



CASVA

Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts



Fig. 1. Nanni di Banco, *Four Crowned Martyr Saints*, c. 1409–c. 1417, marble with traces of gilding, after conservation, in the exhibition *Monumental Sculpture from Renaissance Florence: Ghiberti, Nanni di Banco, and Verrocchio at Orsanmichele*, National Gallery of Art, 2005–2006. Photograph by Rob Shelley



Collaboration, Conservation, and Context

In support of its mission to generate new research and to promote discussion of the way we think about and experience art, CASVA holds scholarly symposia every year. These are typically highly collaborative, engaging both curatorial and conservation departments, as well as other institutions.

Most recently, the Center collaborated with colleagues to arrange a series of meetings in connection with the exhibition *Colorful Realm: Bird-and-Flower Paintings by Itō Jakuchū (1716–1800)*, which featured thirty of Jakuchū's scrolls from the Zen monastery Shōkokuji, together with his triptych of the Buddha Śākyamuni. These works of art, the subjects of long and careful restoration, were lent to the National Gallery of Art by the Imperial Household of Japan for just one month.

Essential to the planning of the exhibition was a commitment to explore the implications of recent technical and art-historical research during this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. CASVA worked closely with the Freer and Sackler Galleries to bring together scholars from around the world, especially several from Japan with special relationships to the Jakuchū scrolls. From different viewpoints, they engaged in discussions of pigment analysis, stylistic and chronological development, and the meaning of these transcendent Buddhist images in their historical context. Papers from this symposium will be published in

a volume of the National Gallery of Art's *Studies in the History of Art* series, which should become an important reference work for scholars throughout the world, including Japan.

The findings of a similarly complex set of collaborative meetings held some six years ago appeared in another such volume this spring. *Orsanmichele and the History and Preservation of the Civic Monument* (*Studies in the History of Art*, volume 76), edited by Carl Brandon Strehlke, includes papers from two symposia, one held at the Gallery in October 2005 and the other in Florence a year later. The inspiration was again an exhibition marking the completion of a long campaign of restoration, and the loans were again made in the expectation that CASVA would bring together experts to explore the history and conservation of the works of art and their context.

Orsanmichele, the late medieval oratory and granary in the heart of Florence, was rebuilt beginning in 1337 after being destroyed by fire. The building, which has been called the birthplace of modern sculpture, bears traces of its original open loggias and once provided an outdoor sculpture gallery of works by the greatest Florentine artists, commissioned over two centuries by the fiercely competitive Florentine guilds. Since the 1980s, a systematic program of conservation of these site-specific masterpieces was undertaken at the *Opificio delle Pietre Dure e Laboratori di Restauro* in Florence, the renowned Italian national restoration laboratory. The campaign also included the production of copies of the sculptures and the removal of the originals to a museum on the upper floor of the building. *Orsanmichele and the History and Preservation of the Civic Monument*

Fig. 2. Nanni di Banco, *Four Crowned Martyr Saints*, c. 1409–c. 1417, marble with traces of gilding, Orsanmichele, Florence, in its original niche, before conservation. Scala/Art Resource, NY

includes reports by the skilled restorers in Florence who worked on the sculptures over many years and by art historians dedicated to tracing their history, as well as by the public officials responsible for making decisions about the fate of these works.

It was to mark the completion of the conservation of Ghiberti's bronze *Saint Matthew* (1419–1423) that this overwhelming figure was sent to the Gallery, together with Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Martyr Saints* (c. 1409–c. 1417) and Andrea del Verrocchio's *Christ and Saint Thomas* (1467–1483). In September 2005 the sculptures were installed in the climate-controlled and spacious galleries of the West Building, an environment that could not have presented a more striking contrast to their original densely layered urban context. Debate during the exhibition focused on that context as much as on technical questions. Exhibited in a minimalist framework in the Gallery, Nanni di Banco's *Four Crowned Martyr Saints* became more approachable, as if the figures were engaged in a conversation viewers might join (fig. 1). In their original shadowy niche, placed higher on the wall of Orsanmichele, they had seemed more remote in time, their ancient costume and sober demeanor more imposing (fig. 2). The marble relief at the base of the niche, to which the Gallery installation made no reference, once provided a link between the worlds of the saints and the street, depicting those “Maestri di Pietra e Legname” (master craftsmen in stone and wood) who had commissioned the tabernacle. There, in a self-referential episode, Nanni di Banco showed a sculptor completing a statue of a heroic putto. In the new installation in the Orsanmichele museum there is no suggestion of a niche, and the predella remains outside, exposed to the elements.

One of the discoveries brought to light during the symposium in Washington, and now published in the CASVA volume, concerns an easily overlooked but precious Florentine work in

the Gallery (fig. 3). This small marble relief was donated by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation in 1960. Its modern provenance is well established, for the relief passed from the Florentine dealer Stefano Bardini to the prince of Liechtenstein in 1896, and thence to New York. From a quatrefoil opening emerges the figure of a woman, identified as Charity by the inscription on the scroll in her right hand. She looks upward to heaven, her eyes made especially expressive through the insertion of metal highlights in her pupils. With her strong left arm she embraces two small children. They in turn embrace each other as they raise up their hungry mouths to two streams pouring from an opening in Charity's garment. Where an artist in a later century might have revealed a breast, this sculptor carved a flame-like heart, thus associating the woman with the ancient figure of the pelican feeding her young with blood from her breast. By Dante's time, this was seen as symbolic of Christian charity and of the divine love to which the woman appeals.

The relief has long been attributed to Giovanni di Balduccio (1318/1319–1349), but only tentatively associated with Orsanmichele. In his paper for the symposium, Francesco Caglioti (University of Naples) made that association firm, proving that this relief and others showing the virtues of Poverty (Museo del Bargello) and Obedience (Museo di Orsanmichele), together with twelve apostles immured on the outside of Orsanmichele, were all part of a project managed by the banker and poet Franco Sacchetti to restore the monument before his death in 1400. More difficult to establish are the original location and purpose of these reliefs, several of which Sacchetti recorded finding under “filth and grime.” Caglioti has made a convincing argument that they belonged to an earlier tabernacle at Orsanmichele made in the 1330s. It had to make way some twenty years later for the magnificent sculptured tabernacle by Andrea Orcagna seen today.



Fig. 3. Giovanni di Balduccio, *Charity*, c. 1330, marble, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection

Sacchetti's decision to place several of Giovanni di Balduccio's tabernacle reliefs on the walls filling in the granary loggia was an early act of pious conservation. Why the relief of Charity was not included is not known (though Caglioti can now place it in the Peruzzi collection in 1890), but patient research has found it a context: the Gallery has provided a protective home.

There can be no doubt about the original settings of the monumental sculptures at Orsanmichele. And yet, for curators, conservators, scholars, and the public, there remain difficult questions concerning the broader relationship between museums and site-specific works in need of protection. The new CASVA publication contains arguments both passionate and scientifically detached about protecting an irreplaceable cultural heritage in an urban setting and about the importance of collaborative work concerning context and conservation. • Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*