Jordan S. Sly, Exhibit Review, 4/12/2019

National Gallery of Art | *Verrocchio: Sculptor and Painter of Renaissance Florence*[i]

Andrea del Verrocchio (birth name Andrea di Michele di Francesco) is a figure of immense importance to Renaissance art. To many visitors to Washington, D.C's National Gallery of Art, however, his name may lack the recognition of his more famous students such as Sandro Botticelli and Leonardo Da Vinci. As Andrew Butterfield, the curator of the recent Verrocchio exhibit discusses in the exhibit's introductory video, Verrocchio was a member of the urbanized artisan guilds, an artist and craftsman to the powerful Medici, and a teacher to many of the era's most famous artists. But, as the exhibit argues, Verrocchio was an amazing artist in his own right and this exhibit, the first to focus primarily on Verrocchio in the United States, emphasizes this fact to indicate his lasting is influence; which can be gleaned, in part from the fact that the collection assembled for this exhibit contains art from museums from around the world.[ii]

Giorgio Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists* notes Verrocchio as a studied artist of immense talent, though lacking true artistic gifts. Vasari's central notion is that Verrocchio was a craftsman and keen observer who could accurately reproduce moments from life but did so without artist flair or an artists' eye for story, movement, or emotion. As Vasari notes, Verrocchio's work was "hard and crude, since it was the product of unremitting study rather than of any natural gift or facility."[iii] This being said, however, Vasari places him amongst the period's most famous artists primarily, perhaps, because of his association with the Medici and for his influence on the likes Botticelli and Da Vinci; who he notes directly surpassing the master's craft. This coupling is evident in later scholarship, as well as in the layout of Butterfield's exhibit.

The exhibit flows in approximate alignment with the central strands of Butterfield's argument that Verrocchio's work as a sculptor, draftsman, craftsman, painter, and teacher

prove his role as a vital artisan and artist of the Renaissance. The first gallery places Verrocchio in the absolute center of Renaissance power as his commissioned work as his work, as Butterfield describes, as the "court artist for the Medici" is on full display.[iv] As one enters the first of five rooms, the emotive power and realism of Verrocchio's sculptures immediately captures attention as his David stylishly pouts, hands on hips, flanked by two Medici princes assertively staging a triptych of commissioned power (photo 1). Each room within this exhibit displays Verrocchio's talent in diverse media and demonstrates a different aspect of his impact on the development of Renaissance art. Within the Medici sculpture room, we see Verrocchio as commissioned artist developing works that work to praise the Florentine rulers both in life and in death. More importantly, however, we see Verrocchio's immense skill in displaying an almost uncanny and perhaps unsettling realness and attention to detail. Visitors are allowed to step quite close to the art in order to better appreciate these fine details. This is one of the most important aspects of this exhibit for American audiences. For those able to see these works in their original seating in the Uffizi or the Museo di Palazzo Vecchio they will find the National Gallery exhibit to be far more direct, focused, and more easily demonstrative of Verrocchio's skill; this is by design. In the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, for example, Verrocchio's *David* was presented alongside Donatello's *David* and among other later representations of *David*, but with the focus on the Donatello and bronze sculpture as a medium. Even within the NGA's permanent collection, the prominently displayed Medici busts become obscured amongst the quantity of other Renaissance sculpture. Verrocchio, as Butterfield argues however, deserves to be featured on his own merits and not merely by association.

Other words in this first room focusing on commissioned sculpture include his grotesque *Head of a Gorgon*, curious *Tobias and the Angel*, and his beautiful and emotive *Bust of Christ*. Each one of these pieces demonstrate his place as the court artist for the

Medici by directly linking his artistic development with his commissions. For example, the exhibit places his *Head of Gordon* directly between *Tobias and the Angel* and the *bust of Giuliano de' Medici*, whose armor features a similar gaunt and horrific face. The painting of *Tobias and the Angel* demonstrates, as the item label describes, the sculpture-like qualities of the faces as Verrocchio employs his skill in representing a biblical scene favorable to merchants as the Medici had been in the development of their wealth. The progression on display indicate Verrocchio's development in each commission towards greater works as each work seeds another. From *Tobias and the Angel* to the *Giuliano de' Medici*, we see in facial characteristics of Giuliano represented, the movement and life of the later bust, and the inclusion of detail in his armor and adornment through both painting and terra cotta sculpture. We see a mirror progression on the other side of the first room which brings the visitor from the *bust of Loroenzo de' Medici* which is modelled after an original by Verrocchio to the *bust of Christ* which was known as one of the most beautiful representations of Christ in the Renaissance world. In this series, Butterfield is developing the notion of Verrocchio's ability to capture human emotion and life in terracotta in ways his contemporaries and patrons distinctly appreciated.

