

Italian Renaissance Sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Marietta Cambareri

Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Art of Europe
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The collection of Italian Renaissance sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is distinguished by two exceptional works, the *Madonna of the Clouds* by Donatello (*fig.1*) and the bronze statuette of *Architecture* by Giambologna (*fig.2*). However, these are just two highlights of a broader and deeper collection. An exhibition called “Donatello to Giambologna: Italian Renaissance Sculpture at the MFA, Boston”, which opens at the Museum in January 2007, will show the collection as a whole, providing the opportunity to appreciate the depth and range of this relatively unstudied and unknown part of the MFA’s collection.

The story of the collection begins with the foundation of the Museum of Fine Arts in the late 19th century.¹ The incorporation of the Museum came in 1870 and its doors opened on Copley Square on July 4, 1876. The early Copley galleries brought Italian Renaissance sculpture to Boston, not in the form of original works of art but rather in plaster cast

reproductions (*fig.3*). It seemed impossible to the founders, most concerned initially with the notion of education, to imagine filling the galleries with original works of art. The transformative moment in institutional identity did come, when the mission became to collect only original works, but only in the early 20th century. Earlier, more modest efforts in this direction were helped by the generosity of original trustees and supporters. Many of the earliest works of art came into the collection as gifts.

The first hero of the tale is Charles Callahan Perkins, who was born in 1823 and died in 1886.² Perkins graduated from Harvard in 1843 and went to Europe to study art. In Rome he got to know the American sculptor Thomas Crawford and commissioned a marble *Hebe and Ganymede*³ from Crawford around 1851 and gave it to the MFA in 1876. Perkins studied painting in Paris with Ary Scheffer and com-



Figure 1. Donatello (1386-1466), *Madonna of the Clouds*, c.1425-35; marble, Height: 13 1/4 inches (33.1 cm) Width: 12 3/4 inches (32 cm). Gift of Quincy Adams Shaw through Quincy Adams Shaw, Jr. and Mrs. Marian Shaw Haughton. Acc. No. 17.1470

missioned from Scheffer the painting of *Dante and Beatrice*,⁴ of 1851, now in the MFA's collection. Influential in the teaching of art and art criticism in Boston schools, Perkins had a particular interest in Italian Renaissance sculpture. He wrote the earliest histories of Italian sculpture by an American. *Tuscan Sculptors*, published in London in 1864, was followed by *Italian Sculptors* in 1868 and they were illustrated by his own etchings. Perkins was a founding trustee and great benefactor of the Museum, the first honorary director, and head of the original Collections Committee, which over-

saw accessions into the Museum's collection. In many ways the MFA was his brainchild. It was Perkins who gave voice to the idea that the MFA should be modeled on the South Kensington Museum in London, now the Victoria and Albert Museum. He gave initial impetus to the collection of plaster

Figure 2. Giambologna (1529-1608), *Architecture*, c. 1600; bronze; Height: 17 3/4 inches (45.1 cm) Maria Antoinette Evans Fund and 1931 Purchase Fund Acc. No. 40.23



cast reproductions with the idea that they would serve to educate the Boston populace about the great works of art in the world but he firmly believed that it would be too challenging and too expensive to collect the real thing. However, Perkins himself collected original works of art, many of which are now in the MFA's collection.

Perkins (or his wife, who survived him) gave to the MFA a small core of Renaissance sculptures, works he may have begun collecting while in Europe after graduating from Harvard. They should be celebrated because they opened the way for collecting and understanding Renaissance sculpture in Boston and at the MFA. A 1902 photograph (fig. 3) of the plaster cast gallery of Renaissance sculpture at Copley Square shows that original works were integrated into the early plaster cast installation.⁵ On the rear right wall we see displayed three sculptures given to the MFA by Perkins: a late 15th century glazed terracotta *Nativity*,⁶ already on loan to the MFA in 1876-9;⁷ a 15th century terracotta *Assumption of St. Mary Magdalen*, another version of which is in the V&A in London;⁸ and a glazed terracotta *Madonna and Child* relief by Andrea della Robbia.⁹ This installation shows a first step towards collecting and displaying original works of art even within the context of the plaster cast collection.

