VERONESE’S PORTRAIT OF THE SCULPTOR VITTORIA

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The smallest telling snapshot flashes to us a more immediate image of a person than pages of biography and interpretation, and neither a mass of documents about an artist, nor the entire body of his works, reveals so much of his essence as a likeness taken from life by one of his gifted contemporaries. Paolo Veronese’s portrait of the Venetian sculptor Alessandro Vittoria, which has recently come into the Museum’s collection, is filled with a special interest for the Museum because of the statuette which he conspicuously displays, a work by Vittoria of which the Museum owns a version. But aside from its content, the painting is so strong and beautiful that it would be valued even as a portrait of an unknown man. In 1928 when it was auctioned at Christie’s in an unnamed sale, it was called simply “Portrait of a Sculptor, in Black Dress,” and it was not until 1937, after the picture had been brought to this country and exhibited at the Cleveland Museum, that Alfred M. Frankfurter identified the sober, middle-aged subject as Alessandro Vittoria.

Vittoria was not a Venetian by birth but came from Trent in the Italian Tyrol. His life and activities were recorded in the eighteenth century by Tommaso Temanza and in the nineteenth by Benedetto Giovanelli, and from their enthusiastic encomiums emerge certain credible details, along with much that has since been emended or rejected. Vittoria was born in 1524 or 1525, the son of a tailor, Virgilio della Volpe, and was put to the study of sculpture in Trent with two little-known masters, Martino da Como and Antonio Medaglia di Pelo Superiore. It seems probable, too, that he learned from Vincenzo Grandi of Padua, who in 1534 signed and dated a beautiful but still rather quattrocento cantoria in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Trent.

From the time when Vittoria, at the age of eighteen or nineteen years, left Trent for Venice, his career is clearly recorded for us in contemporary documents and in a large body of signed works. Vittoria himself all through his life kept a full and detailed journal, in which appears his statement that he came to Venice for the first time on Saint James’s day in July of 1543. Bishop Cristoforo Madruzzo is said to have been his patron, but it was through the good offices of Titian that he was introduced to Jacopo Sansovino, the foremost Venetian sculptor of that day, and accepted by Sansovino as an apprentice and helper. The remainder of his long, full life was passed for the most part in Venice, although he worked for churches in Verona and Padua, and in the fall of 1552, as a result of a quarrel with his master, he stayed for a short time in Trent and in Vicenza. The dispute, which has been made much of by students of Venetian sculpture, appears to have arisen when Vittoria submitted to Ercole II of Ferrara the model for a figure of a giant marble Hercules after the commission for the project had already been tendered to Sansovino. The older sculptor’s resentment of Vittoria’s youthful temerity was somehow healed by that mighty meddler Pietro Aretino, who already had a high regard for Vittoria and patched up their differences.

By May of 1553 Vittoria was back in Venice and for the next two years was hard at work under Sansovino’s direction on the caryatids for the portal of the Library, now the entrance to the Royal Palace. In 1557 he was admitted to the Scuola of the stonecutters and carvers in Venice and from this time until his death in 1608 produced a long series of sculptures. Foremost in importance are the many impressive portrait busts of his Venetian contemporaries,
Portrait of Alessandro Vittoria, by Paolo Veronese (about 1528-1588). H. 43 1/2, w. 32 1/4 inches. 
Gwynne M. Andrews Fund, 1946
among them the Museum's fine portrait of a member of the Contarini family. In the strong heads of Domenico and Francesco Dudoco, of Sebastian Venier, and the beautiful portraits of Pietro and Carlo Zeno, Vittoria has rendered the human countenance with peculiar seriousness. The pierced pupils of the deeply shadowed eyes and the turn of the heads on the broad torsos memorialize in Vittoria's portraits much less of the worldly status of the subjects than of the quality of their interior life. It is this power to grasp the significant in human appearance and to give it enduring formulation which justifies Luigi Sera in his assertion that Vittoria is unequaled in portraiture by any sculptor before Bernini.

Vittoria exercised his talent for portraiture not only in monumental sculptured busts but in innumerable medals. Aretino, who was himself the subject of one of Vittoria's finest medals, wrote to a lady of his acquaintance recommending Vittoria as a medalist, remarking that the Prince of Piedmont, the King of Spain, and the Emperor Maximilian had already been portrayed by him.

Another category of sculpture in which Vittoria excelled was the modeling of statuettes, like the one he holds in our portrait of him by Veronese. This handsomely designed small figure betrays at the first glance its clear relation to Michelangelo's Dying Slave in the Louvre, one of the figures intended for the great project of the tomb of Pope Julius II. This reminiscence of Michelangelo is not unique in Vittoria's work; the allegorical figures uneasily reclining on the pediment of the overdoor in the Doge's Palace pay direct tribute to the times of day that ornament the Medici tombs. Since it is fairly certain that Vittoria never visited Florence or Rome, his familiarity with the works of Michelangelo must have come to him through drawings or through small models by Michelangelo or his pupils, which frequently turned up for sale in Venice. Vittoria's notebook for 1569, indeed, records his purchase of one foot from the figure of Day, presumably from one of the models.

