

## MISZELLEN

Charles M. Rosenberg: SOME NEW DOCUMENTS CONCERNING DONATELLO'S UNEXECUTED MONUMENT TO BORSO D'ESTE IN MODENA \*

One of Borso d'Este's first acts upon being elected Marchese of Ferrara, Modena and Reggio was to grant these cities a reduction in the salt and milling taxes. In no part of his realm was this action met with greater rejoicing than in Modena. On October 16, 1450, the reductions were announced at a meeting of the Savi, the ruling council of Modena. At this session the Savi decided to celebrate their new Marchese's generosity in three ways: First, the particular decree would be celebrated by a general festival to be announced by the joyous ringing of the city's bells. Second, Borso's elevation to Marchese would be commemorated by an annual holiday and procession to be held on October 1, the anniversary of his election. Third, a marble statue of Borso would be erected in his honor in the main square of the city.<sup>1</sup> The history of this projected monument as noted in the records of the Savi of Modena has been published by Giulio Bertoni and Emilio Vicini in an article written in 1905.<sup>2</sup> The course of this project as it appears in the Bertoni and Vicini documents is worth reviewing because of the information which it provides about certain technical aspects of Donatello's approach to monumental sculpture.

The first entry in the *Vachette*, the records of the proceedings of the Savi, notes the October 16 decision to erect the statue.<sup>3</sup> The next entry is dated two days later and records that the Savi had requested the Marchese to supply them with an *ymagine* depicting the manner in which he wished to have himself portrayed in the monument.<sup>4</sup> Although in the fifteenth century the term *imago* could mean either a drawing or a piece of sculpture<sup>5</sup>, it seems safe to assume that the image requested was a two-dimensional representation. In the next entry, dated March 8, 1451, Gerardino della Molza, one of the Massari of Modena, presented *Donatello de Florentia* to the Savi.<sup>6</sup> After his introduction, Donatello proceeded to argue two points concerning the projected monument. First, he suggested that it would be better to make the actual statue of bronze, rather than marble, since otherwise the *pedes* would not support the weight of the figure. Second, he proposed that the statue be fire-gilded in order that it should better endure the hardships of exposure to the elements. Both of these arguments are extremely interesting. First, the suggestion concerning the use of bronze rather than marble was made not because of any symbolic distinction between the materials, nor on the basis of cost, but rather because of the technical consideration of weight and stress. This may very well explain why most free-standing equestrian monuments produced in the Renaissance were made of metal. It is to be noted, however, that the entry in the *Vachette* does not categorically prove that the Modenese intended an equestrian monument. The entry does refer to "feet". However, the monument actually erected in Borso's honor in Ferrara a few years later portrayed the Marchese seated on a fall stool, which also has "feet". Presumably, if the Modenese monument was also meant to be a seated image, the problem of stress would also have arisen in relation to the legs of the fall stool. Second, Donatello's proposal that the statue be fire-gilded was likewise conditioned not by an aesthetic or symbolic reason, but by the technical consideration of durability.

The Savi approved Donatello's plan the following day and designated him as the recipient of the commission.<sup>7</sup> The contract, entered in the *Vachette* on March 10, 1451<sup>8</sup>, stipulated that Donatello should make the state *ad similitudinem et ymaginem ipsius domini et eiusdem altitudinis et grossicionis vel maioris prout ipsi Magistro Donatello videbitur ne ex longiori aut altiori prospectu ipsa statua minoris stature videatur*; that Borso should be represented in the clothes and manner which he had indicated; that the statue should be firegilded; and that the work should be completed within one year. For labor and materials Donatello was to receive a total of 300 gold florins to be paid out as needed, with any sum remaining to be paid at the conclusion of the monument. The terms of this contract are very revealing. First, the specification that the figure be made life-size or *larger* so that it would not appear to smaller than life-size

\* I would like to thank Professor Ulrich Middeldorf for his kind advice and assistance with this article.

<sup>1</sup> Giulio Bertoni and Emilio P. Vicini, Donatello a Modena, in: Rassegna d'Arte, 5, 1905, pp. 69-72 (p. 71, note 1).

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. (here cited as Bertoni-Vicini, with the number of the documentary appendix, pp. 71-72).

<sup>3</sup> Bertoni-Vicini, doc. I.

<sup>4</sup> Bertoni-Vicini, doc. II.

<sup>5</sup> Webster Smith, Definitions of *Statua*, in: Art Bull., 50, 1968, pp. 263-267.

<sup>6</sup> Bertoni-Vicini, doc. III.

<sup>7</sup> Bertoni-Vicini, doc. IV.