Also visible on the same wall in the 1902 photograph (fig.3) are works given to the Museum by the next great hero of the tale and still the greatest hero of the MFA's Italian Renaissance sculpture collection, Quincy Adams Shaw (1825-1908). A Harvard graduate in 1845, Shaw was just

two years younger than Perkins, but seems to have been miles ahead as a collector of Renaissance sculpture. The two sculptures included in the plaster cast room are a glazed terracotta *Nativity* attributed to Luca della Robbia¹⁰ and a terracotta *Madonna and Child with Angels* attributed to Bartolomeo Bellano.¹¹ They were bequeathed to the MFA in 1917 according to the terms of Shaw's will, but clearly were already on loan by at least 1902. Shaw also bequeathed to the MFA an extensive collection of works by Jean-François Millet, including *The Sower*,¹² along with his Renaissance sculptures. It is perhaps not surprising that the man who loved the sometimes heroic, sometimes atmospheric, sometimes intimate, and sometimes almost microscopic realism of Millet also loved the Italian



Figure 3. Plaster Cast Gallery, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Copley Square. Photograph May 1902

Renaissance Madonna and Child, especially the experimental naturalism of works, for example, by Luca della Robbia, and epitomized by the marble relief of the *Madonna of the Clouds* (fig. 1) by Donatello.¹³

With Shaw's bequest of 19 Italian Renaissance sculptures in 1917, the MFA entered onto the stage as an important repository of this material in America. Shaw's collection included not only the Donatello relief, but also works by Luca and Andrea della Robbia, Mino da Fiesole, Bartolomeo Bellano, and some lesser known artists like the Florentine Andrea Guardi. The *Madonna of the Clouds* (fig. 1) is a work of the greatest innovation, in its technique, its subject matter, and its expressive impact. The technique is called *rilievo schiacciato*, or flattened relief, and was an invention of Donatello's that involved the very shallow carving of the marble surface to create the effect of depth and three-dimensionality.¹⁴ The subject relates to the theme of the Madonna of Humility, a 14th century subject that remained popular even in the 15th century. By showing the Virgin seated on the ground with the child on her lap, the theme stresses one of the virtues associated with the Virgin, her humility. Donatello presents his figures as if seated on the ground, but transports them up into the clouds, making the Virgin also Queen of Heaven.¹⁵ It vividly conveys the con-

Figure 4 (opposite). Workshop of Giovanni della Robbia (1469-1529?), *Head of Flora*, c.1520, glazed terracotta; Height: 6 7/8 inches (17.5 cm) Zoe Oliver Sherman Collection. Acc. No. 22.658

cept described in the gospels, "he who humbles himself shall be exalted" as in Luke 18:14 and Matthew 23:12. The emotional impact of the group is unusually intense, with the Virgin's severe profile, the weight of the frame above bearing down upon her, imparting an almost prophetic quality, as if she were seeing into the future of the child she holds in her lap.¹⁶

The MFA's collection is particularly strong in glazed terracotta sculpture, including works by Luca, Andrea, and Giovanni della Robbia, as well as others working in the medium. In recent decades, a new appreciation of the della Robbia technique has developed, overcoming an old notion of this material as a pretty, over-produced form of decoration in order to appreciate it as a serious Renaissance art form answering serious Renaissance questions.¹⁷ The technique was a new invention, like Donatello's *rilievo schiacciato*. Luca della Robbia developed a particular recipe for colored glazes that was held as a family secret. It allowed for a particularly vivid colorism, achieving pure brilliant whites and blues and made ambitious attempts at the greens of grass and the colors of flowers. The technique also imparted durability both to the color tones and to the relatively fragile terracotta medium. Thus, the della Robbia technique attained some important goals of Renaissance art, pure brilliant color and permanence or durability. One charming example in the MFA's collection is a fragmentary *Head of Flora* (fig. 4), possibly from the workshop of Giovanni della Robbia, which exemplifies both the charm and the ambitious colorism of this important technique.





