An overlooked ‘Christ the Redeemer’ in the ambit of Bartolomeo Bellano

by Michael Riddick

Fig. 01: Christ the Redeemer, Bartolomeo Bellano or circle (?), probably Florence, end of the 15th cent. (Louvre Inv. OA7411)
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A singular example of the *Resurrected Christ* in the Louvre (Fig. 01, cover) has escaped discussion in the literature concerning plaquettes and other bronze reliefs. The height of this particular object, approximately 19.2 cm—as well as its subject—suggests its former use as ornamentation for a tabernacle door. The five piercings along its margins would have secured it while a curved indentation along the middle-left margin (just above Christ’s extended hand) may either be a flaw or could be an intentional divet incorporated to allow space for a key to pass through the tabernacle’s door.

At first glance, the present relief suggests an image of the *Resurrected Christ*, as it’s described. However, its independent protagonist, lacking the presence of a tomb, tousled soldiers, and a triumphant banner, instead suggests the depiction of a *Man of Sorrows*. However, he is not the humble half-length *Man of Sorrows* found in popular depictions. Rather, he is *Christ the Redeemer*, bearing an open, inviting hand as though mystically inviting the viewer into a restorative and safe refuge through the communal act. Christ hovers redemptive between life-and-death, appealing to the viewer with a solemn, yet confident, soulfulness that evokes his recent sacrifice.

Although more typical of Northern Europe, the Quattrocento function of this imagery on tabernacle doors sought to emphasize Christ’s spent blood for mankind’s redemption. The frequent impetus for such eucharist-themed *Schmerzensmann* was due to the theological *Triduum Mortis* debates of the mid-15th century, concerned over whether the blood of Christ was alive-or-dead during the three days following his death and preceding his Resurrection.

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Fig. 02: Spinello Aretino’s fresco of about 1400 at the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo.
While a taxonomy on the *Man of Sorrows* and its variants is too exhaustive for this discussion, the present relief can be narrowed to a specific region. Full-length depictions of the *Man of Sorrows* are rare in Quattrocento Italy and remain largely exclusive to Tuscany (especially Siena and Florence) with some outlying examples found in Rome and elsewhere.³

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³ Fig. 03: Full-length Bleeding Christ between the Virgin and St. Lucy for the high altar of Saint Lucia at San Giovanni’s Church of Misericordia in Valdarno, attributed to Mariotto di Cristofano.

³ Fig. 04: A bronze tabernacle door depicting *Christ the Redeemer*, ca. 1439, Badia, Florence.
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One of the earliest identifiable Italian depictions of this motif is Spinello Aretino’s fresco of about 1400 at the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo (Fig. 02). Other notable examples include Giovanni di Paolo’s Man of Sorrows and Last Judgment, ca. 1425, at the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Siena and the ca. 1420-30, Full-length Bleeding Christ between the Virgin and St. Lucy for the high altar of Saint Lucia at San Giovanni’s Church of Misericordia in Valdarno, attributed to Mariotto di Cristofano (Fig. 03).

The earliest suggested example of this motif in metal relief is on a tabernacle door at the Badia in Florence, datable to the late 1430s (Fig. 04). By the end of the 15th century this motif was reasonably diffused in both painted and sculpted depictions. It’s noteworthy that numerous of Italy’s chief Quattrocento sculptors and their workshops produced this effective motif, a subject which Michelangelo eventually experiments with as a probable basis for his celebrated marbles of the Risen Christ.

Fig. 05: Golden figure of Christ crowning the Vagnucci Reliquary at the Cathedral of Cortona, probably French, ca. 1410. Other portions by Gusto di Firenze, completed 1457.

Fig. 06: Bronze and enamel tabernacle door featuring Christ the Redeemer by Antonio di Pietro Averlino (called Filarete), ca. 1440 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv. 5966)
Another sculptural exploration of this theme is Vecchietta’s bronze *Christ the Redeemer* set atop his ciborium for the Hospital Church of S. Annunziata in Siena, made between 1467-72. Vecchietta’s atypical realization of Christ appears informed by the remarkable sculpture of Christ which crowns the Vagnucci reliquary at the Cathedral of Cortona.\(^5\) The reliquary itself was devised by the celebrated Germanic-Florentine goldsmith Gusto da Firenze. However, the reliquary’s figure of Christ was merged, being a probable earlier work of French origin of about 1410 (Fig. 05).\(^6\) However, the fame of this pseudo-Italian meets-Northern reliquary may have had a marked Northern influence on the Redeemer motif emanating out of Tuscany.

Other noteworthy examples of the Redeemer motif in low-relief bronze include Filarete’s unusual depiction of a forward-gazing Christ (Fig. 06) which may indeed borrow from the Vagnucci Christ. Filarete could have seen the Vagnucci reliquary during his work on the Santa Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaio in Cortona. Another example in bronze, now lost, was produced by Verrocchio’s workshop, ca. 1477, incorporated on Luca della Robbia’s tabernacle for the chapel of St. Luke in the hospital church of Santa Maria Nuova.\(^7\)

The Louvre’s *Redeemer* plaquette is presently attributed to Bertoldo di Giovanni, assigned when inventoried upon receipt from the Brauer donation of
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1921-22. While no published data exists concerning this attribution it could be assumed the association with Bertoldo was given not only on account of his work in the medium of bronze but also probably due to the weighted drapery and stocky physique of Christ whose manner recalls Bertoldo’s figures on his twelve stucco reliefs for the Palazzo of Bartolomeo Scala in Florence or his terracotta friezes on the façade of the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano.

