





# BERTOLDO

## DI GIOVANNI

The Renaissance of Sculpture in Medici Florence

AIMEE NG

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# REFRAMING BERTOLDO AND HIS LEGACY

ALEXANDER J. NOELLE

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Long described as a disciple of Donatello (ca. 1386–1466) and tutor of Michelangelo (1475–1564), the Florentine sculptor Bertoldo di Giovanni (ca. 1440–1491) purportedly facilitated an almost hereditary transfer of creative genius between the great sculptors of the Early and High Renaissance. In the process of establishing continuity, Bertoldo’s own artistic identity was suppressed to provide a more pure inheritance; as a result, his oeuvre and contribution to the art of his time were largely overlooked. In 1895, however, he was rediscovered by art historian Wilhelm von Bode<sup>1</sup> who, after decades developing his thoughts, published the first monograph on the sculptor in 1925.<sup>2</sup> The book, however, focused primarily on Bertoldo’s relationship with his patron, Lorenzo de’ Medici, “il Magnifico” (1449–1492), the de facto ruler of Florence from 1469 until his death and one of the city’s leading commissioners of artwork. In early twentieth-century studies, Bertoldo seems to have been consigned to the status of ancillary figure to the great names of the Renaissance: Donatello, Michelangelo, and Lorenzo.

Despite renewed interest in Bertoldo—initiated by Bode and reinvigorated, more recently, by the scholarship produced around the five hundredth anniversary of the death of Lorenzo—the sculptor remains an elusive figure.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have proposed numerous theories in their attempt to reconcile Bertoldo’s privileged position in Laurentian Florence with his relatively small known production.<sup>4</sup> One

Bertoldo di Giovanni, *Mehmed II* (1433–1481), ca. 1480 (cat. 15a, rev.)



went so far as to say that Bertoldo may have been the illegitimate son of Giovanni di Cosimo de' Medici (1421–1463) and therefore Lorenzo's cousin, though this has been disproven.<sup>5</sup> In 1992, James David Draper published the first book to focus on Bertoldo since Bode's earlier volume; in it, he reduced Bode's original checklist of the artist's work substantially.<sup>6</sup> There has been no critical reassessment of Bertoldo since.

To understand more fully the nature of Bertoldo's artistic practice and his relationship with Lorenzo, it is necessary to return to the sculptures themselves, as well as to the period documentation, significantly more of which has been unearthed since both Bode's and Draper's publications. The artworks and archival materials reveal much about Bertoldo's personal and artistic origins, the patronage he received over the course of his career, and his collaborations with other artists. Through the examination of these texts and objects, Bertoldo can finally be appreciated in his own right, his artistic identity no longer overshadowed but, rather, enhanced by his connections to Donatello, Michelangelo, and Lorenzo.

## OEUVRE

Bertoldo's surviving work comprises six bronze statuettes, five bronze reliefs, six medals, one polychrome statue, one terracotta frieze, and a series of stucco reliefs.<sup>7</sup> The only securely attributed objects, however, are the two that are signed: the *Bellerophon Taming Pegasus* statuette (cat. 6) and the Mehmed II medal (fig. 1), inscribed "The work of Bertoldo Florentine sculptor."<sup>8</sup> On the basis of Quattrocento and Cinquecento documentation, the *Orpheus* statuette (cat. 1), the *Crucifixion* and *Battle* reliefs (cats. 10, 11), and the Pazzi Conspiracy medal (cat. 14) can almost certainly be attributed to Bertoldo.<sup>9</sup> These six works, different in size, type, and iconography, form the cardinal points against which further attributions to Bertoldo can be assessed; the identifying characteristics of Bertoldo's artistic practice are discernible from these reliefs, medals, and statuettes.

