

James H. Beck: DONATELLO'S BLACK MADONNA

For Ulrich Middeldorf

The composition and form of Donatello's bronze Madonna and Child for the high altar of Il Santo in Padua has always been somewhat puzzling to students of the master's art (Figures 1 and 2). It seems to represent an anomaly in which Donatello, who nearly unaided introduced into the language of forms in fifteenth-century Italy a new interpretation of the human figure, thoroughly and uncompromisingly rejects his own discoveries.

Placing the onus of the Madonna's invention and execution onto one of the host of shop-workers known to have been active in the master's Padovan *bottega* cannot be supported on stylistic grounds. Furthermore an assistant or assistants could hardly have produced such an apparently *retardataire* group, and would have clung instead to the most current ideas of the master at that moment. In any case the beauty and refinement of the modelling, the absolute control over the medium, the intricate iconography woven into the work, all together make it impossible to doubt that we are dealing with a statue conceived of and in large measure executed by the master himself. One might even sustain that it represents one of the finest productions of his Paduan period. To be sure, the Madonna and Child forms the central focus for the entire altar, large and complex as it was, regardless of which reconstruction from the nearly a score one chooses to accept. In this circumstance it is scarcely possible that Donatello would have turned over such a key statue to an assistant.

Horst W. Janson's explanation of the statue, together with his analysis, is the most fruitful yet entertained. He with good reason suggested that Donatello must have been requested to conform his Madonna and Child with an older Madonna image owned by the Church.¹ Janson further postulated that this older image may even have been attached to the original altar for which Donatello's monumental bronze altar was a replacement.

Scholars have long observed that Donatello's group reflected a much earlier type, one current in the years shortly after the first millenium and one that persisted as a vital motive well into the Dugento. Hans Kauffmann associated it with the relief and painted Madonna and Child in S. Maria Maggiore in Florence attributed to Coppo di Marcovaldo, but Janson has demonstrated that such a reflection on a Florentine work for one executed in Padua is unlikely.

Unfortunately the known documentation relative to Donatello's activities on the altar gives no information whatever as to any special contractual instructions for the statue, although there must have been some either written or oral, if Janson's explanation is correct.² On the other hand, there does exist in the literature a highly suggestive notice that may serve to clarify the matter. Santori published a notice (only partially transcribed) and together with his summary it reads as follows: *1402, 10 Dicembre... P. M. Gaspare de Mantova, Ministro della Provincia del Santo, decreta che il superfluo delle offerte fatte alla Madonna Mora venga devoluto a rinvovare l'altare maggiore: Capsa remaneat in statu pristino, ita quod oblatio deveniat pro aptando altare magnum conventus et anchonam unam.*³

The Chapel of the Madonna Mora referred to in the document is still extant and is still known by that name. It lies on the left flank of the church and forms what might be called the left transept. The chapel is the most ancient part of the church; for it should be recalled, Il Santo was constructed on part of the site of an earlier church called Santa Maria Mater Domini or Sancta Dei Genetrix which was said to have been founded in the year 1100.⁴ At the time of Anthony's death in 1231, this church was being used by the Saint and his followers and his body was placed to rest in a marble arca within it.⁵ Saint Anthony's remains were kept in the old church and presumably in the Chapel of the Madonna Mora until Saint Buonaventura transferred them to the newly built church dedicated to Saint Anthony (Il Santo) at which time it was discovered that the tongue of the famous thaumaturge was miraculously still intact (April,

¹ *Horst W. Janson*, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, II, Princeton, 1957, p. 184. *Janson* also points out that there are parts that have remained unfinished, especially on the back where *The Fall* is shown in relief. He also remarks that the Christ Child's left eye and right hand are badly mutilated. For a summary of the reconstructions and a new one, see *John White*, *Donatello's High Altar in the Santo at Padua*, Parts I and II, in: *Art Bulletin*, LI, 1969, pp. 1-14; 119-141.

² For the Documentation, see *Giuseppe Fiocco and Antonio Sartori*, *Il trittico donatelliano del Santo*, Padua, 1961, *passim*; see also *J. White*, *op. cit.*, *passim*, for further bibliography.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴ *Bernardo Gonzati*, *La Basilica di S. Antonio di Padova*, I, Padua, 1852, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.



