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Beyond the Visual

The Multi-Sensory Reception and Display of Renaissance Sculpture

Bronze statuettes produced in Renaissance Italy are often said to have been designed explicitly to be handled.¹ But in the present day, objects such as Giambologna's gilded bronze »Venus Urania« (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) are in practice subject almost exclusively to ocular scrutiny alone, whether displayed in glass cases, set on pedestals with signs saying »do not touch,« or reproduced on the pages of art historical books and websites (fig. 1). In fact, both modes of display – that of the museum and that of the reproduction – take such works not only out of the realm of the multi-sensory, but also out of time and even space itself, as seen particularly clearly in illustrations that depict bronze statuettes against monochromatic backgrounds as if floating immaterially in an undefined space (fig. 3).² But getting Renaissance sculpture out of the museum and photographic or digital reproduction and back, so to speak, into the hands of its original beholders is easier said than done. Indeed, exactly whether and how such objects were originally handled in practice is far from clear, despite many scholars' assumptions about their initially-intended tactile reception.

There are, of course, numerous portraits showing collectors and artists touching or holding statuettes, such as an example attributed to Francesco Morandini that depicts the Florentine scholar, collector and Benedictine monk Vincenzo Borghini (Oxford, Christ Church Picture Gallery, fig. 2).³ Looking at this image, it seems quite reasonable to assume that the object held up in the sitter's right hand is probably a gilded bronze statuette. But could even the rather hefty Borghini really hold up this type of work with such apparent ease,



Fig. 1 Giovanni Bologna (Giambologna), *Venus Urania*, ca. 1575. Gilded bronze. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (on display in November 2010)

the base casually resting on his index finger with just a thumb to hold it steady? The answer, of course, depends on how much it weighs.

In the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, there is a hollow bronze cast of comparable size to the object held aloft by Borghini that may well be another version of the statuette seen in the portrait.⁴ The Ashmolean Museum does not normally record the weight of such objects. Indeed, with very few exceptions, one almost never sees weight listed as an attribute of small-scale sculpted objects in catalogue entries, museum files or auction listings, an important indication of just how far down the list of priorities weight is throughout the art world.⁵ In this particular case, however, Ashmolean Museum curators were able to confirm that the statuette weighs 1.577 kg.⁶ Even though the sculpture is a hollow bronze cast filled with plaster, rather than a much heavier solid metal cast, it still is a substantial work that is difficult to hold elevated in one hand with any ease. Indeed, if one tries to grasp the sculpture like the sitter in the portrait does, it is extremely difficult to hold it comfortably, let alone steadily.

Weighing and, perhaps even more importantly, actually handling such objects has important consequences for our understanding of tactile encounters with Renaissance sculpture. In general terms, it reminds us that portraits of sitters holding statuettes should not be treated as accurate »snapshots« of how such works really were handled in practice. Such images could, in fact, be as carefully constructed as present-day photographic or digital reproductions and museum installations. (Another Early Modern parallel would be the many seventeenth-century Flemish depictions of galleries that likewise do not document actual collections or hangings.⁷) In the specific case of the portrait of Borghini, weighing and handling a statuette very similar to the one in the painting suggests that the object the sitter holds aloft may well not be a bronze at all. Instead, it could well be one of the much lighter wax replicas we know from documents that Borghini owned, possibly gilded to simulate metal or simply depicted as gilt in the portrait.⁸

Similarly, if we look at an image like Titian's »Portrait of Jacopo Strada« (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) and think about how the sitter holds the female statuette well away from his body with apparent ease, one realises that it too may have been made of wax or perhaps more likely plaster, rather than solid marble, as is usually assumed. Conversely, the fact that the sitter in Agnolo Bronzino's »Portrait of a Young Man« (Paris, Musée du Louvre) caresses a female statuette without actually picking it up from its shadowy tabletop suggests that it may well have been made of marble and thus was precisely not easily lifted.

