



Andrea Bacchi

**“Rinascimento
privato”**

**The Adventures of a Renaissance Sculpture:
Antonio Minello's Apollo
from Padua to Rome and Vienna**

“This remarkable Carrara marble relief, in actual fact a 45 cm high figure carved almost wholly in the round, with a non-coeval giallo antico marble frame and standing out starkly against black marble slab, is a masterpiece of Renaissance sculpture [...] The statue’s unique quality is not due solely to the rarity of such works which bear lofty witness to the civilisation of humanism in northern Italy and to the mood in the great 15th and 16th century courts of the Po Valley such as Ferrara and Mantua, but also to its collecting history which we are extremely fortunate in being able to trace thanks to archive documents and to references in written works.”



**THE ADVENTURES OF A RENAISSANCE SCULPTURE:
ANTONIO MINELLO'S APOLLO
FROM PADUA TO ROME AND VIENNA**



MARQUIS COSTANZO PATRIZI
(Rome 1590 - 1624)



COUNT GRIGORIJ STROGANOFF
(St. Petersburg 1829 - Paris 1910)



CAMILLO CASTIGLIONI
(Trieste 1879 - Rome 1957)



GIUSEPPE SANGIORGI
(Massa Lombarda 1850 - Rome 1928)

*“Antonio de Minelo
sculptore famosissimo”*





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Antonio Minello (Padua 1465 ca - Venice 1529)

Apollo (detail)

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L’Apollo di Antonio Minello dalla Padova umanistica
alla Roma barocca e umbertina fino alla Vienna degli anni Venti
Italian Text



“Rinascimento privato”

**The Adventures of a Renaissance Sculpture:
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INTRODUCTION

This remarkable Carrara marble relief, in actual fact a 77 cm. high figure carved almost wholly in the round, with a non-coeval *giallo antico* marble frame and standing out starkly against black marble slab, is a masterpiece of Renaissance sculpture which, while known to scholars for quite some time, has been largely overlooked by modern critics. Published for the first time in the early 20th century, the *Apollo* reappeared on the antique market for the last time in 1965 before sinking once again below the waterline. It resurfaced only very recently thanks to Shelley Zuraw, who drew scholars' attention to it in 2016 when she reproduced it as a piece whose whereabouts were unknown, in an article pessimistically entitled "A Lost Apollo", and attributed it hypothetically to Antonio Minello: a little-known Renaissance sculptor from Padua. The statue's unique quality is not due solely to the rarity of such works which bear lofty witness to the civilisation of humanism in northern Italy and to the mood in the great 15th and 16th century courts of the Po Valley such as Ferrara and Mantua (a world of luxury and erudite sophistication of which Maria Bellonci paints a vivid fresco in her last and most celebrated work, a fictional autobiography of Isabella d'Este published with the evocative title of *Private Renaissance* in 1985), but also to its collecting history which we are extremely fortunate in being able to trace thanks to archive documents and to references in written works. The *Apollo* attributed to Minello, which was probably carved in Padua at the time when humanism infused the cultural climate that flourished in and around the city's *Studio* or university, and may well have once belonged to some learned collector in Venice or at the court of the Este or the Gonzaga, or in one of the university cities such as Padua itself or Bologna, is known to have been part of the collection of Costanzo Patrizi, one of the shrewdest patrons of the arts in early Baroque Rome, by the beginning of the 17th century. Another crucial chapter was added to the *Apollo's* important collecting history in the 19th and 20th centuries when it passed into the hands of Russian Count Grigorij Sergeevič Stroganoff,

Antonio Minello
(Padua 1465 ca
- Venice 1529), *Apollo*
Carrara marble, Belgian
black marble,
Giallo Antico marble;
overall height 68 cm

PROVENANCE: Marquis Patrizi
collection, Rome; Count
Gregory Stroganoff
collection, Rome;
Camillo Castiglioni
collection, Vienna;
Collection Camillo
Castiglioni de Vienne,
Sale Frederik Müller & Cie,
Amsterdam, 17-20
November, 1925, n.108;
Sangiorgi collection, Rome;
Private collection,
Montecarlo.