Bertoldo revels in the articulation of nude, muscular forms, especially in twisting, unnatural poses. His male figures—whether in relief or cast in the round—tend to be heroic in stature, with broad faces, large almond eyes, brawny builds, and widely spaced hand grips. They have distinctive tight curls of hair and, often,



Fig. 1. Bertoldo di Giovanni, *Mehmed II* (1433–1481), ca. 1480 (detail, cat. 15b, rev.)

delicately chased pubic hair. Appearing only in medals and reliefs, Bertoldo's female figures also have a standardized depiction of hair; their long, flowing locks swirl around their heads and bodies, often defying gravity to express emotion. The women's bodies are soft and gently curved, typically wrapped in loose fabric that, like their hair, occasionally floats. While they are less muscular than Bertoldo's male figures, the women share a certain broadness. In his medals, Bertoldo scales down his bold figures but retains their robust presence. His compelling reverses are filled with diminutive characters enacting complex scenes in compressed spaces.<sup>10</sup> Across different objects and media, and through reinterpretations of antique examples, Bertoldo's sculptures are characterized by all'antica inspiration, modernized with an intriguing degree of lyrical, almost poetic, stylization of figures.

More than a century of scholarship has resulted in the addition to Bertoldo's oeuvre of fourteen works, predominantly in bronze, based on their similarities to the primary six. Works in other media, including a polychrome statue (cat. 18), as well as reliefs in terracotta (cat. 19) and stucco (see figs. 115–26), are also now given to Bertoldo. Bode's 1925 volume had added to the production of the sculptor considerably since his more restrained 1895 article, encompassing a mass of objects of markedly different quality.<sup>11</sup> Few of these attributions stand. Draper's monograph narrowed Bertoldo's output to twenty-one objects, taking into account the scholarship of the intervening decades. The corpus has been reassessed in this publication, and Draper's attributions stand with one exception: the *St. John the Baptist* at the Musée du Louvre (see fig. 211), originally given to Bertoldo by Draper himself. The facture of the *St. John* may correspond to that of Bertoldo's statuettes, but the physiognomy of the gaunt hermit is quite distant from his typically brawny rendering of the male



form.<sup>12</sup> The figure is also far removed from Bertoldo's depiction of a similar hermit saint, the St. Jerome at the left edge of the *Crucifixion* relief (cat. 10). The statuette does, however, have parallels with the polychrome *St. Jerome* (cat. 18), given here, tentatively, to Donatello and Bertoldo, its own attribution insecure.<sup>13</sup> The bronze statuette was unable to travel to the exhibition and thus cannot be judged against the sculptures on view and upon which its attribution to Bertoldo depends. Clearly, Bertoldo produced more—perhaps many more—than these twenty (or twenty-one) objects. The damaged bronze *St. Jerome*, formerly in Berlin, may be the statuette of the saint listed in the same document as the *Orpheus* (see fig. 83);<sup>14</sup> Bertoldo may have created a smaller version of the *Orpheus*, reworked to ascribe to the iconography of Apollo (see fig. 190);<sup>15</sup> and a bronze centaur by him, recorded in Palazzo Medici, for example, is now lost, as are the two gilded wooden angels he completed for the cathedral of Florence.<sup>16</sup>

Bertoldo may not have executed each of the objects now attributed to him in their final materials, as is inscribed on the *Bellerophon*,<sup>17</sup> but he is credited with modeling their original form. The facture and materials differ, but the motifs, physiognomy, and style across media are consistent. The concept of Bertoldo as a designer, modeler, and frequent collaborator is substantiated in the archival documents that detail his life and artistic practice, regardless of patron.

## ORIGINS AND TRAINING

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the date of Bertoldo's birth has been debated. Most scholars agreed on a date in the 1420s,<sup>18</sup> largely because of Giorgio Vasari's claim that when Bertoldo was the curator and teacher in Lorenzo's sculpture garden on Piazza San Marco, acquired by 1475, he was so "old" that he "could no longer work."<sup>19</sup> Bertoldo died in December 1491, so a birth date in the 1420s would be reasonable if he were the elderly instructor that Vasari envisaged; the life expectancy for Florentine men was about sixty, with few living past the age of seventy. In 2005, however, Lorenz Böniger and Luca Boschetto's publication of previously unknown documents related to the sculptor's family resulted in a new chronology of Bertoldo's early life.<sup>20</sup> He was born to immigrants, working-class wool weavers who lived in the German community in Florence's Oltrarno neighborhood.

