

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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Sculpture in the Widener Collection

The importance of the paintings recently given by Mr. Joseph E. Widener to the National Gallery of Art has tended to overshadow the great collection of sculpture included in the gift. Yet the David by Donatello from the Casa Martelli is generally considered one of the most important examples of Renaissance sculpture in America. In 1916, in order to get permission from the Italian government for the exportation of this statue, Mr. Widener acquired a Saint John the Baptist, also by Donatello, and presented it to the National Museum of Sculpture in Florence. The Widener David is in some ways the most interesting of Donatello's three celebrated renderings of this subject. Though carried very close to completion, there are portions of the arms still unfinished, and these provide an insight into the artist's methods of carving, giving a unique opportunity to study the technique of one of the greatest of all Italian sculptors.

The statue in the National Gallery foreshadows and probably influenced Michelangelo's own treatment of this theme, the famous David now in the Academy in Florence. A sketch for the Widener David is owned by the Berlin Museum, and the statue also appears in the background of a portrait of Ugolino Martelli by Bronzino painted about 1535.

Another work by Donatello in the Widener gift is the small bronze Cupid, formerly in the collection of the Duke of Westminster. Though strongly influenced by Antique art, Donatello in this enchanting work reveals his own interpretation of the charm of childhood.

Other great Florentine sculptors of the fifteenth century are also represented in the Widener Collection: Antonio Rossellino by a Bust of the Young Saint John the Baptist, which also comes from the Martelli palace; Benedetto da Maiano by the strongly characterized portrait of Pietro Talani; and Desiderio da Settignano by a relief of Saint Jerome, and the forceful yet sensitive portrait of Marietta Strozzi.

The further development of Italian sculpture in the sixteenth century is to be seen in a group of fine bronzes. The largest of these are exhibited on the Main Floor near the two statues by Jacopo Sansovino from the Mellon Collection. The most impressive of these larger works has also been attributed to Jacopo Sansovino. It is a portrait bust of the notorious Venetian art critic, poet, and blackmailer, Pietro Aretino. Another Venetian work, the Portrait of an Old Woman, is placed near the bust of Aretino. Though the artist and subject have not been identified, this bust is one of the most incisive characterizations of sixteenth century sculpture. Companion pieces were acquired some years ago for the Louvre and the Hermitage Galleries.

Other bronzes are exhibited on the ground floor. The largest of these are shown with the Renaissance furniture from the Widener Collection. Among these are Adriaen de Vries, Virtue and Vice, Giovanni Bologna, Hercules Carrying the Boar of Erymanthus, and Baccio Bandinelli, Cain Slaying Abel. Benvenuto Cellini is the best known of the artists represented in the collection of smaller bronzes. His group representing Virtue Overcoming Vice is closely related to the celebrated Perseus statue, described at length in his autobiography; but as Bode has said, "The Virtue Overcoming Vice is more cleverly constructed ... broader and larger in composition." Other well known works among the small bronzes are Francesco da Sant' Agata, Hercules Strangling Antaeus, Severo da Ravenna, Neptune and a Sea Monster, and several examples by Riccio.

The Widener donation also includes distinguished examples of French sculpture of the eighteenth century. With the French furniture of the same period on the ground floor are a Bacchanale by Clodion, after the well known etching by Fragonard, and a small group representing The Punishment of Cupid by Falconet. In a room on the main floor designed especially for eighteenth century sculpture are shown a bronze by Jacques Saly and three works in marble by the greatest French sculptor of that brilliant age, Jean Antoine Houdon. Houdon's bust of Voltaire, signed and dated 1778, the year of the death of the great French philosopher, is a penetrating characterization of a witty and cynical

old man; while his portraits of Alexandre and Louise Brongniard executed a year earlier reveal all the sparkling beauty and innocent gaiety of childhood. It would be difficult to find three busts by Houdon more characteristic or of more exquisite quality.