residence, begun in 1489 for Filippo Strozzi the Elder (1428-1491), an arch-rival of the Medici, particularly of Lorenzo the Magnificent, but not finished until some 50 years after his death, in 1538, when Cosimo I de' Medici, Duke of Tuscany (1519-1574), confiscated it.

The catalogue, edited by Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, directress of the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, and by Marc Bormand, curator-in-chief of the Département des Sculptures in the Louvre, and jointly published by Mandragora Editore Firenze and the Editions du Louvre, has Italian, French and English editions. Cost: 39 euros at the

exhibition, 50 euros elsewhere. The exhibition's panels and its large easy-to-read caption texts are in Italian and English; free caption booklets are also available in French, Russian, and Chinese. Opening times: daily 9 AM-8 PM, Thursday 9 AM-11 PM. Full-price tickets are 12.50 euros. ○



Donatello's *St. Louis of Toulouse*
(Antonio Quattrone photo)



Brunelleschi's or Nanni di Banco's
Madonna and Child made of painted
and gilded terracotta