DEPTH OF FIELD

Relief Sculpture in Renaissance Italy

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Forewords

The Victoria and Albert Museum houses the national collection of sculpture. The Henry Moore Institute is a centre dedicated to the study of sculpture, with no collection of its own. It can be difficult to focus on one or a small group of objects in the V&A, simply because there are so many. In the Institute it is much easier, because there are so few. We are a kind of *Kunsthalle*, developed on a modernist model, but unusual because we also make historical exhibitions. These exhibitions are rarely monographic, and usually develop their argument primarily by means of the objects themselves.

The V&A's project to reinstall the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries provided the Institute with a moment for a collaboration which took its part within the re-conceptualising of these galleries. It was a partnership that provided the Henry Moore Institute with an opportunity not simply to borrow works, but more importantly to work with the V&A curators in thinking about alternative ways of displaying the objects which were part of their preparatory programme. Thus our small, temporary exhibition could make a contribution to a larger and longer-lasting initiative.

The opening offer of Donatello's *Ascension* relief made it clear that the Museum was seriously committed. Nevertheless, beginning with such an important work, and creating a show around it, was not without attendant complications, not least because its very importance is often taken for granted. The V&A is rather like Italy, a place where hundreds of objects of high artistic interest jostle for attention. While its curators know which works they regard as more significant than others, historically this has not always come across in the Museum's displays. The under-stated way in which the *Ascension* relief had been shown in the V&A has much to do with an understanding that presentations of individual works are ultimately provisional in comparison to the objects themselves.

One of the key contributions of the Institute's team of curators was thus simply to ask its V&A guardians why this relief – modestly

displayed alongside many others in the Museum's old Renaissance galleries – was regarded as so important. Despite our anxiety at losing the loan offer, we spent some time on this question, returning to it again and again, as there were no easy answers. Amongst the many other Italian reliefs in the V&A collection, the *Ascension* is an anomaly – not only in technique and narrative, but also in terms of its historical place. Although the original context for the *Ascension* has been extensively researched, no definitive evidence has come to light regarding its purpose or place. Both its author and his methods are regarded as having been deeply influential, yet there are few other works like it, lending it a perplexing status in the development of Italian relief sculpture.

This elusiveness has had an effect of somehow freezing rather than freeing up further possibilities. Having arrived at an impasse in the consideration of different possible historical contexts for its display, we returned to a more independent approach, made possible, perhaps, by the resolutely ahistorical feel of the Institute's galleries. This seemed to me like a welcome return of contemporary authority: we can look at this object as contemporary spectators and still enjoy its allure, without knowing anything of the extensive bibliography which can attempt to explain it, but can never contain it. Our exhibition was a way of looking for answers, and if it only succeeded in confirming the isolation of the *Ascension* relief in particular, it nevertheless trained the eye and the mind to look at relief more generally, and to think about when and why it was used.

The *Ascension* was, in many ways, the problem object of our exhibition, and one which almost escaped its confines. But we did put it on display in a way which made us see how easy (rather than difficult) it was to look at, once it was given some special attention (plate 3). And so other reliefs, placed high up on our walls (walls as high as the original exterior court for which they were formed), made the point that they too could be seen, quite plainly, as objects of different qualities and functions, high or low, unique or multiple, interior or exterior, intimate or public. Thus the boundaries between sculpture, the decorative and applied arts and painting were easily overcome, reinforcing not only the originary nature of the V&A's collection, but also our own aspirations for the wider consideration of sculpture in relation to other disciplines and cultural practices.

Depth of Field was a title which, drawing on a modern understanding of photographic fields, proposed to the viewer that we understand relief primarily as a technology of reproduction (even if some exhibits were unique): a means of commemoration, suited to mural and architectural demarcation, to travel and to handling. We saw this in medals, in seals and irons, in tablets and tombs, in portable retables and coins. We learnt to associate relief with significant spaces and moments of life: with birth, marriage and death, with the church, the hall, the bedroom. We became accustomed to its shallow field, its linearity, and above all, perhaps, to its narrative quality. In this way, while the exhibition hardly explained the *Ascension*, it helped us to see it.