1 Donatello, *Madonna and Child* from the main altar of *Il Santo*, Padua.



2 Detail of Figure 1.

1263). Nothing remained of the old church of Santa Maria Mater Domini which had given way to the building of the new church except for a single chapel, that of the Madonna Mora. Clearly this chapel must have been considered especially sacred, having close connections to the patron saint of the new church. The ground plan of Il Santo reveals that the church had been constructed with the intention of maintaining the importance of the Chapel of the Madonna Mora, which is on axis with the crossing. Even if the walls of the Chapel of the Madonna Mora had been considerably altered when it was incorporated into the new building, the sacred or venerated character of the area had been preserved.

The Chapel of the Madonna Mora obtained its name according to the opinion of Gonzati because "bruno, o moro, è il colore in cui fu dipinto il volto della Vergine che qui se venera."⁶ Undoubtedly there must have been a specially venerated Black Madonna in the Chapel. The cults which celebrated the Black Madonna have yet to undergo a systematic analysis although it is well known that images of

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240. In another place *Gonzati* gives an alternative explanation for the name of the chapel (p. XV), "I Rogati Negri n'erano patroni dal che per avventura il titolo di Madonna Mora o Nera." but this forced argument needs no comment; even the author himself abandons it later on in the same book. A mid-nineteenth century remodelling project for the Chapel of the Madonna Mora is discussed in *Nino Gallimberti*, Pietro Selvatico architetto, in: *Bollettino del Museo Civico di Padova*, N.S., IX, 1933, pp. 156-166.

this kind were to be found in abundance in most of Europe and especially in France.⁷ An especially famous example was the *Vierge Noire* from Chartres, a statue destroyed in the Eighteenth Century (Fig. 3). The question of the origin of this type, however, still remains open. There are those who suspect that these statues, which were almost exclusively carved in wood, became blackened by age or by candle fire over the centuries accruing thereby the aspect that gave them their special distinction. Such an explanation offers certain problems, for it is natural to wonder why only the exposed parts of the figures became blackened while the rest of the figures did not. Another explanation of the origin of the Black Madonna type centers on the belief that it represents a survival of certain pagan black stone images, especially those pertaining to fertility goddesses and mother earth.

There is a passage in the Old Testament that has been connected with the image of the Black Madonna. From the Song of Songs, I, 4 are the lines *Nigra sum sed formosa filiae Iherusalem sicut tabernacula cedar, sicut pelles Salomonis*.

However, the origins and the meaning of the Black Madonna are not clear, although most ancient examples that have come down to us (from the end of the eleventh century) represent stylistically a Byzantino-Romanesque character, with powerful frontality and axiality, differing not at all from other contemporary wooden Madonnas, except that the exposed parts of the figures are black or brown. Donatello's Madonna on the main altar of Il Santo has been related to precisely these Byzantino-Romanesque images. By accepting Janson's proposition that there must have been a particularly sacred older Madonna image in Il Santo before the rebuilding of the altar, and by combining this theory with the document already cited, the conclusion is inevitable: Donatello's bronze Madonna embodies and reflects an image of the Black Madonna that pre-existed it, one which was located in the Chapel of the Madonna Mora. One further assumption may be made considering the evidence: the ancient image of the Black Madonna that was in the demolished church of Santa Maria Mater Domini must have been intimately connected with Saint Anthony himself. Perhaps he had brought it with him to Padua from the south of France, where he spent several years in the 1220s. Donatello's Madonna and Child was a conscious, planned allusion to the pre-existing Black Madonna.⁸



3 Notre-Dame de Chartres. Seventeenth-century etching.

⁷ Studies on the Black Madonna are rather sparse and somewhat inconclusive. See *Marie Durand-Lefebvre*, *Étude sur l'origine des Vierges noires*, Paris, 1937; *E. Saillens*, *Nos Vierges noires, leurs origines*, Paris, 1945; and references in *I. E. Haering* (Forsyth), *Cult Statues of the Madonna in the Early Middle Ages*, Ph. D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1960. See also *L. W. Moss and S. C. Cappannari*, *The Black Madonna: An Example of Cultural Borrowing*, in: *The Scientific Monthly*, LXXVI, No. 6, 1953, pp. 319-324. Somewhat unexpectedly, I have been unable to find commentaries on this widely used image in the writings of contemporary theologians. I suspect, therefore, that while it was not prohibited by the Church, there was no great enthusiasm to discuss and propagate the worship of this type of image.

⁸ For a possible confirmation of the Black Madonna aspect of Donatello's Virgin on the Padua Altar, Professor *Middeldorf*, with his usual acumen, has called my attention to a payment of 1477 (*Fiocco and Sartori*, op. cit., p. 74). From the document we learn that the hands and faces of the Saints on the altar were silvered. The Madonna and Child group is not mentioned specifically and apparently they were not touched, leaving the black appearance of the bronze.

