

1986/87 RSA Design Bursaries Competition Medals Section

Travel Bursary Report

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During September 1987, on the strength of the RSA Bursary and other money, I was able to visit more than 30 museums and galleries and 40 churches in northern and central Italy. I was also able to meet Professor Bino Bini, a sculptor and medallist who had been recommended to me by the RSA, while I was in Florence.

The notebook is a consecutive journal of works encountered and my comments, where they are not technical, are of course subjective rather than academic. What follows is a breakdown of the major areas of study and my observations on them.

My first objective was to look at a variety of bronze relief work to see how the various problems of perspective and figurative modelling had been dealt with. Some of the best examples of this are the many bronze doors which are to be found in churches throughout Italy and I was able to see about twenty sets of these, as well as a number of bronze panels on fonts, pulpits, and so on, from the twelfth to the twentieth century.

The oldest and crudest of those that I visited are the doors of San Zeno in Verona, which are extremely naive in composition and technically very primitive. Unfortunately they are being restored this year and I was only able to see copies of a few of the panels. However it is clear from the photographs available that the earlier panels (Primo Maestro) owe a stylistic debt to Nordic, and possibly Russian artists, compared with those of the Second Master whose style is evidently Gothic and Italian.

The doors of Pisa Cathedral, executed a century later, are an extension of that Second Master's work, being in fairly low relief and of a far higher technical proficiency. Lettering is used throughout to help identify the Biblical stories and the figures are given a greater degree of contextual support in the form of architecture or foliage. Those of Andrea Pisano, made for the Baptistery in Florence, are a further refinement of the same approach. One hundred and sixty years separate the doors of Pisa and Florence but while there is a dramatic improvement technically, conceptually and in terms of perspective the representation of stories from the Testaments remains very much the same. The new craft skill shows itself in the decorative margins and in the panel construction.

With Ghiberti's first set of doors for the Baptistery, which maintain the same format of panel construction and decorative margin, there is a further technical refinement. However having accepted the format of Andrea Pisano's quadrilobe panels, Ghiberti

also makes a far more positive use of the available space, with compositions that actually exploit the limitations of the frame.

At the same time that Ghiberti was beginning the *Gates of Paradise* (the late 1420's), Donatello was working on a panel depicting *Herod's Banquet* for the Baptistery font of Siena Cathedral. By employing different levels of relief on the same panel, that is to say by using incised lines as well as a progressive modelling from low to high relief, and by using the geometric perspective of a fixed viewpoint, he was able to create a different kind of picture-panel. Instead of portraying figures within a formal structure against a blank background, he employs an integral composition with enough spatial variety to portray several sequential scenes from the story on the same panel.

The later work of Donatello in Padua and in Florence show few further technical innovations, rather they demonstrate the conceptual inventiveness of the artist. The sacristy doors of San Lorenzo are composed of twenty panels showing the forty saints in pairs against a plain background. Positive use is made of the formally decorative frame by positioning the figures in relation to it, as well as to each other. The Padua altar panels are as complex in their figurative organisation as Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* however Donatello works within a tighter modelling range, apparently not using the addition of separate figures cast in the round. The surface quality of the later San Lorenzo pulpits is different again from both Donatello's earlier work and Ghiberti's which had been highly polished. Apart from the use of chisels on the details, the broader areas are matted or planished giving a rough textural surface.

While I was able to see several doors of the intervening period it was only the more recent ones which were of comparable interest to me. Giacomo Manzù's pair of doors for the Vatican, completed in 1963, are about twenty feet high and each contains five figurative relief panels bolted to the beaten bronze main-frame. Although each of the eight smaller panels measures around 1.5'x3', the maximum depth of relief is no more than 3/4". Manzù is very much a draughtsman in his relief work but the linear clarity is as much a product of the forceful modelling of drapery as it is of his use of carved or modelled lines set against a smooth background. The door escutcheons of palm-stems and vine leaves, and also of wheat sheaves, as well as the animal figures near the base of the doors, are modelled in the round providing a visual counterpoint to the reliefs.

Emilio Greco's doors for Orvieto Cathedral, which were erected only a little later, are sculpturally very different, a similar texture being employed over the entire surface of the doors. The three figurative scenes on each door, although clearly welded together, appear to merge into each other. On the side doors Greco has placed fully modelled angels against a textured surface. Greco's figure work is more abstract and more impressionistic than Manzù's but their compositions are equally formal. Both artists obviously favour maintaining stylistic links with the early Renaissance in their portrayal of spiritual statements through emphatic figurative expression. It is immediately recognisable that Donatello has been one of their principle sources.