His father was Giovanni di Bertoldo della Magna, whose surname identifies him as a native of southern Germany.<sup>21</sup> Giovanni had a leadership role in their community as a captain of the confraternity of Santa Caterina del Carmine, the membership of which consisted exclusively of weavers from the “Magnia Alta,” the same region as Bertoldo’s father. Neither Bertoldo nor his family were considered Florentine citizens; they were therefore ineligible for public office and exempt from communal taxes, which they did not pay, though many foreigners in their position did.<sup>22</sup> Given the paucity of documents mentioning Bertoldo before 1463—perhaps related, in part, to his non-Florentine status—and the discovery of the ages of his siblings, a later birth date of about 1440 seems probable.

Nothing is known of Bertoldo’s artistic training from contemporaneous documentation, although it seems likely that he trained with Donatello. The only clues to Bertoldo’s early work as an independent artist come from archival sources that identify him simply as a “carver” in 1465.<sup>23</sup> Three months later, however, he is described as someone who “works in bronze” in a legal document resolving his default on a series of rental payments.<sup>24</sup> The resolution was handled, on Bertoldo’s part, by his guarantor Niccolò di Lorenzo Capponi, who detailed the transfer of financial responsibility from himself to Donatello, if and when Bertoldo came into the artist’s employ.<sup>25</sup> For centuries, it had been assumed that Bertoldo was a “disciple of Donatello,” per Vasari, who listed him as one of the inheritors of Donatello’s workshop materials, along with Nanni di Banco, Antonio Rossellino, Desiderio da Settignano, and Bartolomeo Bellano.<sup>26</sup> Vasari also narrated how, having begun work on the *Passion* and *Resurrection* pulpits of San Lorenzo (figs. 2, 3), the master “could not finish them due to old age, and so Bertoldo, his pupil, finished them to the utmost perfection.”<sup>27</sup> He clarified further, writing that “[Donatello] left his pupil Bertoldo all of his work to complete, particularly the bronze pulpits of San Lorenzo that were, by him, finished in great part and brought to the state in which they can be seen today in that church.”<sup>28</sup> Bertoldo also identified himself as a “disciple of Donatello” in a letter of 1479 to his patron, Lorenzo.<sup>29</sup>

A lack of clarity remains regarding the relationship between Donatello and Bertoldo, although they were at least expected to work together, as evidenced by the legal proceedings from 1466. Before the discovery of this document, a connection between the two sculptors was presumed from Vasari’s and Bertoldo’s explicit statements (not to mention the stylistic parallels in their work). However, their association must be viewed in the context of Vasari’s desire to create a direct



Fig. 2. Donatello (ca. 1386–1466), *The Passion Pulpit*, ca. 1461–66. Bronze, 55 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 125 $\frac{1}{4}$  × 68 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (140 × 319.5 × 174 cm). San Lorenzo, Florence





Fig. 3. Donatello (ca. 1386–1466), *The Resurrection Pulpit*, ca. 1461–66. Bronze, 55 $\frac{1}{8}$  × 125 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 68 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (140 × 319.5 × 174 cm). San Lorenzo, Florence

## 3

BERTOLDO DI GIOVANNI

**Shield Bearer, ca. 1470–80**

Gilt medium zinc brass, h. 8⅞ in. (22.5 cm)  
The Frick Collection, New York (1916.2.03)

Wilhelm von Bode rediscovered and published the *Shield Bearer* currently in the collections of the Prince of Liechtenstein in 1895, attributing it to Bertoldo based on its similarities with the *Battle* relief (cat. 11), a documented work, and especially with the flanking figure at the relief's far right.<sup>1</sup> A decade later, he did the same for its pendant, now in The Frick Collection, when it resurfaced in Florence.<sup>2</sup> Upon first learning of the Frick statuette, however, Bode considered it to be a forgery based on descriptions of the Liechtenstein bronze that made the two statuettes seem identical.<sup>3</sup> Photographs quickly persuaded him otherwise, and the two statuettes have been attributed to Bertoldo ever since.

