

Through a Mirror, Darkly: Medardo Rosso and Donatello

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I.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a resurging interest in Donatello. The literature alone produced in these years—by practicing artists, curators, and guild art historians—became so profuse that many have been tempted to speak of Donatello’s nineteenth-century Renaissance. This corpus was as diverse in scope as it was vast: some labeled Donatello a classicizing sculptor or an early apostle of Renaissance naturalism; while others saw him as a Daedalian craftsman whose work had spanned multiple media and disciplines or as a crypto-medieval artist whose evocations of romance and chivalry—in the *Saint George*, for example—referenced a dreamy, pre-Enlightened past.¹ Together, these studies signal an interest in the sculptor that was unrivaled, in many ways, since the Cinquecento.

At no time did this spirit echo more loudly than in May 1887, when the Florentine state inaugurated its new National Museum—the Bargello—with an exhibition to honor the fifth centenary of the sculptor’s birth. For its organizers, the so-called *Esposizione Donatelliana* would serve as a symbolic nimbus crowning the artist, a ritual meant to affirm their native son’s status as the patron saint of sculpture. The catalog accompanying the show informs us, however, that the event’s primary objective was neither art-historical nor retrospective, but rather to expose Donatello’s example “to living artists [in the hope] that [emulation] of him might incite them to new endeavors.”² As the show’s organizers saw it, every sculptor—even the neophyte—was descended from Donatello, such that a sustained encounter with his work was an ancestral rite of passage, one that would imbue initiates with a new “stimulus to produce [and] to make progress in [their] art.”³ It was with thoughts like these in mind that the organizers attempted something unprecedented: to gather Donatello’s entire oeuvre in one place, bringing together original works (or plaster casts when these could not be moved) and even including several hitherto unknown objects from private collections.⁴

To the final category of Donatello pieces belonged a diminutive statuette of David perched triumphantly atop the lifeless head of Goliath. The catalog identified the work as a bronze cast directly from a lost wax *bozzetto*, or preparatory model, for the renowned marble statue of the same subject, then in Florence's Casa Martelli.⁵ If the available evidence is any indication, it was this piece, of all those displayed, that most sensationalized visitors—not only because it was Donatello's lone surviving workshop model but because its emergence from an obscure collection in Umbria, just months prior, had been so unexpected.

Europe's tribe of connoisseurs was nearly unanimous in accepting the specimen as authentic.⁶ Among the devotees was the German curator and scholar Wilhelm von Bode, who purchased the iridescent relic (at considerable cost) in 1894 and eventually made it a focal point of the bronze room in Berlin's Kaiser Friedrich Museum. In his first published remarks on the *bozzetto*, four years later, Bode praised "the assurance, vigor, and grandeur [of the] figurine," and he marveled that the "fleeting wax model [had been] immortalized in bronze only by chance," plucked from the jaws of oblivion by someone who had discerned its evidential value to posterity.⁷ For unlike its larger counterpart—which had been marred, Bode implied, by the interventions of less able assistants—this *bozzetto* delivered the unmediated trace of Donatello's hand at work. Bode deemed the piece's arrival auspicious, one senses, because of its potential to unlock—as never before—the innermost thoughts of the master as he deliberated the sculptural act.

But was the event too auspicious? In an article on the *bozzetto* from 2009, Volker Krahn argued—astonishingly—that the prized artifact belonged neither to Donatello, nor even to the fifteenth century, but was instead the work of the Milan-born sculptor Medardo Rosso (1858–1920). Adducing the statuette's murky provenance, its style, and numerous aspects of its facture, Krahn constructs the most compelling case imaginable for a re-attribution to Rosso, who was not yet thirty years old at the time of the exhibition.⁸ Among the evidence that Krahn produces is a photograph from the sculptor's first studio in Milan, signed and dated 1883, nearly a half-decade *before* the *Esposizione Donatelliana*.⁹ The snapshot documents an earlier phase in the model's creation, where compositional basics are still being worked out on a *clay* maquette; Whether or not he did so consciously, Rosso here proclaimed his authorship.

Given Medardo's absolute silence on the matter, the question of his intentions must remain speculative. We do not know whether the act was motivated by financial need, by a perverse ambition to fool the cognoscenti, or by the hubris of a young artist eager to slip his piece—a Trojan Horse—into the exhibition to

court comparison with an acknowledged master. Yet another possibility is that the *bozzetto* was a private exercise that had inadvertently passed into the hands of unscrupulous dealers. It is worth stressing, however, that at the heart of this episode lay something much more fundamental: a record of the young sculptor's spirited confrontation with the work of his remote predecessor, a subject barely acknowledged in the art-historical literature on Medardo to date.¹⁰

In seeking to unpack this relationship the present essay pursues two interdependent lines of inquiry. It attempts, first, to provide a framework for understanding

Medardo's engagement with Donatello, charting several key biographical references as well as more general historical developments. Donatello's legacy became a topic of passionate interest in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and Medardo reveals himself—*sotto voce*—as a partisan in these debates throughout. Using these remarks as background, I then examine what impact, specifically, Donatello had on Medardo's practice.

Scholarship on Rosso has tended to downplay such influences, or even to renounce them outright. The prevailing narrative generally follows a plotline of disavowal, casting the sculptor as an iconoclast who disencumbered himself of Italian influences—past and present—by moving to Paris in the late 1880s to join the French avant-garde. This literature zeroes in on the eccentricity of Rosso's works—on the thoroughly disarming *Carne altrui* (Fig. 1), for instance, where the sculptor merged plaster, wax, and pigment to confounding ends. Besieged by so many crabbed, bruised, and fragmentary surfaces that puncture any claim to mimetic legibility, many have discovered an aesthetic whose relationship to previous traditions of sculpture is best described in negative terms.¹¹ Where, after all, might Rosso fit within a genealogy of sculptural modernism when, as one early critic opined, his works “[did not really] resemble anything, not even sculpture”?¹² No older masters, in other words, could



Fig. 1. Medardo Rosso, *Carne altrui* (version 3), c. 1905–6, plaster, wax, and pigment, 23.45 × 22.5 × 16 cm. Paris, Galerie de France

account for the phantasmagorical dimension of Rosso's objects and their fundamental strangeness.

