



## VERROCCHIO: LEONARDO'S MASTER

■ BY LUCY GORDAN



In the circle above,  
Verrocchio's portrait in a  
print kept  
in the British Museum  
of London

Left, Verrocchio's sculpture  
of *Lady with Flowers*  
and Leonardo's *Drawing  
of Hands*

Below, a self-portrait  
of Giorgio Vasari



In 1550 Giorgio Vasari (1511-1577), a Tuscan painter, architect, and "the father of art history" published his first edition of *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (*The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*). It's a collection of biographies of almost 300 Italian (mostly Tuscan) artists from Cimabue (1240-1302) to Vasari's contemporaries and includes one of himself. A second edition, substantially different from the first, included artists like Tintoretto and Titian from Venice, although Vasari is still criticized today for having given too much emphasis to artists from Florence and Rome and mostly ignoring the artists from the rest of Italy and certainly the artists from the rest of Europe.

Of Vasari's biographies, one concerns Andrea Verrocchio (c. 1435-1488); two are of Verrocchio's teachers Desiderio Da Settignano (c. 1430-1464) and Donatello (c. 1386-1466); three of his students Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519), Domenico del Ghirlandaio (1448-1494), and Perugino (c. 1450-1523); and two more of Ghirlandaio's student Michelangelo (1475-1564) and of Perugino's student Raphael (1483-1520).

Vasari begins his biography of Verrocchio: "Andrea

del Verrocchio, a Florentine, was in his day a goldsmith, a master of perspective, a sculptor, a wood-carver, a painter, and a musician; but in the arts of sculpture and painting, to tell the truth, he had a manner somewhat hard and crude, as one who acquired it rather by infinite study than by the facility of a natural gift. Even if he had been as poor in this facility as he was rich in the study and diligence that exalted him, he would not have been most excellent in those arts, which, for their highest perfection, require a union of study and natural power. If either of these is wanting, a man rarely attains to the first rank; but study will do a great deal, and thus Andrea, who had it in greater abundance than any other craftsman whatsoever, is counted among the rare and excellent masters of our arts."

With all due respect for Vasari's judgment, the press release for the exhibition "Verrocchio: Leonardo's Master" explains: "The original polymath, Verrocchio experimented passionately with diverse techniques and materials from drawing and painting to carving in marble and casting in bronze. Comparable only to the schools of Giotto, Donatello, and Raphael, Verrocchio's workshop was an exceptionally creative and collaborative environment, where he forged a generation of teachers develop-



ing and sharing his knowledge and discoveries. As a result of this collaborative environment, it is almost impossible to attribute multiple works from the period to the many artists that trained there. 500 years on, attributing works from Verrocchio's workshop continues to be the subject of an ongoing and lively scholarly debate. What is not contested, is how Verrocchio's teaching led to the formation of a generation of artists who spread the taste and style of the Florentine Renaissance, characterized by its focus on beauty, nature, and aristocratic elegance throughout Italy and beyond."

Yet, in spite of Verrocchio's multiple artistic talents and his importance as a teacher, up to now there has never been an exhibition devoted to Andrea di Michele di Francesco di Cione, who adopted the name of his goldsmith mentor Francesco Luca Verrocchi. For it was as a goldsmith that Verrocchio gained fame and the notice of his patrons, the Medici family, though he's most admired as a sculptor, both of terracotta and bronze. Indeed, *Wikipedia* tells us: "Few paintings are attributed to him with certainty." Those painted in his workshop, like most of the artworks created there, were a group effort.

*Verrocchio: Leonardo's Master's* excellent magnificently illustrated catalog, in both Italian and English editions (53 euros), contains a timeline of Verrocchio's life and his major works, even if comparatively little is known about his private life, except that he never married and helped his family financially.

Verrocchio was born in Florence, the son of a tile and brick maker, turned tax collector, and lived at the corner of *Via dell'Agnolo* and *Via de' Macci*. Verrocchio's goldsmith workshop, where he was an apprentice, was on *Via Calimala*. He may also have been an apprentice to Donatello. Verrocchio's first professional break came in 1464 when he begins working, mostly as a sculptor, for the Medici: tomb for Cosimo the Elder (1464), *Incredulity of St. Thomas* (1467), copper hall for cathedral dome (1468), and their numerous commissions until c. 1480 when Sixtus IV summoned him to Rome to produce some of the twelve silver statues of the Apostles for the altar of the Sistine Chapel.

Upon his return from Rome he opened his own workshop near the Duomo on what is now *Via dell'Orto*, in the same location where Michelozzo and Donatello had their workshop and continued to make works-of-art for Tuscany, particularly in Pistoia. It is here that Leonardo (another polymath but with different talents and a loner), Lorenzo di Credi, Ghirlandaio, and Perugino worked as his apprentices.

