

## Alison Luuchs: A RELIEF BY BENEDETTO DA ROVEZZANO IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART IN WASHINGTON\*

*In commemoration of the 500th  
anniversary of the artist's birth*

The National Gallery of Art's marble high relief fragment of two putti with a plaque and a fruit festoon (Figs. 1, 2) has borne the label "Florentine School, c. 1500" since its acquisition with the Widener collection in 1942.<sup>1</sup> This designation looks very close to the mark, for the work appears to testify to the peculiar sculptural gifts of one of Michelangelo's less celebrated contemporaries, Benedetto da Rovezzano.<sup>2</sup>

Benedetto (1474 - c. 1554) has until recently had the misfortune to be most widely represented by the awkward St. John the Evangelist he carved for the apostle series for the Cathedral of Florence in 1512. Nevertheless, far as he was from the mainstream of progressive figure sculpture of his time, he has been recognized as an exceptionally fine decorative sculptor: "Il est le dernier écho de la grâce florentine avant les tours de force de l'école de Michel-Ange."<sup>3</sup>

Each distinctive feature of the National Gallery's marble relief appears also in works of Benedetto's, most of which are scattered, in fragmentary form, in and around Florence. The type of putto head (Fig. 2) with a high hairline broken by a curling tuft in the middle of a rounded forehead, thick raised locks of hair with incised lines, broad lower lip, wide-set eyes with incised pupils, and eyelids in fine little raised lines, can be seen on the Sernigi tabernacle in the church of S. Trinita, now in the Ardinghelli chapel in the right aisle.<sup>4</sup> On the tomb of Piero Soderini in S. Maria del Carmine (completed shortly before 1510, during Soderini's administration as Gonfaloniere of Justice)<sup>5</sup> can be found fruit festoons similar to those in the Gallery's relief — deeply carved for a rich play of light and shadow, disorderly, tapering at the ends, with wisps of leaf and twig sticking out at the edges.

The National Gallery's putti stand on a carved-out ridge, a logical but surprisingly unusual feature which, however, occurs in Benedetto's Borgherini fire-place relief in the Bargello and also in some of the narrative reliefs from his most important work, the damaged and dismembered tomb-monument

\* This article is the result of research for a seminar in Italian sculpture conducted at the National Gallery of Art in Washington by Dr. Douglas Lewis, curator of sculpture at the Gallery, for graduate students from Johns Hopkins University. I am most grateful to Dr. Lewis for his continuous guidance and assistance. My thanks go also to Dr. Ulrich Middeldorf for his generous advice and encouragement; and for important suggestions to Dr. Egon Verheyen, chairman of the History of Art Department at Johns Hopkins University, to Dr. Alessandro Contini-Bonacossi, curator of the photographic archives at the National Gallery of Art, and to Michael and Anne Mezzatesta, fellow students of art history. Further thanks are due to the photographic and photo archives staffs at the National Gallery of Art, to the priory of the church of S. Michele a S. Salvi, and to the Soprintendenza alle Gallerie in Florence for their cooperation.

<sup>1</sup> A-125, "Florentine School, c. 1500. Architectural plaque: Putti Bearing Inscribed Tablet." Widener Collection, 1942. The earliest known reference to this relief is by G. Migeon, *La Collection Chabrière-Arles*, in: *Les Arts*, no. 22, October, 1903, p. 7, where it is illustrated (but not discussed) as "Bas-relief de marbre blanc. — Art italien — XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle." In: *Inventory of objets d'art at Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Estate of the late P. A. B. Widener*, Philadelphia, 1935, p. 22, it is described as "Italian 16th century bas relief." Migeon mentions that objects from the Parisian Chabrière-Arles collection were exhibited at Lyons in 1877 and in the Petit Palais in Paris in 1900, but does not indicate whether this was among them.

<sup>2</sup> For Benedetto's life and work see *Vasari-Milanesi*, IV, pp. 529-536; F. Schottmüller in *Thieme-Becker*, III, pp. 314-316; and E. Luporini, *Benedetto da Rovezzano. Scultura e decorazione a Firenze tra il 1490 e il 1520*, Milan, 1964 (furthermore cited as: *Luporini*). Born in Pistoia, he did most of his architectural and sculptural work in and around Florence. Otherwise, he was active in Genoa c. 1499-1502, with a possible trip to France between 1502 and 1505, and a stay in England from c. 1524 - c. 1536 (he was back in Florence by 1543; see *Luporini*, p. 143).