Yet latent in the *David* episode is something of much greater consequence: a dialogue with Donatello that would remain vital to Rosso for decades to come, shaping his work even as he subjected the Renaissance sculptor to significant reinterpretation. In what ways, then, did Donatello serve Medardo's project? This is the larger question I will address in the space that remains.

II.

An analysis of Medardo's relationship to the Renaissance is complicated by a methodological dilemma that must be addressed at the outset: the artist's own insistent—almost pathological—rejection of his Italian heritage. As early as the 1880s, but with increased frequency as his career progressed, Rosso waged a vocal campaign to distance himself from Italy's artistic past. He would claim, for example, that the Renaissance had spawned the “most banal [and] nefarious” works, and that the revered sculptures from that period—as well as those by the Greeks and Romans—were “nothing but paperweights” (the embodiment, that is, of purposelessness).¹³ At the heart of this campaign, by all appearances, lay an anecdote that the sculptor circulated among his peers and critics, evidently with enough regularity—or insistence—for it to acquire the veneer of truth. Recounting his stint in the Italian national army in 1879–80, Rosso recalled how his troop train had passed through Florence, and how he had “covered [his] eyes to avoid the sight of the city that had cradled the Renaissance, which [he] already abhorred.”¹⁴

That Medardo may have renounced his Italian heritage—retrospectively or prognostically—is not entirely surprising. The ambitious artist in him was perhaps dismayed by the enormity of Italian tradition. And the careerist in him may have reasoned that a French—and not Italian—passport would help him to court Parisian patrons. Above all, however, Rosso's condemnation of his Renaissance ancestors may have been a means of aligning himself with Europe's avant-garde, whose serried ranks he wished to join. As is well known, the performance of a break with tradition was an almost obligatory credential for membership in avant-garde circles. Such events are a hallmark in biographies of modern artists, and they are too legion to name.¹⁵ What is important to note, however, is that Medardo's alleged psychodrama has all the trappings of one of these self-legitimizing creation myths. In showing the artist turning a blind eye on Florence, that is, the anecdote bears witness *ex negativo* to what Rosso would become: an artist defined by his independence from a tradition-laden past, its works and institutions.

While the story can be questioned, its impact on subsequent thinking about Rosso cannot be denied. Following Medardo's lead, literature on the sculptor describes someone who, "unlike Rodin and the Salon sculptors...belligerently denied the past," who "attained artistic manhood" by wiping "out all tradition," and who "freed himself from all those hereditary conceptions which are wont to be sources of unconscious inspiration—perhaps because he never felt them as strongly as others."¹⁶ What all these statements are avowing, in one way or another, is Rosso's modernity—and there is much to recommend the designation. But in accepting such labels *tout court* are we not upholding the very myths that Medardo himself constructed? Could it be that in accepting Rosso's claims uncritically we risk filtering out the aspects of his practice that discomfited the artist, that were fraught with ambivalence, or that his official biography would not admit?

As Rosalind Krauss has famously shown, the avant-garde's rhetoric of originality is a fiction, less a description of actual artistic practice than a symptom of the need to give modern art a mythology.¹⁷ But it was a myth to which Medardo himself subscribed, arguably to a greater extent than his native French counterparts (many of whom, like Degas, Cézanne, and Matisse, openly acknowledged their regard for Renaissance artists). Perhaps the sculptor's desire to assimilate into French artistic circles led him to adopt the rhetoric of Paris's vanguard in an almost hyperbolic manner. Or perhaps, contrary to what is often said, the sculptor felt his Italian ancestry pressing down on him like the weight of an anvil—the vehemence with which he rejected his heritage a barometer of just how inexorable it felt.

Behind this compulsive language of rejection, though, there lingered Donatello, who was something of a "problem case" for Rosso. For although Rosso viewed Donatello as a glaring exception to Renaissance norms, as we will see, attaching his works to the artist—conceding their debt, however small, to the art of the past—meant jeopardizing his legitimacy as an *avant-gardiste*, predicated as it was on the wholesale eradication of tradition. This paradox, it can be argued, helps to explain Rosso's near-total silence about Donatello, the veiled nature of his engagement with the earlier sculptor, and even his later efforts to reconfigure, downplay, or omit certain phases of his career.

III.

One such omission—acknowledged, to be sure, but rarely studied—is the *Scapigliatura*, a group of poets, artists, and scholars based in Milan with whom Medardo remained affiliated during the 1880s and 90s (he would renounce the

affiliation only later in life, for reasons similar, one might surmise, to those discussed above). The very fact that Medardo maintained regular contact with this circle for roughly three-quarters of his artistic career suggests that their affinities were more than casual. And to attend to this relationship, it can be argued, is to introduce an alternative—and far more historically engaged—set of concerns to Rosso's project.

Members of the *Scapigliatura* fraternity united over their disapproval of modern Italy.¹⁸ Indeed, their writings burst at the seams with protests against the developing capitalism of Italy's monarchy, its church, and its increasingly imperialistic military. Above all, however, the *scapigliati* targeted Italy's prospering bourgeoisie, whom they blamed for rising regional tensions and the unregulated appetite for industrial progress in the north.