<sup>8</sup> Bertoni-Vicini, doc. V.

when seen from afar or above, probably meaning that the statue was to be raised above the viewer, was probably Donatello's own suggestion as he was entrusted with the task of determining the proper amount of adjustment to make. As such it is one of the clearest expressions of the artist's concern with the optical adjustment of figural proportions. Vasari's famous story about the St. George<sup>9</sup>, and Charles Seymour's observations about the foreshortening of the S. John<sup>10</sup>, both suggest Donatello's awareness of the effects of positioning on the appearance of his sculpture, but this passage in the Modenese contract is concrete evidence of the artist's concern with perceptual problems. Second, the specification that the statue should represent the Marchese in the clothes and character (*persona*), presumably meaning gesture, stance and expression, which pleased him, suggests that both of these factors were considered to have a considerable import. They were necessary to make the statue appear life-like, but also they were required to denote the status and symbolic meaning of the figure.

The remainder of *Vachette* entries published by Bertoni and Vicini deal with payments made throughout 1451 to Gerardo Malerba, a mason and associate of Donatello, for various trips into the mountains for stone<sup>11</sup>; a payment to Donatello for the purchase of metal and expenses incurred in August, 1452<sup>12</sup>; and a payment to Bartolommeo de Stevanino for a trip to Padua in March, 1453, during which he apparently made one final effort on behalf of the Savi to persuade the artist to come to Modena to complete the statue.<sup>13</sup>

The final documents which Bertoni and Vicini published were two entries from the *Ordinaria* of 1444-1465.<sup>14</sup> The *Ordinaria* was the account book of the Massari, or paymasters of Modena. The first entry was dated June 25, 1451, and refers to a payment of seven lire made to Tommaso Valentino for a *boletta* from Donatello. The second entry is dated October 3, 1451, and concerns the payment made to Malerba for a six day trip which he had taken with Donatello to obtain stone in the preceding month.

Somehow, in their examination of the *Vachette* and *Ordinaria* Bertoni and Vicini overlooked five additional entries which concern the projected monument. One of those in the *Ordinaria* concerns a payment of eleven lire to Bartolommeo dai Paroli on February 5, 1453, for a trip which he made to see Donatello.<sup>15</sup> This document establishes another contact between the Savi and Donatello prior to March 1, 1453. Unfortunately, the purpose of the journey is not indicated. It is worth noting, however, that the amount paid to dai Paroli was rather large, considering that Malerba received only one and one-half lire for his six day trip in September, 1451. The eleven lire must also include some payment to Donatello as well as a reimbursement of dai Paroli for his expenses. The other four documents, two in the *Vachetta* for 1450 and two in the *Ordinaria*, are much more interesting because they concern the statue prior to Donatello's entry into the project and suggest that the commission had originally been awarded to another artist.

The first of these entries is found in the *Vachette* and is dated November 5, 1450.<sup>16</sup> It records the Savi's decision to entrust Gerardino della Molza and Tommaso Cavalarino with the task of overseeing the monument's execution. The second entry appears in the same *Vachetta* on December 13, and concerns the reimbursement of Lanzalotto Cavalarino, one of the Massari, for three ducats which he had disbursed to the Master of the Borso statue and forty-three soldi which he had given to the man who carried the three ducats to the Master.<sup>17</sup> The third entry, which appears in the *Ordinaria*, 1444-65, elaborates on these payments, stating that the messenger was Giovanni da Mangardino and that he had traveled to Bologna.<sup>18</sup> This entry is ambiguous, but it would appear that the artist to whom the three ducats were paid was in Bologna at the time. In any case, from these payments it is clear that the commission had already been assigned to an artist by December 13, 1450, two and one-half months before Donatello's name appears in the records. The final entry, dated February 17, 1451, however, is the most interesting one.<sup>19</sup> It concerns a payment of ten florins to a *Maestro Nicolò da Fiorenza* who *feci* the statue of Borso. Though the past tense is used in this entry, it must refer to the Modenese monument since no other statue of Borso is ever mentioned in the *Vachette* or *Ordinaria*. Donatello's real name was, of course, Donato di Nicolò di Betto Bardi. However, in no surviving document is he ever called by his father's name, Nicolò. Therefore, it is logical to assume that another artist must have received the commission prior to Donatello.

<sup>9</sup> *Vasari-Milanesi*, II, pp. 402-403.

<sup>10</sup> *Charles Seymour, Jr.*, *Sculpture in Italy: 1400-1500*, London and Baltimore, 1966, pp. 55-56.

<sup>11</sup> *Bertoni-Vicini*, docs. VII, VIII and IX.

<sup>12</sup> *Bertoni-Vicini*, doc. X.