The remainder of this essay will consider more carefully what we can learn about bronze statuettes in particular if we take them out of their museum cases and reproductions, whether contemporary photographs or Early Modern portraits. It will explore how these objects would have been encountered by their original beholders not within the ocular regime of the museum or the art historical reproduction – nor even by Michael Baxandall's famous »period eye« – but instead by actual »period bodies« that would have deployed not only sight and touch, but all five senses.⁹ Specifically, it will use as a case study a bronze statuette depicting Hercules and Antaeus that was originally owned by Isabella d'Este, the Marchesa of Mantua and wife of Francesco Gonzaga, who displayed it in her

»Grotta,« the small room that, together with her »Studiolo,« housed the bulk of her famous collection in the Ducal Palace (fig. 3).¹⁰

In a posthumous inventory, the statuette is listed on raised shelving in the »Grotta.«¹¹ Today, it is in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and attributed to Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi, better known as Antico.¹² In a letter of 1519, Antico wrote that the »Hercules and Antaeus« was one of eight bronzes cast for Isabella. Provenance suggests that this object is the same one mentioned in Antico's letter, with further proof provided by Isabella's name, which is cast into its base. So, we know when, by whom and for whom the statuette was made, and we know where it was displayed shortly after Isabella's death. But these facts only begin to hint at the multi-sensory environment in which it originally existed.

For instance, we can consider the »Hercules and Antaeus« in terms of the sense of hearing. Both the statuette and its owner inhabited a rich and complex soundscape. When entertaining learned visitors, Isabella might well have discussed or read aloud the tale of Hercules and Antaeus, perhaps using her copy of Philostratus' »Imagines,« which included a vivid description of a painting depicting the wrestling match between Hercules and Antaeus, the latter the son of Gaia the Earth, from whom he gained his incredible strength.¹³ Isabella's bronzes were not only surrounded by the sound of learned conversation, but also that of music. In fact, Isabella was a renowned patron and performer of music and dance, as suggested by the many musical images found in her »Studiolo« and »Grotta.«¹⁴

The significance of music for Isabella is further confirmed by one of her favourite devices, the »impresa delle pause,« which appears on all manner of objects, including the lavish ceiling of the »Grotta« itself. The »impresa« comprises a line of musical notation in Isabella's own contralto clef with nine silent pauses and a repeat sign. It is, in effect, a representation of »infinite time and infinite silence.«¹⁵ Of course, women were praised in the Early Modern period for their silence, but Isabella herself was famously vocal, at least in musical terms, giving the device added resonance. Isabella's musical device also appears on a maiolica plate depicting the tale of Pan and Apollo and attributed to Nicola da Urbino (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art), which was made for one of her dinner services. The plate reminds us that another sense, that of taste, can be brought into play when discussing Isabella as a fully embodied beholder of sculptural objects.

For instance, napkins folded into recognizable shapes could be placed on banquet tables, sometimes accompanied by both edible and more permanent sculpted objects. Sugar statuettes in particular are documented from the later fifteenth century onwards and often linked to wedding festivities, such as the 40 such sculptures depicting the Labours of Hercules that were displayed at a Medici wedding in 1608.¹⁶ More permanent sculptures were also connected to the sense of taste, such as Benvenuto Cellini's famous »Salt-Cellar« (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Both Isabella and her son Federico Gonzaga commissioned their own elaborate salt-cellars, the latter writing about his version that it »pleases us greatly and already we have desired that it adorn our table.«¹⁷

Perhaps closer in spirit to the »Hercules and Antaeus« is a bronze sculpture of Hercules sleeping (London, Ranger's House) that was made for the table of the Bolognese gentleman Gaspare Fantuzzi who had his own name inscribed beneath the figure's pillow. Fantuzzi's commission appears to be based on ancient literary references to Lysippus's »Hercules Epitrapezios« or »Hercules of the table,« a small sculpture said to have belonged to Alexander the Great, among others, that ended up on the table of a Roman collector, where it was affectionately described by Statius and Martial.¹⁸ Given that Isabella owned books by both authors, it is possible that she too was inspired by such ancient models to place her own »Hercules« on a banqueting table.