<sup>3</sup> M. Reymond, *La Sculpture Florentine*, Florence, 1900, IV, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Photo Alinari 2409 (detail). An inscription dates this work to 1552, thus years after Benedetto's career was ended by blindness (*Luporini*, pp. 133, 169). It is almost certainly composed chiefly of fragments of the ill-fated Gualberto monument (see note 6), carved c. 1505-1513; see *Paatz*, *Kirchen*, V, pp. 291-292 and 390-391; G. Carocci, *La Chiesa e il Monasterio di S. Trinita*, in: *L'Illustratore Fiorentino*, N. S. 10, 1913, pp. 65-66, and *Luporini*, pp. 129, 133.

<sup>5</sup> Photo Alinari 2067. *Luporini*, p. 134; *Paatz*, *Kirchen*, III, pp. 212-213 and 276, note 135.



2 Benedetto da Rovizzano, Putto (detail of the marble relief, fig. 1). Washington, D. C., National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection.



3 and 4 Benedetto da Rovezzano, Two Putti with Coats-of-arms. Badia di Passignano (Firenze), S. Michele.

to S. Giovanni Gualberto (a work of c. 1505-1513).<sup>6</sup> The Gualberto reliefs also have figures with the hair type, smooth faces and wide-spaced eyes circumscribed by raised lines described above. In particular the angel with splayed wing-feathers looking over its right shoulder in the relief of the translation of the body of S. Giovanni Gualberto<sup>7</sup> and the putti with coats-of-arms in the Badia di Passignano near Florence (Figs. 3 and 4) look like relatives of the putti in the National Gallery.

The most closely comparable object, however, is the base of a tabernacle (Fig. 5) convincingly attributed to Benedetto by Luigia Maria Tosi in 1931.<sup>8</sup> The tabernacle — or remains of one — is now in the chapel of the Sacrament (once the sacristy) of the church of S. Michele a S. Salvi, just east of Florence. The deeply and lushly carved, lovingly detailed fruit festoon (Fig. 6) hanging over the bottom edge, the bead-and-reel and deep curved molding around the inscription, the playful manner in which the eagles

<sup>6</sup> An appropriate monument for S. Giovanni Gualberto, founder of the Vallombrosan order, was planned by the order's members in 1505. Benedetto da Rovezzano and assistants worked on it from about 1505 until 1513 in the Guarlone palace at San Salvi, just east of Florence, which belonged to the Vallombrosans. According to *Vasari* (-*Milanesi*, IV, p. 532) it was to be set up in S. Trinita in Florence, where S. Giovanni's body would be moved from its humbler grave at the abbey of Passignano. Don Biagio de' Milanese's Vallombrosan chronicle (1420-1515) implies the monument was intended for Passignano. In any case, the pieces of this greatly admired monument were not assembled because of a dispute among the monks, and during the siege of 1529-1530 they were damaged by soldiers and subsequently scattered. Most of the surviving pieces, formerly at the Bargello and later at the Cenacolo at S. Salvi, are now undergoing restoration. For documentation and summaries of various opinions see *Paatz*, *Kirchen*, V, p. 316 and p. 390, and *Luporini*, pp. 128-131 (extensive illustrations and measurements in the latter).

<sup>7</sup> Photo Brogi 4446.

<sup>8</sup> *L. M. Tosi*, *Sculture inedite di Benedetto da Rovezzano*, in: *Dedalo*, 11, 1930/31, pp. 35-42; she is the second to make this attribution. *Carocci*, whom she cites as the first, flatly states the tabernacle is by Benedetto, but does not give a source: *G. Carocci*, *I dintorni di Firenze*, I, Florence, 1906, p. 5.



5 Benedetto da Rovezzano, Tabernacle. Florence, S. Michele a S. Salvi.

supporting the plaque tangle in their bands, the streamers with flame-like tassels, crinkling in the eagles' claws, all have close counterparts in the National Gallery's relief. Like the Gallery's object, the S. Salvi tabernacle also shows traces of gilding in a few places, including the letters.