For the *scapigliati*, the bourgeois disease had also infected art of their day, much of which looked to classical models—from antiquity and the Renaissance—in search of a universal rhetoric of triumph to legitimize the fledgling Italian nation.¹⁹ This idealist, bourgeois ideology of the aesthetic—and its tendency to gather art and industry in the same breath—was, for the *scapigliati*, a conspiracy to deny the realities of contemporary life. While the state bolstered Italy's radiant narrative of progress, it obscured those who languished beneath its shadow. For the *scapigliati*, then, it was an ethical duty to present a version of reality that was not exempt from life's most unsettling aspects. Inspired by French realists of the 1860s such as Baudelaire and Manet, the *scapigliati* (roughly the Italian equivalent for *les bohèmes*) spotlighted individuals who had been casualties of modernity: the poor and the marginalized, or “children of sick fathers” (in the words of the poet Emilio Praga, “eagles losing their feathers, [who] flutter about silent [and] starved”).²⁰ Depicting these subjects truthfully was the central plank of the *Scapigliatura's* platform and the essence of what Felice Cameroni (a doyen of the movement) would call “[nostro] realismo scapigliato.”

It was within this context that Donatello emerged as a consistent talking point among members of the *Scapigliatura*. By the 1860s, many had joined what might fairly be called a struggle over Donatello's legacy, a struggle that played out in an ever-burgeoning literature on the artist. One conventional interpretation from this time fixed on Donatello's rediscovery of Italy's Greco-Roman heritage, a reading with parallels in the state-sponsored neoclassical art that flourished about mid-century.²¹ Consider, for example, the full-length, marble portrait of Donatello that the academic sculptor Girolamo Torrini completed around 1848 (Fig. 2), one of twenty-eight statues of “uomini illustri” made to ring the loggiato

of the Uffizi in Florence (the program was completed in 1858).²² Torrini's *Donatello* is an uncompromising agent of classicism, not only in its Apollonian restraint, its material, and in what Donatello sculpts (a classicizing portrait relief stands at his feet), but in where he locates inspiration, his gaze—and ever-rational mind—trained upward toward Olympian heights (and thus away from both the tools with which he labors and the lived world around him).

There was also the twenty-foot-tall colossus of Dante Alighieri that Enrico Pazzi fashioned for the square of Santa Croce in Florence, this ceremoniously inscribed and dated 1865 (the six-hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth, but also the year that Florence

became Italy's capital). The figure's dependence on Donatello's *Saint George* is palpable not only in its *contrapposto* pose, but also in the manner in which its limbs are arranged and in its intense stare, which lingers somewhere in the distant space of thought. Here, in a productive misreading of the normative interpretation of the *Saint George*, Pazzi transforms Donatello's icon of courage into a modern-day defender of the Italian republic.

The *scapigliati* rejected this interpretation of Donatello completely. They took umbrage at the notion that Donatello's legacy lay in his appeal to reason or normative classical ideals. Indeed, it is tempting to see Pazzi's scowling giant as the very embodiment of the type of monumental statuary that Medardo, channeling his fellow *scapigliati*, would later call a "negation of life," that which anesthetized viewers through its appeal to abstract virtues and moral codes (how deeply the *scapigliati* must have moaned at the *Esposizione*



Fig. 2. Girolamo Torrini (with Giovanni Bastianini), *Donatello*, 1848, marble (part of the series of 'uomini illustri'). Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi, Loggiato

Donatelliana, with its triumphal rhetoric, and its enlisting of art—and artists—in the cultural project of the state).²³ For the *scapigliati*, Donatello's real achievement had been to reground sculpture in mundane experience. His relevance to modernity was found not in the stony classicism of *George*, but in works like the *Mary Magdalene*, a piece that became a touchstone of conversations about Donatello's realism.

With the *Magdalene*, to extract from these accounts, Donatello had delivered a view of the human condition "in all of its realism, full of sentiment and severity (*crudezza*)." The sculptor's vision of the mendicant was profoundly affecting, "[her] pain immense, [her pathos] contagious, [all of her] emotions true."²⁴ This was life laid bare: the *Magdalene*'s tresses were unruly, the crenellation of her two teeth was crooked, her flesh was pale, necrotic, and "worn out from fasting and abstinence."²⁵ In her vulnerability, her unprepossessing appearance, and her very disenfranchisement from civilization, the *Magdalene* must have looked—to *scapigliati* eyes—like an emblem of the destitution of modern life. The brutal realism of the statue supplied, moreover, a mighty counterexample to what sculpture had become in their opinion: artificial, idealistic, and tainted by the ideology of the bourgeoisie.

It was with thoughts like this in mind that the *Scapigliatura* group came to deputize Donatello as the patriarch of their movement, a paragon of nonconformity who had similarly looked with disapproval at his own age.²⁶ For the *scapigliati*, the Renaissance signaled the beginning of modernity's discontents, and in Donatello they found a historical figure who had shared, and who could legitimate, their iconoclastic agenda.

Here timing matters. When Medardo matriculated to the *Scapigliatura*—in the early 1880s—he joined a party with Donatello as its father figure. This fact cannot have been lost on Rosso. His close personal ties to those who most vociferously advocated Donatello's realism make it inconceivable that he was not *au fait* with this interpretation of the sculptor. And yet no personal testimony, no letter, not even a passing mention attests to anything more than a superficial familiarity with the older artist. Given Rosso's tightly managed approach to his writings, however, it is sensible to query whether these are the documents that would best register such interest, or whether one is better served looking elsewhere.

IV.