RIASSUNTO

La Madonna di Donatello sull'altar maggiore del Santo a Padova ha sempre incuriosito gli studiosi per le sue caratteristiche più dugentesche che donatelliane. L'autore condivide la supposizione del Janson che l'artista abbia preso come modello una più antica immagine di Madonna conservata nella stessa chiesa. L'autore vede la soluzione del problema nel fatto che Donatello abbia imitato, per la sua figura, quella della cappella della Madonna Mora. Questa cappella, unico vestigio dell'antica Chiesa di S. Maria Mater Domini, forma la navata sinistra dell'odierna chiesa e fu il primo sepolcro dei resti di S. Antonio prima che fossero traslati nella nuova chiesa. Il nome della cappella deriva da una "Vierge noire" che vi era venerata e che probabilmente era una copia della Madonna nera di Chartres. Le origini delle immagini delle Madonne nere non sono ancora del tutto chiarite. Il bronzo di Donatello risente della Madonna nera, immagine strettamente in relazione con la persona stessa del Santo.

Photo Credits:

Broggi: Figs. 1, 2. - After É. Saillens, Nos Vierges noires, Paris, 1945: Fig. 3.

Hans Martin von Erffa: JUDITH - VIRTUS VIRTUTUM - MARIA

Max Denzler zum 25. November 1969

Ungeachtet der verschiedenen, in den vergangenen vier Jahrzehnten unternommenen Bemühungen ist es noch nicht überzeugend gelungen, Donatellos Judith ikonologisch zu deuten. Auf Grund einiger Beobachtungen am Bildwerk und ihrem Vergleich mit dem Bibeltext sowie mit mittelalterlichen Quellen soll im folgenden der Vorstoß zu einer — im Gegensatz zu den bisherigen Versuchen — komplexeren Deutung gemacht werden.

Dargestellt ist eine Frau, die ein Schwert über ihrem Haupt schwingt. Unter und halb neben ihr ein grobschlächtiger Mann, seiner Sinne nicht mächtig. Er ist nicht tot¹, sondern trunken, und die Frau hat mit ihrer Linken seinen Haarschopf ergriffen. Im Begriff zuzuschlagen, verharret sie mit ernstem, unverzerrtem Gesichtsausdruck in aufrechter Haltung.

Die Geschichte der biblischen Judith ist zu bekannt, als dass sie hier wiederholt werden müsste. Nur gelegentlich sei auf einen bestimmten Vers des Textes hingewiesen, um zu verdeutlichen, wie Donatellos Standbild nicht nur einen Augenblick aus dem dramatischen, Tage währenden Geschehen darstellt, sondern wichtige Punkte aus der ganzen Erzählung in diesen Augenblick einbezieht. Die Begriffe „Standbild“ und „Darstellung eines Geschehens“ werden in der Kunstgeschichte meist antagonistisch gebraucht. In der Tat ist aber hier Statuarik und Handlungsmoment in vollendeter Form verschmolzen; sie sind in eine Spannung gebracht, die man *azione interiore* und *intima tensione* genannt hat.² Das kann nicht in illustrativer Absicht geschehen sein, die Figur muss in dieser Ambivalenz einen bestimmten Sinn haben, sie muss eine Eigenschaft darstellen wollen: mit anderen Worten, sie ist nicht nur die biblische Judith, sondern zugleich eine Personifikation. Aber was personifiziert sie?

Das Bildwerk steht vor dem Haus der gesetzgebenden Körperschaft der Stadtrepublik Florenz, die in ständigem Kampf gegen übermächtige Feinde, gegen gekrönte oder geweihte Machthaber ihre Kräfte zuerst stählte, später verzehrte. So liegt die Deutung nahe, dass Judith dasselbe aussagt wie ihr Nachbar David: der zarte Jüngling (das schwache Weib) besiegt in unbeirrbarem Gottvertrauen — und durch List! — einen Riesen aus dem feindlichen Heer (den Feldherrn des feindlichen Heeres), welches das eigene Volk mit Untergang bedroht. Die Mahnung an den Bürger des Stadtstaates könnte eindeutig sein: Judith personifiziert Florenz oder doch die Summe der heroischen Tugenden seiner Bürger.

¹ Ein zeitweilig vermuteter Schnitt in der Gurgel hat sich bei genauerer Untersuchung als Gussnaht erwiesen.

² *Andreas Grote*, Cellini in gara, in: *Il Ponte* 19, 1963, p. 1-22 (p. 14).