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ART REVIEW

'Bertoldo di Giovanni: The Renaissance of Sculpture in Medici Florence' Review: Out of the Shadows

An exhibition highlights the work of the underappreciated 15th-century sculptor—and teacher of Michelangelo—who advanced both the art of his time and the agenda of his patrons, the Medici family.

Exhibition gallery view of Bertoldo's 'Bellerophon Taming Pegasus' (c. 1480-82) PHOTO: THE FRICK COLLECTION, NY

By Cammy Brothers

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Florence did not become the cultural center of Renaissance Italy by accident. It was the result of large scale, discerning patronage of the arts, above all by the Medici family. They were motivated not only by genuine enthusiasm but also by a need to overcome their modest family origins and the stain of usury surrounding their banking activities, both goals they accomplished magnificently through their cultural largess.

One early beneficiary of their generous patronage, and propagator of the Medici family cultural agenda, was Bertoldo di Giovanni (c. 1440-1491), the subject of an exhibition currently on view at the Frick Collection. "Bertoldo di Giovanni: The Renaissance of Sculpture in Medici

Bertoldo di Giovanni: The Renaissance of Sculpture in Medici Florence

The Frick Collection
Through Jan. 12, 2020

Florence," curated by the Frick's Aimee Ng, Alexander Noelle and Xavier Salomon, is the first show to bring together almost all of Bertoldo's roughly 20 known works from collections across Europe.

Born to German immigrant parents, Bertoldo became a close adviser to Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492), a curator of his collection of antiquities, and a treasured member of the Medici household. Long overshadowed by his identity as Michelangelo's sculptural master, he trained the young artist in the garden of Lorenzo, a de facto school for artists in late-15th-century Florence. While historians once discounted the existence of this informal school as a myth advanced by Giorgio Vasari, recent research has confirmed that it was very real. The garden brought together promising young artists from Tuscany to be taught by Bertoldo, benefiting not only from his expertise but from the collection of antique sculptures and fragments he kept on hand.

Bertoldo di Giovanni's 'The Pazzi Conspiracy (Lorenzo de' Medici)' (1478) PHOTO: MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL BARGELLO, FLORENCE

Seeing Bertoldo's "Battle" (c. 1480-85), a bronze relief sculpture and the first piece in the exhibition, it is easy to see why Lorenzo held him close. Just over three feet wide, it seethes with energy, the rearing horses and nearly nude soldiers driving forward as if by sheer effort they could break free of their flat frame and fully enter the viewer's dimension. Here was an artist who could transform the venerable but dusty heritage of ancient Roman sarcophagi and their battle scenes into a vibrant new form. It was exactly the project the Medici hoped to promote, placing themselves as patrons at the center of a revival of the prestigious art of ancient Rome, and thus associating themselves with a longer and more illustrious lineage than they possessed.

Michelangelo's first significant work, his marble relief of the "Battle of the Centaurs" (c. 1492) at the Casa Buonarroti, made while he was still a teenager, is inconceivable without Bertoldo's "Battle." The densely interwoven bodies, twisting and bending, create an uninterrupted field, directly modeled on Bertoldo's relief. Neither panel shows the ground plane, or the sky, or any indication of landscape. Rather than describing a particular historical event, Bertoldo's relief was always known only as a battle. Although Michelangelo's panel has an ostensible subject, as in Bertoldo's case its real subjects are the human body in movement and the artist's skill in portraying it. This would become Michelangelo's life project.

Bertoldo di Giovanni's 'Battle (c. 1480-85) PHOTO: MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL BARGELLO, FLORENCE

Beyond Michelangelo, Bertoldo's impact on Florentine art lay in the model he provided to his peers of how to transform ancient Roman models for modern use. This comes through in almost everything he did: from the cocked hips and tilted head of the "Shield Bearer" (c. 1470-80), to the heroic horses of the small bronze "Bellerophon Taming Pegasus" (c. 1480-82) and "Hercules on Horseback" (c. 1470-75), to the bronze medals fashioned after ancient Roman

coinage. This context would have required a much larger exhibition to convey, one that a strategic partnership with the Metropolitan Museum of Art (which, along with its collection of Roman antiquities, houses the "Cupid," attributed to Michelangelo but with a similar pose to Bertoldo's "Orpheus" of c. 1471) or Florence's Bargello Museum might have allowed.

Bertoldo di Giovanni's 'Shield Bearer' (c. 1470-80) PHOTO: THE FRICK COLLECTION, NY

The curators obtained several exceptional loans. Most striking is the entire terra-cotta frieze of Lorenzo de' Medici's villa of Poggio a Caiano (begun c. 1487). Populated by ancient gods, it depicts an elaborate allegory of the Medici family, meant to signify the renewal of time, and by extension their rule. The curators' placement of the frieze at eye level dampens its perception as an architectural feature. Many of its figures' traits, such as their deep eye sockets, were calculated to be seen from below, and at a distance. But seeing it up close makes it possible to appreciate some extraordinary detail, such as the virtuoso imitation of green and red porphyry in the section depicting Mars opening the doors of the Temple of Janus.

Section of Bertoldo di Giovanni and collaborators's frieze for the portico of the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano PHOTO: GABINETTO FOTOGRAFICO DELLE GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI

It may be difficult to imagine why Lorenzo would reserve such a lavish piece of architectural sculpture for a country villa, but the Medici were constantly worried about the criticism that their lavish spending might provoke.

And well they should have been. In 1478, as part of the Pazzi conspiracy, there was an assassination attempt against Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano, and his brother died. Bertoldo's medal, included in the exhibition, commemorates this traumatic event.

Section of Bertoldo di Giovanni and collaborators's frieze for the portico of the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano PHOTO: GABINETTO FOTOGRAFICO DELLE GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI

Bertoldo's importance for Renaissance art doesn't match his relatively small surviving output and obscurity to all but a specialized audience, which is probably why an exhibition has never before been attempted. In two rooms and an ambitious catalog, the curators largely correct for this historical neglect. But for the full story, visitors will need to go to Florence. There are worse things.

—Ms. Brothers is an associate professor at Northeastern University and the author of "Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture" (Yale).