

Vasari on “rilievo schiacciato”—Some Reflections in the Light of Donatello’s Reliefs

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Vasari discusses three kinds of relief sculptures in the technical preface “Della Scultura” of the *Vite*—“mezzo rilievo” (high relief), “basso rilievo” (low relief) and “rilievo schiacciato”. While his definitions of the first two are quite clear, his definition of “rilievo schiacciato” is vague. In addition, Vasari points out that Donatello’s relief works embody the quintessential nature of “rilievo schiacciato”. How to understand Vasari’s statements of “rilievo schiacciato” in context of Donatello’s reliefs concerns not only the clarification of Vasari’s controversial definition of the third kind of relief sculpture, but also a more adequate interpretation of Donatello’s relief works.

This essay begins with the exposition of Vasari’s accounts of the above-mentioned three kinds of relief sculpture. By the different degrees of plastic projection from the relief ground we see a clear distinction between “mezzo rilievo” and “basso rilievo”; however, the distinction between “basso rilievo” and “rilievo schiacciato” is not so obvious. In the literal sense, the plastic projection of “rilievo schiacciato” is lower than “basso rilievo”; while in fact, the lowness or even flatness of the plastic projection from the relief ground should not be taken as the most significant feature of “rilievo schiacciato”. Instead, Vasari’s emphasis on the character of “disegno” in “rilievo schiacciato” reveals more information about his intention to coin this new term of relief. “Disegno” is the basic concept of Vasari’s historical construction of the Italian Renaissance art; also, it is Vasari’s aim to establish “disegno” as the all-embracing idea for art *per se*. Vasari’s intention to make “rilievo schiacciato” the embodiment of the concept “disegno” in relief sculpture clearly demonstrates his consistent assertion of the significance of “disegno” in every field of the visual arts.

Since Vasari characterizes “rilievo schiacciato” in connection with Donatello’s relief sculpture, it is meaningful to investigate Vasari’s statements in light of Donatello’s reliefs. First of all we shall clarify whether it is really Donatello’s intention to create a new kind of relief like “rilievo schiacciato”. According to the evidence from many historical documents it is clear that in the fifteenth century “rilievo” was a general artistic term from the

workshop and was used to describe all projective plasticity of depicted figures and objects in painting and sculpture. The relief work in our sense was described in Donatello's time as "historia", "nostra donna col bambino", "tondo" etc. In fact, "relief" as a subcategory of sculpture is to be found for the first time in Vasari's *Vite*. Since it is Vasari's intention, not Donatello's ambition, to assert relief as an independent kind of sculpture, it seems ahistorical to interpret the originality of Donatello's relief sculpture as his striving to create a new kind of relief.

Furthermore, Donatello's endeavor to explore the potential expressiveness of (very) low relief is to be understood in the light of his studies of Ghiberti's bronze reliefs and the Sienese art. Some of Ghiberti's reliefs on the North Door of the Florentine Baptistery did reveal Ghiberti's endeavor to create with very low relief the spatial scenery for narrative on the relief ground. In the Sienese art of the fourteenth century there are numerous examples of low relief sculpture as well. In addition, the Sienese sculptor Jacopo della Quercia—Donatello's contemporary—is a capable master of (very) low relief.

Hoping to provide a new understanding of Donatello's relief sculpture instead of labeling it with the much disputed term of "rilievo schiacciato", I point out three features of Donatello's relief sculpture in the last chapter: (1) "continuous narrative"—the elaborately shaped spatial scenery for dramatic narration, (2) "optical correction"—taking the viewer's standing point into consideration instead of one-sided concentration on linear perspective system, and (3) active visual perception—stimulating the viewer's emotional involvement in the depicted scene.

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