Penelope Curtis
Curator, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

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The invitation extended by Penelope Curtis for V&A curators to collaborate on an exhibition at the Henry Moore Institute opened up an exciting opportunity to adapt and develop some of the ideas that were blossoming within the Medieval and Renaissance Galleries team in London. Then under the direction of Malcolm Baker, the Galleries' concept team had been charged with developing a new approach to the display and interpretation of the Museum's European collections, covering the full range of material from 300–1600. Both Penelope's and our aim was to allow the seeds of that thinking to be developed within the focus of an unique exhibition.

We immediately homed in on the V&A's Italian sculpture collection, which is arguably the most important outside Italy. It is particularly rich in works in relief – from the ubiquitous Madonna and Child to medals and plaquettes – of such a variety of material, treatment, style and original context that my colleague Paul Williamson was inspired to suggest 'the relief' as the focus of the exhibition. This was an area ripe for investigation, and one which could be encountered in an extensive variety of settings; forming or decorating diverse

objects from the painting and sculpture of renowned masters to more humble caskets, combs and even wafers. Perhaps the natural choice as centrepiece was Donatello's *Ascension with Christ Giving the Keys to St Peter* (plate 1), though it had only been lent once before and never outside London. It was from this bold beginning that the idea to explore the broad experience of relief in fifteenth-century Florence emerged.

The *Ascension* proved to be a challenging but ideal focus, prompting probing questions from the Henry Moore curators, who took nothing for granted, as well as further debate about the uncertainty of its origins and therefore how it was originally intended to be viewed. In exchanging and developing ideas the combined HMI/V&A team exploited our different art historical approaches, perspectives and expertise, exploring the period eye, together with a nuanced emphasis on the response of the contemporary viewer. The presentation of this and the other works – including metalwork, gems and ceramics – within the modern and comparatively unmediated setting at Leeds provided a fresh perspective for the visitor and one that differed significantly from the V&A context. We were able to experiment with placement in respect of the visual response of viewer to image, and to expand a number of interconnections with which the V&A team were preoccupied – for instance, between art and artefact, sacred and secular, as well as the references made by the makers to the ancient and more recent past. Though the exhibition naturally developed a life of its own, the fruits of the thinking and experimentation will live on in the new V&A galleries, opening in autumn 2009. A variation on the Virgin and Child display, for example, will form part of an exploration of the making of art in the time of Donatello, with Madonnas placed both high and low, representing the different roles they played within street, church and home.

In the modern museum or gallery context, of course, we might perceive these objects as rarefied works of art, unable to be touched, but in fifteenth-century Florence the imagery, function and materiality of relief encouraged a range of sensual responses. This complex interweaving of making and meaning was at the heart of the Leeds exhibition, and the accompanying conference (4–5 March 2005) was designed to expand beyond the scope we had necessarily set ourselves in an exhibition of forty-five objects. Both the geographical and temporal boundaries were extended to cover the whole of Europe from the fourteenth to

the sixteenth centuries. The conference, organised by Martina Droth of the Henry Moore Institute and Glyn Davies of the V&A, facilitated a more in-depth examination of the place of relief in daily life in the Renaissance, exploring the mechanisms by which these objects were produced, disseminated and experienced within their cultural context and beyond. Papers were invited to touch on the 'inherent intersections between "high" and "low", between "fine" art and decoration, both as understood then and now, as well as informing broader contexts, such as cultural influences, local and export markets, social structures, artistic practice, and aesthetic preferences'.

The invitation attracted scholars with varied academic interests and expertise, each of whom challenged the audience to think in different ways – whether presenting new ideas about familiar objects or novel approaches to examining the material culture and perceptions of the time. Though, perhaps surprisingly, there is an absence of direct discussion of exchange or consumption, in many instances the connection between past and present experience was directly explored, or at least inherent. Under the energetic editorship of Donal Cooper and Marika Leino, this volume has been shaped to present a large proportion of the papers given at the conference. Now focusing exclusively on Italy and supplemented by two additional essays, it culminates in an enlightening summation and overview of the field by Sarah Blake McHam specially written for this volume. The publication of conference papers allows the authors time for reflection, development and further inspiration while making their ideas accessible. Taken as a whole, these essays go a long way to addressing the aim of the conference to expand our knowledge of how and why this particular form of artistic production flourished in such diverse and innovative ways during the Renaissance.

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