Tosi assigns this tabernacle base to the period between 1505 and 1513, when Benedetto was at his best and was working at S. Salvi on the Gualberto monument. The remarkable stylistic resemblance between the two objects immediately prompts one to assign a similar date to the Washington relief. Beyond this, the almost perfect correspondence between the measurements of the two reliefs suggests not only that they were carved at the same time and place, but that they were intended as a pair, serving some purpose in which they existed as counterparts to each other.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For the exact measurements, see our Appendix, p. 369.



6 Benedetto da Rovezzano, Two Eagles Supporting Inscribed Tablet (detail of the tabernacle, fig. 5). Florence, S. Michele a S. Salvi.

The purpose for which the two objects were carved remains in doubt.<sup>10</sup> In their present state I can conceive of them only as frontals for a pair of altars or tabernacles somehow related to each other, almost certainly at S. Salvi.<sup>11</sup> But no evidence remains in the church today to show where the altars (or chapels) in question might have stood.

The damage to the National Gallery's relief, which has several fruits broken, could be the work of the same soldiers who destroyed the Gualberto monument at San Salvi around 1530 (nails on the left side suggest an attempt at repairs, as Dr. Lewis has pointed out). But the S. Salvi tabernacle base, while it shows some breakage, is generally in better condition. Thus the damage to the National Gallery's relief may also have occurred during its transportation to France — where it is first documented in 1903<sup>12</sup> — perhaps by a purchaser or perhaps by Napoleon's armies, which carried away so many other Italian art treasures.

The inscription on the National Gallery's fragment<sup>13</sup>, whatever its specific destination may have been, has an especially familiar ring to students of Florentine history during Benedetto's lifetime. One can even find the same inscription today over the main portal of the Palazzo Vecchio. That inscription, unfortunately for present purposes, dates from 1851.<sup>14</sup> But Savonarola's call for a Florence under the reign of Christ had not long been silenced when "a very beautifully modelled Christ" was set up in 1500 at the

<sup>10</sup> I am skeptical of *Luporini's* contention (p. 129) that the S. Salvi tabernacle base was part of the Gualberto monument (although this hypothesis seems more plausible for the pilasters and arch set above the base. The pilasters are of paler, slightly pinker marble than the base. I could not judge the color of the upper section). The S. Salvi and Washington reliefs seem related to each other, but it is hard to conceive of how the two of them would relate to the fragments of the Gualberto monument that survive. We have no idea of just what form the monument should have taken. *Paatz*, *Kirchen*, V, p. 316, suggests a free-standing sarcophagus in the nave under a baldachin-like tabernacle. *D. F. Tarani* offers a drawing by Giuseppe Castellucci suggesting the monument would have been spread over three walls of a chapel; see *L'Illustratore Fiorentino*, N. S. 8, 1911, p. 81). Furthermore, the inscription on the Washington plaque has a doctrinal character ill-suited to a monument to a particular person, even a Saint. See below.

<sup>11</sup> For a list of the "relics of many Saints" once to be found at San Salvi see *Richa*, I, p. 391 ff.

<sup>12</sup> See note 1.

<sup>13</sup> REX REGVM ET DOMINVS DOMINANTIVM (King of Kings and Lord of Lords). It comes from the Book of Revelations (19:16), where the phrase is singled out as an inscription on the robe and leg of the Rider called the Word of God, who would bring forth God's wrath. It appears reversed to "Lord of Lords and King of Kings" in Revelations 17:14, with reference to the victory of the Lamb which His faithful followers will share. The phrase is most familiar since the eighteenth century as part of the lyrics of the Hallelujah Chorus from *Händel's* *Messiah*, which are based on this and other passages from Revelations (19:16, 19:6 and 11:15). I am grateful to Ms. *Susan Caroselli* for the citations.)

<sup>14</sup> The 1974 Guida del Touring Club Italiano for Florence to the contrary (p. 105). For evidence of its modernity see *A. Lenzi*, *Palazzo Vecchio*, Milan-Rome, 1929, pp. 110, 116 n. 9, 315, and 362 n. 47.

