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ART REVIEW

'Donatello, Michelangelo, Cellini' Reviewed

A Boston show of sculptors' drawings from Renaissance Italy offers unusual insights into artists' working methods.

By **CAMMY BROTHERS**

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Boston

In our era of rapid prototyping and 3D printing, technologies that promise to transform the production of everything from medical devices to skyscrapers, it is easy to lose sight of how three-dimensional objects came into being in the predigital age. One way into this question is through drawing. What role did it play in the production of Renaissance sculpture, some of the most ambitious and technically accomplished ever produced? Or, as Columbia University art historian Michael Cole puts it, "Why did sculptors draw?"

This is the problem at the center of "Donatello, Michelangelo, Cellini: Sculptors' Drawings from Renaissance Italy," currently on view at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and co-curated by Mr. Cole and Oliver Tostmann, formerly of the Gardner and now Curator of European Art at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn. The show highlights several important objects from the Gardner's own collection, including Michelangelo's moving return to the subject of the Pietà in a late-career drawing (1540) and a self-portrait of Baccio Bandinelli (c.1545)—both much more readily viewed in the exhibition than in their traditional spots on the Gardner's

Donatello, Michelangelo, Cellini: Sculptors' Drawings from Renaissance Italy

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

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walls. It also includes an impressive array of international loans, including objects from the National Gallery of Scotland, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Louvre, and Casa Buonarroti, a Michelangelo museum in Florence, among others. The exhibition includes 47 drawings, small sculptures, paintings and reliefs organized thematically in two rooms.

The show offers particularly intriguing insights into less familiar aspects of Michelangelo's career, in particular his study of ancient sculpture, his use of terra-cotta models, his gradual entry into the world of architecture and his late religious drawings. United for the first time here are a series of studies of a rather unprepossessing-looking fragment of a Venus. Much has been made of Michelangelo's lack of interest in female bodies, but he examines this one from every angle. Particularly precious here is the juxtaposition of the drawings with Michelangelo's terra-cotta model from the Casa Buonarotti (c. 1530) of a similar female nude, so that viewers can understand the multiple ways Michelangelo prepared himself to sculpt figures. Our notions of genius and spontaneous inspiration may favor the idea that Michelangelo worked directly on the marble, but this was true only prior to elaborate preparation.

The modest-looking terra cotta is of extraordinary historical interest. Molded in clay as a working model, it was then fired as a way of archiving the idea, offering insight into Michelangelo's methods. Although he famously burned a number of his drawings at various points in his career, or instructed others to do so, he also carefully preserved many parts of his preparatory process for later reference and reuse.

The complex interplay between drawing and model arises again in the gorgeous, highly finished drawing by Benvenuto Cellini of a Satyr (1543-45) and the matching small bronze from the J. Paul Getty Museum that stands next to it. While one could be forgiven for jumping to the conclusion that the drawing was preparatory for the bronze, its finished state implies otherwise—this is, instead, a record of the final design solution, probably intended for presentation to Cellini's patron, Francis I.

The bronze sculpture is also not what it seems: Although it looks perfectly complete, it is thought to be one of two nearly identical works produced as part of the preparatory process, allowing Cellini to test two distinct methods of bronze casting while also assessing the skill of the local French foundries.

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'Self-Portrait' (c. 1545) by the sculptor Baccio Bandinelli. *ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON*

Michelangelo and Cellini are forceful presences in the show, Donatello is represented by a single drawing that may not be his. It is a double-sided sheet depicting David on one side and the Massacre of the Innocents on the other, and it is the subject matter that has led scholars to suggest Donatello's name. Attributing drawings can be a tricky business, and the traditional as well as most reliable method is based on stylistic comparisons to other known drawings, as well as on comparisons of handwriting. In this case neither are possible, because it is the only drawing ascribed to Donatello that has gained some acceptance among scholars. Although connoisseurship goes in and out of fashion, this example demonstrates how lost we are without it.

Among the claims of the show is the relevance of architecture to sculpture—and the impossibility of separating them during this period. "Architecture" occupies one wall of the exhibition. But it is a broad category that encompasses a range of significant but typically neglected objects, including tombs and fountains. Also in this category but unrepresented here are objects such as candelabra, chimneypieces and altar frames: all important and expensive aspects of Renaissance art that art historians tend to overlook because they do not readily correspond to our own categories.

The sculptor Baccio Bandinelli (1493-1560), although not known widely enough to have been included as one of the exhibition "headliners," was a colorful character who seems to have been universally disliked. He is the subject of an engrossing self-portrait, in which he holds a sheet of paper with an image that appears to be either a red chalk study for a sculpture or a depiction of an existing work in bronze. That painting—along with a portrait of the Flemish sculptor Giambologna attributed to Peter Candid (c. 1548-1628), from the National Gallery of Scotland—demonstrates the importance of drawing to the sculptor's self-image. This association with drawing heightened the sculptor's status—it presented an alternative to the unflattering image presented by Leonardo da Vinci, in which he describes the sweat of sculptors, their filthy houses and faces caked in dust. Here they are finely dressed, in elegant surroundings. Just as important was undoubtedly the 16th-century notion of *disegno*, which in English carries the double meaning of drawing and design. It is this second idea of design, and with it invention, that holds the key to a great deal of the dynamism and tension of 16th-century art, as a range of protagonists working in various media sought to lay claim to the mastery of *disegno*.

The show, housed in the exhibition wing completed in 2011 by the ever-busy Renzo Piano, demonstrates the possibilities afforded by this expanded space for showcasing objects from the Gardner's permanent collection. According to Isabella Stewart Gardner's will, "the general disposition or arrangement of her paintings" was to be

maintained. While this provides a wonderful window into the history of collecting, and the courtyard is breathtaking, it can be difficult to see works of art that hang high on the wall. This is exactly the kind of show the Gardner should be doing in their new spaces: it not only makes these works readily visible but casts them in a new light.

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