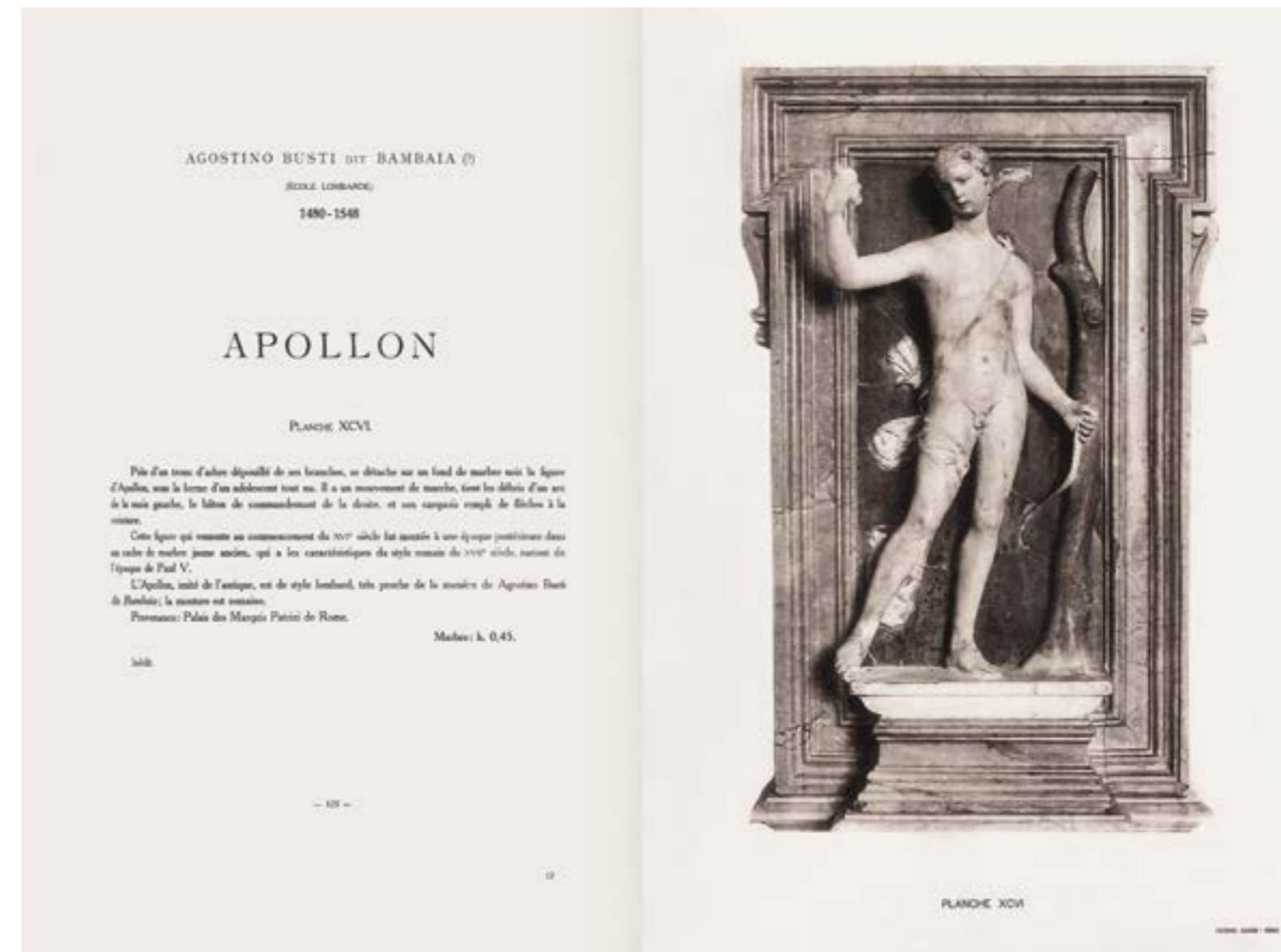
who amassed a vast and absolutely outstanding collection of works of art in Rome. That collection's dispersal after the Count's death sparked something of a controversy, with Roberto Longhi complaining that it was a grievous loss for Italy public heritage. While an important 15th century Flemish tapestry, for example, was bought by the great art dealer Joseph Duveen (1869–1939), the *Apollo*, attributed at the time to Bambaia, went to an extremely wealthy and insatiable central European collector named Camillo Castiglioni, and thus ended up in Vienna. Beset by financial woes, however, Castiglioni was soon to put it up for sale again at a huge auction held in Amsterdam in 1925. Thus the unforeseeable vagaries of history eventually brought the relief into the hands of Giuseppe Sangiorgi (1850–1928), the owner of what was probably the most illustrious art gallery in early 20th century Rome, who had already acquired many of the former Stroganoff collection's other highlights a few years earlier. The Minello *Apollo* today is one of the very few Venetian Renaissance works of private sculpture on a secular theme not to have ended up in a major public collection. Most of the others belong to such leading museums as the Musée du Louvre in Paris or the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the current international popularity of such pieces accurately mirrors the admiration that they have attracted since the early 16th century, when they were eagerly sought by important collectors also in northern Europe.

