

EXHIBITS

Masterpiece of Renaissance Sculpture in New York

From June 16 to Oct. 17, 1993, New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art is displaying one of the most important pieces of civic sculpture from Florence, the bronze "Christ and St. Thomas" by Verrocchio, which has been removed from the outside wall of Orsanmichele, the historic grain market and shrine, and restored. This building was the center of Florentine economic life between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries and had strongly been associated with communal liberty since the 1390's.

The two-figure over-lifesize sculpture embodies better than almost any other surviving work from the period, the unity of thought in art, religion, technology, politics, and economics which marked the "universal thinkers" of the Florentine Renaissance.

Unveiled in 1483, the statue group

of "Christ and St. Thomas," depicted the moment when the apostle Thomas demanded physical proof that the risen Christ was indeed the same Jesus he had seen crucified. Christ revealed his wounds and Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God." Christ replied, "Because you have seen me, Thomas, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed."

Verrocchio (c.1435-1488) is best known as the teacher of the most famous "universal man" of the Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), but this exhibit may help restore the fame which was eclipsed by his greater pupil.

It was in Verrocchio's workshop that Leonardo assisted in casting the gilded bronze ball atop Brunelleschi's cathedral dome in Florence, a feat Leonardo recalled much later, when he

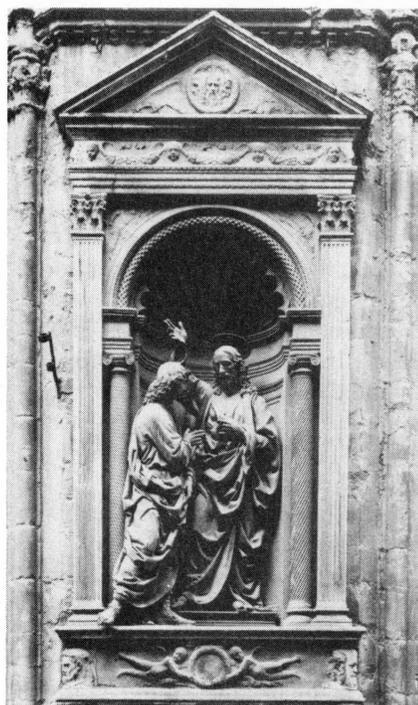
was designing astronomical instruments after 1500. The contract for the Orsanmichele group was awarded to Verrocchio between 1466 and 1467, while Leonardo (then a teenager) was in the shop.

Leonardo's notebooks contain detailed evidence of his study of large-scale bronze casting, yet no major statue by him has survived. Before the early 1400's, bronze casting in Italy was carried out by Byzantine master foundrymen, who came via Venice. The Venetian-Byzantine monopoly on casting was broken by Lorenzo Ghiberti at the beginning of the century when he set up his own foundry in Florence. Advances in warfare also spurred the need to improve casting techniques for founding cannon. In the Christ-Thomas group, Verrocchio was the first Florentine sculptor to cast large statues in a single piece, a singular technological advance.

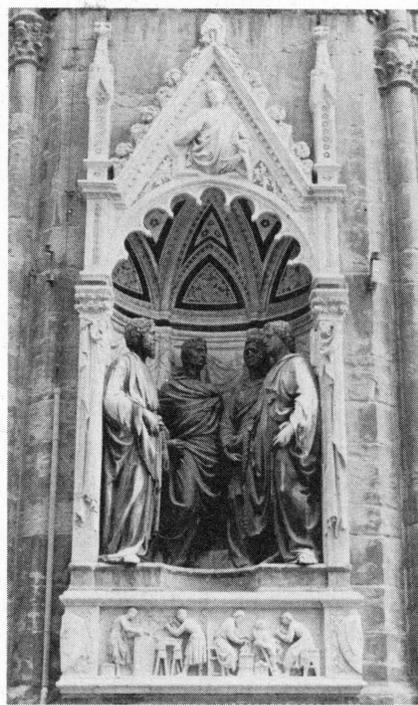
Civic Humanism

Verrocchio's sculpture was commissioned by the guild of commercial lawyers (Mercanzia) as the last in a series of thirteen monumental statues of patron saints of the major guilds to decorate the exterior of Orsanmichele. Most of these statues were put up in the early 1400's, the period of the new translations of Plato and the burst of "civic humanism." The Orsanmichele statues embodied the Florentine ideal of building a republican citizenry by creating suitably beautiful public spaces, in which conspicuous acts of virtue could be carried out.

