

Book Review: The restoration of the wooden crucifix of the Servants of Padua



Review by Sante Guido

Il restauro del crocifisso ligneo di Donatello nella chiesa dei Servi di Padova
Edited by Elisabetta Francescutti in collaboration with Francesca Meneghetti
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This book contains the proceedings of a study day (Centro culturale delle Grazie, 15 May 2015, Udine) dedicated to the conservation work on the sculpture of the famous Florentine sculptor. The volume is complemented by a richly updated bibliography on the work of Donatello, on 15th-century wooden sculpture in Tuscany, and on the restoration of numerous works related to the Crucifix of the Church of the Servants of Padua. The volume represents the culmination of a complex project that took place over the course of eight years, and it clearly articulates this extraordinary multidisciplinary project. It comprises a collection of thirteen essays (written in Italian, with a final summary of each article in both Italian and English), describing the multifaceted phases of study and restoration of a masterpiece of Renaissance sculpture. The Crucifix had been previously unknown, and it was disfigured by a nineteenth-century intervention that had given the polychrome wooden sculpture the appearance of dark and oxidized bronze.

The entire restoration project was conceived following the attribution of the sculpture to Donatello through the research of Marco Ruffini (Sapienza University of Rome) in 2008 and subsequent confirmation by Francesco Caglioti, noted scholar of Florentine Renaissance sculpture (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa). The Crucifix was recognized definitively as a work by Donatello from his time in Padua between 1443 and 1453 when he created many other—and better known—masterpieces such as the equestrian monument of Gattamelata; during this time, he also created the 29 bronzes for the altar of the Basilica of Sant'Antonio.

After this discovery, the Church of the Servants of Padua, the office of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage (MIBAC) of the Veneto, and the Restoration Center of Udine collaborated to devise a project for the restoration of Donatello's work. Over time, the project was articulated in several ways. For example, between March 28 and July 26, 2015, an important exhibition entitled "Donatello Unveiled: Masterpieces Compared" was presented at the Diocesan Museum of Padua. Three masterpieces by Donatello on the same subject were exhibited together; these works included the Crucifix of the Church of the Servants of Padua, after its discovery and its restoration; the Crucifix of Santa Croce in Florence; and the bronze Crucifix from the Basilica of Saint Anthony in Padua.

At the completion of the restoration project and the exhibition, and in order to supplement the book (which is a collection of all the data from the entire project) a website was created: www.donatello.beniculturali.it (in Italian only). The website allows visitors to follow the evolution of the restoration of the Crucifix of the Church of the Servants with in-depth presentations of the scientific research, the graphic projects, the drawings, and all other phases of the work connected with the Crucifix.

The volume itself begins with an article by Elisabetta Francescutti, the MIBAC project director, who explains the project overview and focuses on the use of wood, the plasticity of sculpture, the original polychromy, the chronology of the other interventions that took place over six centuries of the life of the sculpture, and the problems associated with placing the sculpture in its original chapel. This last topic is the subject of another article found at the end of the volume, this article written by Francesca Borion in which the restoration of the entire chapel of the Crucifix is analyzed. The restoration process, as well as the technique and materials used by Donatello, are thoroughly explained and illustrated with many photographs (before, during, and after the restoration) in the chapter written by restorers Angelo Pizzolongo and Catia Michielan (MIBAC). The sculptor Giovanni Sicuro writes of his precisely calibrated reconstruction of some of the original parts that no longer existed: fingers and part of the hair as well as the three iron nails which Sicuro constructed in a similar way to those found in other works by Donatello.

Luciana Travan and Paola Saccheri (University of Udine) are the authors of the anatomical and anthropometric study of Christ, complemented by the writing of Alberto Lolli on the posture of the dying body created by Donatello.

Two long texts comprise the diagnostic section. In the first, Marco Nervo (Venaria Reale, Turin), Nadia Pastrone (National Institute of Nuclear Physics, Turin), and Alessandro Re (University of Turin) discuss the process of performing a computerized thermographic scan and analyze the complicated data gathered for 3D reconstruction of the sculpture. In the second article, written by Fabio Frezzato (Research Center on Painting, Palladio, Vicenza), the analytical investigation (with cross-section, ESEM, and micro-FTIR) of the materials used by Donatello is described; plaster, white lead, lead yellow, and pigments were obtained by micro sampling both before restoration and after the removal of overpaint.

The second part of the book is dedicated to an in-depth comparison of the data collected on the Crucifix of the Servants of Padova with the data of the Maddalena, also by Donatello (1455-1456), for the Baptistery of Florence (Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence). Laura Speranza (Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Firenze) writes about the conservation history of polychrome wooden sculpture, the painting technique, and—with numerous photographs—the results of the recent restoration. Luciana Travan and Paola Saccheri (University of Udine) analyze the anatomy of the female figure highlighting the great realism of Donatello. Peter Stiberc (Opificio delle Pietre Dure, Firenze) is the author of an article on the CT scanning of the wood block, the stucco used for hair, and of the original repairs that were necessary during the statue's creation due to the insufficiently seasoned wood.

In the third and last part of the volume, the results of the restoration of the original wooden cross and of the stone Golgotha are presented by Milena Dean. Monica Pregnotato (MIBAC) and Raffaella Portieri write about the patinated plaster decorations that the sculptor Renzo Canella added to the sides of Donatello's Crucifix in 1912 as part of the latest restoration of the chapel for the fourth centenary of the miracle of the blood flowing from the Crucifix. The volume closes with an article by Francesca Meneghetti (MIBAC) and Corinna Matiello about the history and restoration of the reliquary containing the Ampoule of the Miraculous Blood.

This is an important book in the field of cultural heritage conservation studies and a milestone in the technical understanding of Renaissance wooden sculpture and of the working methods of Donatello and his circle.

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