On the basis of photographic evidence, it is possible to verify the existence, beginning in 1883, of no fewer than five plaster casts of works by Donatello in Rosso's workshops: a relief of the so-called *Madonna Pazzi*; heads of St. Francis and Anthony (both cropped from the original life-size figures); a bust of Niccolò da Uzzano; and another of a simpering boy (now attributed to Desiderio da Settignano, but then almost unanimously given to Donatello).²⁷ In his pursuit of copies, Rosso may well have received assistance and encouragement from Camillo Boito—an esteemed historian and theorist of restoration and a partisan of the *Scapigliatura* movement. In the early 1880s, Boito had been elected to oversee the reconstruction of Donatello's high altar ensemble for the Basilica di Sant'Antonio in Padua and as part of his research had embarked upon a systematic survey of the sculptor's oeuvre; it would not have been unimaginable for Boito to have taken casts during these visits.²⁸ At the same time, Rosso may have acquired the replicas from Bode, who had also, in these same years, ordered casts of each of Donatello's Paduan works in preparation for his landmark 1883 monograph on the topic (the resulting volume—*Donatello in Padua*—holds the curious distinction of being the first study on the artist endowed with photographic reproductions, even though the entire suite was shot from casts).²⁹ Upon finishing the book, Bode had undertaken to place these copies—evidently with great care—in public and private collections, and it would not have been unimaginable for him to furnish Rosso with one or more of the casts, or alternatively with copies from them (the two knew each other, after all, though they were not necessarily well acquainted).³⁰

Although the provenance of these casts must remain open to speculation, the allure they held for Rosso is unmistakable. That this modest corpus of replicas became a staple of Medardo's creative life can be inferred, in the first place, from their continuous presence in his studios. While the sculptor jettisoned other studies as he moved from one atelier to the next, these copies invariably traveled with him. A photo of Medardo at work in his shop in Montmartre from 1890, for example, confirms that he kept the *Francis* close to hand almost a decade after its initial acquisition (Fig. 3). Should we accept, moreover, that the photo is staged—nothing about it is casual, from the arrangement of objects in the room to how each sculpture is displayed to Rosso himself, who attends to his work with almost Pygmalion-like tenderness—then it may even suggest a certain pride in the Donatello replica, given that replica's centrality in the composition, and the attention that it commands. Indeed, as late as 1904, Rosso would encourage the gallerist Auguste Artaria to exhibit certain copies he had produced, among



Fig. 3. Medardo in his workshop at Montmartre, 1890

them “6 buste de personage par Donatello, cire,” a recommendation that might further vouch for the protracted nature of Medardo’s interest.³¹

Medardo’s copies after Donatello are not unknown to specialists, who have responded to these objects in two ways. Adopting Medardo’s own nomenclature, but perhaps mistaking his intentions, some have labeled these works “pezzi di paragone,” or “comparison pieces,” noting the artist’s tendency “at exhibitions or [during studio visits to] place them beside his other works to demonstrate, through juxtaposition, his [own] sculptures’ superiority...as if he were in direct competition with the [Renaissance].”³² Meanwhile, those unwilling to concede any relationship—even a negative one—to Medardo’s work have classified these replicas as financial in motivation, one-offs that the sculptor, in a pinch, could sell to make ends meet.³³ Both approaches sustain the same basic idea: that Medardo’s copies reflect—even materialize—the sculptor’s agonistic stance toward the past. In the former case, the casts are pressed into service as clumsy foils for Rosso’s progressivism, visually staging his victory over tradition; in the latter, they stand for the liquidation of that tradition.

What these accounts paper over, however, are the various occasions—all admittedly private—in which Rosso referred to these same works as “masterpieces,” a term that places the objects in a decidedly more positive light (we do

not know, in each instance, whether he was referring to the copy or original).³⁴ How starkly at odds such language is with the official stance that the sculptor adopted vis-à-vis the Renaissance around these same years. These faint silhouettes of interest suggest that, even while Medardo circulated myths among his French colleagues to the contrary, he allowed Donatello confidentially a more complex role in his practice.

V.

Medardo's enduring fascination with these casts raises the question of whether, or to what extent, they left traces in his work. In what ways did Rosso assimilate their lessons, and in what ways did he reinterpret them? A comparison between *Madre e bambino che dormono*—among Medardo's earliest documented sculptures, from around 1883—and Donatello's *Madonna Pazzi* helps to focus the issue (Figs. 4, 5).³⁵ Here, Rosso conserves the formal essence of his model: echoes may be found, for instance, in the orientation of the group, their exchanged glances, the mother's gently titled head, and the position of the child's hand, turned here into a formless mass. Even the intimacy of scale lingers.

But Medardo departs from his prototype in striking ways. He abstracts the pair from any possible narrative context: no ground, no decorative adornments, and no iconographic prompts are there to act as footholds. Along parallel lines, the sculpture is made using a great economy of means. Whereas Donatello had trained his chisel on minutiae—tousled hair, rippling drapery, delicate folds of skin—Medardo's sculpture is raw in its modeling and visibly handmade (many of its effects are produced with fingers alone). What Medardo has done, it would seem, is strip Donatello's piece down to its emotional nucleus, isolating the gentle impress of the mother's cheek against her child's. This gesture is rendered additionally vulnerable by the fact that the group is no longer sheltered by an architectural niche, or within virtual space, as in Donatello's work. Cleaved from these securities, the object instead exists in *our* space. The fact that Rosso cast *Madre e bambino* in "eternal" bronze ought in principle to have ennobled the work, but this is not the case.³⁶ Occupying a scale that is neither charmingly small nor imposing, the artifact looks both anonymous and insignificant, a frail thing almost held together—but only just barely—by the pair's embrace.³⁷

Less than one year later, in early 1884, Medardo produced what might fairly be called a sequel to *Madre e bambino* (Fig. 6).³⁸ A shared pedigree is suggested by the mother's face, nearly identical in its physiognomic detail and sketchy modeling. Indeed, the very name of the work—*Dorme*, or *She Sleeps*—binds it to



Fig. 4 Donatello, *Madonna Pazzi*, c. 1420, marble, 74.5 × 69.5 cm. Berlin, Bode-Museum

its predecessor. But as the title suggests, Medardo has excised one element—the infant—from his new composition, stripping the original work (and by extension the Pazzi Madonna) down to an even more iconic core. Rosso's reduction of the child to anomic formlessness was not without consequences, for it increased the work's affective appeal to viewers. Gone is the delicacy of maternal touch, with the mother—now alone—reduced to a fragment, peering out from a sedimentary—almost moldering—knot of material.

