

Fifteenth-Century Sculpture in Tuscany

Italian sculpture of the fifteenth century, particularly in Tuscany, departed from the elegant, decorative style of the earlier Gothic period to reflect a greater admiration for, and understanding of, the strength and structure of the human body. In this respect, Renaissance artists emulated the ideals of the ancient Greeks and Romans, even when depicting contemporary or Christian subjects.

An interest in the human body in motion can be seen in the full-length figures of the Florentine *Madonna and Child* of about 1425, and Matteo Civitali's *Saint Sebastian* of about 1492. In both works, the figures adopt the classical weight-shift pose of ancient sculpture (*contrapposto*), in which the body is supported on one leg while the other leg remains relaxed, hips and shoulders aligning themselves accordingly.

At this time, sculpture was not created chiefly for collectors, but served a variety of purposes in daily life. The sculpture in this gallery is largely religious in subject. Large-scale works, such as Mino da Fiesole's *Charity* and *Faith*, were often made for churches, where they formed part of altar decorations or tombs. Smaller pieces, such as Jacopo della Quercia's *Madonna of Humility*, may have been made for private devotion in homes or convents. In accordance with popular taste, sculptors often painted their works in a variety of colors (polychrome) to achieve a naturalistic effect, or applied gilding to enhance their preciousness or spiritual immanence.



Jacopo della Quercia
Sienese, 1371/1374–1438

Madonna of Humility, about 1400

Jacopo della Quercia was born in Siena, where he was probably trained by his father, Piero di Angelo. He was active in Lucca, Ferrara, Siena, and Bologna, where he carved works in both marble and wood. As the most important sculptor of Siena, Della Quercia strongly influenced the younger Florentine master Donatello, and, a generation later, Michelangelo.

The devotional theme of the *Madonna of Humility* originated in Sienese painting during the fourteenth century. The Virgin is seated humbly on the ground, in a pose that emphasizes her humanity and her submission to divine will. With her left knee bent beneath her and her right knee slightly raised, she holds the Christ child on her lap. Jesus clutches his mother's dress as he turns his head toward the viewer, as if distracted from nursing. Both mother and child are draped with heavy fabrics that fall in soft, rhythmic folds over their substantial bodies. Traces of gilding and polychromy can be seen on the hair of the figures and along the inner folds and hems of the garments. The robust figures and compact composition endow this work with a monumental quality that belies its small size.

Marble, with traces of gilding, .584 x .488 x .283 m
(22 7/8 x 19 1/4 x 11 1/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1960.5.2



Florentine, 15th century

Madonna and Child, about 1425

This painted terra-cotta (baked clay) statue is an example of the Italian Renaissance interest in bringing a new naturalism to images of sacred figures.

A strong and active young woman, Mary stands in classical *contrapposto*, with her weight borne on her left leg and her right leg relaxed. She thrusts her left hip out to counterbalance the weight of the sturdy infant she holds in her arms. Along with her pose and Greek profile, several elements of the Virgin's costume, such as her sandals and the palmette decorations on her cuffs, also reveal the sculptor's interest in the classical past. The Christ child is especially charming, holding his left hand shyly to his mouth as he turns his head to look at the viewer. To a fifteenth-century audience, Jesus' nudity would have been understood as a mark of his humility and humanity. This earthly quality is enhanced by the naturalistic coloring of the figures.

In its human dignity and emotional appeal, this *Madonna and Child* is reminiscent of works by the Florentine master Donatello (about 1385–1466).

Painted and gilded terra-cotta, 1.208 x .472 x .335 m
(47 1/2 x 18 1/2 x 13 1/8 in.).
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.112



Florentine, 15th century

Madonna and Child, about 1425

This *Madonna and Child* is one of the best preserved examples of fifteenth-century gilded and polychromed terra-cotta relief. In contrast to the hardy, full-length Virgin in the center of this gallery, here Mary is an elegant princess, with high cheekbones, waving locks, and serene expression. The naturalistic colors of her face take on an almost cosmetic quality in their description of her red lips and blushing cheeks. The Virgin's delicate beauty is enhanced by the use of gold on her hair and garments. The Christ child is equally refined. Modeled as a fully round figure, he twists toward the viewer in a graceful, balletic pose as he reaches for the edge of his mother's veil. On the base, an inscription reads AVE MARIA GRATIA PLENA ("Hail Mary Full of Grace").

The combination of elegance and energy suggests an artist who was influenced by the Florentine masters Lorenzo Ghiberti and Donatello. Compare this work with the *Madonna and Child* relief from the circle of Giovanni di Turino, also in this gallery, to see a more approachable version of the subject.

