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Ghiberti's Greatest Work

Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378/80–1455) has never had the name recognition value of other Florentine artists like Giotto, Masaccio, Donatello, Botticelli, or Michelangelo; but a new exhibition sponsored by the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York may change that. The show, which arrives at the Met on October 30, brings three of Ghiberti's bronze relief panels from the east portal of the Florence Baptistery (the Battistero di San Giovanni), plus two small figures and two heads from the doorframes. Ghiberti's gilt-bronze doors have been undergoing restoration for more than two decades, an exacting labor now almost complete. When the component works return to Florence in 2008, they will be reassembled as a unit and placed in a hermetically sealed vitrine in the Museo Dell'Opera del Duomo, never again to be lent to another museum. Meanwhile, a reproduction of them now replaces the doors in the Baptistery. Published to accompany the exhibition is a new book, *The Gates of Paradise: Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance Masterpiece,* edited by Gary M. Radke,[1] containing essays by Italian and American art historians about the history and aesthetic qualities of the work, as well as an account of its current restoration.

Ghiberti's masterpiece, begun in 1425 and completed in 1452, consists of ten relief panels placed on a pair of bronze portals framed with smaller figures and garlands of leaves, flowers, and fruit. Considering that they are 555 years old, their freshness and vitality are startling. The present work was actually the *second* set of doors commissioned for the Baptistery by the Calimala, or Wool Merchants Guild, which had been entrusted with the decoration and maintenance of the Baptistery since the mid-twelfth century. Both of Ghiberti's sculptural ensembles had an incalculable influence on Florentine art of the *quattrocento,* most immediately on Donatello, who worked as his assistant on the first commission. That pair consisted of twenty-four panels representing scenes from the Gospels and Acts, plus portraits of the four evangelists and four doctors of the church. They were originally intended for the east portal of the Baptistery and followed the general plan of an earlier set of doors (for the south entrance) executed in International Gothic style by Giovanni Pisano during the previous century, a series of scenes from the

[1] THE GATES OF PARADISE: Lorenzo Ghiberti's Renaissance Masterpiece, ed. by *Gary M. Radke.* Yale University Press. $45.00.

life of St. John Baptist. Once Ghiberti's counterpart had been installed, Florence's admiration for it led to the commissioning of yet another portal, this one depicting scenes from Hebrew Scripture. When the second set of panels and their frame were completed, they replaced Ghiberti's earlier doors, which were then moved to San Giovanni's north entrance. The new work remained there for five centuries, subjected to several varnishings and cleanings, the most extensive performed after the destructive flood of 1966. Then, in the 1980s, a more comprehensive restoration was undertaken, using the most advanced techniques so far developed.

In his biography of Ghiberti, Vasari remarked: "Indeed, the doors may be said to be perfect in every particular, the finest masterpiece in the world, whether among the ancients or moderns. Very truly does Lorenzo merit praise, for one day Michelangelo Buonarrotti stopped to look at the work, and on being asked his opinion he said, 'They are so fine that they would grace the entrance to Paradise,' a truly noble encomium pronounced by one well able to judge." Granted, Vasari had never seen the Parthenon friezes, but otherwise his estimate is accurate, particularly if the field is restricted to relief sculpture. Michelangelo is credited with the epithet "The Gates of Paradise," but research has shown that the term was, from the medieval period forward, often used to describe baptistery doors. After all, the ritual of baptism is the indispensable first step for salvation in Christian faith, and its symbolic import has to do with purification from Original Sin and all sins committed since birth. The immersion-reemergence process also figures death and resurrection into eternal life, and the Gospels tell how Jesus himself underwent the ritual at the hands of the itinerant prophet John the Baptist, whose iconography always depicts him wearing woolly sheepskins. The Baptist was the patron saint of Florence, and it is hardly accidental that the Wool Merchants Guild, besides the Baptistery doors, gave Ghiberti a later commission to cast a bronze statue of this kindred saint for one of the exterior niches of the Church of Orsanmichele. These niches combine elements from both Gothic and Renaissance style, and the same may be said of Ghiberti's *St. John the Baptist* and his work in general. His first set of doors did not constitute much of a stylistic advance on Pisano's earlier pair; but the second set is clearly informed by the new aesthetic canons being developed in the early fifteenth century. Ghiberti's gates open on the interior of the Baptistery, but they also open on a new stylistic era. A door will not admit a supplicant, of course, unless someone unlocks it, and the massive bronze barrier at San Giovanni's entrance reminds us that salvation hinges on decisions made by the institution dispensing, or not dispensing, the sacraments. The metaphoric keys to the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus entrusts to Peter have been literalized by tradition, first in the form of papal iconography (a pair of keys crossed over a miter) and then in popular imagination, which visualizes St. Peter as something like a heavenly sentry, posted by the Pearly Gates.