Five years later, in one of his first undertakings in Paris—the *Bambina ridente* of 1889—Medardo similarly pared a work by Donatello down to its emotional



Fig. 5. Medardo Rosso, *Madre e bambino che dormono* (also *Amore materno*), c. 1883, bronze, 39 × 28 × 20 cm. Private collection

essence (Fig. 7).³⁹ He emptied his portrait of extraneous details of costume and attribute. Even the base was done away with to enhance the immediacy of the child's laughter. Unselfconscious, the child cranes her neck forward, mouth agape, and reveals her tongue and small teeth. Although there can be little doubt that Medardo had here looked to the *Laughing Boy* for inspiration (then attributed to Donatello), the sculptor's personal testimonies encourage just the opposite conclusion. On at least one occasion, Rosso declared that he made this portrait after



Fig. 6. Medardo Rosso, *Carne altrui* (formerly *Dorme*) (version 1), 1883–84, gesso with pigment, 50 × 41.5 × 19 cm. Barzio, Museo Rosso

one Marie-Jacques Enjolras, the daughter of a staff member at the Hôpital Lariboisière, where the artist was recovering from a bout with influenza.⁴⁰

Why would Medardo have insisted that he modeled his portrait directly *sur le vif*? One possibility is that he wished to draw attention away from his original source, perhaps because the association would compromise his work's originality, and thereby Rosso's efforts to constitute himself as a modernist. Claiming that the bust represented the

direct recording of visible reality (or at least his perception of reality), and thus that it had no mediating model, was one way of maneuvering himself out of the troubled waters of influence. At the same time, insisting that the *Bambina ridente* originated in a face-to-face encounter with another subjectivity—that it was linked to a singular, spontaneous experience—guaranteed the uniqueness of what he made. This is an aesthetic position similar to that adopted by the Impressionists, whose own efforts to appoint the self as the sole agent of artistic creation had, by the 1880s, made them fixtures of the vanguardist discourse of originality. Like the Impressionists, whose paintings Rosso appears to have studied while in Paris, the sculptor styles his work as the transcription of sensory data, and little more.⁴¹

Despite Medardo's efforts to exempt his work from influence, the echoes proved too powerful for some critics to miss. Writing in 1909, and referring to the *Bambina ridente* in particular, the poet and artist Ardengo Soffici noted that "no sculptor [after] the incomparable Donatello [understood] and could express so well the qualities and spirit of that unripe age."⁴² For this critic, at least, Medardo's work was "donatellesque" in spirit if not in letter.



Fig. 7. Desiderio da Settignano (formerly attributed to Donatello), *Laughing boy*, c. 1460, marble, 33 × 21.5 × 13 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Fig. 8. Medardo Rosso, *Bambina Ridente* (version 2), c. 1900–15, plaster, wax, and pigment, 27.5 × 19 × 18 cm. Madrid, Centro de arte Reina Sofía

Taken together, these three early works betray the immense care with which Medardo studied Donatello. But they also discourage the view that Rosso's conduct was archaeological in nature. It was not about excavating past forms or types; it was about *re-enchanting* them, about extracting the kernel of their realism—a mother's caress, a child's mirth—and activating it in the here and now.

How did this re-enchantment figure later in the sculptor's career? As Rosso began to establish himself more firmly in Paris, he arguably intensified the realist dimension of his work, entrenching his project still more in the pathos of modernity. A key ingredient in this heightened realism was Medardo's appeal to new materials, and particularly paraffin wax, which he interlaced with tempera paint, shellac, and even sand. Significantly, Medardo utilized this multi-media approach not only to create new subjects (the *Ecce puer* of 1906, for example), but to *remake* earlier ones. Beginning in the late 1890s, Rosso began to produce variants of his sculptures from the previous decades, working from the same plaster matrices, but availing himself of these new media to push the expressive resources of his realism to new extremes.

This campaign began with a second iteration of the *Bambina ridente*, which Rosso produced in 1899. In this version, Rosso used not bronze but plaster covered with a quasi-epidermal layer of wax (Fig. 8). How different the effects

produced by these media! Where the uniform brown varnish of the first specimen might suggest good health, the skin of its companion is mottled and sallow in appearance. Blotches of darker pigment cling to the surface like some parasitic residue, obfuscating many of the child's features. Such tactics lend the work an overall indeterminacy of meaning. Faced with so many contused surfaces, that is, one might reasonably wonder whether the child simpers or grimaces, whether she pulses with life or is, instead, gray with fatigue.

This tendency toward indeterminacy became even more pronounced in Rosso's subsequent adaptations. In 1905, for example, the sculptor submitted *Dorme* to a further reduction, drifting from his original source—the Pazzi Madonna—further still (Fig. 1). Here, Medardo's prototype becomes virtually unrecognizable: the subject is solitary, brittle, spidery, and ruinous. Figure and ground are driven toward a dense confusion, with the erstwhile mother peeling herself from the puckered junction of painted wax and plaster. Perhaps in an effort to obscure his subject further, Rosso outfitted the sculpture with the more gnostic title *Carne altrui* (*The Flesh of Others*) and thus changed its putative referent (several of Medardo's contemporaries would identify the subject as a prostitute, a rather ironic inversion of the work's original inspiration, the Virgin Mary).⁴³ It may come as little surprise, then, that one later critic—probably confounded by works like this—wondered whether Medardo made sculptures that were invaluable or, rather, “Milanese waste products” (*un cascame milanese*).⁴⁴ Was it even appropriate to call Rosso a sculptor, he wondered, when his sculptures were “pathetic,” when everything he made “seemed to fall apart”?⁴⁵

Although the above remarks are derogatory in nature, they reveal something at the heart of Medardo's project. Indeed, it can be argued that fragility—an aesthetic of “falling apart”—came to have a paradigmatic significance for Rosso, one joining his choice of subjects, his materials, and his technique. If Medardo's realism had led him to Donatello, then it also led him, at this later stage in his career, to tamper with the very stuff of sculpture, its material substrate. In an effort to capture the essence of what it meant to be alive in modernity, in other words, Rosso had resorted to making “pathetic” sculptures, works that *materialized* a vision of human life that was vulnerable and impermanent, no different from—and no more important than—clotted wax and clay. To paraphrase, Medardo aspired, with his sculptures, to turn something perishable into something immortal, to carve out a space in which the spectator might contemplate human subjectivity under the conditions of its systematic undoing.