Two statuettes of Saint Sebastian bear further witness to Vittoria's preoccupation with the struggling baroque figure of the slave. One of them, a fine bronze standing on a circular pedestal, belongs to the Metropolitan Museum. It is signed Alexander Vittoria [T[ridentinus] F[aciesbat] and constitutes the surest but not the only proof that our painting represents Vittoria. For though the head of the bronze statue is turned away from the spectator, while the in-

Saint Sebastian, by Alessandro Vittoria (born 1524 or 1525, died 1608). Bronze. Height 21¼ inches. Lee Fund, 1949
Portrait of Jacopo Strada, by Titian. In the Gemäldegalerie, Vienna
Portrait of a Sculptor, by Jacopo Palma the Younger (1544-1628), perhaps a portrait of Alessandro Vittoria. In the Gemäldegalerie, Vienna
Portrait of Veronese’s brother, Benedetto Caliari. Detail from The Marriage at Cana, by Veronese. In the Louvre, Paris
distinct head of the figure in Veronese's painting seems to turn forward and a little down, the angles of the raised arms and the stance of both figures against their tree trunks leave little reasonable doubt that they are two versions of a theme with which Vittoria was experimenting. The other statuette of Saint Sebastian is a bronze which was recently in the art market in New York and was published by W. R. Valentiner in a study of versions of this Sebastian figure. It is not signed and differs also in the addition of a loincloth and the omission of the tree trunk. Essentially the same figure occurs three times elsewhere in Vittoria's oeuvre. It becomes the Saint Sebastian in a niche, one of the three figures on an altar which he made about 1565 for the church of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice. It is seen again in the youthful male figure representing Autumn in the atrium of the Palazzo Pisani at Montagnana. In this work, however, which Vittoria made between 1565 and 1570, little except the raised left arm that frames and shields the face remains of the boundslave theme as it occurs in the bronze statuettes and in our painting.

Finally, in 1600, toward the end of his life, Vittoria reverted again to the theme in the altarpiece of San Salvatore, where his Saint Sebastian has become a highly emotional Counter Reformation figure with the right arm raised and the head thrown back in torment.

The identification of the subject of Veronese's portrait as Alessandro Vittoria does not rest upon the statuette alone. As early as 1602 Vittoria obtained permission to build his funerary monument in the church of San Zaccaria. This work, which is largely due to helpers under his own supervision, was completed in 1605, three years before his death. It is a dignified structure, surmounted by a figure symbolizing Sculpture and presenting, between caryatids labeled Painting and Architecture (the sister arts of which he was in a minor way a practitioner), Vittoria's self-portrait bust. This bust and the similar one in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum both show him at the very least twenty years older than in our painting but nevertheless make it plain that Veronese's portrait represents the same man.

In painting Alessandro Vittoria with one of his own works, Veronese chose a type of portrait that seems to have been formulated in Venice and had already gained considerable popularity there. Titian and Tintoretto, as well as Veronese, painted such portraits of sculptors. Titian's superb representation of Jacopo Strada in the Vienna Gallery is perhaps the best known of the type. In it the attributes of sword and chain, fur-trimmed cloak, and books conspicuously displayed pronounce Strada more than the sculptor which the figure and medals declare him to be. Following Titian's own humanistic inclinations and perhaps the sitter's express desire, Strada is immortalized as a gentleman and scholar.

Beside this brilliant portrait by Titian our painting is a somber, silent work. Its background is darkly vague, with only a dim suggestion at the left of some sculptured architectural decoration. Aside from the handling and other technical matters which bear witness to the authorship of Veronese, it is just this reticent seriousness that makes our portrait typical of him. For the great decorator Veronese, painter of richly overburdened banquet tables and scintillant brocades, becomes suddenly solemn and curiously chaste and humble when wrestling with the problem of painting a particular human being. In the midst of the Marriage at Cana in the Louvre, perhaps his most sumptuous and luxuriant feasting scene, the individual portrait heads strike a movingly austere note. In the figure supposed to represent his brother Benedetto the brocaded robe and the gesture of the lifted wine cup are in the painter's lavish mood, but the handsome head is remarkable not so much for its worldly glory and physical force as for its serious characterization.

The black Venetian dress in which Vittoria is portrayed by Veronese is rendered more dense and light-absorbing by the tiny frill of white that frames the neck and wrist. And above the monumental bulk of the body the head turns to the spectator with an immanent melancholy recalling Greco's Spanish knights. The hands, which in portraiture are usually made to play an articulate and expressive role, are poised in our painting in a contained but
purposeful gesture upon Vittoria’s statuette. But neither they nor any single feature of the face have been permitted to detract one whit from the extraordinary power of the eyes. Beneath the high, pale brow and shadowed above and below with weary lines, they look out with an imponderable meaning.

It is just possible that we have from one other painter besides Veronese a record of Alessandro Vittoria’s appearance. Among the many Venetians with whom he appears to have been on friendly terms the younger Palma is especially mentioned. And it was in Vittoria’s own house in 1602 that Palma signed one of his important contracts. Ridolfi, in his Maraviglie, records, furthermore, that one Signor Ascanio Spineda in the seventeenth century owned a number of portraits by the younger Palma, including a likeness of the sculptor Alessandro Vittoria. There is a painting in the Vienna Gallery, ascribed to Palma, which shows a sad, gray-bearded old man holding a small sculptured figure. It is tempting to see in this painting Spineda’s portrait of Alessandro Vittoria, perhaps as he appeared in 1602 at the age of seventy-eight, when Palma surely knew him.