This is also, potentially, an area of missed opportunity. As the dating on the *bust of Lorenzo de' Medici* indicates, this is a later sixteenth-century recasting of Verrocchio's original. The neighboring exhibit "Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain (curated by C.D. Dickerson III and Mark McDonald)"[v] discusses the impact of Berruguete's travels to Italy in his development as a sculptor in the period following Verrocchio's death (1488). While direct linkage may be difficult to trace, it is clear that Berruguete was influenced by the works he was able to access during his stay in Florence, and there are tantalizing similarities in expressions and emotive movements between the two.[vi] Some reference between the two international exhibits would have been welcome if only to

disprove these similarities or to expand on the greater influence of Verrocchio's workshop outside of Florence. Additionally, given Verrocchio's skill in illustration and his early use of Chiaroscuro shading, some tie-in to the recent exhibit "The Chiaroscuro Woodcut in Renaissance Italy" curated by Naoko Takahatake.[vii] This would be an interesting connection due to Verrocchio's techniques as a sculptor shaped his methods of illustration and painting which in turn influenced later sixteenth-century artists who drew on the inspiration of Verrocchio's students.[viii]

In the second room of the exhibit Verrocchio's famous *Putto with a Dolphin* and *Putto Poised on a Globe* sit in the center of the room and are encased in glass, as are his beautiful and delicate *Lady with Flowers* and *Bust of a Young Woman* which sit directly behind the *putti* (photo 2). Additionally, many smaller studies and works in silver and gold are also placed behind glass in large exhibit cases. While it is clear that these works are extremely precious, the glass cases may have an impact on the visitor engagement with the works when compared the open works in the abutting rooms. With these works, their larger scale and position within Verrocchio's development and his influence seems as hermetically sealed as the display cases. As Robert Hodge and Wilfred D'Souza note, "the glass barrier severely restricts the communication potential of object as artefacts."[ix] This is of course a paraphrase in a discussion about the emotional and physical knowledge barrier with regards to indigenous objects, but there is a similar argument to be made for the works of Verrocchio that Butterfield makes clear in the other areas of the exhibit. Visitors in the second room appeared to spend less time focusing on each work, and instead passed quickly through the room on the way to the more immediate works. This may be a result of the sudden introduction of glass display cases maintaining distance between the work and the visitor, or it may be the result of the room being situated in what could be seen as a passageway between the first and final rooms.

Branching from this middle section is a screening room playing a short video introducing visitors to the work of Verrocchio. A longer video is available on the ground floor strangely removed from the context of the exhibit. Opposite the screening room is a small room filled with drawings including an anatomical sketch of a horse thought to be work towards his large bronze equestrian statue of the Venetian Bartolomeo Colleoni in addition to other craftworks such as intricate metal workings. This room continues the central thesis about the scope and variety of Verrocchio's works and his place in the heart of Renaissance artistic development through a multitude of media.

The final room addresses Verrocchio as a teacher and seeks to further link his name with those of his more famous pupils. This is directly evidenced by the work in center focus of this room. In the previous two main rooms, Verrocchio's most famous works were directly highlighted with *David* taking absolute center stage as one enters the exhibit through the archway from the grand atrium (photo 3). In the development of each room's narrative, we see the centerpiece forming something of the penultimate expression of the artist's craft. *David* as the emotive bronze surpassing Donatello's stiff interpretation of the figure and as the height of Verrocchio's work as a commissioned artist as his work for the Medici pushed his talent and developed his sense of character as the patrons themselves found their way into the art. This sense is also evident in the second room highlighting both his skill as an artist cognizant of display as the *Putto with a Dolphin* was designed to be viewed with equal beauty from all angles, and an artist of immense skill and a sense of pure sensual and secular beauty as displayed in his *Lady with Flowers*; itself a feat of history though either its existence as a monument of pure beauty or in its survival despite the purges of Savonarola.[x] In the third main gallery, however, it is not Verrocchio's work that is seated in the center of the room, but Leonardo Di Vinci's *Ginevra de' Benci* (photo 4). Andrew Butterfield's well-curated display makes this culmination something of an inevitability and consistent with the