Porta de' Signori in the Palazzo Vecchio, "as if to say 'we have no other king than Christ'."<sup>15</sup> The concept was reinforced in 1502 when a statue of the *Sancto Salvatore* to stand on the tribunal in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio was commissioned from Andrea Sansovino.<sup>16</sup> And in the desperation of 1528, before the final return of Medici tyranny, Christ was in fact declared King of Florence. Inscriptions testifying to his dominion were set up at that time over the portal of the Palazzo Vecchio and the entrance to the chapel of the Signoria that had been built in 1511.<sup>17</sup>

Since Benedetto da Rovezzano was working in England from 1524 on, and was still there as late as 1536<sup>18</sup>, the National Gallery's object cannot be associated with the actual proclamation that Christ was King of Florence in 1528. This fact lends further support to the period around 1505 (and in any case before 1512), when the Christ sculpture and the Sansovino Savior indicate that the concept was already in the air, for the Washington relief. At that time the dedicatory inscription "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" might have included a significance beyond its obvious and familiar one — namely, an opposition to a particular set of earthly lords, the Medici.<sup>19</sup>

The National Gallery relief and its S. Salvi counterpart represent Benedetto da Rovezzano working at his highest level in the type of work he did best. In addition, they reflect a peculiarity of Benedetto's decorative style which cannot be explained by any of the documented information that exists on him.<sup>20</sup> The fruit garlands, in spite of their generic similarity to Della Robbia work and to the borders of Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise, are essentially un-Florentine in their treatment. The delicate, wispy foliage, deep undercutting, painstaking detail and high degree of independence of each fruit from the others and from the background suggest an artist with direct experience of Rome — antiquity itself, and the kind of sculpture that was being executed in Rome in the last quarter of the fifteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

While neither Vasari nor any documents record that Benedetto was ever in Rome, there are numerous periods before the English journey when he could have made the trip. His closeness to the decorative style of two other Florentine masters, Giuliano da Sangallo and Andrea Sansovino, again places him in a particularly Romanizing and Roman-trained circle. The problem of an unrecorded Roman experience for Benedetto can only be raised here. But it merits the serious consideration of any scholar who might want to give Benedetto the closer attention which the quality of the San Salvi and Washington reliefs indicates he deserves.

<sup>15</sup> Luca Landucci, *Diario Fiorentino*, ed. I. Del Badia, Florence, 1883, p. 208; in April, 1500, on the occasion of the defeat and capture by the French of Lodovico il Moro, Florence's great enemy, *posesi alla porta de' Signori un Cristo di rilievo molto bello, come parve che noi volessimo dire 'Non abbiamo altro re che Cristo.' Credo fussi una permissione divina, come più volte aveva detto frate Girolamo, che Firenze non aveva altro re che Cristo.* The doorway in question was an entrance to the chambers of the Signori on the second upper story of the Palazzo, according to Wackernagel, *Lebensraum*, p. 71. The sculpture has vanished.

<sup>16</sup> G. Poggi, *Di un'opera di Andrea Sansovino pel Palazzo della Signoria*, in: *Riv. d'Arte*, 6, 1909, pp. 144-146, based on records of the Operai del Palazzo della Signoria; there is no indication that this statue was ever delivered. It was to be placed *supra cornicionem residentie magnificorum et excelsorum dominorum et in medio dicti cornicionis supra capud ubi residet magnificus Vexillifer Iustitie in memoria eterna diei Sancti Salvatoris in qua die celebratur festivitas eius, et propterea vigore ipsorum auctoritatis etc. servatis etc.* (*ibid.*, p. 145).

<sup>17</sup> Wackernagel, *Lebensraum*, pp. 71-72 and 77-78. The present Palazzo Vecchio portal inscription replaced one of these, which read JESVS CHRISTVS REX FLORENTINI POPVLI S. P. DECRETO ELECTVS. The other, still visible over the entrance to the chapel of the Signori, reads SOL IVSTITIAE CHRISTVS DEVS NOSTER REGNAT IN AETERNVM.

<sup>18</sup> Luporini, pp. 143-144, 168.

<sup>19</sup> Wackernagel, *Lebensraum*, p. 71; the Medici were in exile from 1494-1512 and from 1527-1530.

<sup>20</sup> The following observations were stimulated largely by conversations with Dr. U. Middeldorf. Luporini (p. 14) also remarks on the Romanity of Benedetto's style, and even posits Benedetto's participation, as a member of Andrea Sansovino's workshop, in ornamental carving for the tombs of Cardinals Ascanio Sforza and Girolamo Basso in S. Maria del Popolo in Rome, 1507-1509 (*ibid.*, p. 67). More convincing is his detailed case for Benedetto as a pupil and assistant of Giuliano da Sangallo (*ibid.*, pp. 30 ff., 40 ff.). He also proposes to publish a study on work by Benedetto with Andrea Sansovino's shop at the Santa Casa at Loreto after 1514 (*ibid.*, p. 67).