In like manner, Manfrini's doors for Siena Cathedral show a clear debt to both Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* and the Verona doors. He has used a new format of panel arrangement, similar to that which Manzu' would later use, but given a greater predominance to the marginal columns of saints in niches.

I do not have the same confidence about either Lucio Minguzzi's doors for the Vatican (1977), or those of Angelo Biancini for a church in Via Masaccio, Florence (1962 or after). Biancini's doors may well have been translated directly from the medium of glazed terracotta, since there are examples of his door panels in this medium in the Vatican Museum. When coloured, his textures seem fairly alive, but in blackened bronze the forms are muddy, and the subject virtually indecipherable. Minguzzi's doors follow a similar format to Manzu's, but his figures suffer from a lack of clarity which I think is largely due to the excessive texturing of the expressive details. Only by analysing the content of each door can one discern any difference between the right hand door of *Good* and the left hand door of *Evil*, and even then only with difficulty. There is no hint of meaning to be obtained from their form since his figures are all equally chaotic.

There are a great many bronze relief works in the Vatican Museum, including several maquettes for doors. Of special interest were four panels of the Evangelists by Lello Scorzelli. These measure around 2'x3', and each has been cast from a pattern carved on a slab of wet clay. They are highly gestural in the modelling style, reminiscent of Alexandre Charpentier's impressionistic portraits of the 1890s, but although the surface is vigorously incised the moulding of the features and details is very sensitive.

Although differing in technical approach and in its expressive potential, the progress of marble reliefs followed a similar course from the Romanesque to the Renaissance. It was interesting to see how certain Romanesque artists had employed an extremely straightforward flattening of the subject as a form of perspective, particularly in some of the bestial friezes, like those on the portals of San Lorenzo in Genoa or Verona Cathedral, and to compare them with the later more sophisticated works of Luca della Robbia and Agostino di Duccio. I found many good 15th and 16th century marble reliefs, particularly portraits, but no later ones until the 20th century. In Santa Croce in Florence, there is a chapel with four panels by Libero Andreotti dated 1926, and I found several of his other works in the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, as well as a large relief from 1922 by Arturo Martini.

As far as figure sculpture was concerned my interest became limited to the same periods. The series of prophets by Giovanni Pisano in Siena were particularly impressive as well as the bronze and stone statues by Donatello in both Padua and Florence. Mirko Basaldella, while very much a 20th century artist, sensitively echoes Donatello in his *David* (1937), and *Oedipus* (1942); although the influence is perhaps received via Rodin.

I have not listed the figure sculptures of which I took note or photographed since they have only an indirect relationship with relief work. I looked at over forty

individual or groups of figures by some twenty or so sculptors. The same is true of the many frescoes and panel paintings of the 14th and 15th centuries. The hundred and sixty paintings by some fifty different artists of the 16th and 17th centuries are of greater importance. They are too numerous to itemise here but they are of particular importance to the History of Art aspect of my degree course. Of special note were paintings by the Carraccis, Caravaggio, Rubens, Van Dyck, and the Dutch landscape and genre painters.

I was in fact able to see far less 20th century sculpture and painting than I had hoped. Four and a half galleries in various cities were closed for a number of different reasons. However the Vatican Museum of modern religious art is one of the best collections of major artists from the last forty years that I have ever seen. The Guggenheim Collection in Venice provided me with further insights into the international developments between Cubism and Abstract Expressionism; another important area of my degree course. What was available at the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome was helpful in showing further examples of international work since 1870, though of course with a predominance of Italian art. During my stay in Venice I was able to visit the Matisse exhibition, which contained a very high number of his pieces of sculpture, as well as a major retrospective of Jean Tinguely.

Although I had already left for Italy by the time Professor Bini wrote to me, I was fortunate in being able to meet him and his daughter Anna, who is also a professional medallist, at short notice. It was especially fortunate that Anna Bini, whose English was excellent, was also involved with the craft, as she was able to interpret with a full understanding of the Professor's working methods.

