

Andrea Verrocchio (1435-1488)

Andrea Verrocchio ran one of the most successful studios of Florence and was one of the first truly Renaissance men of Florence. In addition to being a master sculptor and painter, he was also an accomplished musician, scholar and architect. He was the director of the largest botteghe in Florence which, under the patronage of Piero and Lorenzo de' Medici, also became the most successful. He dominated Florentine art after the death of Donatello, who remained *il primo artista* in Florence throughout his life.

Verrocchio's botteghe was renowned for its diversity. For example, his botteghe produced sculptures (in bronze, marble, and wood) paintings, drawings, and forged church bells; they forged the huge ball that crowned Brunelleschi's Dome, and coats of arms for fireplaces, and crafted fine jewelry. He also painted pennants and banners for many jousts and tournaments. It was Verrocchio who painted the dazzling pennant that Lorenzo de' Medici used at the joust in Piazza Santa Croce.

Products of Verrocchio's botteghe were group projects with many apprentices and assistants working with the master. For example, as many as four artists have been suggested as having been involved in the production of the altarpiece The Madonna Enthroned Between John the Baptists and St. Donates. Scholars have suggested that Verrocchio, Lorenzo di Credi, Perugino, and Leonardo da Vinci all worked on the group.⁷² Perhaps the most recognizable painting the studio executed was The Baptism of Christ, in which the young Leonardo da Vinci probably painted an angel and the landscape. Verrocchio was a very private individual and had the reputation of a somewhat harsh master. He pushed his assistants hard, but often underpaid them. For example, when Lorenzo de Credi was paid twelve florins a year when he began to work for Verrocchio.

Life style

Like Donatello, Verrocchio surrounded himself with youthful male apprentices throughout his life. His large botteghe were filled with youthful male apprentices and assistance that lived with him. Furthermore, the only women he seems to have ever occasionally lived with are his step-mother, sisters, and nieces, all of whom he supported. When Verrocchio reached the age of 30, he did not marry. In fact he remained a bachelor his entire life.⁷³ Furthermore, he did not have illegitimate children and, as of yet, no documents have been uncovered that would hint at mistresses, or any sexual involvement with women at all.

Also, Verrocchio was at the very least homo-sociable. He was a member of the coterie of artists and philosophers that centered around Lorenzo de' Medici's Palazzo and villas, and was in regular contact with Ficino, Bertoldo, and Poliziano. For example, at Careggi, where Ficino and the neoplatonists often met, Verrocchio executed a bronze Putto with Dolphin for a fountain.⁷⁴ And, some of the apprentices who lived in Verrocchio's botteghe were sodomites, which will be further discussed under legal evidence.

Contemporary Sources

Verrocchio had strong connections with his favorite apprentice, Lorenzo Di Credi, according to Vasari, "But most of all Andrea loved Lorenzo di Credi".⁷⁵ By 1475, Lorenzo di Credi (1457-1536) was living in Verrocchio's botteghe and they collaborated on the Bishop of Pistoia's memorial. di Credi soon became a senior partner in botteghe and ran much of the daily business with Verrocchio's brother Tommaso. Although certainly talented, as can be

clearly seen in the panel Life of St. Donatus of Arzzo in Worcester Massachusetts, Lorenzo di Credi was not among the artists that Vasari included in Lives of the Artists. Also, he was strongly religious and also never married ⁷⁶.

Vasari also recorded di Credi's almost hysterical reaction to Verrocchio's death. Verrocchio went to Venice around 1480 to execute his equestrian masterpiece Colleoni, a memorial to Bartolommeo da Bergamo. (Colleoni has been compared and contrasted with Donatello's Gattamelata ever since.) In 1488 at the age of 45, Verrocchio passed away while working on this commission. He had requested that his remains be buried in Venice, but instead, Lorenzo Di Credi had his remains brought back to Florence. They were buried in Verrocchio's family crypt at Santo Ambrogio.⁷⁷

Artist's Writings

As of yet, no diary or letters concerning his sexuality are available to this inquiry.

Demographic Evidence

The botteghe of Andrea Verrocchio and Lorenzo di Credi was located in the area that was the center of sodomite activity of Florence. Their studio/living quarters were actually Donatello's and Bertoldo's old botteghe, located behind the Duomo.⁷⁸ Again, his front door was within a leisurely three minute walk to the doors of San Lorenzo, the parish with the highest incidents of sodomy in all of Florence. The Old Market Place and the infamous Street of the Furriers were also within a few minutes stroll. The Street of the Furriers was renowned for "...men who usually frequent this place around this hour[night time] in order to engage in the vice of sodomy..."⁷⁹ The St. George niche was even closer, perhaps a two minute walk.

Furthermore, botteghe were places where sodomitical behavior occurred in Renaissance Florence. Rocke estimates that 2,550 accusations of sodomy brought to the attention of the Officers came from botteghe or other workplaces. In all botteghe and workplaces were responsible for 15% of the total accusations investigated by Office of the Night. Take the case of the candle maker Francesco di Giuliano Benintendi who “not only sodomized a boy in his shop but keeps a bed [there], and encourages this business in his shop. His shop is always full of boys.” complained a concerned citizen⁸⁰.