However, the relief may arguably be closer to another of Donatello’s protégés: Bartolomeo Bellano. Bellano is thought to have been active in Donatello’s Paduan workshop between 1443-53 and is documented for his assistance on Donatello’s sculpture of Judith Slaying Holofernes in Florence ca. 1456-59. He is also thought to have assisted Donatello during the realization of the bronze pulpits for San Lorenzo, ca. 1465.

Not immune to the proliferation of the Redeemer motif, Donatello himself rendered the subject on his marble lunette for the Church of Sante Flora e Lucilla in the Sienese province of Torrita, ca. 1429-30 (Fig. 07). While Donatello’s creation is infused with more energy than the Louvre plaquette, there is yet a general semblance between Christ’s noble expression and the overall bold, weighted appearance that fortifies the implied heavenly divine realm to a firm earthly attendance. It would not be unusual for Bellano to borrow closely from Donatello’s models, translating them into his designs for bronze. One such instance can be observed on Bellano’s autograph relief plaque of the Dead Christ with Two Angels which borrows the manner of Christ’s face as featured on Donatello’s wooden crucifix, ca. 1440-45, at Santa Maria dei Servi in Padua (Fig. 08).
Nonetheless, the general stance of Christ on the Louvre plaquette diverges from Donatello’s Redeemer and instead follows Florentine types like those already cited. Other significant examples of the Florentine type include Neri di Bicci’s provincial painted example at the Convento di S Maria del Carmine in Tavarnelle Val di Pesa, completed in 1471 and another anonymous example, ca. 1450, at the Florentine Church of San Martino a Mensola. In observation of the Florentine versions of the Redeemer motif we may logically deduce the Louvre plaquette is of Florentine origin and probably datable from the 1460-80s, placing it in a window commensurate with Bellano’s activity there in the ambit and wake of Donatello.¹¹

Though triumphant in expression, a unique vocabulary for Christ’s facial type on the Louvre plaquette may be observed on Donatello’s relief of the Risen Christ for the bronze pulpit of San Lorenzo in Florence, ca. 1463-66 (Fig. 09). Bellano’s potential collaborative work on the pulpits could have served as an additional reference point for the manner of the plaquette relief, if realized by him or an artist in his circle. While the modeling of the hair is entirely different between the two sculptures, there

Fig. 09: Detail of the Risen Christ bronze panel for the San Lorenzo Pulpit, Florence, ca. 1463-66 by Donatello and assistants.

Fig. 10 (left-to-right): Detail of a bronze Seated St. Jerome with a Lion, attributed to Bartolomeo Bellano, late 15th century (Louvre); Detail of a bronze relief of Christ the Redeemer, Bartolomeo Bellano or circle (?), probably Florence, end of the 15th cent. (Louvre); Detail of a terracotta God the Father (private collection); Detail of a bronze David with the Head of Goliath, attributed to Bartolomeo Bellano (Metropolitan Museum of Art)
are general corollaries with regard to the deeply channeled wrinkles on the forehead, the deep-set eyes framed by high cheekbones, the squared fingers and the block-like physique of the protagonist.

The same aloof, yet seasoned gaze of the Louvre plaquette draws even closer comparisons with the bronze *Seated St. Jerome with a Lion*, attributed to Bellano;12 the head of Goliath at the base of his bronze statuette of *David* at the MET;13 and a terracotta *God the Father*, privately held and attributed to the Circle of Bellano (Fig. 10).14 The facial character of these sculptures, their furrowed brow lines, slightly agape mouths, hair modeled in distinct long locks with a procession of closely arranged parallel lines and the resigned, yet confidently bold, appearance of each artwork are invitingly relatable to the *Redeemer* plaquette. A final facial comparison can be drawn between the Louvre plaquette and Bellano’s carved marble *Lamentation* for the SS. Trinità in Padua (Fig. 11).15

Of alike boldness is the manner in which Bellano models his drapery, like ‘crumpled paper,’ as described by Wilhelm Bode.16 The strict, sticky-like folds of Christ’s perizonium on the *Redeemer* plaquette recall the various draperies featured in Bellano’s oeuvre. Finally, a superficial comparison can be drawn between the plaquette and his bronze putti, in-the-round, which flank the funeral monument of Pietro Roccabonella in Padua, ca. 1491-96/97 (Fig. 12).
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Fig. 12 (left-to-right): A bronze relief of *Christ the Redeemer*, Bartolomeo Bellano or circle (?), probably Florence, end of the 15th cent. (Louvre); A bronze sculpture of a putto for the funeral monument of Pietro Roccabonella in Padua by Bartolomeo Bellano, ca. 1491-96/97
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Endnotes

1 Louvre Inv. OA7411.


7 The original tabernacle door was stolen in 1919 and remains unaccounted for. A modern replacement is situated in its stead. See Andrew Butterfield (1997): The Sculptures of Andrea del Verrocchio. Yale University Press, p. 125, fig. 159.

8 Philippe Malgouyres, private communication, Jan 2019.


10 NGA Inv. 1957.14.139.

11 A positioning toward a later period in the 1470s, or even beyond, is also possible given the manner of the relief which evinces a ‘blockier’ quality that is commensurate with Bellano’s later creations. See James David Draper (1992): Bertoldo di Giovanni, Sculptor of the Medici Household: Critical Reappraisal and Catalogue Raisonné. Columbia, Mo., pp. 35–36.

12 Louvre Inv. OA7250.

13 MET Inv. 64.304.1.


15 Victoria & Albert Inv. 314-1878.