Bust - Giovanni di Antonio Chellini da San Miniato

Object: Bust

Place of origin: Florence (made)

Date: 1456 (carved)

Artist/Maker: Rossellino, Antonio, born 1427 - died 1479 (sculptor)

Materials and Techniques: Carved marble

Museum number: 7671-1861

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 64a, The Robert H. Smith Gallery

Public access description

This bust is a portrait of Giovanni Chellini, who died in 1462 at the age of 83 or 84. An inscription within the hollow base of the bust identifies both sitter and artist: MAGisteR IOHANES MAGisTRI ANTONII DE SancTO MINIATE DOCTOR ARTIVM ET MEDICINE . MCCCCLVI. In the centre are the words: OPUS ANTONII. [translation]

Giovanni Chellini da San Miniato (d. 1462) was well-known in Florence as a doctor and teacher of medicine. The present bust was probably based on a mask cast from the doctor's face a few years prior to his death.

The bust was presumably commissioned by Chellini himself, and stayed in his family until it was sold in Florence in the second half of the nineteenth century. Chellini treated the sculptor Donatello for an illness, and in payment Donatello gave him a bronze roundel of the Virgin and Child in 1456, which is now also in the V&A collection and displayed nearby to the bust.

This sculpture is one of the earliest and finest Renaissance portrait busts and is the earliest known work by Rossellino. It epitomises both his mastery of carving and the taste for life-like portrait busts that developed in Florence around this time. Made six years before the sitter died, the extraordinary handling and particular features of the bust indicate that it is based on a life-mask. A plaster mould was taken of the sitter's face, which would faithfully record his or her features. During the process, a band was placed around the sitter's head to protect the hair, and in the process the ears would be pinned back. However, this feature would not have been directly translated into an image cast from the mould, and in any event need not have been translated into the carved marble. To ensure his own fame and that of the sitter, Rossellini signed it underneath.

Descriptive line

Bust, marble, Giovanni di Antonio Chellini, docotor of medicine, by Antonio Rossellino, Italy (Florence), dated 1456

Physical description

This bust in brownish marble shows the sitter represented in full face with bare head. The ears are pressed back against the skull. He wears a close-fitting tunic fastened by three buttons at the neck.

Dimensions

Height: 51.1 cm, Width: 57.6 cm, Depth: 29.6 cm, Weight: 80 kg

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Object history note

This bust was bought by John Charles Robinson for £110,- from “the ancient palace of the Pazzi family in Florence” in 1860 (Pope-Hennessy 1964, p.000). Pope-Hennessy records that it is identical to one described by Cinelli as belonging to the Samminiati family who were descended from the nephew of Giovanni Chellini. Their property passed in the mid-eighteenth century to the Pazzi family through the marriage of Gian Cosimo Pazzi to Camilla, daughter of Senatore Ascanio Samminiati. The patronage of the chapel of SS Cosmas and Damian in the church of San Domenico at San Miniato al Tedesco, dedicated to Chellini in 1455, also passed to the Pazzi family.

The authenticity of the inscription has been questioned. Macclagan and Longhurst state that the first part of the inscription is original but suggest that the words OPVS ANTONII could have been added later. However, there is a similar inscription beneath Rossellino’s 1468 bust of Matteo Palmieri (Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence). The date has also been questioned on the grounds that it appears it could have been carved from a death mask and therefore should be dated to after Chellini’s death in 1462. However, it could equally have been based on a life-mask, or have been designed to suggest that was the case. Both death and life masks were commonly used throughout the Renaissance in the creation of sculpted portrait busts. Vasari suggested that it was Verrocchio who started this process, however Fusco (1982) points out that he helped to make an already existing practice much more commonplace. Cennino Cennini’s Craftsman’s Handbook, published in the late fourteenth century, gives clear instructions on how to make life masks (ref) and Ghiberti, writing in c. 1445-55, makes reference to Pliny’s account of Lysistratos making life masks in the fourth century. In fact, Rossellino could have easily released the ears from the head while carving and not retained what might be a side-effect of the modeling process.

Historical significance: The bust was originally attributed to Donatello, because it seems to be identical to a bust by Donatello that was recorded as being in the Casa Pazzi in Borgo degli Albizzi in 1841. The attribution was probably also linked to the fact that Donatello gave Chellini the present of a bronze roundel of the Virgin and Child. This gift was made in thanks for Chellini’s treatment of Donatello when he was
sick. The attribution to Antonio Rossellino, however, is accepted by Robinson, Bode, Weinberger and Middeldorf, Gottschalk and Planiscig (Pope-Hennessey 1964, p125).

This bust is the first dated work of Antonio Rossellino, and is one of the earliest and finest Renaissance portrait busts. The portrait type is close to that of the relief head of Neri Capponi on the Capponi monument in Santo Spirito, Florence, which was executed in the studio of Bernardo Rossellino before 1457. The characteristic brownish marble is used again in Antonio Rossellino's St Sebastian at Empoli. This work is said to have been a much later work, however Pope-Hennessey (1970) believes it to be from the same period as the bust. Not only because it is carved from the same type of brownish marble, which does not appear again at San Miniato or in any later work before he carved the St John the Baptist which is now in the Bargello. Not only this but the carving is very similar to the Chellini bust. Pope-Hennessy makes another comparison with Rossellino's Madonna and Child in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and dates all three pieces to the same time period. All three are of the same type of marble, but also the treatment of the texture of the flesh and the hair in the Virgin and Child and the bust are treated in very similar ways.

**Historical context note**

The identification of Giovanni da San Miniato with Giovanni Chellini has been made through comparison with the head of the recumbent figure on Bernardo Rossellino’s monument to Chellini in San Domenico at San Miniato al Tedesco. The inscription on the tomb shows Chellini to have been about 83 or 84 when the bust was carved. In 1401 Chellini was elected to the post of lecturer at the University of Florence, and that in 1402 he was elected lecturer of philosophy and logic (possibly a renewal of the previous contract). A document from 1403 confirms that he attained the high post of Vice-Rector within the university, describing him as “Magister Johannes … de Sancto Miniate e Pagn Portigiani da Fiesole”. In the records of San Domenico at San Miniato al Tedesco Chellini is described as: “doctor of high reputation in Florence, where he worked and taught with great credibility”. Lightbown (1962) suggests that Chellini must have left by 1404 to take up practice as a doctor as he is no longer mentioned in the University documents. A detailed account of Chellini’s life after 1404 can be found in a seventeenth-century copy of a manuscript by Scipione Ammirato il Vecchio (1531-1601) in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence. From this document it is clear that Chellini was a humanist, and the document contains references to Chellini’s library, as well as the following extract: “He was a friend of the celebrated sculptor Donatello, and having through divine aid cured him of his ailments, Donatello gave him (I will use his own words) ‘a roundel as bog as a trencher, on which was sculptured the Virgin Mary with the Child at her neck, and two angels at the sides, all of bronze, and on the outer side it was hollowed so that melted glass could be poured on to it, and it would make the same figures as those on the other side.’ This was in the year 1456.” Although very successful in Florence, it is clear also that Chellini was a very private man and not connected with the aristocracy or with the politics of the city. Lighthbown suggests that the “knowledge that such a man commissioned a bust of himself surely helps to define the extent of action of Florentine humanism.”

**URL**

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16256/giovanni-di-antonio-chellini-da-bust-rossellino-antonio/