The *Shield Bearers* appear, upon first glance, to be mirror images, yet numerous differences mark each as a distinct individual. Both statuettes show nude men supporting shields while clutching clubs, vines of ivy or wine leaves wind around their waists, garlands are woven through their hair, and both turn to look over their shoulders in opposite directions. The correspondences, however, end here. The Frick bronze depicts a clean-shaven and slender figure younger than his Liechtenstein counterpart, who is bearded and brawny. Upon close inspection of the Frick statuette's face, two small, curving horns can be observed emerging from his tussled locks, a detail absent from the Liechtenstein bronze. On the reverse, the Frick bronze sprouts a swishing tail from the base of his spine, and he also has a set of panpipes at his left hip,

## 4

BERTOLDO DI GIOVANNI

**Shield Bearer, ca. 1470–80**

Gilt medium zinc brass, h. 8⅞ in. (22.5 cm)  
Liechtenstein: The Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna (258)

as well as the end loop of his headdress laying across his neck, none of which appear on the pendant figure.

Following Bode's early suggestion that the two *Shield Bearers* flanked the *Hercules on Horseback* (cat. 2) as heraldic wild men, most of the subsequent scholarship identified the two figures as these fantastic human-beast hybrids, acting as honor guards for the equestrian statuette.<sup>4</sup> However, there is no evidence that the three bronzes formed a miniature equestrian monument.<sup>5</sup> In fact, iconographic, technical, and historical evidence confirms that they were not the result of a single commission. Dissociated from the *Hercules on Horseback* statuette, the two *Shield Bearers* can, for the first time, be considered independently.

Bertoldo engaged with the established iconographies of wild men, fauns, and Hercules when devising the two *Shield Bearers*. Neither statuette conforms exactly to any one of these types; the resulting iconographic confusion is apparent in the literature. Since their rediscovery about 1900, the two figures have been assigned titles ranging from "Heraldic Wild Man as Hercules" to "A Faun Disguised as Hercules."<sup>6</sup> The bronzes invite close inspection while the viewer probes their appearance for clues to their identities, which are both suggested and obscured by conflicting details that are revealed as the bronzes are examined, such as the vines of a wild man, the horns and tail of a faun, and the club of Hercules. While it is clear that the two statuettes were conceived as a pair, they do not represent the same species, and the viewer is compelled to consider the relationship between the

two figures in addition to untangling their multivalent identities. Bertoldo seems to have designed the statuettes to invite interrogation, just as he crafted other deliberately ambiguous artworks to intrigue and engage the learned Renaissance mind.<sup>7</sup>

As can be seen in the earliest photographs of the Frick bronze (fig. 192), the shield is not original to the sculpture and the club has been altered. Both were replaced to match the statuette's pendant. The fingers of the Frick statuette's right hand, for example, have been reforged above the modern shield (see fig. 131). As evidenced by photographs, the shield and club top were added about 1907–10.<sup>8</sup> The bottom point of the modern shield, which has broken off from the Liechtenstein original, has been replaced to imitate similar depictions of shield-bearing Herculean figures on contemporaneous panels (fig. 193).<sup>9</sup> The alloys of the top of the club and the shield do not match each

other (or the statuette itself), which suggests that they were added in different campaigns.

The original appearance of the statuettes is unknown, although both were originally gilded, the only statuettes by Bertoldo to be finished in such a way. The intricate chasing also lends the statuettes an air of fine goldsmith's work, and it is likely that the shields once had enamel or precious metal inserts bearing armorial devices nestled inside their raised borders. Displayed as a pair, the statuettes balance harmoniously when the Frick statuette is on the left and the Liechtenstein statuette on the right. In this orientation, their respective shields and heads face outward, their curving classical contrapposto poses are anchored by their weight-bearing inner legs, and the vines draped across the figures create a dynamic diagonal from upper left to lower right, bridging the two independent bronzes (see page 154).



Fig. 192. Plates showing the Frick *Shield Bearer* (from Bode 1907–12, 1: pl. XII)





3