Painted and gilded terra-cotta, 1.025 x .622 x .283 m
(40 3/8 x 24 1/2 x 11 1/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.93



Mino da Fiesole

Florentine, 1429–1484

The Virgin Annunciate, about 1455/1460

Mino da Fiesole was born in Papiano and moved to Fiesole at a young age. During the 1450s and 1460s, he carved portrait busts for patrons in Florence, Rome, and Naples, as well as several tombs, altars, and tabernacles. After traveling to Rome between 1472 and 1480, Mino returned to Florence, where he worked until his death in 1484.

This bust-length, life-size figure displays Mino's remarkable facility for working in marble. The young woman's face is a delicate oval; her small chin is slightly pointed. Turning gently to her right, she lowers her almond-shaped eyes in an expression of humility. The woman's thin, almost ascetic features give the work a fragile, mystical feeling. For her veil, Mino created the illusion of transparent fabric, allowing her ear and headband to show through. On the base, traces of a painted inscription, AVE MARIA GRATIA PLENA—a variant of the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary in the Gospel of Luke—identify the figure as the Virgin of the Annunciation. Although its original function is unknown, the flat back suggests that the piece was intended to be placed against a wall.

Marble, .510 x .370 x .136 m (20 x 14 1/2 x 5 3/8 in.).
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.71



Mino da Fiesole

Astorgio Manfredi, 1455

Mino da Fiesole and his patrons, the Medici family of Florence, were pioneers in the revival of an ancient Roman art form—the independent portrait bust. The subject of this work, Astorgio Manfredi, was a *condottiere*, or mercenary captain, who offered his services and those of his army to warring Italian city-states. He was governor of Faenza in 1455 when he commissioned the twenty-five-year-old Mino to carve his portrait, perhaps inspired by busts that the artist had made two years earlier for his Florentine ally Piero de' Medici.

Manfredi is depicted as a man of action. With deeply incised eyes set beneath a furrowed brow, he gazes intently into the distance. His face sags softly under his chin; deep vertical folds cut into the flesh of his cheeks. Over a shirt of intricately carved chain mail, Manfredi wears a richly embossed breastplate. An inscription on the underside of the work—one of the earliest to be found on a Renaissance portrait bust—identifies the sitter, artist, and date of completion: ASTORGIVS. MANFREDVVS. SECVNDVVS. FAVENTIE. DOMINVS./ ANNO. XLII. ETATIS SVE./ 1455./ OPVS. NINI. (“Astorgio II Manfredi, Lord of Faenza, in the 42nd year of his age, 1455, the work of Nino.”) The spelling here of Mino's name as Nino remains unexplained.

Marble, .515 x .542 x .277 m (20 1/4 x 21 1/4 x 10 7/8 in.).
Widener Collection 1942.9.135



Mino da Fiesole

Charity and Faith, about 1475–1480

Carved in high relief, these two figures continue the medieval artistic tradition of personifying virtues. Here, Charity and Faith (Hope may once have completed the group) are depicted as young women dressed in thin, clinging garments that reveal their bodies underneath. *Charity* offers succor to an adoring child. *Faith* is identified by her now-broken cross and chalice. On bases treated as banks of heavenly clouds, each figure stands in graceful *contrapposto*, bearing weight on one leg, while the other leg is relaxed. The high, plucked foreheads and long, slender fingers reflect a late fifteenth-century ideal of beauty contemporary with the early paintings of Botticelli.

The placement of the figures in shell-topped niches suggests that they were once part of a monument, perhaps a tomb, combining sculpture and architecture. In this context, the virtues would have represented the reasons for the deceased person's hopes for entering Paradise.

Marble, each 1.260 x .430 m (49 3/4 x 17 in.).
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.117 and 1937.1.118



Matteo Civitali

Tuscan, 1436–1501

Saint Sebastian, about 1492

Matteo Civitali was born in the city of Lucca, in Tuscany. Probably trained in the Florentine studio of Antonio Rossellino, Civitali worked chiefly in Lucca on tombs and altar decorations for the cathedral and other churches. These included statues of Saint Sebastian in marble, wood, and terra-cotta. In his final years, Civitali worked on an important program of statuary for Genoa Cathedral.

According to legend, the pagan emperor Diocletian ordered that Saint Sebastian be shot with arrows in persecution of his Christian faith. With his hands bound behind him to a tree trunk, Sebastian stands in classical *contrapposto*, gazing upward for divine assistance. His body is modeled to suggest the bones and muscles beneath the surface of the skin. The statuette is painted in naturalistic colors, and small reddish stains appear near the holes where arrows would have pierced Sebastian's body.

The story of Saint Sebastian was popular during the Italian Renaissance. The public venerated Sebastian as a defender against the plague, and his story provided artists an opportunity to portray the male nude. The intimate scale of this figure, perhaps based on a larger version for a church altar, suggests that it was made for devotion in a private home.

Painted terra-cotta, .653 x .177 x .097 m (25 21/32 x 6 31/32 x 3 3/16 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.76