Leaving Lorenzo di Credi in charge in 1486 Verrocchio moved to Venice to start casting the bronze monument to Bartolomeo Colleoni, but he died in June of 1488 before he'd finished. Nonetheless this equestrian statue, now in Venice's *Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo*, is generally considered one of his masterpieces and the second most important equestrian monument of the Italian Renaissance

after Donatello's statue of Gattamelata (1453) in Padua. Lorenzo di Credi brought his mentor's body back to Florence where it was buried in the Church of Sant'Ambrogio.

On in Florence at the 16th-century *Palazzo Strozzi*, once a private home, and in the *Museo Bargello* until July 14th is "Verrocchio, Leonardo's Master", which spans the artistic output in Florence from 1460-1490. "It brings together for the first time", recounts the press release, "masterpieces by Verrocchio from collections around the world, contextualized by works from his forefathers and peers as well as by the pupils he worked with intensively in his workshop...Curated by two of the world's leading experts of 15th century art, Francesco Caglioti and Andrea De Marchi, the exhibition

showcases over 120 paintings, sculptures and drawings with loans from over seventy major museums and private collections across the world, including the Metropolitan, The National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., the Louvre, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Victoria and Albert, and the *Uffizi*." Several have never been displayed in Italy before. Twelve have been restored especially for this exhibition.

The exhibition is one of the many events worldwide to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Leonardo's death. It aims to bring valuable insight into the early influence of Florence and of Verrocchio and his workshop on Leonardo's oeuvre (seven on display here). The National Gallery in Washington D.C. will host a smaller, especially curated version, of the show from 29 September 2019 to 2 February 2020.

"Verrocchio: Leonardo's Master" is divided into 11 sections: 1) "Verrocchio

between Desiderio and Leonardo: The Female Portraits" where it will be possible to compare the hands of Verrocchio's *Bust of a Lady with Flowers* (the first female bust with arms and hands, usually in the *Bargello*) and Leonardo's *Study of Female Hands*, loaned by Her Majesty The Queen from the Royal Collection. 2) "Verrocchio Between Desiderio and Leonardo: The Ancient Heroes and The David" 3) "Verrocchio and His Followers: the Madonnas, Between Sculpture and Painting". 4) "Verrocchio as Fresco Painter". 5) "The School of Verrocchio as Painter Between Ghirlandaio and Perugino". 6) "Verrocchio in Rome, Verrocchio and Rome", which, "according to Vasari, played a crucial role in Verrocchio's art and career; he lived there under Pope Sixtus IV (1471-84) and it was there that he decided to leave the goldsmith's trade for sculpture, to follow in the footsteps of the ancients." 7) "The Winged Boy with Dolphin and Sculpture as the Master of Space". 8) "Verrocchio For Pistoia: The Forteguerri Cenotaph, The Madonna di Piazza and Lorenzo di Credi". 9) "From Verrocchio to Leonardo: The Folding of the Drapery Immersed in Light". 10) (at the Museo del Bargello) "Apex: The Incredulity of St. Thomas and a New Face of Christ" and 11) (at the Museo Bargello) "Verrocchio and his Rivals: the Crucifixes".



Verrocchio's *Incredulity of St. Thomas*

The press release tells us, "The Bargello [housed in the medieval *Palazzo del Podestà*,] is home to the most important collection of Renaissance sculpture in the world with masterpieces by Brunelleschi, Donatello, Luca Della Robbia, Verrocchio, Michelangelo, and Giambologna, only to name a few... For the first time ever, the *Bargello* hosts *The Incredulity of St. Thomas*, a masterpiece of bronze casting and refined design that marked the peak of Verrocchio's career as a sculptor and became the most celebrated and oft imitated sculpture of its day... Three examples [in clay by Verrocchio] of this work, out of the six known at present, are documented and compared here, revealing its subtle interplay of variants compared to the group cast in metal at Orsamichele. The many crucifixes in Section 11 show Verrocchio's equally crucial influence in the field of wood carving [in particular on Benedetto da Maiano and Andrea Ferrucci]."

Although it might seem strange, the highlight of the exhibition is not by Verrocchio but by Leonardo, probably while an apprentice in Verrocchio's workshop. It is a small terracotta statue of *The Virgin with the Laughing Child*.



Leonardo's only statue, "Madonna with Laughing Child" and his drawing of a Madonna's skirt

stylistic similarities. The work can also be compared with other famous works of the master such as the *Uffizi's Annunciation* or *The Virgin of the Rocks* and *St. Anne in the Louvre*. "This superb Madonna," writes Professor Caglioti in the catalog, "has no persuasive points of comparison with any other Florentine Renaissance sculpture, yet it has many points of comparison with Leonardo's drawings and paintings particularly with his youthful work, but also with his more mature output." ○

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