Why did Renaissance Florence devote so much attention to the project of providing beautiful doors for the Baptistery? The basilica of San Giovanni, dedicated to the patronal saint, was an elegant Romanesque construction of the eleventh and twelth centuries and had served as the town's cathedral until 1128, after which the designation went to Sta. Reparata. This church was in its turn supplanted at the close of the thirteenth century by the present cathedral of Sta. Maria del Fiore, Florence's signature edifice, eventually known as the "Duomo." Sta. Maria del Fiore ("Saint Mary of the Flower") was a construction begun, first, by Arnolfo di Cambio and Giotto and then finally completed by Brunelleschi from 1417 to 1434. The dome Brunelleschi designed for it, so high as to inspire awe and acrophobia, is designed on an octagonal plan and might be understood as an elevated echo of the octagonal form of the Baptistery, sited just west of the Cathedral. But in theological terms there can be no Ascension or Assumption without the preliminary of Baptism. Changing San Giovanni's function instead of closing the church was a way to acknowledge and maintain its importance in Florentine history, an importance that required concerted artistic emphasis. After all, Dante had been baptized there and referred to it (*Inferno* XIX, l. 17) as "my beautiful San Giovanni." It's even possible that his poem influenced decisions concerning the Baptistery's new ornaments. In Canto IX of *Purgatorio*, the pilgrim poet mentions a pair of doors opening on the first part of the upward helical track around the Purgatorial Mountain and tells how his guide and companion Virgil unlocked them with a silver and a gold key. These gates, too, had a literary antecedent: the bronze portal to the temple that Aeneas discovers in a Carthaginian grove (Book I, *Aeneid*).

It's striking that both narratives involve relief sculpture, though not executed on the doors mentioned. In Virgil's epic, Aeneas enters the temple and finds relief representations of the Trojan War carved on supporting columns, a surprise prompting his plangent *lacrimae rerum* speech. In the *Commedia*, after Dante passes through paired doors designed to bar or provide entrance to the path up Purgatory, he comes upon a series of relief sculptures dealing with the virtue of Humility, cut in marble and attached to the living rock of the mountain. One of these scenes depicts Trajan in conversation with the mother of a slain soldier, a reference calling to mind Trajan's Column in Rome, where scenes from the Dacian Wars are represented in a helical series of relief carvings. Did these literary antecedents figure in the decision of the Calimala to commission relief sculptures for the Baptistery? They escape mention in available sources, but there's every reason to assume that a city caught up in a revival of classical culture originating with Florence's greatest poet did remember them. Of course, a more immediate and concrete example would have been the Gothic bronze door for the Church of San Zeno Maggiore in Verona, whose simplicity and dramatic power incited Ezra Pound's admiration in *The Spirit of Romance*. No one has established that Ghiberti saw that door, but he

must have been aware of its existence as the first work of bronze casting completed in Italy since the classical period.

It would be misleading, though, to account for the doors solely in aesthetic terms. Guild members and the artist were faithful congregants who regarded their work as having a public mission. In Christianity, salvation is ritual and sacramental, but it is also supported by passionate contemplation of sacred story—first, the record of the Almighty's saving intervention as found in Hebrew Scripture and then in the gospel accounts of Christ's Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection. In a society where very few people could read Italian and still fewer Latin (the Vulgate hadn't yet been translated), the importance of visual reminders of these narratives—in stained glass, in fresco, and in sculpture—should be underlined. Actually, the ten panels, disposed on paired doors, remind us of pages of a book; and a chronological reading of them begins, as it does with print in a codex, at the top left (the Genesis story), moving to the right, then down and left again, and so on to the last panel in the lower right corner (the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon). There's no surprise if both Pisano's *trecento* work and Ghiberti's first set of doors took New Testament scenes as their subject. On the other hand, if Ghiberti's second commission turned to Hebrew Scripture, the choice reflects a growing influence of Renaissance humanism on thought and art during that period.