VI.

To develop our argument in one final way, we might consider how Donatello enters Medardo's project at a material level. As we have seen, Medardo's sculptures—especially those produced from the mid-1890s—frequently mingled plaster, wax, pigment, and clay. It bears mentioning that this fusion of pedestrian materials had little precedent in the nineteenth century but belonged, as Rosso's contemporaries acknowledged, to the legacy of Donatello.⁴⁶

If we accept the proposition that Rosso consciously revived the "crude materiality" evinced by works like the *Magadlene*, we must then ask, to what end? As nineteenth-century commentators knew well, materials have a social valence—they are inscribed with notions of class and ideology. We might, by way of comparison, recall some of the criticisms leveled against Medardo's contemporary August Rodin, and particularly those concerning his use of media. Rodin's ample reliance on "eternal" bronze and marble, some critics held, was a shameless appeal to the taste of the bourgeois nouveaux riches who so enthusiastically supported him.⁴⁷ In their very raw matter, that is, Rodin's sculptures pandered to consumer demand. Medardo's preferred materials, by contrast, look like a sober corrective to this practice. In their humility, which borders on decrepitude, these substances defiantly assert their independence from bourgeois sensibilities.⁴⁸ It is suggestive to think, then, that in an effort to purify sculpture of bourgeois aesthetics, Medardo had revived an archaic practice that he related so strongly to Donatello.

This issue of revival brings us back, by way of conclusion, to the exhibition with which this essay began. The show's premise had been to expose living artists to Donatello, the better to "incite them to new endeavors." In Donatello, Medardo found an individual who had similarly looked with disapproval on his own era, someone who had opposed classical idealism by stridently showing its antithesis: an unadulterated view of humanity—gritty, plangent, true to life. Accordingly, Medardo approached the older artist's work as if it were an alloy from which some long-forgotten substance might be released, infused in the present, and mobilized in an effort to document the ephemeral beauty of his age.

At stake, however, is more than the matter of influence, two sculptors caught in a solitary binary orbit, as it were. To attend to Rosso's encounter with Donatello, I have tried to suggest, is to make it impossible to see the young sculptor as disinterested in his historical inheritance (as some, and even Rosso himself, would have us believe), but rather constantly, even painfully, aware of its presence—a presence as ponderous and real as the tangled clay from which he made his sculptures. To acknowledge this encounter with Donatello is also to

grant the Renaissance a much more significant role in Rosso's oeuvre—indeed, to see it as intimately bound to his very critical project: purging sculpture of its triumphalist pretensions and suffusing what shell remained with the true spirit of modernity.

If Donatello offered the antidote to such triumphalism, his example also proved potentially poisonous, for it threatened to undermine Rosso's status as an avant-garde artist. Foregrounding this paradox helps, for one thing, to explain the discrepancy between Rosso's words and his work. For another, it accounts for the uneasy place that Medardo occupies in narratives of modern art. For sculptures like *Carne altrui* cannot be fully explained using modernist shibboleths like "innovation" or "rupture." Nor do more traditionalist positions—those based on art's continuity with the past—apply. Rather, it would seem, Rosso's works inhabit an interstitial space between these two opposing—indeed incommensurable—aesthetic ideologies. It is arguably this lack of a neat fit with either—the *ambivalence* that Rosso's works exhibit toward tradition, that is, and particularly Donatello's tradition—more than anything else, that gives Rosso's fragments the "uncanny" air so often described by critics. Never quite embracing tradition, nor rejecting it, Rosso's works inhabit an aesthetic borderland, partaking of both positions, but always "without home."

That these facets of Rosso's work have remained relatively hidden (whether because time has blunted their critical edge, or because the artist willfully obscured them) has only been to our detriment. For with his sculptures, Medardo posited a dimension of life that could, on the one hand, never be fully destroyed—his subjects become immortal or universal not despite being casualties of modernity but precisely because of that fact. But his sculptures also posit a dimension of life that will never be fully reintegrated into a world in which it no longer has a place. Understood in these terms, Medardo may be the most "real" sculptor of the nineteenth century. And this, to conclude, had much to do with Donatello.

Endnotes

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1. The literature on Donatello from this period is too vast to name. Representative approaches may be found, for example, in Semper 1875; Semper 1887; Carocci 1887; Cavallucci 1886; Müntz 1885; Trombetta 1887; and Tschudi 1887. For a fairly exhaustive list of this literature, see the bibliography in Pfisterer 2002, pp. 623–50.

2. “Questa Mostra dunque ... servirà ad onorare la memoria del grande Artefice, e a popolarizzare viepiù la sua fama, tornerà in vantaggio pure degli artefici viventi ... dal che vien desto il sentimento di emulazione, se ne ha incitamento a nuovi tentativi.” In *Esposizione Donatelliana nel R. Museo Nazionale* 1887, V. On the history of the Bargello more generally see Tomasillo 1994.

3. Cf. “il nome e la imagine di lui, mandati ai più lontani nepoti ... di stimolo perenne a lavorare con ardore e progredire nell’arte.” Cited in Gotti 1890, p. 131.