Some of the monumental saints' statues included low reliefs on the base with a story from the life of the saint relating to the guild's activity. In Nanni di Banco's "Four Crowned Saints" (1409-17), paid for by the guild of carpenters and stonecutters, the four classically attired saints stand in sol-



Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Lent by the Superintendency of Florence



EFINS Andrew Sparnhaus

Verrocchio's "Christ and St. Thomas" (left), the last statue added to the walls of Florence's Orsanmichele, introduced a narrative element. Right: Nanni de Banco's "Four Crowned Saints," showed guild members at work in the bas relief below.



Verrocchio, "Christ and St. Thomas" (1483). The over-lifesize statue group, recently restored, adorns the outside of Florence's Orsanmichele, a center of Renaissance "civic humanism."

emn conversation. Below, we glimpse them in their shop—a realistic view of sculptors at work in that day, complete with measuring tools.

Half a century later, Verrocchio's group was the first to introduce a narrative into the major statue, combining the two aspects which had been separated. This is also true technically, because the statues are not fully round, but hollow in back, i.e., neither free standing statuary nor pure relief.

The group replaced Donatello's statue of St. Louis of Toulouse commissioned by the Guelph Party, an institution of oligarchist rule which was eclipsed with the sweeping social changes of the Renaissance. Verrocchio had to fit his statues into the pre-

existing niche designed by Donatello, the brilliant innovator of the early fourteenth century. The sculpture is on view in the Lehman wing of the museum in a plain niche replicating the original niche's dimensions.

Mercy and Truth

The story of Doubting Thomas had long been used in Florence to represent the theme of justice, because it includes the two essential aspects of a good judge: clemency—the infinite mercy of Christ, who forgives Thomas for his hardness of heart—and the desire for truth, represented by Thomas. A poem associated with this theme, written by the fourteenth century writer Franco Sacchetti, reads in part: "Touch the truth as I do, and you will believe in

the high justice of the Trinity, which always exalts each person who makes judgments."

Through his ingenious calculation of the gestures and stances which unify the two figures, Verrocchio showed his mastery of the Renaissance ideal of expressing the motion of the mind through the movement of the body. Just as Leonardo would do in his 1483 painting of "The Virgin of the Rocks," Verrocchio used light and dark to bring out the meaning of gestures. Christ's right hand is placed in such a way as to be brightly illuminated, encouraging the viewer to imagine the radiation of the Holy Spirit from the hand as he blesses Thomas.

—Nora Hamerman

The Polish Rider

Rembrandt's "The Polish Rider," shown on the cover, was painted in the year 1655. It was selected for this special issue as a companion to "History as Science: America 2000" by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., because it so strongly conveys LaRouche's concept of the crucial role of individual ideas and individual personalities in the shaping of universal history.

The painting, which recalls Dürer's "Knight, Death, and the Devil," is universally viewed as portraying a youthful Christian soldier fully armed and prepared for combat. The light, which shines upon the youth's face as he turns towards the viewer, and also upon his weapons, emphasizes that the individual is both the living image of God (*imago viva Dei*), and is capable of acting upon history as an adopted son of God (*capax Dei*).

The extreme dynamism of the horse and rider is in stark contrast to the grim, rocky valley beneath the darkened hill. This contrast is reinforced by the life-giving pool at the base of the hill, before what appears to be the church tower and ruined castle at the hill's crest.

—William F. Wertz, Jr.