Fig. 2 Attributed to Francesco Morandini (Il Poppi), *Portrait of Vincenzo Borghini*, ca. 1573. Oil on panel. Oxford, Christ Church Picture Gallery

The food served at elite banquets alongside both permanent and ephemeral sculpted objects offered an astonishing range of flavours. For instance, at a feast organized by Isabella's nephew in 1529, the menu included: a salad of anchovies; another of capers, truffles and raisins; slices of prosciutto and salted beef tongue; pork loin fried with sugar and cinnamon; and sea bream with laurel leaves – and that is just a partial list of the antipasti. Such lavish meals also addressed the sense of smell, not only through the pleasant odours of food and wine, but also the scented water poured from ewers during hand-washing rituals.¹⁹

Even away from the table, Isabella lived in a richly scented environment. She must have washed and laundered regularly, given the quantities of soap she ordered, and she was famous throughout Europe for her beautifully-scented gloves.²⁰ Smells also would have wafted in and out of the »Grotta« and »Studiolo« from two nearby lushly-planted gardens. Inside the »Grotta« itself, a silver perfume flask and perfume burner were at hand. Such pleasant odours would have counteracted the offensive smells of melting, fatty tallow from the candles that, together with oil lamps, lit Isabella's apartment.

An object like Antico's »Hercules and Antaeus« would thus have witnessed and, occasionally, participated in a complex, multi-sensory environment comprising sound, taste and smell – indeed, the object itself would have given off a faint metallic smell when touched or handled with bare hands.²¹ But what of the two senses most closely associated with the reception of art, namely, sight and touch?

In the case of sight, it is Leon Battista Alberti's perspectival vision that is usually presented as the model for all vision in Renaissance Italy. In practice, however, art objects were only rarely seen by an immobile beholder standing in a single, fixed location. In Isabella's rooms, even the so-called »flat« art on display, such as the paintings

by Mantegna, Perugino and others in her »Studiolo,« were more often than not viewed obliquely, partially or even in a blur by a beholder walking, sitting and generally moving around the room's small, narrow space.²² But perhaps even more than the paintings in the »Studiolo,« the sculpted objects in the »Grotta« would have been seen from many different angles by their original beholders.

Contemporary depictions and descriptions of studies suggest that bronze statuettes were often displayed on raised shelves, as seen in Vittore Carpaccio's imaginary reconstruction of St Augustine's study (Venice, Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni) or, indeed, as suggested by the inventory of Isabella's »Grotta.«²³ In its elevated position, the »Hercules and Antaeus« would thus have been seen from below rather than head-on, as in most art historical reproductions, including the one illustrating the present essay (fig. 3). Also unlike in most art historical illustrations and museum displays, the statuette would have been lit by ever-changing natural light or the flickering light of candles and oil lamps, which would have glowed, flitted, even danced over its gleaming surfaces. In fact, the post-humous inventory of Isabella's collection lists two oil lamps and a candleholder on the same level as the »Hercules and Antaeus.«

Isabella's fondness for partially-gilded statuettes – like the reduced-scale »Apollo Belvedere« also by Antico (Frankfurt, Liebieghaus) that she owned – may be explained in part by the even more spectacular effects candle- and oil-light would have had on such surfaces on a dark night or gloomy afternoon. The visual reception of objects like the »Hercules and Antaeus« must therefore have

been much more changeable and unstable than is usually assumed by models ultimately based on the paradigm of linear perspective, with its implicitly immobile, disembodied beholder and static, unwavering light – the light, in other words, of present-day museum installations and photographic or digital reproductions.

But what if we turn, at long last, to touch? As has already been suggested, Early Modern portraits can be useful for thinking about how such objects might have been handled, but only up to a point. There are also some descriptions of precious collectibles being handled in this period, but these tend to refer to smaller objects such as gems or coins. Tactile engagements are similarly implicit in the utilitarian objects associated with reading and writing in studies like Isabella's. In the portrait of Borghini, for instance, spectacles, an inkwell and books are all depicted close to hand on the collector's table (fig. 2). In Isabella's »Grotta,« two elaborate inkwells were placed on the same raised shelving as the »Hercules and Antaeus.« Together with the candlestick and oil lamps also listed as being on the same level, such utilitarian objects must have been taken down when needed.

