

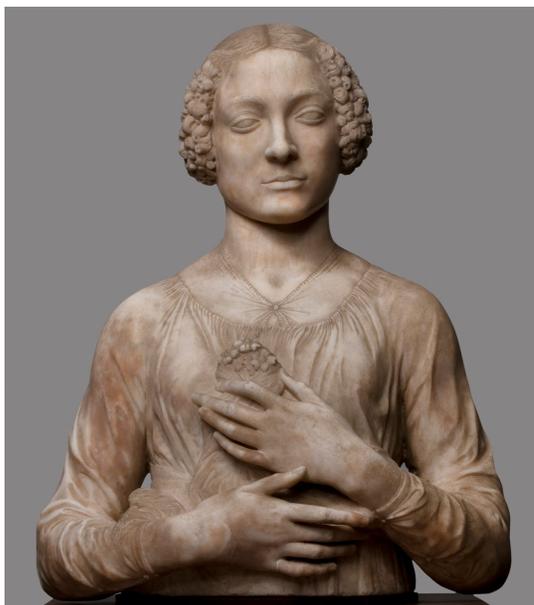
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## ART REVIEW

## 'Verrocchio: Sculptor and Painter of Renaissance Florence' Review: Reclaiming the Teacher Surpassed by the Pupil

Andrea del Verrocchio, Leonardo da Vinci's mentor, was a stunning innovator and a virtuoso draftsman, sculptor, and painter of psychological depth and subtlety.



Andrea del Verrocchio's 'Lady With Flowers' (c. 1475/1480) PHOTO: MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL BARGELLO, FLORENCE

By *Cammy Brothers*

Sept. 18, 2019 4:12 pm ET

*Washington*

**Pity the artist** known mainly by association with a former student. Such is the fate of Andrea del Verrocchio (c. 1435-1488), a multifaceted, enormously talented painter and sculptor of Renaissance Florence, who had the misfortune to have taught Leonardo da Vinci when the young artist apprenticed in his studio, and has thus spent the rest of history in his shadow. Until now. With a magnificent exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, "Verrocchio: Sculptor and Painter of Renaissance Florence," curated by scholar-dealer Andrew Butterfield, the time has come for Verrocchio to reclaim his place as an innovator in his own right.

An earlier version of the exhibition in Florence this summer focused on the "school of Verrocchio" as much as on the artist himself, addressing the vexed question of attribution. The results were fascinating, but also dizzying for the nonspecialist.

**Verrocchio: Sculptor and Painter of Renaissance Florence**

*National Gallery of Art  
Through Jan. 12, 2020*

For the Washington show, Mr. Butterfield has pared down the selection of objects and for the most part included works firmly attributed to Verrocchio. In four dense rooms, he builds an image of Verrocchio as a virtuoso

draftsman, sculptor, and painter of psychological depth and subtlety.

Take the extraordinary “Head of a Woman with Braided Hair” (1475/1478) from the British Museum. He experimented with oiled charcoal to make the blackest black, using it to define the braids, and smudged the surface of the sheet around the eyes, cheeks and chin. The result is a fully modeled and highly expressive likeness, at once beautiful and particular, with locks of hair as animated as the face. It is easy to see how much Leonardo learned about portraiture from Verrocchio, and even Raphael’s and Michelangelo’s female portraits are difficult to imagine without Verrocchio’s example, here and elsewhere.



Andrea del Verrocchio's 'Head of a Woman With Braided Hair' (1475/1478) PHOTO: THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Verrocchio’s originality can be easy to miss, because his subjects are often familiar. For example, visitors to the exhibition are greeted by the heroic young “David With the Head of Goliath” (c. 1465) cast in bronze and gazing ahead, a slight smile playing on his lips. Unlike the soft, sensuous adolescent body fashioned by Verrocchio’s great predecessor and rival Donatello in his c. 1440 version, Verrocchio’s figure is wiry and muscular. The artist has injected his David with the specificity of a portrait, conveying the psychological intensity of the moment after his heroic feat. A prize of the Bargello Museum in Florence, the David is one of a number of exceptional loans secured for this show.

A lighter-hearted but equally stunning work in bronze is his “Putto With a Dolphin” (c.1465/80), formerly the centerpiece of a fountain. Verrocchio was one of the few Renaissance sculptors to do his own bronze casting (Lorenzo Ghiberti was another), and it was an extremely difficult process. Disasters were commonplace. Knowing that, certain details, like the putto’s drapery, which flutters like silk in the wind, jump out at you. No one else had tried anything like it before; nor did they after.

Not every work here is a masterpiece. The Frick Collection’s blank-faced marble “Bust of a Young Woman” (c. 1470) flanks a doorway, her lack of animation a sharp contrast to the beauty and liveliness of the famous “Lady With Flowers” (c. 1475/80) on the opposite side. Unique among surviving 15th-century marble busts, the “Lady” is a full half-portrait, including the woman’s arms and hands. The hands almost seem the subject of their own portraits, so specifically are they described. While marble was the material for lasting portraits, evoking ancient Roman examples, Verrocchio adds something particular, personal and momentary in this portrait, making the viewer feel as if this is a woman one might encounter and recognize. The slant of her head and subtly upturned lips make it even more engaging.

The exhibition’s last room, dedicated primarily to paintings, challenges viewers to discern subtle distinctions among paintings of similar subjects. Installed in the middle of the room is Leonardo’s “Ginevra de’ Benci” (c. 1474/78), temporarily relocated from its place in the permanent collection galleries. It is a fantastic chance to see Leonardo as he was in the 15th century, just one among many artists striving to achieve a balance between portraiture and



Andrea del Verrocchio's 'David With the Head of Goliath' (c. 1465) PHOTO: MUSEO NAZIONALE DEL BARGELLO, FLORENCE

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solated genius popular culture has made him out to be. Placed as it is, near Verrocchio's delicate and subtle iterations of the Madonna and Child subject in paintings from Berlin, London and Edinburgh, viewers may begin to grasp how much of the penetrating vision we credit to Leonardo he learned from his teacher.

We tend to toss the moniker "Renaissance man" around freely, cheapening cases in which it is actually earned. Equally accomplished as a painter and sculptor, Verrocchio was that and more. While we know him as the teacher of a generation of Florentine artists—not only Leonardo, but also Botticelli, Ghirlandaio and Perugino—this exhibition makes clear how much he had to teach, and how each of his remarkable students could absorb only a part of it.

—Ms. Brothers is an associate professor at Northeastern University and the author of *"Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture"* (Yale).

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