A RELIQUARY BUST MADE FOR POGGIO BRACCIOLINI

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Director

Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini, commonly known as Poggio (1380–1459), was a renaissance humanist who belonged to a brilliant group of Italian poets, artists, philosophers, and men of letters from whose work the modern world has drawn heavily for inspiration. He studied with John of Ravenna and the Greek Emmanuel Chrysoloras. At the age of twenty-two he was inscribed in the Florentine Guild of the Arte de' Giudici e Notai. For forty years he served almost continuously as the Apostolic Secretary for Italian and Latin letters under Popes Boniface IX, John XXIII, Martin V, Eugenius IV, and Nicholas V. In his later years he was Chancellor of the Florentine Republic.

Poggio traveled to England, France, Germany, and Switzerland, seeking and studying unknown or unpublished manuscripts which had been hidden away in libraries. He soon began collecting codices, books of all kinds, medals, cameos, sculptures, and, in particular, classical Roman busts. From the proceeds of the sale of a manuscript of Livy in 1434 he was able to buy a villa near Terranuova, his native village in the Val d'Arno, northwest of Arezzo and south of Florence. In this country seat, called the Villa Valdarnina, he brought together his collections and established a center for scientific and literary studies. His fame was such that in 1462 Terranuova was called Terranuova Bracciolini. He counted among his many friends the foremost minds of the Renaissance, and the sculptor Donatello, who has a particular interest for this article, is said to have been influenced by Poggio's collections of ancient marble sculptures.

Poggio has been described as both a man of letters and a man of flair and natural instinct, a diplomat, a historian, polyglot, philologist, bibliographer, epigrapher, numismatist, and archaeologist. The universality of his interests is reflected in the variety of his own writings. But this irascible and petulant man of genius was often in trouble for the rashness of his tongue. Some of his books were banned by the Index in 1557, along with the writings of Erasmus and Machiavelli. The following is a partial list of his many publications: the Dialogues—De avaritia, De nobilitate, Contra hypocritas, etc.; the Liber facettiarum; the Historia disceptativa convalis; four books of the De varietate fortunae; De miseriis humanae conditionis; innumerable Épîtes, and the History of Florence from 1350 to 1455.

During the papacy of Eugenius IV, in the month of May 1434, while Poggio was still in Rome, a poor citizen, who had a vision of the fabulous treasures he would find in the church of Saint Sixtus (Sixtus II, Bishop of Rome in the third century), discovered there a marble casket with two glass vessels containing the bones of Saint Lawrence, Sixtus's archdeacon. This relic was given to Poggio. Four years later Poggio and his wife, Vaggia (Selvaggia de' Buondelmonti, a member of a prominent Florentine family, whom he had married in 1435 or 1436), had the bones of Saint Lawrence placed in a reliquary embellished with their coats of arms, which they gave to the church of Santa Maria in Terranuova. It was placed in the chapel of the Santissima Annunziata, built by Poggio for the use of his family, with a marble plaque on the front of the altar describing in detail the finding of the bones and recording their gift. Poggio's first gift to the church had been made in 1427, and there are records of chalices and vestments given by him in 1441. Dr. Ernst Walser of Zurich, in Poggio Florentinus, Leben und Werke (Berlin, 1914), wrote that both the reliquary and the plaque were in the chapel until shortly before 1914, when the reliquary was sold.

A few years ago I was browsing in an antique shop in the neighborhood of London's Bond
Reliquary bust made for Poggio Bracciolini in 1438 or 1439, possibly the likeness of a contemporary bishop. Silver-gilt with copper-gilt base. It was made to hold relics of Saint Lawrence.
Detail of the bust showing the collar decoration, similar to that on a reliquary bust made for the Old Cathedral in Utrecht in 1362, now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
Street when my attention was drawn to a metal bust on the floor. It was filthy with grime, tarnished, painted with a darkened varnish, and the face was covered with several layers of flaking paint. After discovering that the bust could be readily exported from England because its price was less than a thousand dollars, I opened the hinged miter and saw that the inside was of carefully hammered silver. There could be no doubt that here was an Italian fifteenth-century reliquary bust. The condition of the silver-gilt head, the cabochons and filigree on the miter, the copper-gilt base, the enameled coats of arms and inscriptions, further attested its authenticity.

When the bust was safely placed in our workroom at the Metropolitan Museum we began slowly to clean it and to separate the various layers of paint on the face. It became apparent that even if it had been painted originally, which is doubtful, the remains of the successive layers of loosened paint unfortunately obscured fine modeling and careful engraving in the silver. The result is a sensitive portrait in the form of a reliquary—surely the reliquary given by Poggio Bracciolini and his wife to their church in Terranuova. The names of Poggio and Vaggia are inscribed on the enameled silver plaques at the left and right of the base. On the front and rear of the base there are four additional enameled shields with the arms of Poggio and his wife.

We have no indication where the reliquary may have been made. There is a record of legal proceedings in the year 1459, between Poggio’s son Giovanni Battista and Ludovico da Foligno, a goldsmith in Ferrara, where Poggio spent several months prior to his gift of the reliquary to the church in Terranuova, which could conceivably refer to our bust.

It is interesting to compare an earlier, medieval reliquary bust in the Rijksmuseum in Am-
The reliquary in the process of being cleaned. Several layers of flaking paint and gesso were removed.
sterdam, made for the Old Cathedral of Utrecht. It has an engraved inscription with the date 1352. The animal decoration on the collar is similar to that of the Bracciolini reliquary. Possibly they both derive from the same early source. One thinks also of the comparable bust of Saint Rossore in the church of Santo Stefano dei Cavalieri in Pisa, sometimes attributed to Donatello, which was made about 1427. This copper-gilt bust stands in the church of the knights of the Order of Saint Stephen, which was not built until 1565. It is said to have come in 1592 from the church of Ognissanti in Florence. There are also two comparable busts in the cathedral of Aosta in northern Italy from the third decade of the fifteenth century.

It would indeed be fortunate to be able to associate our bust with one of the renowned sculptors of the Renaissance. One recalls in particular the sculptured prophet by Donatello in the cathedral of Florence which has often been spoken of as a likeness of Poggio, and other works attributed to the same sculptor. Donatello’s friendship with Poggio is well known. For the moment at least we must remain content to have brought back from oblivion a masterpiece of the fifteenth century. The bust will be shown at The Cloisters, although in its actual dating this spirited portrait belongs to the Italian Renaissance. It is so definitely reminiscent of medieval prototypes that it will serve a useful purpose in our collections.

Vera K. Ostoia, Research Fellow in the Department of Medieval Art, is continuing the search for further information regarding our reliquary bust.