4. On the plaster casts exhibited in the *Esposizione Donatelliana* see Barocchi and Bertelà 1985, pp. XLVII–LV.

5. *Esposizione Donatelliana nel R. Museo Nazionale* 1887, p. 9, cat. 59. Since it entered the record in the 1880s, the *bozzetto* has been a mainstay in literature on Donatello, invoked perennially—into the 1990s—in discussions of his technique, his *botteghe*, or, more broadly, his place in histories of collecting. On the Martelli *David* (National Gallery, Washington, D.C.), and for further references to the *bozzetto*, see Lewis 1985, pp. 176–8 and Courajod 1884, p. 283. See also Schlegel 1968, pp. 245–58; and Caglioti 2000, vol. 1, pp. 251–52.

6. See, for example, Semper 1887, p. 72 note.

7. Bode 1898, p. 256.

8. Krahn 2009, pp. 40–47. For a well-reasoned critique of Krahn, see Mola and Vitucci 2009, pp. 340, 344–45. While the case for Rosso’s authorship is far from closed, it seems certain that the *bozzetto* influenced his early work. The comparison Krahn draws between the model and Rosso’s *Il cantante a spasso* (c. 1882), in particular, attests to the *bozzetto*’s entanglement with the sculptor’s production. In other words, even if Rosso acquired a copy of the *bozzetto* in the early 1880s, and did not produce the model himself, there can be little doubt that its scale, method of facture, and pose influenced—or was influenced by—one of his early works.

9. As Krahn himself notes, it is probable that Rosso added the date to the photographic negative much later, perhaps during his years in Paris (1889–1914). This leaves open the possibility that Rosso backdated the work.

10. Giovanni Lista is, to my knowledge, the only scholar to acknowledge—more than perfunctorily—Medardo’s debt to Donatello. See Lista 2003a, pp. 48–53; and, with different aims, Lista 2003b, pp. 39–49.

11. This verdict is found *passim* in the literature on Rosso. For representative remarks, see, for instance, Caramel and Mola-Kirchmayr 1979, p. 179; Krauss 1981, p. 34; and Hecker 2008, pp. 131–34.

12. Meier-Graefe 1904, p. 24. One trend in the historiography on Rosso’s works is to resort to geological metaphors such as erosion and entropy. Cf. Krauss 1981: “We feel we are looking at something that was shaped by the erosion of water over rock, or by the tracks of waves on sand, or by the ravages of wind” (p. 33); or Barr 1963: “strange figures of men...seem to grow out of the earth like tree trunks with spreading roots” (p. 9). While I am in essential agreement with such descriptive impulses, it is worth pointing out that they often reinforce Rosso’s outlier status.

13. See Mola and Vitucci 2009, p. 18; and Barr 1963, p. 9. See also Martini 1997 ed., p. 247: “Medardo Rosso definì la vecchia scultura con una sola parola: fermacarte.”

14. Barr 1963, p. 10. Historical support for Medardo's story remains scant. In the absence of any authenticating source, it is impossible to know when precisely the sculptor launched this myth. It is possible—if not certain—that he began to circulate the anecdote only later in life, perhaps after he had settled in Paris. In a letter of 1909, Rosso's friend Ardengo Soffici related that the sculptor told him that he never "went to Florence because he wanted to keep himself far from the peril of a beauty *toute faite*," suggesting that the anecdote was in circulation before then (Soffici 1909, p. 142).

15. On the modernist trope of the "clean break" with tradition—its origins, history, and legitimating function—see Duve 2013 and Duve 2014. Duve's focus in both essays is the formation of the *Salon des Refusés* and Courbet's *Pavillon du Réalisme*, but his insights apply to the trope generally.

16. Barr 1963, pp. 9, 61; Meier-Graefe 1904, p. 22. Along similar lines, this literature furnishes the sculptor with influences that are overwhelmingly *French* in orientation (this despite the fact that he spent much of his creative life in Italy, even leaving Paris as late as 1913–17 to return to his native Milan for months on end). In particular, scholars routinely and productively place Rosso's oeuvre in relation to his Parisian contemporaries, likening the fugitive surfaces of his waxworks to Edgar Degas's *Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans*, for example, or the glinting daubs of color in Georges Seurat's paintings of everyday life, or otherwise regarding Rosso's work as an idiosyncratic reaction to the warm-blooded classicism of Auguste Rodin.

17. See Krauss 1985.

18. For a general and well-historicized survey of the movement, as well as an exhaustive bibliography, see Del Principe 1996.

19. One need not look far for an example of this mindset. In May 1881, when the city of Milan showcased the nation's cultural and economic achievements at the *Esposizione dell'Industria e delle Belle Arti*, it drew explicit connections between their age and the Renaissance, "that ascendant movement, when [Italy had cast away] the chains of the Middle Ages...to give the world the likes of Vinci, Sanzio, and Buonarrotti, [a moment], like the epochs of Hadrian and Pericles [where] art and industry were merged in a single embrace" (*Catalogo ufficiale* 1881, p. 9). The artists exhibited at the *Esposizione* were largely neoclassical in inspiration and local (e.g., from Lombardy).

20. English translation provided by Del Principe 1996, p. 12.

21. See, e.g., Franconi 1857.

22. On this program and its underlying political and cultural agendas, see Scudieri 2011.

23. Cited in Moure 1997, p. 22.

24. Carocci 1887, p. 80; Trombetta 1887, pp. 161–62. Trombetta devotes a lengthy chapter to the question of Donatello's realism (pp. 157–94). So does Hans Semper in his monograph from ten years earlier (see Semper 1875, pp. 133ff).