Figure 5. Attributed to Giovanni Francesco Rustici (1474-1554), *St. John the Baptist*, c. 1510-20; glazed terracotta; Height: 39½ inches (100.3 cm)
Gift of Mrs. Solomon R. Guggenheim. Acc. No. 50.2624

Figure 6 (opposite). Attributed to Giambologna (1529-1608), *Corpus*, c.1600, silver; Height 11¼ inches (29.84 cm)
John H. and Ernestine A. Payne Fund and Gift of Randolph J. Fuller
Acc. No. 1982.210

One of the most thrilling aspects of the Italian Renaissance sculpture collection at the MFA is that it holds remarkable surprises, works not previously known in scholarship, or not displayed at the Museum for many decades. The most exciting work to emerge from the storerooms is a white-glazed terracotta sculpture of *St. John the Baptist* (fig.5), recently attributed to Giovanni Francesco Rustici.¹⁸ Rustici was a brilliant modeler whose works in clay were sometimes fired and glazed by the della Robbia shop, like the relief of the *Noli me tangere* in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, in Florence. The *St. John* is about 40 inches tall, probably dates to around 1510, and is striking for the intensity of the gaze and sharply-turned head; the beautiful modeling of the flesh; and the vividly-worked surface of the goat-skin tunic. The sculpture was given to the MFA in 1950 by Mrs. Solomon Guggenheim. According to letters in the MFA files, Mrs. Guggenheim thought that the *St. John* was by Andrea della Robbia. Upon acquisition, the museum attributed it more generically to the della Robbia shop, dated around 1550. Its relationship to the central figure of Rustici's bronze group of the *Preaching of the Baptist*, over the North Door of the Florentine Baptistery, was recognized and its high quality was noted, as was its bad condition.¹⁹ It appears to have gone directly into storage, its condition never addressed. It has only recently undergone conservation work and been installed in the MFA galleries.

Like Rustici's Baptistery group, to which it has been related, the *St. John* reflects the influence of Leonardo da Vinci, especially in the torsions and intensity of expression





Figure 7. Florentine, *A Hero (David?)*, mid-16th century, wax;
Height (overall, including base): 33 inches (83.8 cm)
Maria Antoinette Evans Fund and Francis Bartlett Donation, by
exchange. Acc. No. 29.1085

Figure 8 (opposite). Central Italian (possibly Montelupo), *Bust of a
Woman*, c. 1490-1500, maiolica (tin-glazed earthenware);
Height: 21 inches (53.3 cm)
William Francis Warden Fund. Acc. No. 54.146

that create a sense of animation, engaging and enlivening the space around the figure. The creamy cast of the glaze differs from the pure brilliant white of many works by the della Robbia workshop; the play of light and shadow created by the glaze enhances the chiaroscuro effects of the monochrome sculpture imparted by the vigorously modeled surfaces. This creative use of the glaze implies experimentation with an established medium to achieve particular results, and can be compared, for example, to Leonardo's experiments with fresco technique in his *Last Supper* in Milan.

An important aspect of the current reevaluation of this collection includes a consideration of the condition of works of art; their conservation treatment; and the secrets of their manufacture that can be revealed through technical analysis of the works themselves. By studying the way a sculpture is made and by analyzing the materials used, we can learn secrets of workshop practice that were carefully guarded in the Renaissance. This is particularly true of glazed terracotta made in the della Robbia shops, since the composition of the glazes was kept a secret.²⁰ The MFA is currently carrying out a research project that includes the sampling and analysis of glaze and clay compositions of all of the glazed terracotta sculptures in the collection. Some results will be presented in the upcoming exhibition.²¹

Some pieces are in rather compromised condition, or are fragments like the *Head of Flora* (fig.4). In many cases, technical analysis can provide information about how the work was made. For example, in order to ascertain the sta-





Figure 9 (opposite). Pier Jacopo Alari Bonacolsi, called Antico (c.1460-1528), *Bust of Cleopatra*, c.1519-22, bronze; Height: 25 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches (64.45 cm) William Francis Warden Fund. Acc. No. 64.2174

Figure 10. Attributed to Ferdinando Tacca (1619-1686), *Hercules and the Erymanthian Boar*, mid-17th century, bronze; Height: 29 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (74.2 cm)



bility of a sculpture, an x-radiograph might be taken. This in turn can reveal how the piece was made, if it was ever broken, and if extensive repairs were ever carried out. X-radiography, along with close visual examination, of the *St. John* (fig. 5), for example, revealed that it was fired in three pieces, and that it had broken in half at some time and filled with plaster to repair it. Typically, a terracotta sculpture was modeled in clay and then cut into pieces and hollowed out to reduce the risks that it would crack in the kiln. In this case, the piece was cut into three sections that may reflect the challenges inherent in firing a figure with such a complex posture. Analysis of the composition of the clay was consistent with other works in glazed terracotta made in Florence that have also been analyzed, supporting the idea that this work was made by an artist working there. Thermo-luminescence testing indicated that the piece was last fired between around 1499 and 1601, consistent with a sixteenth-century dating for the piece.²²