exhibit's general thesis. Within the third main gallery, the curators shift the focus away from Verrocchio as a direct creator and move towards building his role as a teacher and influence on many important artists of the period. This case is quite clearly and convincingly made by direct example in this gallery. Attention is immediately drawn to the Leonardo in center of the room which features in large text along the back wall of the gallery a quote by Ugolino Verino which reads "Whatever painters have that is good, they drank from Verrocchio's spring." This is the only large format text in the whole of the exhibit, and it is appropriately placed above Leonardo's *Ginevra de' Benci* which, as the accompanying label explains, was likely started while still in Verrocchio's workshop and bears a convincing resemblance to *Lady with Flowers*. Many of the paintings in this gallery demonstrate similar traits traceable through Verrocchio's work on display in the adjoining rooms giving the visitor cause to move back through the exhibit to review the source material. With one particularly strong example —that of the Madonna and Child— the curators haven chosen to group the works together in order to make a solid case for their argument of undeniable influence and the artistic development of later masters. Through this series, we are shown how elements of Verrocchio's focus on minute facial features, emotionality, and realism are both incorporated into the paintings of Leonardo and Botticelli and also the subtle changes each artist makes in their interpretation focusing more on the realism with Di Vinci, and more on the impressionistic with Botticelli, for example. This again speaks to the above-mentioned Vasari quote that seems to act as something of a thorn in Butterfield's side as we see, in sharp contrast, the observer and craftsman overshadowed by the students with a more attuned eye for the artistic and imaginative. The power and influence of Verrocchio is inescapable, but the exhibit's concluding focus on his more famous students is testament to their lasting impact on the general interest of museumgoers. For as much as Butterfield emphasizes Verrocchio's own artistic genius, there is something uncomfortable in the terminal sense of

his role as the influential teacher that enabled the genius of others. This perhaps speaks more to the expectations of visitors wondering why Verrocchio should be given his own exhibit in the National Gallery of Art. Names like Botticelli and Di Vinci transcend their fifteenth-century moment and their Florentine location and have been items of world heritage. Despite his importance to the development of Renaissance art, Verrocchio has perhaps not transcended his particular moment or location in the same way, and therefore requires these anchors to prove the argument of his importance to the general public. Works by Verrocchio have been collected by the NGA and these works are on display in this exhibit, as are works from around the world. The scope of this collection and the diverse collections from which these pieces come from too point to Verrocchio's importance to the world of art.

This being the first major exhibit to focus on Verrocchio in the United States, the display in the grand exhibit space of the National Gallery of Art is nearly as important as the connection with artists like Di Vinci and Botticelli, and others, as well as his role as a valued artist of the Medici in establishing Verrocchio's importance and authority. As Peter Higgins discusses in his essay in Suzanne MacLeod's work on museum architecture, space can act as a legitimating factor for the objects contained within by working with audience expectations of grandeur and tradition. [xi] Suzanne MacLeod herself discusses the notions of expectations and limitations space can imbue objects with.[xii] Additionally, Sophia Psarra has similarly written about pedagogical architecture, or rather the ways in which spaces communicate notions of learning through expectations or through enhanced elements designed to quantifiably increase learning.[xiii] In each of these examples, there is a level of theatre and of science, but the end result is a space of agreed upon authority and learning either through the reinforcing of tradition (colonial or neo-classical architecture, for example) or in the purposeful development of carefully designed spaces (buildings designed to enhance the story being told within the building and to add a layer of educational design naturally into the