25. Carocci 1887, p. 80.

26. It bears mentioning that this reading of Donatello as nonconformist extended well beyond the *Scapigliatura* circle. In his monograph on Donatello, for example, Hans Semper (a German) wrote that the sculptor had "sought to emancipate [sculpture] from the suffocating idealism of [the Renaissance]." In Semper's view, Donatello had "challenged the shapeless chimeras of [Renaissance philosophy]" and opposed "the immoral power bids of ecclesiastical dogma" and "political tyranny" (see Semper 1875, p. 133).

27. Giovanni Lista offers several brief but suggestive remarks about these plaster copies and their eventual acquisition by private collectors. See Lista 2003a, p. 109. On the attribution of the so-called *Bambino ridente* see Mola and Vittucci 2009, p. 100 note 6, but also more generally, Mola and Vittucci 2009, pp. 335–45.

28. Boito would publish the results of his research in 1895, and again, in significantly expanded form, in 1897. See Boito 1895; Boito 1897. The ideological underpinnings—and somewhat imaginative nature—of Boito's reinstatement became something of a *cause célèbre* in the subsequent century (for the substance of these critiques, see Castellani 2000, pp. 12–13; Papi 2010, pp. 153–66).

29. In the introduction to *Donatello in Padua*, Bode explained that the casting campaign, backed by the administration at Berlin's Royal Museums, was owing to the lack of a complete photographic corpus documenting Donatello's high altar (see Bode 1883, p. 6 and note). On Bode's campaign see Gentilini 1985, p. 405.

30. On Rosso and Bode's relationship see Krahn 2009, pp. 46, 47 note 28.

31. Cited in Mola and Vittucci 2009, p. 338.

32. Caramel 1994, p. 41.

33. Cf. Barr's related observation that the very fact that Medardo "was willing to sell [these copies] proves that [he] detested classical and Renaissance works" (Barr 1963, p. 56).

34. See, for example, Medardo's letter to Gottfried Eissler in 1903 (quoted in Mola and Vittucci 2009, pp. 335, 341 note 2). It should be acknowledged that Rosso's praise may not have been for what the copies imitated (i.e., their relationship to Donatello) so much as for their value as objects in themselves. After all, several of these replicas differed significantly from their prototypes, in format especially. Thus, the casts that Rosso owned of Donatello's *Francis* and *Anthony* re-produced just the head and neck of what were in reality full-length sculpted figures—a de-contextualization that afforded the works greater intimacy, riveting viewers' attention on the figures' psychology in ways that their larger counterparts arguably did not (it was precisely the lack of intimacy in the originals—their sociable distance from the viewer—that someone of Medardo's ken may have found unsavory).

35. Here, and elsewhere, I rely on the dates methodically put forward in Mola and Vittucci's magisterial catalogue raisonné. On the difficulty of dating Medardo's works—and especially the perilous chronology of his copies—see, for example, Mola and Vittucci 2009, *passim*. On this work in particular, see pp. 236–37. Rosso also called the sculpture *Amore materno*, but this appellation appears only in 1886. The work is known to us only through photographs. (Mola and Vittucci suggest that Rosso destroyed the gesso in May 1889 when he left for Paris.)

36. This bronzework was Medardo's first—and probably only—copy of the gesso matrix for *Madre e bambino* (see Mola and Vittucci 2009, pp. 236–37).

37. In the *paragone* debate, durability was the ingredient most often adduced to support bronze sculpture's superiority to painting. That Rosso has here—paradoxically—made bronze look so unglorified, so fragile, might be seen as an effort to undo or undermine bronze's claims to integrity (a point further magnified in the absence of a plinth or supporting structure).

38. On the genesis of *Dorme*, its dating and history, see Mola and Vittucci 2009, pp. 78–84, 242.

39. Mola and Vittucci date the gesso model to 1889, but the first copy—in bronze—to 1895–99. See Mola and Vittucci 2009, pp. 268–69.

40. In a letter to Felice Cameroni dated December 1889, Rosso wrote that he had "almost finished [his] portrait of the young daughter of an administrator at the hospital" (quoted in Mola and Vittucci 2009, p. 110 note 1).

41. There exists a robust literature that aligns Rosso's practice with Impressionism, evident as early as Piérard 1909. For a discussion of this association—which Rosso both courted and rejected—as well as an overview of scholarship on the topic see Lista 2003a, pp. 147–70, 272–74. For a critique of Impressionism's claims to originality see Shiff 1984.

42. Soffici 1909, p. 28.

43. See, for example, Soffici 1910: "*Carne altrui* is [the] misery of commodified pleasure, registered here on the face of a poor, tired girl. In the shadow of the fringe and in the curls that cover her face, in her eyes which hide from shame: her mouth is sad, still wet from strange kisses.... You will recognize her, friend, for she is the accomplice and victim of man's primal instincts" (p. 23).

44. Martini 1997 ed., p. 9.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

46. This is not to doubt the very real impact that Edgar Degas may have had on Rosso. Indeed, Rosso would have known about—although not had physical access to—Degas's *Petite Danseuse* as early as 1883 (see Hecker in Cooper 2003, p. 34), and it can be no coincidence that Rosso's interest in wax in the late 1880s was roughly contemporaneous with his first encounter with the French sculptor. Nevertheless, Donatello's materials are nearly identical to Rosso's, a factor that makes the analogy between those two artists arguably much stronger than the analogy between Rosso and Degas.

47. Benjamin Buchloh has admirably summarized this critique and its implications. See Buchloh 2003, esp. pp. 4–6. For late nineteenth-century critiques of sculpture as commodity more generally, see Droth 2004, pp. 141–66. For the more general trend of bronze and bourgeois taste in the latter half of the 1800s, see de Caso 1975, pp. 1–28.

48. Even when Rosso produced his works in bronze, he lessened the material's overall appeal by allowing it to remain raw and riddled with the vestiges of casting, such as pockmarks, fissures, and holes. In his mature bronzes, Rosso even corrupted the molten metal with sand (on these processes, see Cooper 2003, esp. pp. 70–93).

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