<sup>13</sup> *Bertoni-Vicini*, doc. XII.

<sup>14</sup> *Bertoni-Vicini*, doc. XIII.

<sup>15</sup> See our Appendix, p. 152, document no. V.

<sup>16</sup> See our Appendix, doc. I.

<sup>17</sup> See our Appendix, doc. II.

<sup>18</sup> See our Appendix, doc. III.

<sup>19</sup> See our Appendix, doc. IV.

The *Nicolò da Fiorenza* noted in the *Ordinaria* was most probably Nicolò di Giovanni Baroncelli.<sup>20</sup> Baroncelli was at the time the head of the largest and most important shop in Ferrara. His chief rival in the Ferrarese ambient, Antonio di Cristoforo da Firenze, had left the city by October, 1450<sup>21</sup>, presumably to pursue a commission in Venice. This left Baroncelli the undisputed master of his art. In 1451, Baroncelli was actively engaged in two major projects in Ferrara, the creation of a five figure bronze Calvary for the Cathedral<sup>22</sup> and the completion of an equestrian monument dedicated to Borso's father, Nicolò III d'Este.<sup>23</sup> The latter commission must certainly have suggested to the Modenese Savi Baroncelli's suitability for their own honorific monument.

The introduction of Nicolò Baroncelli into the history of the Modenese monument unfortunately adds another mystery to the statue's history: Why was the commission transferred from Baroncelli to Donatello some time between February and March, 1451? It is possible that the Modenese simply wished to transfer the commission to a more famous artist for reasons of prestige. This is a tenuous argument, however, since certainly within those territories controlled by the Este Baroncelli's reputation must have been almost as great as that of Donatello. Another possible explanation is that another, more pressing obligation intruded to cause Baroncelli himself to relinquish the Modenese commission. The equestrian monument of Nicolò III was begun in 1443.<sup>24</sup> Surviving documents indicate that a certain portion of the monument had been completed by 1446 and was ready to be cast by the end of April of that year.<sup>25</sup> The progress of work on the monument then becomes obscure until 1449, when the *Comune* of Ferrara's payment of the rent for the house where Nicolò Baroncelli was living seems to indicate that he was in the process of making the horse for the monument.<sup>26</sup> In July, 1450, a payment appears in the communal account books of Ferrara for ninety lire of copper purchased by Antonio di Cristoforo, presumably for use in the Nicolò III monument.<sup>27</sup> Then, after having disappeared from the annual estimation of the *Collecta*, the main municipal tax of Ferrara, since 1444, the Nicolò III monument once again reappeared as a major anticipated expense on January 14, 1451<sup>28</sup>, indicating that the pace of work on the statue was accelerating. On January 30, 1451, the *Comune* received an exemption for the importation of more copper and tin to be used in the statue.<sup>29</sup> On March 16, 1451, another rental payment on Baroncelli's behalf seems to indicate that he was still engaged in working on the horse.<sup>30</sup> Finally, on June 2, 1451, the Feast of the Ascension, the monument was formally installed beside the *Arco del cavallo*<sup>31</sup> opposite the Cathedral of Ferrara.

<sup>20</sup> Nicolò di Giovanni Baroncelli is called *Nicolò da Firenze* in the November 27, 1443, deliberation of the Savi of Ferrara which records their decision regarding the competition for the equestrian monument of Nicolò III d'Este, and in two payments from 1447 and 1448 for certain work which he did for the Cathedral of Ferrara. (*Michelangelo Gualandi*) *Memorie originali italiane riguardanti le belle arti*, Serie quarta, Bologna, 1843, Memoria 121, pp. 42-43 and 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34, "Libro della Fabrica della Cattedrale di Ferrara segnato + fol. 18": *MCCCCL a di VII de octubr. o M. o Antonio da fiorenza maistro de zeto de figure de metallo che al presente abita in Venexia*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>23</sup> *Luigi Napoleone Cittadella*, *Notizie amministrative, storiche, artistiche relative a Ferrara ricavate da documenti*, I, Ferrara, 1868, p. 417: *1451 16 Marzo. A Andrea Marsapeschi per prezzo de caxa dove sta Nicolò Baroncelli da Fiorenza, che fabrica el chavallo dove se de ponere suso l'imazene del Marchese Nicholò passado*.

<sup>24</sup> (*M. Gualandi*) *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>25</sup> *Antonio Frizzi*, *Memorie per la storia di Ferrara*, IV, Ferrara, 1796, p. 8, notes a notarial document by Dolcino Dolcini dated April 30, 1446, exempting the city of Ferrara from having to pay taxes on copper and tin imported from Venice for the statue of Nicolò III d'Este.