The MFA's Renaissance sculpture collection includes works in nearly every medium, from the most humble, like a 15th century *Madonna and Child*²³ in *cartapesta* (a form of papier-maché), to the most precious, like Giambologna's exquisite silver *Corpus* (fig.6) of around 1600. A rare surviving wax sculpture was probably made by a Florentine sculptor of the mid-sixteenth century, and relates to Michelangelo's famous marble *David* (fig.7). A small group of sculptures in maiolica (tin-glazed earthenware, more typically used for plates and vessels) includes a charming small tableau of the *Last Supper*²⁴ and an unusual *Bust of a*

Woman (fig.8). Exploiting the bright colors and patterns typical of maiolica, the bust presents the sitter in the sumptuous clothing and jewelry of a young, unmarried woman, or perhaps one recently betrothed, and may have been commissioned to commemorate a betrothal or marriage. The collection includes two exceptional examples of Lombard Renaissance wood carving, an *Adoration of the Shepherds*, which survives in its original frame, and has a coat-of-arms on the back.²⁵ It is attributed to Giacomo del Maino, and probably dates to the 1480 or 90s. Even more remarkable is a wood relief, made around 1520 which shows the scene of the *Massacre of the Innocents*, based directly on a famous print by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael²⁶. It is by the son of Giacomo, Giovanni Angelo del Maino. Thus the MFA has works by two generations of Lombard wood sculptors.²⁷

An interesting characteristic of the MFA's collection



Bequest of Willaim A. Coolidge. Acc. No. 1993.48

Figure 11 (opposite). Attributed to Ferdinando Tacca (1619-1686), *Rape of a Sabine Woman*, mid-17th century, bronze; Height: 39¾ inches (101 cm)

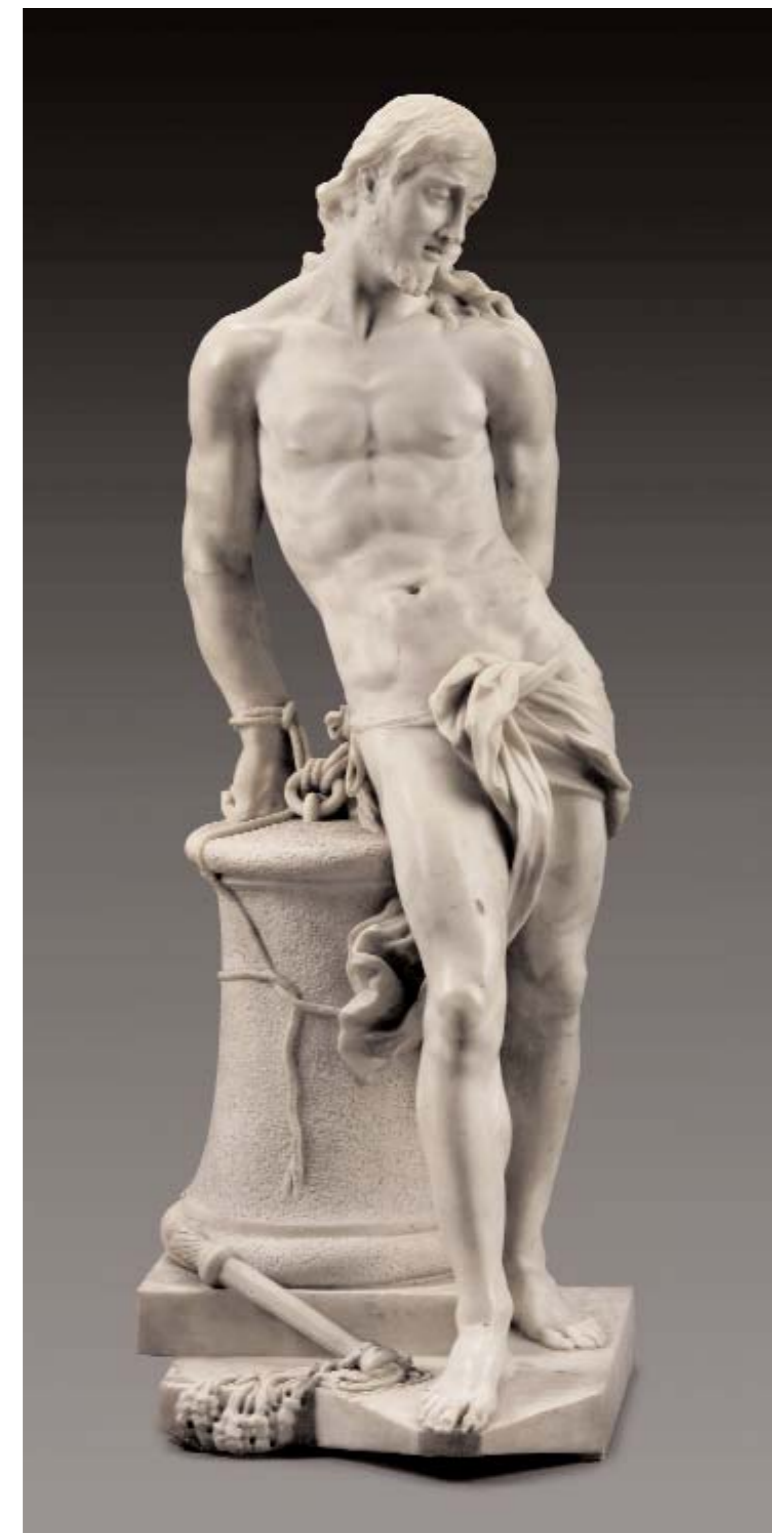
Bequest of William A. Coolidge. Acc. No. 1993.49

Figure 12. Possibly Genoese, *Christ at the Column*, c.1700, marble; Height: 35 inches (88.9 cm)

Museum purchase with funds donated by contribution. Acc. No. 89.507

reflects the fact that early Boston collectors did not amass deep collections of Renaissance bronze sculpture. However, the bronzes that did find their way into Boston collections argue strongly for the idea of "Quality over Quantity". Isabella Stewart Gardner bought Benvenuto Cellini's great *Bust of Bindo Altoviti* in 1898,²⁸ and in the 1960s the MFA acquired Antico's *Bust of Cleopatra* (fig.9). This idealizing bust of the ancient queen may have belonged to Isabella d'Este. It is one of only a handful of surviving large scale busts by Antico in the world.²⁹

The small bronze statuette of *Architecture* by Giambologna (fig.2), a museum purchase in 1940, is generally considered one of the finest example known today of a popular model by Giambologna.³⁰ The exquisite cast and beautiful finish indicate that it was made on Giambologna's model by the specialist in his workshop for bronze casting, Antonio Susini. This allegorical representation of Architecture includes as attributes the square edge, compass, and dividers, along with a drawing tablet and a plummet on its cord around the neck of the figure. The plummet, which the architect would use to set the plumb line, to establish the true vertical line, essential to the beauty and stability of any building, here is worn like a jewel. Michelangelo is quoted as saying that the true artist carries his compasses in his eyes; that he should rely only on the judgment of his eye; that it is the eye of the artist, not the tools he uses that marks the true genius.³¹ Perhaps this relegation of the all-important plummet to ornament implies that the architect's judgment trumps the need for this tool



and thus becomes Giambologna's tribute to the art of architecture and to the genius of the architect.

In addition to the bronze *Architecture* and the silver *Corpus*, Giambologna's work is represented in the MFA's collection by two later bronzes based on his models but probably produced in the seventeenth century by

Ferdinando Tacca, *Hercules and the Erymanthian Boar* (fig. 10) and *The Rape of the Sabine* (fig. 11).³² Both were gifts to the MFA from William A. Coolidge, continuing the tradition established by Perkins and Shaw. Like the Tacca bronzes, another seventeenth-century work in the collection demonstrates the continuity of technique, style, and subject matter in Italian sculpture. The marble *Christ at the Column* (fig. 12) was bought by the MFA in the 1889 from the Demidoff collection in Florence, as a work by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. It is not by Bernini, but may well be by a Genoese sculptor working around 1700, and presents a long, sinuous figure of Christ tied to what looks like a mooring post, evoking the half-column revered as a relic of Christ's flagellation at the church of Santa Prassede in Rome.

Looking at the Italian Renaissance sculpture collection at the MFA as a whole, some themes emerge, which include the generosity of Boston patrons and collectors throughout the history of the Museum and the surprises that can emerge even today from the storerooms of some of the oldest American museum collections. Familiar works take on new resonance within the larger context and lesser known works emerge as important examples to delight the public and specialists alike.

NOTES

- 1 For the early history of the MFA, see Walter Muir Whitehill, *Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. A Centennial History*, Cambridge, MA 1970.
- 2 Whitehill, pp. 8-10.
- 3 MFA accession number 76.702. For additional photographs of and information about works mentioned in this article, please visit the MFA's website, www.mfa.org.
- 4 MFA accession number 21.1283
- 5 I thank Maureen Melton, Susan Morse Hilles Head of Libraries and Archives at the MFA, for making clear the date of this photograph, which was taken in May 1902 as part of a campaign to record the Copley Square gallery installations in preparation for the planned move to the current Huntington Avenue site of the MFA.
- 6 MFA accession number 76.701
- 7 It appears in a painting of the date by Alice M. Frye of one of the "Loan Room" in Copley Square, illustrated in Whitehill, p. 34.
- 8 MFA accession number 95.1377. John Pope-Hennessy, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London 1964, Vol. I, pp. 194-5, where other versions are also listed and various attributions discussed; Pope-Hennessy associates the piece with the workshop of the Master of the David and St. John Statuettes.
- 9 MFA accession number 76.700
- 10 MFA accession number 17.1463

- 11 MFA accession number 17.1462
- 12 MFA accession number 17.1485
- 13 On Shaw as a collector especially of paintings, see Carol Troyen and Pamela S. Tabbaa, *The Great Boston Collectors: Paintings from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, Boston 1984, p. 19.
- 14 John Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello*, New York, London, and Paris 1993, for example; see pp. 115-36, on the *schiacciato* reliefs; and pp. 286-8, on the *Madonna of the Clouds*.
- 15 Pope-Hennessy 1993, notes earlier paintings of the Madonna of Humility set on clouds but also that none display the insistent naturalism of this relief.
- 16 For the relationship with Michelangelo's *Madonna of the Steps* in the Casa Buonarroti, Florence, and the idea of the prophetic Virgin, see most recently Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt in Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt *et al.*, eds., *Giovinetta di Michelangelo*, Florence and Milan 1999, pp.71-2.
- 17 Giancarlo Gentilini, *I Della Robbia: la scultura invetriata del Rinascimento*, Florence 1992; Giancarlo Gentilini, ed., *I Della Robbia e l'arte nuova della scultura invetriata*, Florence 1993.
- 18 Marietta Cambareri, catalogue entry, in David Franklin, ed., *Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and the Renaissance in Florence*, Ottawa 2005, p. 76.
- 19 MFA curatorial file, Department of the Art of Europe.
- 20 See, for example, the results of analyses published in *Les Della Robbia. Sculptures en terre cuite émaillée de la Renaissance italienne*, Paris 2002, pp. 139-51.
- 21 This project is being carried out thanks to the generosity of a Museum of Fine Arts Associates grant (2006).
- 22 All scientific analysis was overseen by Richard Newman, Head of Scientific Research, MFA, Boston, except for thermo-luminescence testing, which was conducted by Christian Goedicke, at the Staatliche Museen, Berlin in May 2004.
- 23 MFA accession number 42.203
- 24 MFA accession number 1983.61
- 25 MFA accession number 46.1423
- 26 MFA accession number 42.563
- 27 Raffaele Casciaro, *La scultura lignea lombarda del Rinascimento*, Milan 2000, pp. 183-4; 277-8; 341; Giovanni Romano and Claudio Salsi, eds., *Maestri della scultura in legno nel Ducato degli Sforza*, Milan 2005.
- 28 See Alan Chong, ed., *Raphael, Cellini, and a Renaissance Banker: the Patronage of Bindo Altoviti*, Boston 2003.
- 29 See James David Draper, catalogue entry on Antico's *Bust of a Youth* in the Liechtenstein collection, in *Liechtenstein. The Princely Collections*, New York 1985, pp.209-12.
- 30 Anthony Radcliffe, *Giambologna's Cesarini Venus*, Washington 1993, pp. 11-2; Marietta Cambareri, catalogue entry in Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi and Dimitrios Zikos, eds., *Giambologna: gli dei, gli eroi: Genesi e fortuna di uno stile europeo nella scultura*, Florence 2006, p. 218.
- 31 See David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, Princeton 1981, pp. 368-79.
- 32 Charles Avery, catalogue entries in Peter C. Sutton, *The William Appleton Coolidge Collection*, Boston 1995, pp. 112-5.