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The Candelabrum by Andrea del Verrocchio

Candelabra by major Renaissance masters are extremely rare, and none is more important or beautiful than the one by Andrea del Verrocchio in the Rijksmuseum (Fig. 1).¹ It was commissioned in 1468 for the chapel of the Sala dell'Udienza, or audience hall, in the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence, and it exhibits a learned, but very free adaptation of classical models. We know from one document that it cost at least 40 florins, – a considerable sum for a decorative piece. Moreover at 1.56 m in height, it is unusually tall and imposing for a secular candelabrum.

The questions naturally arise, therefore, as to who commissioned it and why. Scholars have been unable to answer these questions. But a fresh look at the evidence suggests a new solution, which I shall explore in the following note.

There are only three known documents for the sculpture, but they contain more information than has been previously realized.² To begin with, it needs to be emphasized that the sources for the documents make it clear that the official patron of the sculpture was the Signoria, the executive of the Florentine government. We can be sure of this because one of the payments for the piece appears in the account books of the *Operai di Palazzo*, the officials who, at the Signoria's request, oversaw the restructuring of the Sala dell'Udienza and the Sala dei Gigli beginning in the late 1460s. Moreover, the first payment record for the candelabrum contains more

more specific clues. This document, dated 29 June 1468, states that Verrocchio had been given 8 florins 'on account of a candelabrum of bronze that he had begun for the Sala dell'Udienza; the remainder [of the fee] is to be determined by Niccola di Messer Vieri de' Medici.'³ There are two key points about this record that have been overlooked: first, that one man appears to have assumed a special responsibility for commissioning the sculpture, insofar as he was given the right to determine its price; and second, that the identification of this man in the document is incorrect. Niccola di Messer Vieri de' Medici had died in 1454,⁴ and so he cannot be the person meant in the document. But his son, Carlo, was still alive. Indeed, Carlo di Niccola di Messer Vieri de' Medici was the *gonfaloniere*, or chief executive, of Florence for the months of May and June 1468.⁵ The candelabrum bears an inscription on its base which reads 'MAGGIO E GIUGNO MCCCLXVIII' (Figs. 2–4). There can be little doubt, therefore, that the candlestick was meant to commemorate his *gonfalonierato*, whether for his personal success, or for other, more general reasons.

Indeed, the probable motive is not far to seek, for there was only one important political event during his tenure. On 18 May 1468, the 'Pace Paolina', the peace treaty ending the Colleoni War, was officially ratified in Florence and Venice.⁶ It had taken months of difficult negotiations, and on at least one



Fig. 1. Andrea del Verrocchio (c. 1435–1488), *Candelabrum*, 1468. Bronze, h. 156 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.nr. BK-16933.

occasion in the spring, all sides had remobilized in expectation of renewed fighting. The announcement of the peace was met in Florence and elsewhere with great rejoicing. According to Scipione Ammirato, in Florence they celebrated 'not only with the usual feasts and fireworks, but also with religious processions, with special distributions of charity to the poor, and by bringing to Florence the [miracle-working] painting of the Madonna dell'Impruneta.'⁷ Presumably, the candelabrum was commissioned in commemoration of the peace.

The Colleoni War had begun in 1467. On one side were Florence, Milan and Naples, and on the other was Venice with a consortium of condottieri, led by Bartolomeo Colleoni, the commander-in-chief of the Venetian army. Its peaceful conclusion had two major consequences. First, it ensured that the terms of the Peace of Lodi of 1454 would remain in force. This was crucial as the Peace of Lodi had established the balance of power which would stabilize Italy until the French invasion in 1494. Second, it ensured that the Medici would remain the undisputed rulers of Florence. The motivating force behind the Colleoni War was a group of Florentine exiles, including Dietisalvi Neroni and Niccolò Soderini, who had been expelled from the city at the end of 1466 for their participation in a conspiracy to overthrow the Medici. With the Pace Paolina, the conspirators were eliminated as a political factor in Italy. Upon hearing of the peace's conclusion, Dietisalvi Neroni is reported to have said, 'We are betrayed';⁸ and in fact they were forced to live out their lives in obscurity as exiles in Ravenna and elsewhere. Following the defeat of the rebels, Medici power in Florence was consolidated and reached an unprecedented degree of open expression. There would be no serious threat to their hegemony until after the death of Lorenzo il Magnifico in 1492.

Celebration of the 'Pace Paolina' is known to have been the motivation behind the famous joust of Lorenzo de' Medici in February 1469,⁹ for which Verrocchio supplied Lorenzo's banner. Likewise, the candelabrum appears to have been intended to commemo-

Fig. 2. Andrea del Verrocchio, *Candelabrum*, 1468; detail of the base with inscription: MAGGIO.



Fig. 3. Andrea del Verrocchio, *Candelabrum*, 1468; detail of the base with inscription: E GIUGNO.



Fig. 4. Andrea del Verrocchio, *Candelabrum*, 1468; detail of the base with inscription: MCCCCCLXVIII.

memorate a peace that was a victory for both Florence and the Medici. As *gonfaloniere*, Carlo di Niccola de' Medici would no doubt have been happy to see the commission of a work that honored both the city and his family.

Notes

¹ Inv. no. BK-16933; J. Leeuwenberg and W. Halsema-Kubes, *Beeldhouwkunst in het Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 1973, pp. 374–375. See also G. Passavant, *Verrocchio*, London 1969, pp. 171–172. It was first identified as a work of Verrocchio by W.R. Valentiner, 'Verrocchio's Lost Candlestick', *Burlington Magazine* 62 (1933), pp. 228–232.

² The documents were first published by G. Gaye, *Carteggio Inedito d'artisti dei secoli XIV, XV, XVI*, Florence 1839, I, pp. 569, 570, 575.

³ 29 Junii 1468. *A Andrea di Michele del Verrocchio intagliatore si paga fiorini 8 a conto d'un candelabro di bronzo, che egli haveva cominciato per la sala dell'audienza; il restante dev'essere fissato da Niccola di messer Verri de' Medici.* See Gaye, *op.cit.* (note 2), p. 569.

⁴ P. Litta, *Famiglie Celebri*, Milan 1819–61, VII, s.v. 'Medici', tav. VII.

⁵ S. Ammirato, *Dell'istorie fiorentine*, Florence 1600–41, II, p. 104. That the document refers to Carlo, not his father Nicola, has also been noted independently by Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio, 1298–1532*, Oxford 1995, pp. 58–59, 106.

⁶ On the Colleoni War, and the Pace Paolina, see especially B. Belotti, *La Vita di Bartolomeo Colleoni*, Bergamo 1933, chps. XXIV–XXVI, and L. Pastor, *Geschichte der Päpste seit dem Ausgang des Mittelalters*, Freiburg 1888, II, pp. 392–397. In the literature there is disagreement about the actual date of the ratification of the peace treaty. This is unnecessary: the document formally declaring peace in Florence is Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Archivio della Repubblica, Provvisioni, Registri, 159, fol. 23v–25v, 18 May 1468.

⁷ Ammirato, *op.cit.* (note 5), p. 104. The celebrations he is describing began on 27 April when the peace was first announced.

⁸ Belotti, *op.cit.* (note 6), p. 320.

⁹ C. Dempsey, *The Portrayal of Love*, Princeton 1992 p. 81.