<sup>26</sup> *L. N. Cittadella*, *op. cit.*, p. 417: *1449. A pixon de caxa abita M. Nicholo de Zoane Baroncelli da Fiorenza, che fa el chavallo de bronzo*.

<sup>27</sup> (*M. Gualandi*), *op. cit.*, Serie quinta (1844), p. 178, Appendice a Memoria 121: "Memoriale K fol. 16", *MCCCCL. Vidale Zudò e fratelli al banco di borgorjo de ave Lir. XIII. s. Il d. m per dodexe choi (capi) de paroli secchi bacilli ch. pesa lir. LXXXX di ramo netto dachordo co m. o Antonio de Cristofaro da Fiorenza ch. fa limazene del Signore passado le dite lir. tredexe*.

<sup>28</sup> Ferrara, Archivio comunale, Patronomia, "Liber deliberationum Sapientum Duodeci", 1445-1452, "G", fol. 52 r.

<sup>29</sup> *L. N. Cittadella*, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> See note 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Giuseppe Agnelli*, *I monumenti di Nicolò III e Borso d'Este in Ferrara*, in: *Atti e Memorie della Deputazione Ferrarese di Storia Patria*, 23, 1918, pp. 21-24, established the original location of the Nicolò III monument alongside of the *Arco del cavallo*. The date of June 2, 1451, comes from the "Diario ferrarese", ed. *Giuseppe Pardi*, in: *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, XXV, 7, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Bologna, 1928 (p. 33), though it is to be admitted that payments for gilding the statue and for work on the marble supporting arch stretch out through the end of 1453. Antonio di Cristoforo received a final payment for his part of the monument on August 17, 1451, whereas Nicolò Baroncelli's account was only settled on December 13, 1453, approximately a month and a half after his death. That Baroncelli was responsible for the last phase of the monument and particularly the execution of the arch is proven by the appearance of his signature on the anterior column.

Thus, from the documentary history of the Nicolò III monument it would seem that after an inactive period of almost four years, there was a certain concentration of work on the monument from July, 1450, until its installation on June 2, 1451. It is possible, then, that when Baroncelli accepted the Modenese commission he did not anticipate a firm deadline for the completion of his portion of the Nicolò III statue, but had to withdraw from the Modenese project when pressure was brought to bear by the Savi and, perhaps, even by Borso, to complete the Ferrarese statue by the Feast of the Ascension.

## APPENDIX

Documents relative to the monument to Borso d'Este in Modena not mentioned by Bertoni - Vicini (*Both the Vachette and the Ordinaria, 1444-1465, are to be found in the Archivio Comunale di Modena*)

## I

*Vachetta del Comune: 1450, fol. 96r*

die V nouembriis

In offitio Massarie...

Insuper volverunt quod Gerardinus dela Molcia et Thomasinus Cavalarinus

Procurent, sollicitent et operentur quod fiat statua domini nostri ordinata fieri et quod comunent cum Regimento et Sapientibus.

## II

*Vachetta del Comune: 1450, fol. 113r*

die XIIJ decembriis

In offitio Massarie...

Volverunt quod dentur dicto Lanzaloto ducati tres quos dedit Magistro statuae et solidos quadraginta tres quos solvit pro mittendo pro eo.

## III

*Ordinaria, 1444-1465, fol. 137r (? December 1450)*

E a Zehan da Mangardino che ando a bologna per lo Magistro per fare la statua del Signoria et per spese et ducati tre have el Magistro.

L 9 s 4 d

## IV

*Ordinaria, 1444-1465, fol. 139r (17 February 1451)*

Item spese adi dicto libri vintetre per fiorini dexe li quali io dede a M<sup>o</sup> Nicolo da fiorenza el quale feci la statua del Illu. n. S. et questo de commissione de Mess. lo podestà et de gerardino dala Molza de commissione deli Savi.

L 23 s d

## V

*Ordinaria, 1444-1465, fol. 173r (5 February 1453)*

Et adi 5 del dicto libr undexe a Bartolamio dai Paroli per landata fece a padoa a m<sup>o</sup> donatelo appare bolleta.

L 11 s d

## RIASSUNTO

Nel 1450 il Comune di Modena deliberò di erigere un monumento a Borso d'Este, da poco nominato Marchese di Ferrara, nella piazza principale della città. Donatello fu incaricato dell'esecuzione. L'autore ha trovato nell'Archivio Comunale di Modena — oltre a quelli già noti — nuovi documenti su questa opera d'arte, dai quali si deduce che l'incarico fu dato dapprima a Niccolò di Giovanni Baroncelli e solo nel Marzo 1451 a Donatello. L'autore esamina quindi i motivi di questo cambiamento.