Given that it was difficult, not to say well nigh impossible, to procure large Classical pieces or even modern originals after Classical works at the time, these marble reliefs carved in Padua (and most probably also in Venice) achieved instant popularity with the most illustrious international patrons thanks to their outstanding quality and to the fact that they were easy to transport, travelling swiftly in their capacity as virtual messengers holding aloft the banner of Renaissance Italy.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Antonio Minello,
Apollo (detail)

“ANTONIO DE MINELO SCULPTORE FAMOSISSIMO”

Discussed and illustrated by Antonio Muñoz in the second volume of the Stroganoff Collection catalogue in 1911, the *Apollo* (Fig. 1) was instantly identified as a work of the Lombard-Venetian Renaissance and attributed to Milanese sculptor Agostino Busti, known as Bambaia (Busto Arsizio 1483 – Milan 1548). Recalling the piece’s original provenance from the collection of the Marchesi Patrizi in Rome, Muñoz also remarked that the frame was most probably carved by a workshop in Rome at the end of the 16th century (pointing in particular to the taste prevailing during the reign of Pope Paul V Borghese).¹ Though failing to appear in the sale catalogue when the Stroganoff Collection was auctioned off in Rome in 1925 (at that time, as we shall see, a majority of the collection’s best pieces, undoubtedly including the *Apollo*, had already been sold individually),² the sculpture resurfaced in the sale catalogue of the Castiglioni Collection when that was put up for auction in Vienna late in 1925, and again at the 4th Biennale dell’Antiquariato in Florence in 1965, where it was presented by the Galleria Sangiorgi of Rome, still with an attribution to Bambaia;³ given that it was a work of considerable merit, the *Apollo* was also mentioned, in 1965, in the Florentine magazine “Antichità Viva”.⁴ The attribution to Bambaia appears never to have been entertained too seriously by experts in Lombard sculpture.⁵ Writing in 1990, Maria Teresa Fiorio lists the *Apollo* as one of the works attributed to Bambaia in the past but in connection with which she felt she could not voice an opinion (which is why she does not list it in the previous section containing the works she discusses at some length),⁶ while Giovanni Agosti, writing in the same year, simply mentions it in a footnote with the opinion of Francesco Caglioti, who felt that it might be a 15th century Roman sculpture associated with the artists who worked on the monument to Pope Pius II Piccolomini.⁷ An attribution to Pasquino da Montepulciano is mentioned in an anonymous note on a photograph in the photographic library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence (inv. 92129).⁸ Pasquino da Montepulciano, a Tuscan sculptor (c. 1425/7 – 1485) who was a pupil and assistant of Filarete and who went on to become a “valid second fiddle to the best Florentine Renaissance sculpture”,



was initially close to the followers of Donatello and subsequently of Desiderio da Settignano and of Verrocchio,⁹ but he cannot possibly be considered to have carved this marble *Apollo* because it is a work that reveals beyond all doubt the hand of an artist familiar with the early 16th century style which Vasari called the “modern manner”. Writing in 2006 (and basing his conclusions on the illustrations in Muñoz’s catalogue and in “Antichità Viva”), Vito Zani put forward the name of Marco Sanmicheli, a sculptor recorded in Pavia and Milan between 1495 and 1537 but known to us only from two surviving sculptures.¹⁰ While in this case the time frame was undoubtedly more appropriate, nevertheless the *Apollo* was still being associated – and this, just over ten years ago – with Lombard Renaissance sculpture, essentially on the basis of the initial hypothesis formulated by Muñoz. But then, the relationship between Bambaia’s reliefs in the Classical

1. Antonio Muñoz, *Pièces de choix de la collection du Comte Grégoire Stroganoff à Rome, II, Moyen-âge, renaissance, époque moderne, vol. I, Rome 1911*



2. *Apollo Belvedere*,
Vatican City, Vatican
Museums

OPPOSITE PAGE
Antonio Minello,
Apollo

style and the reliefs in Antonio Lombardo's so-called 'camerino d'alabastro' or alabaster chamber, to which we shall be returning at some length later (and with which our *Apollo* should indeed be associated), is a hypothesis that continues to intrigue scholars to this day.¹¹ And the close ties between Lombard and Venetian sculpture at the turn of the 15th century are abundantly confirmed by the entire career and work of an artist such as Cristoforo Solari, known as Il Gobbo (Milan 1468 – 1524), whose characteristic handling of drapery, with sharp folds closely





3. Nicoletto da Modena,
Apollo Belvedere,
Vienna, Albertina
© Albertina

OPPOSITE PAGE
Antonio Minello,
Apollo (detail)

hugging the body, has much in common with Lombardo's masterpieces.¹²

In her essay published in 2016 and devoted primarily to the relationship between this relief and the *Belvedere Apollo's* (Fig. 2) popularity in the Renaissance, Shelley Zuraw surprisingly fails to discuss the work's attribution, merely reproducing it as "attributed to Antonio Minello."¹³ Zuraw quite rightly set the piece in the context of the small marble reliefs depicting mythological subjects that appear ultimately to have been inspired by the similar and instantly famous reliefs adorning Duke Alfonso I d'Este of Ferrara's (1476 – 1534)