Verrocchio’s botteghe was particularly large in the number of apprentices and assistants that he employed. Which would increase the chance that sodomy could occur. Moreover, citizens denounced some of Verrocchio's apprentices for engaging in sodomy.

Legal Evidence

The Office of the Night records show that citizens thought sodomy was occurred in Verrocchio’s botteghe. Throughout the late 1470’s several members of his staff were denounced as sodomites. For example, Leonardo da Vinci was named in 1476. This has prompted some historians to believe that Leonardo found not only a sympathetic ear with Verrocchio but also a bed. Martin Kemp speculates, “It may have been that a special bond of friendship [exists] Y between the brilliantly attractive student and his unmarried master”.⁸¹

Not surprisingly, most of these charges against Verrocchio’s students went unfounded. As discussed previously, these allegations were made during the downswing of the conviction rate. As Lorenzo de Medici secured his position, the conviction rate steadily decreased from its height in 1472 until its historic low point throughout the 1480's⁸². So it is statistically less likely that an Officers would obtain a conviction.

Also, by the late 1470's, the botteghe was associated with Lorenzo il Magnifico. This association would probably make it less likely that an Officer would vigorously investigate charges. As I discussed under "Donatello", the Signoria had intervened when prominent citizens' reputations were at stake. Also, in the case of Lorenzo's other associates, allegations of sodomy simply disappear while he was in power, only to reappear after his death. Thus, Verrocchio who died five years earlier, had protection throughout his life.

Furthermore, in cases of sodomy Officers were often hesitant to investigate accusations against any citizen of "good social standing". They were not particularly diligent when any member of a successful families reputation was at stake and usually concerned themselves with lower classes of society. Even if a diligent Officer pressed to conviction a member of a successful family, other Officers often blotted out the convicted's name in the register. These "slips of the ink" still hide many successful men's identities today⁸³.

More telling legal evidence is Verrocchio's last will and testament. He passed up his many relations to name Lorenzo di Credi executor and heir to most of his estate. Although Verrocchio had no children, he did have living relations including Tommaso and at least three nieces, all of whom Verrocchio had supported. Furthermore, unlike Donatello he was on good terms with his relations. Tommaso had been involved in Verrocchio's botteghe since its founding and remained a working manger. The family members were provided for in the will, but Lorenzo di Credi received the bulk of the estate, including the botteghe.⁸⁴

Again, people then as now usually left their possessions to those who were closest to them. Some historians argue that Verrocchio was just leaving his possessions to a talented young man, who would carry out his work. Perhaps, but Lorenzo di Credi, though a master, was certainly not Verrocchio's most talented student. Leonardo da Vinci would have that honor.

Furthermore, Verrocchio seems to have bequeathed not only professional items to Lorenzo di Credi, but also some very personal items. As seen in another piece of legal evidence, Tommaso and di Credi were arguing over these. In a tribunal action dated November 5, 1490 Tommaso is demanding that Lorenzo di' Credi hand over, among other things, Verrocchio's lute and bible.⁸⁵ Even if one could accept the unlikely thesis of passing the studio on to another artist, how could one explain a battle over a lute? I believe this legal battle illustrates a particularly strong bond between Verrocchio and di Credi that went beyond a professional relationship.

Homoerotic art

The products of Verrocchio's botteghe existent are not homo-erotic, although some were executed for the neoplatonists. The lack of homoerotic art would be explained by di Credi's actions after Andrea's death. He narrowed the botteghe's style specializing in religious subjects and personal portraits. Once the creator of Venus, he now turned to madonnas, nativities and annunciations. This had a detrimental effect of the botteghe, which soon lost much business.

By the late 1490's di Credi joined Fra Savonarola's movement. Savonarola preached a return to purer medieval times and against sodomy. The Fra rejected the new ideas of the Renaissance and held Bonfires of the Vanities in 1497 and 1498. Di Credi attended these meetings and threw Verrocchio's homoerotic paintings and drawings into the flames.⁸⁶

Summary Verrocchio

Verrocchio was probably a sodomite. His lifestyle points in that direction and illustrates at least homosociable. His studio was located in the center of sodomitical activity; it was

actually Donatello's and Bertoldo's old studio. Furthermore, botteghe were responsible for over two thousand cases of sodomy, of which a few of which come from his. Some historians argue that he had a sexual relationship with Da Vinci, ignoring the brunt of legal evidences which point to de Credi. His reaction to Verrocchio's death shows a strong bond between them which is supported by the will. Lorenzo di Credi continued to work in the botteghe, but soon turned away from the Pagan aspects of the Renaissance. He never married and threw their homoerotic art into the Bonfires.

Another artist who enjoyed the Fra's sermons, was youthful Michelangelo. Even in his old age Michelangelo as he painted the Last Judgement would recall the thunder of Savonarolla's sermons. Perhaps that memory intensified the gloomy, torn personality of the artist.