When the gates are reassembled next year in Florence's Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, they will be contained in a sealed Plexiglas vitrine filled with nitrogen to prevent further corrosion. The current exhibition keeps the works in a similar container, but viewers are at least allowed a near approach—close inspection being a prerequisite if we are to understand Ghiberti's skill and refined intellect. The Duomo Museum didn't send all ten panels for the exhibition, but at least we have three: the first, depicting the story of Adam and Eve; the fifth, of Jacob and Esau; and the ninth, of David. These panels effectively epitomize Ghiberti's multiple strengths, the low-relief rendering of architecture especially notable, given that a complete building can't be a part of sculpture in the round. Three of the ten panels incorporate urban structures: Jacob and Esau, Joseph in Egypt, and the Queen of Sheba. These have a particular interest because they are among the earliest Florentine works based on the new system of single-point perspective discovered by Brunelleschi and advocated by Alberti in his treatise *On Painting*. It's not accidental that Ghiberti uses this system of perspective in the panels involving urban architecture. I've often speculated that Brunelleschi wouldn't himself have developed the laws of perspective without the construction of new civic spaces incorporating a large piazza paved in uniformly square slabs of stone. The straight edges of such paving stones appear to converge and angle upward over a distance; and this observation would have led to more complex analyses of apparent size reduction in other rectilinear structures. In fact, the

Jacob and Esau panel includes a regularly paved piazza with incised lines between the tiles that follow the laws of perspective with near exactitude. It also includes rectilinear architectural elements that approximate those same laws. Furthermore, for the Joseph panel (not included in the current show) Ghiberti worked out the perspective for a *circular* building, an imaginary, arcaded Egyptian temple. It is a perspectival tour de force, but interested viewers will have to go to Florence to see it. The seven panels depicting non-urban settings rely much less on single-point perspective; and this brings us to the topic of the spatial characteristics generic to relief sculpture.

It was Vasari who first noted that the art of relief is equal parts drawing and sculpture—as a way of characterizing the genre, simple enough. Yet, because of the tension between two- and three-dimensional rendering, relief carving is based on complex calculations hard to codify. Meanwhile, tension between drawing and sculpting is also an opportunity for invention. Traditionally, there are four levels of relief. High relief (*alto rilievo*) involves figures with undercuts, that is, figures separated by small spatial intervals from the ground of the sculpture. Median (*medio rilievo*) relief involves volumetric figures extending out from the ground but nowhere separated from it. Low relief (*basso rilievo*, or in French *bas relief*) renders figures almost flush with the ground and barely visible when viewed from the side. (Consider the heads or pictures stamped on coins, which are the most common example of low relief sculpture.) The fourth kind, sunken relief or intaglio, involves cutting into the ground to produce figures lower than the plane of the ground; early Egyptian relief sculpture is of this kind.

Ghiberti's panels use the first three levels and arguably the fourth as well. It should be acknowledged that making a hard-and-fast classification of figures in these categories is impossible, given that a single figure may in its different parts involve two or even three levels. Describing one figure as done in medium relief and another in low relief is often a matter of disputable opinion. Allowing for the arbitrariness of the distinction, we can still say that Ghiberti used at least three levels. What is more interesting is that he lends them a narrative and a perspectival role. Near and large objects or figures are rendered in high relief; items at the middle distance, made smaller by the laws of perspective, are, besides, rendered in medium relief; and still smaller objects far in the background are rendered in low relief or perhaps intaglio. (The reason it's difficult in these panels to distinguish between low relief and intaglio is that the ground does not lie absolutely flat but instead swells outward in places and recedes inward in others.) The kind of perspective used in two-dimensional drawing receives, then, reinforcement from techniques intrinsic to relief sculpture. Sometimes Ghiberti depends heavily on single-point perspective and sometimes he substitutes for it the volumetric gradation of his medium.

Meanwhile, the narrative function is connected to Ghiberti's sense of the importance of various aspects of the story he is telling. Like the

Gothic painters before him, he uses the technique of simultaneous narration in nearly all the panels, with several incidents in one story depicted within a single frame. The key scene or scenes appear in the foreground in *alto rilievo*; events the artist regards as less important (which may occur chronologically before or after the foreground scene) appear at a middle distance in *medio rilievo*; and those that engage Ghiberti the least appear in the background in *basso rilievo*. A shorthand way to express this approach is to say that Ghiberti attests to his sense of a gain in importance by moving some of the scenes into the foreground, emphasizing that primacy by size as well as the height of the relief. This aspect of practice sounds natural and obvious, but narrative demands sometimes override it; for example, in the Moses and Abraham panels, where the principal incident takes place atop a mountain or promontory. Those geographical features can only be rendered satisfactorily in the background; the scale and height of relief of the human figure depicted on them is proportionately reduced. Yet, without having a chance to measure, I sense that relief in the figures of Moses, Abraham, and Isaac is a bit higher than would be expected so far in the background, just as the relief of figures in the foreground of these panels is not so high as in other panels. Ghiberti adjusts the level of relief to compensate for the reversal of narrative priority occasioned by geographic realism.