But would a non-utilitarian object like the »Hercules and Antaeus« likewise have been taken down from its shelf and touched, rather than simply admired visually from afar? Seeing the bronze displayed today in a museum at eye-level, printed on the page of a book, or reproduced digitally on a computer screen makes it easy to forget the logistics originally involved in handling such a work. Although the statuette is nowhere near life-size, it is nevertheless 43.2 cm tall. Perhaps even more relevant is its weight, which curators at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna have confirmed is 6.933 kg.²⁴ This suggests that two fairly strong hands would have been needed to take the piece down from its raised shelf. But the question remains: would the »Hercules and Antaeus« actually have been man- or, better, woman-handled by Isabella d'Este?

In Isabella's portraits, including the well-known profile drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (Paris, Musée du Louvre) and a painting by Titian (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), she is never shown near any of her sculpted objects, let alone handling anything as indecorous as a bronze statuette of two nude men wrestling.²⁵ We do, however, know something about her hands. The instrument-maker Lorenzo da Pavia, for instance, explicitly commented on their delicacy.²⁶ But would Isabella's hands ever have handled the »Hercules and Antaeus?« In the end, given the lack of clear documentary evidence, it is to the object itself and others associated with her that one must turn.

In fact, looking closely at statuettes by Antico that seem to have been owned or commissioned by Isabella tells us a great deal about how such works were meant to be handled. Carefully finished details that invite the collector's caress, like the glistening golden curls that fall over the shoulders of Antico's »Venus Felix« (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) or the heels of his »Apollo Belvedere«'s delicately-woven sandals (Frankfurt, Liebieghaus), make sense only if these objects were meant to be taken down from their elevated positions and slowly turned by hand for closer inspection. Other objects, such as coins and cameos, likewise had to be handled to be properly appreciated, including examples explicitly described in terms of their rectos and versos in Isabella's inventory.

In the case of the »Hercules and Antaeus,« once taken down for closer observation on a table – presumably by a male guest or trusted servant, rather than by the Marchesa of Mantua herself standing on a stool in her fine clothes – it would have been seen from slightly above, revealing the struggling giant's intense emotional state. But it is not what we see from above, rather what is found below that is perhaps most revealing: as mentioned above, underneath the sculpture's base Isabella's own name was inscribed.²⁷ This possessive inscription would, of course, only have become visible when

someone lifted the statuette up – and, once placed on a table, it would have been possible even for Isabella's delicate and decorous hands to do precisely this. But Isabella, herself a daughter, mother and aunt of Hercules – that is, of her father Ercole I d'Este, her son Ercole Gonzaga, and her nephew Ercole II d'Este – in the very act of lifting up this weighty bronze would have mimicked Hercules's own heroic feat of lifting Antaeus up from his mother, Earth.

Once the bronze was safely back on a display table, Isabella and her guests could have admired the wrestling duo with all their senses. The silent scream coming from Antaeus's mouth while real music and conversation filled the air; the polished bronze bodies gleaming as if soaked in sweat; the muscles seeming to twitch by

the light of a flickering candle; the metallic smell of bronze on the beholders' hands mingling with the heady scents of perfume burners and perfumed gloves, as well as the tastes and smells associated with gardens and festive meals – these are just some of the multi-sensory experiences occurring both in space and over time that a collector like Isabella d'Este would have engaged in. Only by taking a work like Antico's »Hercules and Antaeus« out of our present-day ocularcentric practices, whether in museums or in art historical reproductions, and instead considering both the sculpture and its original beholders as fully-embodied entities, only then can we begin to interpret such a work as the truly multi-sensory object that it once really was.