<sup>21</sup> Examples include Andrea Bregno's tomb of Pietro Riario in SS. Apostoli with its garland-bearing putti, the various late Quattrocento tombs and the Bregno Borgia altar in S. Maria del Popolo, and some of the finest panels of the choir screen of the Sistine Chapel. These last may have come from the Bregno workshop, but are of uncertain authorship because of their exceptionally high quality. See R. Salvini, *La Cappella Sistina in Vaticano*, Milan, 1965, I, pp. 128-131 for a summary of opinions, and E. Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, Munich, 1901, plates XII, XIII and XIV for good illustrations. This ornamental style was carried to the north by Gian Cristoforo Romano, who carved similar festoons for the tomb of Giangaleazzo Visconti at the Certosa in Pavia (*Venturi*, VI, p. 1134, fig. 777). On the above works in general and for bibliography see Ch. Seymour Jr., *Sculpture in Italy 1400-1500*, Baltimore, 1966 and *Pope-Hennessy, Sculpture*, II. The sort of antique work that provided a model is represented in its highest quality in certain garlands from the inner enclosure panels of the Ara Pacis, although this particular example probably was not discovered before 1568. See G. Moretti, *L'Ara Pacis Augustae*, Rome, 1938, p. 3 and illustration 43. Steinmann, *op. cit.*, p. 170, notes a relief in the Pantheon which was probably a model for some of the Sistine Chapel sculpture.

## APPENDIX

Measurements taken by the author at the church of S. Michele a San Salvi and with the aid of Dr. Douglas Lewis at the National Gallery of Art gave the following results:

	National Gallery of Art	S. Michele a S. Salvi
Dimensions of entire relief	20-7/8 × 51 in. (.53 × 1.295 m.)	20-3/4 × 50-1/2 in. (.528 × 1.283 m.)
outermost dimensions of inscribed plaque	11-3/4 × 23-1/8 in. (.298 × .587 m.)	11-3/4 × 23-5/8 in. (.298 × .602 m.)
height of outer rim of plaque (from surface of relief)	1-3/4 in. (.044 m.)	1-13/16 in. (.046 m.)
distance from top of plaque to top edge of whole relief	1-1/8 in. (.029 m.)	1-5/16 in. (.033 m.)
width of plaque inside bead-and-reel	19-1/4 in. (.490 m.)	19-7/16 in. (.494 m.)
height of letters (in top row for each relief)	1-1/8 in. (.029 m.)	1-1/4 in. (.032 m.)
width of upper rim of relief (variable)	3/4 in. (.019 m.)	7/8 in. (.022 m.)
width of lower rim of relief (variable)	3/4 in. (.019 m.)	11/16 in. (.018 m.)

The relationship is complicated by the fact that neither relief seems to have survived in its original dimensions. The Washington relief is cut off sharply at each end, particularly on the left, in a manner suggesting it may once have been longer, with margins of smooth marble like the one still existing on the left of the San Salvi piece. But the San Salvi relief is cut off just as sharply on the right, and older photographs indicate it once had an addition on the right, a strip about equal in width to the margin on the left (1-1/16 in.; .027 m.) attached to it, perhaps to replace a previously existing margin which had been broken off. But even allowing for the damage to both, and for the extra line surrounding the inscription within the plaque on the San Salvi piece, the two reliefs are still so similar in style and dimensions as to suggest that they once belonged together.

## RIASSUNTO

Un rilievo in marmo rappresentante due putti con un festone di frutta ed una tavola con iscrizione, conservato nella National Gallery of Art di Washington e rimasto finora senza attribuzione, può essere attribuito a Benedetto da Rovezzano. Questo rilievo sembra essere il compagno di una bella base di tabernacolo in marmo di Benedetto nella chiesa di S. Michele a S. Salvi. Lo stile del rilievo di Washington ed il testo dell'iscrizione, REX REGVM ET DOMINVS DOMINANTIVM indicano la data fra il 1505 ed il 1512 (periodo del Gonfaloniere Pietro Soderini a Firenze). Lo stile dei rilievi di Washington e di S. Salvi, che è il migliore di Benedetto da Rovezzano, farebbe supporre un viaggio dell'artista a Roma non riportato né dal Vasari né da alcun documento.

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