It's interesting to compare these with the Cain and Abel panel, which includes an incident depicted on a background promontory—the burnt offering each of the two brothers makes. Rendered in *basso rilievo*, this event in the narrative apparently engaged Ghiberti's interest less than other incidents. What is curious is that the foreground event is a scene showing Cain's agricultural labors. He ploughs behind a team of oxen; farther to the right is Cain post homicide, receiving the mark of his curse. As said before, the respective sacrifices of Cain and Abel are in the far background; in the middle distance we see the murder of Abel. Why isn't this pivotal *coup de théâtre* foregrounded in the panel? Perhaps because the challenge of rendering an agricultural scene appealed more to Ghiberti *as an artist*. Sheep, dogs, horses, donkeys, birds, and (in the Noah panel) even an elephant appear in the series. Here Ghiberti had the occasion to render oxen and a homely genre scene, and the depiction of Adam's seed committing mankind's first murder yielded pride of place.

But we should recall, too, that the period of nomadic animal herding and the socialist sharing of work and food it required has often been understood as a peaceful Golden Age. With the advent of agriculture comes the parceling out of land and property rights, changes that lead to conflict, violence, and war. In the middle distance of the panel we see Abel placidly shepherding his ewes and rams, and of course it was the membership of the Wool Merchants Guild that commissioned this work. Abel is in the same perspectival plane as his assassination, but on the left-hand side, above the ploughing scene. Cain the farmer shares the

foreground with, on our right, the grieving figure of his later identity, forehead poised to receive the mark of a curse. Just below the smaller scene of the fratricide, he makes his solitary way to the Land of Nod. Having brought up a possible subtextual connection between the shepherd Abel and the Calimala, I notice that the Jacob and Esau panel involves animal skins as well. Genesis tells us that Esau had chest hair and that Jacob did not. So, when Jacob disguises himself as Esau, he drapes a goatskin over his torso before kneeling to receive the blessing of the Promise from the blind patriarch Isaac. As soon as Isaac feels the goatskin, he concludes the person before him is his eldest son and confers his blessing. In this panel, Ghiberti places the scene in the right foreground, showing part of the goatskin at the back of Jacob's neck, so that we don't miss the point.

Critics have commented on the dramatic quality of these reliefs, as witnessed by the gestural language recorded and the varied expressions on faces of the figures. Apart from religious spectacle there was no theatre in Florence at that period; visual art held a monopoly on the theatrical, but it had before Ghiberti seldom or never appeared so forcefully in Florentine art. What is interesting to consider is the overlap between the techniques of rendering space in relief and theatre design. Figures in a relief sculpture must be shown as standing on some kind of supporting floor, even as that surface maintains spatial continuity with the scene receding into its background. Ghiberti's solution was to tip the foreground plane downward, which also requires tipping up the background. The consequence of this approach was that Ghiberti had to devise strategies for disguising the non-naturalistic meeting of the figures' feet with the slanted support surface. The most brilliant example comes in the Jacob and Esau panel, which manages to approximate single-point perspective while still giving the foreground figures a platform where they can plausibly stand. The raked platform was to be used later on in many theatre sets as a way of suggesting deeper space than actual stage dimensions and to allow viewers in the first rows a better view of the lower part of the actors' bodies. Around 1900 painters began, for different reasons, using this same approach in rendering picture space, and figurative painting has retained the option in its repertory of spatial representation ever since.

