Plaquette - The Virgin and Child with St Anthony Abbot and St Jerome

Object: Plaquette
Place of origin: Verona (made)
Date: ca. 1490 (made)
Artist/Maker: Moderno (maker)
Materials and Techniques: Bronze
Credit Line: Salting bequest
Museum number: A.425-1910

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 64, The Wolfson Gallery, case SS3

Public access description
Moderno specialised in plaquettes that were ideal for the collector’s cabinet. His series showing the legend of the hero-god Hercules was particularly popular. The delicately treated Virgin with saints resembles a miniature altarpiece, but it would also have appealed to collectors as an artwork.

Descriptive line
Plaquette, bronze, the Virgin and Child in a niche, by Moderno, Italy (Verona), ca. 1490

Physical description
The Virgin with the Child is seated on a throne in a niche with a shell-shaped hood between heavily decorated pillars; at her feet sit two angels playing lutes. On the left beyond the pillar stands St Antony of Egypt, with bell and staff; on the right St Jerome with a book and the lion at his feet. The base of the niche is decorated with grotesques. Above is a lunette, with Christ rising from the tomb between two sleeping soldiers; on each side are child angels holding a jewelled wreath.

Dimensions
Height: 11.1 cm, Width: 6.1 cm, Depth: 0.45 cm

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Object history note
From the Salting bequest.

Historical significance: Among Moderno's best-known designs, this is, Lewis states, 'the pivotal work of Moderno's career' (Lewis, 1989, 115-116 and notes 100-101). Pope Hennessy notes that this design is frequently encountered, and other versions may be found at The Samuel H. Kress collection in Washington, the British Museum in London, or the Staatliche Museen Berlin. The V&A holds two versions of this plaquette. One untraced example appeared in the Higgins sale (London, 29 January 1904, no. 47) and the Garnier sale (Paris, 18-23 December 1916, no. 520). These versions often vary by the inscriptions to be found on the back as well as the obverse (see Pope-Hennessy, 1965, p. 42). This design was instrumental in identifying Moderno as the same person as Galeazzo Mondella. Indeed, while the inscriptions on the reverse of some versions of this plaquette identify the artist as Moderno (as is the case here), other versions, such as the one sold in the Higgins and Garnier sales, identify the artist as Galeazzo Mondella. Additionally, this latter version bears the inscriptions 'Mantua' and '1490', making it the only dated design by Moderno. Lewis (1989, p. 115) notes that 'the use of haloes is rare to the point of nonexistense in Moderno's work'; the presence of such haloes on the heads of the Virgin, Saints, and resurrected Christs makes this design a particularly interesting example. Lewis notes such haloed saints in the Pietà between candelabra of c. 1490 and the Resurrection of the late 1480s (see the examples in the Samuel H. Kress collection, both illustrated in Lewis, respectively fig 11 and 19).

Lewis calls Moderno 'the most accomplished artist of Italian Renaissance plaquettes' (Lewis, 1989, p. 105). An artist of extraordinary renown, his production was admired and very influential in his time and beyond, a fact that was reinforced by his acquaintance with the reigning duke of Ferrara, Ercole I d'Este (1431-1505) and his daughter Isabella d'Este, a prominent patron of the arts in Mantua from the 1480s (Lewis, 1989, p. 111).

The format of the plaquettes, as small objects easy to carry, would have privileged the diffusion of his art throughout Europe. As Lewis argues, this design was by the mid-1490s vastly influential as the figures' poses are reflected in many contemporary sacra conversazione, in painting as well as in ceramic or enamel (116).

Historical context note
This plaquette by Galeazzo Mondella, called Moderno, belongs to one of twelve signed designs by the artist, to whom Douglas Lewis attributes no less than forty-five designs (Lewis, 1989, p. 105).
Moderno specialised in small bronze plaquettes exploring religious or antique themes, and catered for a clientele of learned humanists. These objects, produced in quantities, were usually found in these scholars’s studios, were they kept functional objects and collectibles. Such plaquettes had an essentially ornamental purpose. They are often incomplete in themselves, as they would be applied or mounted on items of household furniture, such as inkstands, lamps or caskets. They could also sometimes be used as items of personal adornment, to decorate clothing or accessories (see Hill, 1917, p. 104, Spencer, 1969, pp. 5-7).

This is an example of sacra conversazione (Sacred or Holy Conversation) that is, a depiction of the Virgin and Child amidst a group of saints. Instead of grouping the figures in a unified space, Moderno has conserved the shape of an altarpiece to suggest further the devotional aspect of this piece. It thus functions as a miniature altarpiece. As Lewis notes, many versions were mounted with a handle, so as to be freestanding. Lewis continues: "The standard assumption is that a plaquette was equipped with a handle to be presented, as a pax, for the "kiss of peace" at the celebration of the Mass; but recent commentators have suggested that some such objects must have been intended or at any rate employed for private use’ which is further suggested by the structure of the object, the scene appearing framed by its architectural setting and peopled with holy figures in informal attitudes (Lewis, 1989, 116 and note 107). The quality of this refined and heavily adorned design suggests it functioned as an object of personal enjoyment, art for art’s sake, as much as a devotional item. As small objects easily transportable, plaquettes were also used by artists as means of transmitting themes, compositions, and their interpretations of antique and religious subjects (Spencer, 1969, p. 7). They bore and intrinsic value as collectibles, since they appear in 16th century inventories (Spencer, 1969, p. 7).

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O248710/the-virgin-and-child-with-plaquette-moderno/