Notes

- 1 On the tactile reception of Renaissance sculpture in general, see: Geraldine A. Johnson: Touch, Tactility and the Reception of Sculpture in Early Modern Italy. In: A Companion to Art Theory. Ed. by P. Smith/C. Wilde. Oxford 2002, pp. 61–74. – Geraldine A. Johnson: The Art of Touch in Early Modern Italy. In: Art and the Senses. Ed. by F. Bacci/D. Melcher. Oxford 2011, pp. 59–84.
- 2 On the photographic reproduction of Renaissance sculpture, see Geraldine A. Johnson: Using the Photographic Archive: On the Life (and Death) of Images. In: Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History. Ed. by Costanza Caraffa. Munich 2011, pp. 145–156. – Geraldine A. Johnson: (Un)richtige Aufnahme: Renaissance Sculpture and the Visual Historiography of Art History. In: Art History, 36, 2013, n. 1, pp. 12–51, URL: http://www.academia.edu/1462374/_Un_richtige_Aufnahme_Renaissance_Sculpture_and_the_Visual_Historiography_of_Art_History [31.07.2013].
- 3 The attribution to Morandini, also known as Il Poppi, is far from secure. There are several versions of this portrait: Christ Church Picture Gallery, Oxford; Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nîmes; and Accademia, Florence. (The last shows only the sitter's head.) On Borghini as an art collector, see Rick Scorza: Vincenzo Borghini's Collection of Paintings, Drawings and Wax Models: New Evidence from Manuscript Sources. In: Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 66, 2003, pp. 63–122.
- 4 See Nicholas Penny: Catalogue of European Sculpture in the Ashmolean Museum, 1540 to the Present Day. Oxford 1992, vol. 1, pp. 178–179.
- 5 The Victoria & Albert Museum in London is almost the only major collection that occasionally – but even then far from consistently – lists the weight of some of its sculptures. In a future article, I plan to explore the issue of weight in art historical scholarship and museum practices.
- 6 I would like to thank the staff of the Ashmolean Museum for weighing the sculpture, esp. Angelamaria Aceto.
- 7 On this phenomenon, see Zirka Zaremba Filipczak: Picturing Art in Antwerp. Princeton 1987.
- 8 On Borghini's wax statuettes, see Scorza 2003 (note 3), pp. 108–109 and 122 (item 19).
- 9 Michael Baxandall: Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style. Oxford 1972, esp. chapter 2. – Michael Baxandall: The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany. New Haven 1980, esp. chapter 6. – See also Allan Langdale: Aspects of the Critical Reception and Intellectual History of Baxandall's Concept of the Period Eye. In: Art History, 21, 1998, pp. 479–497.
- 10 What follows is based on a chapter in my forthcoming book, Geraldine A. Johnson: The Sound of Marble: The Sensory Reception of Art in Renaissance Italy, which will be published by Cambridge University Press. For more detailed references, see also a short version of this chapter: Geraldine A. Johnson: In the Hand of the Beholder: Isabella d'Este and the Sensual Allure of Sculpture. In: Sense and the Senses in Early Modern Art and Cultural Practice. Ed. by A. Sanger/S.T. Kulbrandstad Walker. Farnham 2012, pp. 183–197.
- 11 For the inventory (which lists many other objects, including ones discussed later in this essay), see Clifford M. Brown: »Per dare qualche splendore a la gloriosa città di Mantua: Documents for the Antiquarian collection of Isabella d'Este. Rome 2002.
- 12 Most recently, on the Hercules and Antaeus statuette in Vienna, see the entry by Claudia Kryza-Gersch in Bonacolsi l'Antico: Uno scultore nella Mantova di Andrea Mantegna e di Isabella d'Este. Ed. by F. Trevisani/D. Gasparotto. Milan 2008, p. 236. – On Antico in general, see Antico: The Golden Age of Renaissance Bronzes. Ed. by E. Luciano. Washington, D.C. 2011.

