Statuette - Moses

Object: Statuette

Place of origin: Augsburg (made)

Date: ca. 1581 - ca. 1584 (made)

Artist/Maker: Gerhard, Hubert (sculptor)
Carlo di Cesari del Palagio, born 1540 (caster)
Müller, Johann (gilder)

Materials and Techniques: Gilt bronze

Credit Line: Bequeathed by Mr George Weldon

Museum number: A.27-1964

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 62, The Foyle Foundation
Gallery, case 13

Public access description

Christoph Fugger was a member of a great banking family from Augsburg, Germany. When he died unmarried in 1579, a large sum of money was set aside from his estate for an appropriately lavish memorial. A site was chosen in the Dominican church of St Magdalena in Augsburg, and the work was entrusted to Hubert Gerhard. The altar memorial consisted of a stone framework of red and white marble, on to which were set gilt-bronze sculptures: a large relief of the Resurrection, a smaller relief of the Ascension (missing since the 18th century), two standing and two seated figures of prophets, two small angels holding the Instruments of the Passion and two large kneeling angels who supported the framework above. In addition to Gerhard, Paulus Mair was employed to cut the marble, Carlo Pallago (a Florentine stucco sculptor) assisted with the casting, the Reisinger brothers of Augsburg supervised the technical side of the work, and the goldsmith Johann Müller was responsible for the finishing, chasing and gilding.

The progress of the commission is fortunately extremely well documented in an account book held in the Fugger archives at Dillingen. Fascinating details emerge from the accounts, such as the fact that the casts of the two reliefs and one of the large angels failed at the first attempt, and it is interesting to see how many people were involved in such a collaborative exercise. In connection with the final polishing, for instance, two women were employed for a number of weeks to rub at the bronzes with wire brushes and tartar and to wash them down with beer and water; and to counteract the effects of mercury poisoning the men working on the gilding were given small amounts of butter. This is unlikely to have been particularly helpful.

The marble framework of the altar was renewed in 1727, when the church was remodelled in the Baroque taste, but the bronzes - with the apparent exception of the Ascension relief - remained in place until 1807, when the church was secularised and the contents sold. The history of the sculptures between the early 19th century and 1964, when they were bequeathed to the Museum, is not known.

Hubert Gerhard was one of a number of Northern sculptors trained in Italy in the second half of the 16th century, all of whom came under the considerable influence of Giambologna and carried the latest artistic developments back to Germany and the Netherlands. The Fugger altar was one of the first manifestations of this mixture of Italianate and Northern styles in South Germany, and Gerhard - together with Johann Gregor van der Schardt and Adriaen de Vries - became one of its leading exponents.

Descriptive line

Statuette, gilt bronze, Moses from the Christoph Fugger altarpiece, designed and made by Hubert Gerhard, German, ca.1581-4

Physical description

Moses, shown with horns, half-kneeling and holding a tablet in left hand, figure in gilt bronze.

Dimensions

Height: 22.2 cm, Width: 17.2 cm, Depth: 15.2 cm, Weight: 4.08 kg

Museum number

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Object history note

This object came into the Museum through a bequest from George Weldon, and was originally part of an altarpiece. The whole altarpiece consisted of a relief of the Resurrection, two kneeling angels, two standing angels holding Instruments of the Passion, two standing prophets and two seated prophets, one of which has been identified as Moses. The altarpiece was surmounted by a relief showing the Ascension, however this has been missing since the early 18th century.

The arrangement of the pieces was as follows: the bronzes were mounted on a red and white marble retable designed by the mason Paulus Mair; the Ascension relief was placed above the Resurrection relief, the four Prophets flanked the Resurrection with the two seated prophets above the two standing (this is suggested by the relative inclination of the heads of these figures); the two standing angels were above the seated prophets, with the kneeling angels in the centre, below the Resurrection relief, to support the marble framework.

The altarpiece was placed in a prominent site within the Dominican church of St Magdalene in Augsburg, the rental of which was finalised by...
the Fugger family in 1580. It was placed on the sixth column in the centre of the nave towards the east, and on the next column, the one nearest the altar, was Christ in the House of Martha and Mary by Jacopo Tintoretto (now in the Munich Alte Pinakothek). When the church was secularised in 1807 and its altars dismantled, all the sculptures and paintings were sold off. The whereabouts of the sculptures between 1807 and 1964 are unknown.

The Dutch born artist Hubert Gerhard was commissioned to do the altarpiece. Work began in 1581 and was largely complete by 1584. Gerhard made most of the models, in wax, in 1581, and a lot of the casting was completed in this year as well. The four prophets and the two angels with the Instruments of the Passion were cast successfully. Problems were encountered in the casting of one of the large angels, and the two reliefs. The account book for the work records that whole heads, arms and legs had to be cast separately and then soldered or screwed to the Resurrection relief, and these additions have become more visible over the years.

Michael Baxandall notes that in metallurgical terms the objects are not technically bronzes: the zinc content is high and the tin content is low, and so the objects are made of brass.

Historical significance: These objects provide an early example of a Northern European artist putting into practice some of the styles and techniques of the masters of the Italian Renaissance, but still keeping to some Northern traditions. For example, in the compositions for the prophets, Gerhard seems to have used simplified versions of Giambologna’s spiral and double-spiral figures. The representation of the drapery, however, shows a more Northern tradition of making patterns of cloth that relate to the figure beneath but not necessarily to the movement of that figure. The Resurrection relief is in a style and narrative tradition very alien to Florentine tradition, except for the articulation of the figures. This shows the influence of the patrons in their preference for the decorum of the Northern narrative, as well as high relief and complex engraving. The models for the bronzes depend for many details on Giambologna’s work around 1580.

The other important feature of this work is the existence of the account book, which details every step of the process including what didn’t go well and different methods that were tried to make things work. It describes metal casting not smelting and assaying, which was rare in 16th century Germany.

The existence of the detailed account book also allows us to question the assigning of authenticity of works to a particular master ‘on the basis of style’. The account book shows us that the process was a collaborative one worked on by many craftsmen, who worked on all the stages between Gerhard’s models and the final gilt pieces. For example, the aggressive engraving on the surface, something alien to the Florentine tradition, could have been the result of efforts to make something of a rough cast, and therefore not necessarily Gerhard’s intention.

A full examination of these points can be seen in Michael Baxandall’s article for the Müncher Jahrbuch (1966), which uses the account books to closely examine Gerhard’s methods and materials.

Historical context note

The altarpiece was made as the memorial for Christoph Fugger, a member of the most successful Augsburg banking family. Despite difficulties in family relations before he died, no money was to be spared to give him a memorial worthy of the family name. Following the Protestant Reformation, which began in 1517 when Martin Luther posted a list of grievances against the Roman Catholic Church in Wittenberg, much of Northern Europe rejected Catholicism, including large parts of Germany. However in Augsburg several convents and churches remained Catholic, and so it should not have been problematic for Gerhard to design such an ornate memorial.

Gerhard was one of the many Northern European artists who spent periods of time in Italy learning from the masters of the Italian High Renaissance. In particular, Gerhard was influenced by the work of Giovanni Bologna (also known as Giambologna), who went from Belgium to Rome to study sculpture and eventually settled in Florence, and it is likely that Gerhard was a student or assistant of Giambologna. Gerhard would have learnt new styles and techniques for individual figures and religious scenes, as well as new methods and processes for making sculpture.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70371/moses-statue-gerhard-hubert/