He showed me a number of photographs of his larger outdoor public sculptures which, like his medals, reflect his strong interest in nature and animal life. He has employed quite a wide range of styles in his medallions, but his subject is invariably the translation of fable and mythic symbol. While on the one hand producing work for issue in San Marino, or through the Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, which he admits is "fairly controlled", he also works in a much freer manner. For example, one medal commemorating the flooding of the Arno in 1966 and, on the reverse, the devastating landslide in northern Italy in 1976, is highly abstract and expressionistic, and strongly evokes the image of destruction by earth by water. In a lighter vein he showed me a book of preparatory drawings another of the collected correspondence which surrounded the issue of Prato bus tokens. They had been commissioned to serve a civic purpose instantly became collectors' items.

Professor Bini's medals are produced almost entirely from copper repoussé patterns and struck, a technique that reflects his skills as a metalsmith and jeweller. He was extremely open about his work and it was very stimulating to meet him.

While I was in Rome I chanced upon the Scuola dell' Arte della Medaglia and although it was closed to students for the summer recess I was able to find out about the courses they hold there. Through a French speaking interpreter I spoke to Signor Turco who explained a little of how the school operated and showed me the

exhibition of students work, past and present. Although I had not been able to warn them of my arrival, I was able to spend an hour there and they were most helpful.

Another surprise encounter was in Orvieto. As part of the local harvest festival celebrations, a number of local societies had set up an exhibition in a local church. While trying to direct me to an exhibition of paintings, the Orvieto Tourist Office misdirected me to a collection of Italian art medals held by the Orvieto Philatelic and Numismatic Society. I was therefore able to see some of the output of the IPZS, as well as Johnson of Milan and the Vatican, over the last twenty years. It was a touch ironic that Orvieto should have the least well endowed of all the museums that I visited. Several thousand plaster casts of ecclesiastic and civic seals, assorted coins, medals and medallions lie in piles, uncatalogued, in the Cathedral Museum, many showing signs of progressive deterioration.

I feel that I need hardly add that I greatly enjoyed my trip as well as learning from a considerable bulk of material. Many of the things that I saw were wholly new to me while others had been merely book-plates before. I am grateful to the CCAT Library for possessing a copy of *Romanesque Bronzes* by H. Leisinger, as well as Charles Avery's book *Florentine Renaissance Sculpture*, both of which together were largely responsible for the route that I took. However my main thanks must go to the sponsors of the medals section, not just for the money, but, more importantly I think, for the impetus that entering the competition gave me.

Galleries and Churches visited

GENOA	
Palazzo Bianco	S. Lorenzo Cathedral
Palazzo Rosso	
Palazzo Reale	
Museo de S. Agostino	
VERONA	
Museo de Castelvecchio	San Zeno
	Verona Cathedral
	S. Anastasia
	San Fermo Maggiore
PADUA	
	Scrovegni Chapel
	S. Anthony's Basilica
	Scuola del Santo
	Padua Cathedral
	Baptistery
VENICE	
Museo Correr (Matisse exhib.)	S. Mark's Basilica
Palazzo Venier (Guggenheim Coll.)	Chiesa della Salute
Accademia	Santa Marie del Giglio
Palazzo Grassi (Tinguely exhib.)	
BOLOGNA	
Museo Civico Mediovale	
Pinacoteca Nazionale	
Galleria Comunale d'arte Moderna	
MODENA	
	Modena Cathedral
	Basilica
LUCCA	
Museo Civico Nazionale	S. Michele in Foro
Palazzo Mansi	S. Paolino
	S. Martino Cathedral
	S. Frediano Basilica
PISA	
Museo Nazionale	Cathedral
Museo del Duomo	Baptistery
PRATO	
	S. Stephen Cathedral
FLORENCE	
Museo Bargello	San Lorenzo
Museo del Duomo	S. Maria del Fiore Cathedral
de 5. Matteo	Baptistery
Museo Santa Croce	Santa Croce
Palazzo Vecchio	San Ambrogio

Uffizi	Chiesa del Via Masaccio
Pitti	
Palazzo Medici Riccardo	
SAN GIMIGNANO	
	Cathedral
	S. Agostino
SIENA	
Museo del Duomo	Cathedral
Pinacoteca	Baptistry
Museo Civico	
CHIUSI	
Museo del Duomo	Cathedral
Museo Etruschi	
ORVIETO	
Museo del Duomo	Cathedral
	S. Giovanni
ROME	
Museo Nazionale d'Arte Moderna	Santa Maria del Popolo
Musei Vaticani	S. Peter's Basilica
Palazzo dei Conservatori	S. Agnes in Agone
Palazzo Nuovo	S. Luigi do Francesi
	Sistine Chapel
	Pantheon
	S. Trinita dei Monte
	San Pietro in Vincoli