- 13 On Isabella's library, see Stephen J. Campbell: The Cabinet of Eros: Renaissance Mythological Painting and the Studiolo of Isabella d'Este. New Haven 2004, pp. 270–279.
- 14 There is an extensive literature on Isabella as a musical performer and patron. See, among others: Clifford M. Brown/Anna Maria Lorenzoni: Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia: Documents for the history of art and culture in Renaissance Mantua. Geneva 1982. – William F. Prizer: Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo da Pavia, »Master Instrument-Maker«. In: Early Music History, 2, 1982, pp. 87–127. – William F. Prizer: Isabella d'Este and Lucrezia Borgias as Patrons of Music: The Frottola at Mantua and Ferrara. In: Journal of the American Musicological Society, 38, 1985, pp. 1–83. – Iain Fenlon: Music and learning in Isabella d'Este's Studioli. In: La corte di Mantova nell'età di Andrea Mantegna (1450–1550). Ed. by C. Mozzarelli/R. Oresko/L. Ventura. Rome 1997, pp. 353–367.
- 15 The phrase is from Fenlon 1997 (note 14), pp. 361–362.
- 16 On sugar sculptures, see esp. K.J. Watson: Sugar Sculpture for Grand Ducal Weddings from the Giambologna Workshop. In: Connoisseur, 189, 1978, pp. 20–26.
- 17 Cited in Valerie Taylor: Art and the table in sixteenth-century Mantua: Feeding the demand for innovative design. In: The Material Renaissance. Ed. by M. O'Malley/E. S. Welch. Manchester 2007, pp. 174–196, esp. 177–179.
- 18 On Fantuzzi's bronze and its ancient literary sources, see: Jeremy Warren: Bronzes. In: At Home in Renaissance Italy. Ed. by M. Ajmar-Wollheim/F. Dennis. London 2006, pp. 294–305, esp. 294–296. – Jeremy Warren: Gaspere Fantuzzi: A Patron of Sculpture in Renaissance Bologna. In: The Burlington Magazine, 149, 2007, pp. 831–835. – Charles McNelis: Ut Sculptura Poesis: Statius, Martial, and the Hercules Epitrapezios. In: American Journal of Philology, 129, 2008, pp. 255–276.
- 19 On food culture and festive meals at the Gonzaga court, see Daniele Bini: Isabella d'Este e la cultura del cibo. In: Isabella d'Este: La primadonna del Rinascimento. Ed. by D. Bini. Modena 2001, pp. 225–233. – Taylor 2007 (note 17), pp. 174–196.
- 20 For the latter, see Evelyn Welch: Art on the edge: Hair and hands in Renaissance Italy. In: Renaissance Studies, 23, 2009, pp. 241–268, esp. 260–262.
- 21 The metallic odour left on hands after touching bronze objects was noted by two ancient authors, Martial and Petronius. See D.M. Jacobson/M.P. Weitzman: What Was Corinthian Bronze? In: American Journal of Archaeology, 96, 1992, pp. 237–247, esp. 238. Although Jacobson and Weitzman correctly note that metal has no intrinsic smell at ambient temperatures, interaction with the warmth and moisture of a beholder's hands results in a chemical reaction that releases an unmistakable metallic smell. (Personal communication from Dr Peter Northover, Dept. of Materials, University of Oxford, 13 April 2010.)
- 22 On the paintings in the »Studiolo,« see esp. Campbell 2004 (note 13).
- 23 On studies in general in the Renaissance, see esp. Dora Thornton: The scholar in his study: Ownership and experience in Renaissance Italy. New Haven 1997.
- 24 I would like to thank Dr Claudia Kryza-Gersch for her help in establishing the weight of this sculpture.
- 25 For a recent study of Isabella d'Este's portraits, see Sally Hickson: »To see ourselves as others see us: Giovanni Francesco Zaninello of Ferrara and the portrait of Isabella d'Este by Francesco Francia. In: Renaissance Studies, 23, 2009, pp. 288–310.
- 26 See Prizer 1982 (note 14), p. 93.
- 27 The inscription reads: »D[IVA]/ISABEL/LA/M[ANTUA]E MAR[CHIONISSA].« For a photographic reproduction, see Manfred Leithe-Jasper: Renaissance Master Bronzes from the Collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Washington, D.C. 1986, p. 79.

Photo credits

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum: 3. Archive of the author: 1–2.



Fig. 3 Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi (Antico), Hercules and Antaeus, cast in 1519. Bronze. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum