



Short notice

Antonio Rizzo's Tondo of the Virgin and Child and the Influence of Donatello

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A sculpture of the Virgin and Child from around 1465-70 (fig. 1) has been on display in the Rijksmuseum since the spring of 2017.¹ Mary holds the child with her left hand and presents him with her right. In his turn, the infant Jesus makes a sign of blessing. In the background there is an angel, half hidden behind Mary. The marble *tondo* is the work of Antonio Rizzo (c. 1430-after 1499), a sculptor from Verona who lived and worked in Venice, where he made this piece as well.²

The round shape of *tondi* was probably derived from the *desco da parto*, a flat dish presented upon the birth of a child. The growing emphasis on the importance of family and children in the fifteenth century popularized the Virgin and Child motif.³ The *desco* shape and Marian iconography were combined and produced the *tondo*. These *tondi* were usually placed above the door or on the wall of the more private apartments.⁴ Given the weight, these works of art would generally have been relatively small and painted on wood. In Tuscany, however, where *tondi* were very popular, sculpted versions of the Virgin were also incorporated in tomb designs.⁵ Rizzo's piece is remarkable in that it is one of the few examples of sculpted *tondi* made in Venice.⁶ It raises the question as to where Rizzo found his inspiration when he created

< Fig. 1
ANTONIO RIZZO,
Virgin and Child,
c. 1465-70.
Marble,
diam. 86 cm x d. 13 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-2016-101.

this *Virgin and Child* in marble, and where the piece was located.

Donatello in Padua

In answering the question as to Rizzo's source for his *tondo*, we must look not to the city of Venice, but to the other territory that was under Venetian rule. As a powerful and wealthy city state, Venice owned a large surrounding area, the Veneto, as well as lands outside Italy. One of the cities under Venice's control was Padua. Erasmo da Narni (1370-1443), known as Gattamelata, had ruled it since 1437. He was a famous *condottiere* in the service of the doges. When Gattamelata died, it was decided to erect a bronze equestrian statue in his honour. It was in part the opportunity to create a monumental and prestigious work of this kind that brought the Florentine sculptor Donatello (c. 1386-1466) to Padua in that same year.⁷

It is almost impossible to overstate the importance of Donatello's time in Padua. As well as the equestrian statue of Gattamelata, he received the commission for a large altarpiece for the Basilica di Sant'Antonio (begun in 1446).⁸ The ensemble served as inspiration for many artists in the Veneto. Among those who copied motifs from it were Giovanni Bellini (1431/36-1516), Jacopo da Montagnana (1440/43-1499/1508), Marco Zoppo (c. 1432-c. 1478) and Andrea Mantegna

(c. 1431-1506). The latter included elements from the altarpiece in the frescos of the Ovetari Chapel in Padua (begun in 1448).⁹

In Padua, Donatello also became involved in making Virgin and Child reliefs. He designed the devotional pieces, but for the most part left their production to his workshop, where his inventions were executed in various materials and shapes, square as well as round. Many of these devotional pieces were made in plaster, terracotta and bronze. The advantage of these materials was that they could be used to make different versions relatively quickly – however, this working method implies that it is not always clear whether a *tondo* was made by Donatello himself, by his assistants or by a follower. This is why most of the reliefs are attributed to the workshop or school of Donatello. The existence of multiple versions of one design did not, though, indicate that a work of art was less appreciated. Wealthier clients could actually choose to have the ‘standard’ design adapted. The terracotta could be painted or a coat of arms could be added in the frame. Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) mentions some of this kind of particularly fine *tondi* in his *Lives*.¹⁰ The large output of Donatello’s workshop meant his designs became widespread, which contributed to the popularisation of the Virgin and Child motif.

Donatello and Rizzo

Donatello’s fame and his Paduan workshop’s huge output of Virgin and Child reliefs made him an obvious source of inspiration for other sculptors, including Antonio Rizzo. The first works in Venice that can be attributed to him are three altarpieces in the Basilica di San Marco (c. 1465-69). After they were completed, and thanks to his help in the defence of the beleaguered city of Scutari, Rizzo’s reputation grew, and as a result he was awarded several prestigious

commissions, such as the tomb of the Doge Niccolò Tron (1476) and the Arco Foscari, the monumental triumphal arch in the courtyard of the Palazzo Ducale. With the latter project, Rizzo received the title of *protomaestro* (overseer of the city’s building projects). Another major commission was the rebuilding of the east wing of the palace. However, in 1496 it came to light that Rizzo had committed large-scale fraud with the money intended for the construction work. Two years later, he was forced to flee Venice and he died soon afterwards.¹¹

When one compares a relief attributed to the school of Donatello (fig. 2) with the *tondo* in the Rijksmuseum, the importance of the former’s work to Rizzo is evident. The Virgin makes

Fig. 2
DONATELLO
(STUDIO), *Virgin and Child within an Arch*, mid-fifteenth century. Gilded bronze, 20 x 15 cm. Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art, inv. no. 1957.14.131. Photo: Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.





the same gesture of presentation with her right hand, while she holds the Child with her left. The Child's *contrapposto* pose also echoes Donatello's *Madonna*. As many versions of this relief, in different materials, must have circulated in Padua and elsewhere in Northern Italy, it is quite possible that Rizzo had seen Donatello's *Virgin and Child* (fig. 3).¹²

Rizzo could have been to Padua and may have also studied drawings of Donatello's work. Although he did not adopt its architectural setting, he did use Donatello's characteristic *schacciato* technique ('impressed' bas-relief). The *schacciato* clouds confirm that Rizzo must have been familiar with Donatello's work.¹³

Fig. 3
AFTER DONATELLO,
Virgin and Child,
mid-fifteenth
century.
Polychromed and
gilded plaster,
48 x 33 cm. London,
Victoria and
Albert Museum,
inv. no. 7385-1861.



Fig. 4

Back of Rizzo's *tondo*: the lines indicate where the sawing reached in working the piece of marble. Photo: Frits Scholten.

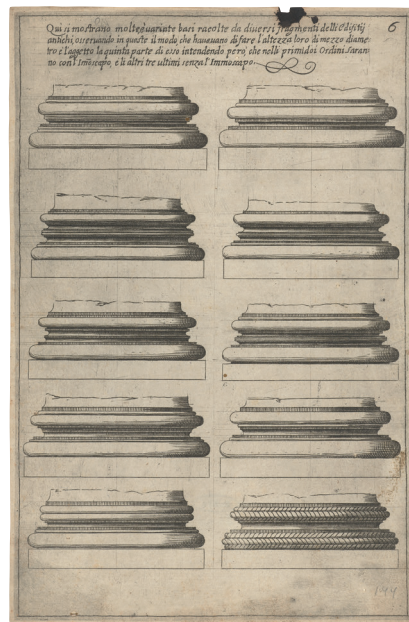


Fig. 5

GIOVANNI BATTISTA MONTANO, *Two Rows of Five Column Bases*, 1636. Engraving on paper, 278 x 180 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. RP-P-1965-475; purchased with the support of the F.G. Waller-Fonds.

While Donatello's sculptures enjoyed fame all over Italy, Rizzo's *tondo* must have been well known at least in Venice. Aside from the example now in the Rijksmuseum, there are two other versions after his *tondo* in the city. Both are not free-standing but built into a wall, and one of them is square, not round.¹⁴

Possible Placement

Although the design of the Rijksmuseum *tondo* bears a strong resemblance to the reliefs made in Donatello's workshop, the marble sculpture is considerably larger. For this reason and because of the associated weight, it is likely that Rizzo's *tondo* was built in and did not hang above a door or on a wall as smaller devotional pieces often did. The depth of the relief, with the image placed obliquely in the frame, means that the composition shows to best effect when seen from below, *di sotto in sù*, and from a distance of several metres. This suggests that the *tondo* was originally placed at a height of four or five metres, perhaps as part of a tall portal or a tomb.

The rough outer edge points to the possibility that the *tondo* had indeed been cemented in. This makes it all the more remarkable that the reverse has a decorative moulded edge tapering towards the back (fig. 4). Viewed from the side it looks like part of the base of a classical column (fig. 5). It may have been a *spolium*, a re-used piece of material from an old Roman building. Another possibility is that the base was damaged on the construction site and rejected as unsuitable to support a column. A spring on the back, caused by the careless use of a stone saw, is a further indication of re-use.

The tomb of Cardinal Rainaldo Brancaccio in the Sant'Angelo a Nilo Church in Naples (fig. 6) gives an impression of how Rizzo's *tondo* might have been positioned if it was part of a funerary monument.¹⁵ Brancaccio's tomb is the result of a collaboration between Donatello and Michelozzo (1396-1472). They were probably given the commission in 1425, almost twenty years before Donatello settled in Padua. The monument was made in Pisa and taken to Naples by boat.¹⁶ Vasari praises it in his *Lives*.¹⁷

What is striking here is that the sculpted Virgin and Child is roughly the same size and the relief about the same depth as Rizzo's *tondo*. It is positioned at a height of about five metres, immediately above the statue of the cardinal on his sarcophagus. The similarity in size and depth of the Neapolitan relief suggests that Rizzo's *tondo* would originally have been placed at a similar height. The position in the Brancaccio monument above the *gisant* of the cardinal relates to the Virgin's role as intermediary between the deceased and Christ.¹⁸ The composition of the *tondo* differs, with the child standing to the left of the Virgin, not the right as in the relief on the tomb, but Rizzo's *tondo* may well have played the same symbolic role.

It is not, however, certain that Rizzo's *tondo* really was part of a tomb. It is also possible that the relief was cemented into a lunette above an arch, not an unusual place for Virgin and Child images. One example is the door of the Chiesa della Madonna di Cittadella in Piombino (fig. 7). The lunette is a composite of a Virgin *tondo* and three other reliefs. The *tondo* is attributed to Andrea Guardi (c. 1405-1476) who spent some time in Donatello and Michelozzo's workshop when the two collaborated on the Brancaccio tomb. It can clearly be seen that the sides of Guardi's *tondo* were cut vertically so that it would butt up with the two flanking reliefs, which were made by an assistant.¹⁹

A last possibility is that the *tondo* was built into an outside wall in a public space, as is the case with the two other versions of Rizzo's work that are in Venice. The absence of any signs of weathering makes this unlikely, however.

Although not all the questions raised by Antonio Rizzo's *tondo* have been answered, most particularly its original location, what is clear is that this graceful piece of sculpture is of



Fig. 6
DONATELLO AND
MICHELOZZO,
*Tomb of Cardinal
Rainaldo Brancaccio*,
c. 1425-27.

Part gilded and
polychromed marble,
907 x 387 cm.
Naples, Sant'Angelo
a Nilo.



Fig. 7
Attributed to Andrea
Guardi, *Lunette with
Madonna and Child
Flanked by Two
Angels*, c. 1460-65.
Marble, 113 x 56 cm.
Piombino, Chiesa
della Madonna di
Cittadella.

considerable art historical value. Not only is it one of the earliest examples of pure Renaissance style in Venetian sculpture and one of the few sculpted Virgin and Child *tondi* made in that city, it is also a good illustration of the influence exerted by Donatello and his workshop in the Veneto until well into the second half of the *Quattrocento*.

Vasari perhaps put the relationship between the two sculptors most tellingly when he wrote: 'In short, it may be said that every man who has sought to do good work in relief since the death of Donato [Donatello], has been his disciple.'²⁰

NOTES

* With thanks to Frits Scholten who drew this subject to my attention.

- 1 On long-term loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) to the Rijksmuseum (inv. no. BK-2016-101). Rizzo's *tondo* was in the stairwell of the Villa Carlotti-Canossa (Caprino Veronese) until around 1920. On an old photograph

there is a note that a Venetian art dealer had been granted an export permit for the *tondo* in 1922, see Francesco Negri Arnoldi, 'Bellano e Bertoldo nella bottega di Donatello', *Prospettiva. Rivista di storia dell'arte antica e moderna* 33-36 (1983-84), pp. 93-101, esp. p. 101, note 31. In 1929 Planiscig mentioned the *tondo* as being in a private collection in Amsterdam, almost certainly

- referring to the collection of the banker Fritz Mannheimer, in whose 1935 inventory the piece is listed, see Leo Planiscig, 'Pietro Lombardi ed alcuni bassirilievi Veneziani del '400, *Dedalo: rassegna d'arte* 10 (1929-30), vol. 2, pp. 460-81; Otto von Falke, *Katalog der Sammlung F[rutz] M[annheimer]*, 1935-36 (typescript in Rijksmuseum Library), p. 149. For a recent overview of the provenance and literature see Frits Scholten in 'Recent Acquisitions', *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 65 (2017), no. 2, pp. 209-10; Anne Markham Schulz, *The History of Venetian Renaissance Sculpture, ca. 1400-1530*, vol. 1, Turnhout 2017, p. 169; Henk van Os, 'Renaissance per e-mail', in *Kunstzinnig. Verzamelde columns*, The Hague 2017, pp. 134-36.
- 2 The *tondo* is attributed to Rizzo on the basis of stylistic similarities to some of his other work. The design of the clothes as well as the anatomy (the hands and face), in particular, are very like another Virgin and Child relief by Rizzo in the San Marco in Venice. An account dating from 1469 confirms that Rizzo was the maker of the latter relief. It is likely that the *tondo* in the Rijksmuseum was made around the same time as the relief in San Marco (c. 1465); Anne Markham Schulz, *Antonio Rizzo: Sculptor and Architect*, New Jersey 1983, pp. 26, 138, 168-69; Schulz 2017 (note 1), p. 169.
 - 3 For this development see Roberta J.M. Olson, *The Florentine Tondo*, Oxford 2000, pp. 22-31, 86-89.
 - 4 Olson 2000 (note 3), pp. 75-80, 83-84; Peter Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior 1400-1600*, London 1991, pp. 252, 261, 264.
 - 5 Examples of *tondi* incorporated in tombs include the monument of Leonardo Bruni (1444) in Florence made by Bernardo Rossellino and the one of Maria of Aragon (1488-90) in Naples made by Benedetto da Maiano. See Olson 2000 (note 3), pp. 141-42. Although the term *tondo* can refer in principle to all circular works of art, a distinction is often made between *tondi* and roundels. The difference is that *tondi* are free-standing and roundels are part of a larger ensemble or built in. See Olson 2000 (note 3), p. 2.
 - 6 Olson 2000 (note 3), pp. 158-61; Schulz 1983 (note 2), pp. 26-27.
 - 7 John Pope-Hennessy, *Donatello Sculptor*, New York/London/Paris 1993, pp. 194-209.
 - 8 Pope-Hennessy 1993 (note 7), pp. 194-200, 211-24.
 - 9 Davide Banzato et al. (eds.), *Mantegna e Padova. 1445-1460*, Milan 2006, pp. 115-17; Martha Levine Dunkelman, 'Donatello's Influence on Mantegna's Early Narrative Scenes', *The Art Bulletin* 62 (1980), no. 2 (June), pp. 226-35.
 - 10 Beatrice Paolozzi et al. (eds.), *The Springtime of the Renaissance: Sculpture and the Arts in Florence 1400-60*, exh. cat. Florence (Palazzo Strozzi)/Paris (Musée du Louvre) 2013, pp. 181-86; Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (Gaston de Vere, trans., David Ekserdjian, ed.), London 1996, pp. 372-73.
 - 11 Schulz 1983 (note 2), pp. 3-46; Schulz 2017 (note 1), pp. 151-75.
 - 12 There are three other versions, in the Victoria and Albert Museum (London, inv. no. 7385-1861), the Wallace Collection (London, inv. no. S297) and the Bode-Museum (Berlin, inv. no. 3044); Schulz 1983 (note 2), pp. 26-27; Negri Arnoldi 1983-84 (note 1), pp. 99-101.
 - 13 Examples of the *schacciato* relief employed by Donatello in Virgin and Child depictions are the *Pazzi-Madonna* (Berlin, Bode-Museum, inv. no. 51), the *Madonna of the Clouds* (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 17.1470), and the *Assumption of the Virgin* (Naples, Sant'Angelo a Nilo, Brancaccio Tomb; see fig. 6).
 - 14 The round relief is in the Rio di S. Marcuola and the square example (without the angel and clouds in the background) is in the inner courtyard of the Palazzo della Canonica; see Schulz 1983 (note 2), p. 139.
 - 15 Scholten 2017 (note 1), p. 209.
 - 16 Ronald W. Lightbown, *Donatello and Michelozzo: An Artistic Partnership and its Patrons in the Early Renaissance*, vol. 1, London 1980, pp. 88-89.
 - 17 Vasari 1996 (note 10), p. 370; Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori: Nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568* (Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, eds.), 6 vols., Florence 1966-87, vol. 3, p. 213: 'Fece ancora, e fu mandata a Napoli, una sepoltura di marmo per uno arcivescovo, che è in S. Angelo di Saggio di Nido, ... e nel corpo della cassa è una storia di basso rilievo sì bella che infinite lode se le convengono.'
 - 18 Lightbown 1980 (note 16), p. 103.
 - 19 Gabriele Donati, *Andrea Guardi. Uno scultore di costa nell'Italia del Quattrocento*, Pisa 2015, pp. 50-54, 129-35, 197.
 - 20 Vasari 1996 (note 10), p. 376; Vasari 1966-87 (note 17), vol. 3, pp. 223-24: 'Et insomma dopo la morte di lui [Donatello] si può dire che suo discepolo sia stato chiunque ha voluto far bene di rilievo.'