It may be stimulating at this point to examine an essential generic difference between sculpture in the round and relief sculpture. The former, since it occupies real space, is under no constraint to develop an illusion of spatial depth. On the other hand, it must embody effective formal qualities when viewed from every vantage point, no mean task, certainly. But a figure in the round is always an alien presence thrust into the "real world," which is not composed of marble or bronze. Such figures arrive among us without a kindred background composed of the same substance—at least if we disregard group sculpture, which may involve more than one figure and perhaps an animal or some rudimen-

tary vegetation. Even such groups are surrounded by an environment that is entirely other, one that includes spectators of flesh and blood staring up from all sides. Meanwhile a figure in relief moves and seems to breathe in a world that is *like itself*, composed of the same material—an earth, a dwelling, a natural surrounding, an atmosphere where it is at home. This fact may explain why figures in relief, even when caught up in tragic narratives, seem, on one hand, less melancholy, less chilly, and, on the other, more at ease, more mobile than sculpture in the round. They are not impeded or demoted by the world of the actual; they have their own realm, beyond comparison or competition with human counterparts. We wouldn't call it Paradise, but it reminds us of that heaven of ideal forms that Plato envisioned, outside the entropy and erosion of material existence. Ghiberti's bronze doors are a material achievement in themselves, and they are also a portal onto a contemplative space elsewhere.

The paradox here is that of course the gates have in fact suffered from corrosion and other kinds of damage. I recall that when I first saw them in 1964, they were relatively intact, the brightness and perfection of the gilding at one with the concept of incorruptibility. Two years later, during the terrible flood, the Baptistery doors suffered extensive damage, in fact, some of the panels were dislodged and knocked about in the water. I didn't see them again until 1984, a time when automobile pollution and inexpert restoration had added to flood damage. The gilding was pitted or worn off or scratched in every panel. It was a depressing sight, and I told myself I would never return to Florence again. Even the Duomo looked discolored; I wondered how long its elaborately designed exterior would hold out against the ravages of the relentless traffic roaring through the center city. (That Florentine authorities haven't banned automobiles from the *Centro città* is one of those contemporary Italian mysteries no one can explain. Florence can be as up to date as it chooses at the periphery, but why not reserve a couple of hundred acres from the harrowing invasion of Fiat?)

Of course it was great news to hear that the doors would be restored; and a sublime experience to see even a fraction of them. I had assumed that they would also be given a new coat of gold, but research has shown that any such process would be too risky because of chemical instabilities hard for the layman to understand. Perhaps we're allowed to hope that future developments in restoration technique may also solve the problem. Meanwhile, the newly cleaned Gates of Paradise will have been preserved from further deterioration in their nitrogenated vitrines. We can see three of these on this side of the Atlantic for a brief period. All those who care about Renaissance Italy, sculpture in general, or relief sculpture in particular, will consider this an unmissable opportunity. The sophisticated design of the Adam and Eve story, its seamless stitching together of four separate chapters in the narrative, the underplayed sensuousness of the modeling of Eve's slender body,

the drama of the Expulsion, which is effected by an angel thrusting the fallen couple out through a portal: This panel alone would justify attending. But you could say the same of the simultaneous economy and complexity of the Jacob and Esau panel, where the boy Jacob assumes an agile and graceful pose with his back to us, in one instance standing, and in another kneeling before Isaac to receive the blessing—all of this in single-point-perspective rendering as discussed above. And then the panoramic David panel, which amalgamates the stories of the young hero's vanquishing of Goliath and his military conflict with Saul, an epic that crams in as much chaotic soldiering and clash of armor as any film version of Trojans vs. Greeks or Greeks vs. Persians. All this in the space of an immobile panel little more than a foot square. Meanwhile, in the foreground the shepherd soon to be king is shown severing Goliath's head, depicted face down so that we only see a Medusan confusion of hair spilling over the lowest part of the relief.

If I have a regret about the exhibition, it's that the concluding panel depicting Solomon and Sheba couldn't join the three that did come. It shows the celebrated pair center stage, hand in hand before a magnificent portal constructed with the ogival arch of Gothic style, set in a building that incorporates neoclassical ornament. For once in the series, a single incident rather than a simultaneous narrative is depicted. It may or may not be over-interpretation to understand the concluding panel in the series as an allegory for the whole of the Gates themselves, a narrative that begins with Adam and Eve exiting Eden through a portal and concludes with the figures of Sheba and Solomon about to enter another. The scene embodies the union of bronze and gold, matter and spirit, a female and a male principle, humanity and architecture, sculpture and drawing, volumetric and perspectival rendering of depth, Gothic and Renaissance style, the fusion of space and time. We may regard it as Ghiberti's entire project, epitomized in a single panel. I see that I will after all have to reverse my earlier resolution and begin making plans to return to Florence to see the reconstituted gates, scheduled for opening at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo sometime in 2008.