architecture from the beginning). It is precisely these notions of performativity that complicate some of the central notions in practice, however. The exhibit spaces within the National Gallery are exceedingly traditional; and purposely so. As Helen Rees Leahy notes in her essay in MacLeod's work, the space itself is a destination, something unique and powerful which communicates a silent message that can be at odds with the exhibit or with the visitors but is always reproduced in some manner by those engaging with it.[xiv] The traditional space for displaying Verrocchio creates an audience, as Leahy discusses, at turns legitimating his role in the Renaissance and creating a space for appreciation. In certain areas of the exhibit, this works quite well. When visitors can stand quite close to the works, uninhibited by glass boxes, we can see levels of engagement with the work and curiosity over the artist's methods and the visual acknowledgement of craft visible down the centuries. Additionally, the visual examples of Verrocchio's influence in his particular Madonna and Child from his workshop, too, make a striking and interesting argument. This being said, however, the neighboring Berruguete exhibit used the space available in a more interesting and engaging way by utilizing the lofty ceilings, blank walls, and the authoritative secular-sacred space to recreate some of the spectacle of the works' original locations (photo 6). This is not to say that the Berruguete exhibit is radical, but it utilizes the traditional space in interesting ways which situate the art in ways the visitor can imagine their original context. The display of Verrocchio's work in a somewhat sterile and overly musified setting removes some of the excitement of the art and their original placement. The *Putti*, for example, are place at about eye level, which allows visitors to comfortably view the statue. The intention of the piece in its original context, however, was to be seen from a lower level and the beauty of the object from any angle therefore being Verrocchio's genius. While educational in a traditional way, it is not clear if this exhibit inhabits the tenants of Barbara Soren's notions of a transformative

experience despite what could be a revelation and a chance in thinking about the Renaissance for some visitors.[xv]

The exhibit sparring use of text allows the visitor to glean the selective message of the curator's central message. To supposedly increase engagement with th exhibit and to potentially increase the longevity of its influence, the curators have included the hashtag "#Verrocchio" to the gallery's introductory text.[xvi] This hashtag has been used in other Verrocchio exhibits internationally, and therefore scrolling through Twitter posts using this hashtag many images from past exhibits clutter the thread. The posts using this hashtag fall mainly into posts of people (myself included[xvii]) making note of a particular work or commenting on the gallery using superlative and flowery language and performing the role of an art critic or other sophisticate; perhaps fulfilling the curation of the visitors as new found appreciators of Verrocchio in a traditionally appropriate way conducive to the authoritative space in which it is housed.

Whether the visitor finds the setting for the exhibit sterile or stimulating, the authority of the space imbues the exhibit with an impressive weight that allows the curatorial team headed by Andrew Butterfield to make argue their important thesis convincingly. The scope of the exhibit and the international loans from other national museums and private collections both indicates Verrocchio's importance to the global understanding of art, but also speaks to the importance of the display of NGA's own pieces and maintaining our role in the national museum sphere. This exhibit is sponsored by Bank of America's cultural funding operation, which funds many art exhibits of similar weight, scope, and importance internationally. Ultimately, however, these factors of sponsorship, elegant housing, and national status may play against Butterfield's central notion as the scale of the exhibit may force the emphasis on Verrocchio's students and his impact less as an artist, but as a skilled and studied, as Vasari

emphasized, craftsman who influenced the more well-known figures who may draw a larger crowd.

Notes and Sources

[i] https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2019/andrea-del-verrocchio-renaissance-florence.html | Visited on 4 Nov 2019.
[ii] Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College; The British Museum, London; The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; The Frick Collection, New York; Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Palermo; Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence; Hamburger Kunsthalle; Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Rome; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Musée du Louvre, Paris; Museo di Palazzo Vecchio, Florence; National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh; The National Gallery, London; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Nationalmuseum, Stockholm; Private Collections; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpurensammlung und Musseen für Byzantinische Kunst; Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main; Victoria and Albert Museum, London
[iii] Giorgio Vasari, "Life of Andrea Del Verrocchio: Florentine Painter, Sculptor, and Architect, C. 1435-88," in George Bull (trans. and ed.) *Lives of the Artists*, vol. I. London: Penguin, 1987, 232.
[iv] Charles Dempsey, "Verrocchio and the Humanist Culture of Medicean Florence," in Andrew Butterfield (ed.) *Verrocchio: Sculptor and Painter of Renaissance Florence*, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, 2019, p. 34.
[v] https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2019/alonso-berruguete-renaissance-spain.html
[vi] C.D. Dickerson III, "The Experience of Italy" in C.D. Dickerson III and Mark McDonald (eds.) *Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain*, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2019, pp. 18-36.
[vii] https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2018/the-chiaroscuro-woodcut-in-renaissance-italy.html
[viii] Butterfield, 2019, pp. 16, 295-297.
[ix] Robert Hodge and Wilfred D'Souza, "The museum as a communicator: a semiotic analysis of the Western Australian Museum Aboriginal Gallery, Perth" in Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *The Educational Role of the Museum*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 58.
[x] Butterfield, 2019, p. 135.
[xi] Peter Higgins, "From Cathedral of Culture to Anchor Attractor," in Suzanne Macleod (ed) *Reshaping Museum Space*, London: Routledge, 2005.
[xii] Suzanne MacLeod, "Rethinking Museum Architecture: Towards a Site-Specific History of Production and Use," in Suzanne Macleod (ed) *Reshaping Museum Space*, London: Routledge, 2005.
[xiii] Sophia Psarra, "Spatial Culture, Way-Finding and the Educational Message: The Impact of Layout on the Spatial, Social and Educational Experiences of Visitors to Museums and Galleries." in Suzanne Macleod (ed) *Reshaping Museum Space*, London: Routledge, 2005.
[xiv] Helen Rees Leahy, "Producing a Public for Art: Gallery Space in the Twenty-First Century," in Suzanne Macleod (ed) *Reshaping Museum Space*, London: Routledge, 2005.
[xv] Barbara Soren, "Museum Experiences that Change Visitors," *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 24 (3), 2009, 233-251.
[xvi] https://twitter.com/search?q=%23verrocchio&src=typed_query
[xvii] https://twitter.com/jordanssly/status/1191491200760586240?s=20

Photos

Photo 1

Photo 2

Photo 3

Photo 4

Photo 5

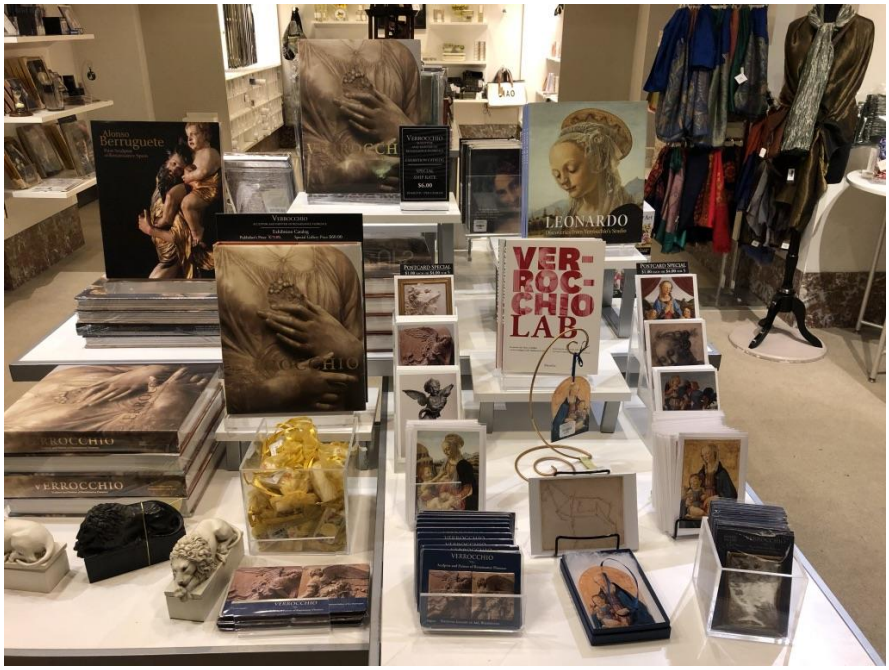

Photo 6