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Review by Jill Carrington

Cooper, Donal and Marika Leino, eds. *Depth of Field: Relief Sculpture in Renaissance Italy*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2008. 419 pages.

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While freestanding statues such as Michelangelo's *David* and Donatello's bronze *David* are arguably the most well-known Italian Renaissance sculptures, the present volume is the first devoted solely to relief sculpture. The scholarship is current, high quality and focused largely on activity in Florence during the first half of the fifteenth century. Eight of the eleven essays were originally presented at the conference that accompanied the exhibition titled "Depth of Field: The Place of Relief in the Time of Donatello" held at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds from September, 2004, to March, 2005. The Henry Moore Institute and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London collaborated on the exhibition, which features works lent by the V&A while its galleries are undergoing renovation.

The essays prove the editors' claim that relief sculpture "was one of the most dynamic areas of artistic invention" in the early fifteenth century (21). The innovations began in Florence with Donatello, Ghiberti and Luca della Robbia. In response to demand, these artists promoted the making of reproducible sculpture. Indeed, the capacity for reproduction characterizes relief sculpture and explains the allusion to photography in the title *Depth of Field*. Donatello also developed *schacciato* relief, a very low form of relief, in marble. Younger artists eagerly embraced these practices, as the exhibition and essays amply demonstrate.

Due to space limitations, the present review treats the essays by David G. Wilkins, Amy R. Bloch and the concluding response by Sarah Blake McHam.

In his essay "The Invention of the Pictorial Relief," David Wilkins examines the development between 1400 and 1450 of pictorial relief, a new type of relief that ranges in height from high to low and creates an illusion of deep space. Donatello invented

the pictorial relief in the *St. George* relief of the St. George tabernacle on Orsanmichele in Florence c. 1417. Wilkins observes that development of pictorial relief goes beyond the confines of relief sculpture to encompass architecture, painting, large figural sculpture, and the system of linear perspective. The role of Brunelleschi's experiments in linear perspective c. 1413 or earlier have been underappreciated in stimulating Donatello, other sculptors and painters to explore perspective and atmospheric effects. The illusionism of pictorial relief was also fostered by strong interest in depicting character and emotion and the rejection of Gothic forms such as the quattrolobe frame in favor of a simple rectangle or square format. Wilkins extensively treats *schacciato* relief as a crucial step in the development of pictorial relief and suggests that Donatello likely began the St. George relief in traditional high format and may have resorted to *schacciato* in part to make his work easier and quicker. While not offering a definitive study, the essay offers many thoughtful insights. However, several statements are misleading. For example, angels emerging from the background in Ghiberti's *Baptism of Christ* for the Siena Baptistry font are said to characterize pictorial relief and reject "the flat background characteristic of his earlier high relief style" (86), though the angel of the high-relief *Sacrifice of Isaac* competition panel (1401-3) also emerges from the background. Buttressing his argument that three marble *schacciato* reliefs by Donatello may have been part of the Medici collection as early as 1492 is an observation that these "works in monochromatic marble offer restrained elegance typical of courtly taste" (95), a statement that oversimplifies the complexity of courtly taste that often favors quite the opposite style of elaboration, bright colors and gilding.

In "The Evolution of Lorenzo Ghiberti's Approach to Narrative Relief," Amy Bloch focuses on Ghiberti's Old Testament panels of the East Doors of the Baptistry of Florence, known as the "*Gates of Paradise*" (cast between 1428 and 1437) and the large relief of the tomb-shrine of St. Zenobius (1439-1442). While previous scholars have tended to characterize Ghiberti's compositions as evolving from simple to complex or from clear to disorganized, Bloch convincingly argues that Ghiberti's visual organization increased in sophistication and served to involve the viewer physically and emotionally in the images. In the last four panels of the East Doors (scenes of Moses, Joshua, David and the

Queen of Sheba) and the Zenobius relief, Ghiberti situates the main event and figures along or near the central axis and increases the number of onlooker figures. The viewer gazes directly at the main event as he stands in front at the center, the site where fictive three-dimensional space of the relief flows into the actual space occupied by the viewer. Some figures on the periphery are shown crossing the framework into the viewer's space, thus fostering the viewer's identification with them. The spectator is encouraged to look and respond emotionally to the events depicted just as the crowds do.

In the relief depicting the fifth-century St. Zenobius resurrecting a boy, the central placement of the miracle communicates forcefully with the viewer. This relief involves the additional element of time, since figures on the periphery and farthest from the miracle do not react joyfully, according to hagiographical accounts, but turn away and ponder what they see or converse with their neighbors, as if they are reflecting upon an event that has taken place in the past. These figures assume the role of the fifteenth-century beholder, separated by centuries from the event and encouraged to meditate on its meaning. This narrative mode developed by Ghiberti led to the types later employed by Domenico Ghirlandaio, notably in the Sassetti Chapel frescoes in the church of Santa Trinita (1480-1485), and by Raphael in the frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican (1508-11).

Sarah Blake McHam, who delivered a keynote address at the 2008 South-Central Renaissance Conference, wrote the concluding response in *Depth of Field*, "Now and Then: Recovering a Sense of Different Values." It offers the most thorough assessment to date of the study of Italian Renaissance relief sculpture in terms of the exhibition's main goal of examining how fifteenth-century Italians perceived sculpted reliefs and used the objects they acquired.

McHam chose to focus on fifteenth-century relief sculptures of the *Madonna and Child* due to their plurality in the exhibition and popularity among fifteenth-century Italians signaled by the hundreds of such reliefs that survive. The use of images of the *Madonna and Child* was motivated by the concern of the populace for the future of their souls and in hope of shorter time in Purgatory. Not only did they pray before images of the *Madonna and Child* in churches, they also acquired images for their homes,

and their purchases were often reproductive reliefs, that is, inexpensive, ready-made relief sculptures cast in stucco or terracotta.

McHam traces the change in scholarly approach that led to the serious consideration of replicated reliefs. Traditional approaches to sculpture have focused almost solely on unique works, identifiable artist, and costly media, such as marble or bronze. The countless works that did not meet these criteria were largely ignored. Only in the last twenty-five years have specialists turned to consider reliefs that exist in multiple versions, cannot be assigned to an individual artistic persona, and are made of cheaper materials.

McHam calls on historians of Italian Renaissance art to widen their purview. She sweeps aside as artificial the distinctions between sculpture and painting she shows did not exist among fifteenth-century Florentine artists such as Ghiberti and Alberti. Indeed, historians should consider visual works in any media pertinent to the study of function. Similarly, neither geographical barriers between art in Italy and north of the Alps nor chronological distinctions between Medieval and Renaissance should be an impediment to research. Her essay proves that she is up to the challenge of this inclusive approach.

McHam also highlights topics that deserve further research. To cite one example, fifteenth-century *Madonna and Child* reliefs are influenced by the forms of both Trecento Italian paintings and the Byzantine icons; however, systematic investigation is lacking about other aspects of the relationship between *Madonna and Child* reliefs and these earlier prototypes, particularly miracle-working examples. It may be, McHam suggests, that the ability of casting to provide replicas spurred the production of *Madonna and Child* reliefs precisely to meet the demand for copies of earlier works deemed spiritually efficacious.

The volume includes eight other essays that space does not allow me to discuss in depth: “Contemplative Relief: Meditating on Christ through Sculptural Form in Early Trecento Italy” by Peter Dent; “Sculpting the Air: Donatello’s Narratives of the Environment” by Amanda Lillie; “Agostino di Duccio and Carlo Crivelli: Playing with Two and Three Dimensions” by Peta Motture; “Relief is in the Mind: Observations on Renaissance Low Relief Sculpture” by Francois Quiviger; “Reproducing Relief: The Use and

Status of Plaster Casts in the Italian Renaissance,” by Eckart Marchand; “Sculptural Values:’ Reading Fictive Relief in Late Fifteenth- and Early Sixteenth-Century Italy,” by Alison Wright; “The Production, Collection and Display of Plaquette Reliefs in Renaissance Italy,” by Marika Leino; “Seeing the Past: Titian’s Imperial Adaptation of a Classical Relief,” by Beverly Louise Brown.

As a whole, the present volume serves not only historians interested in the function and reception of fifteenth-century Italian art. The ideas about relief sculpture explored in the anthology and catalog -- as well as the fresh view of the sculptures on display at Leeds with their startlingly different arrangement and setting -- have fostered a re-engagement with the sculpture which has guided the reinstatement of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Medieval and Renaissance galleries. We look forward to seeing the outcome of this synergy at the V&A itself when the galleries reopen in 2009.

*Jill Carrington*