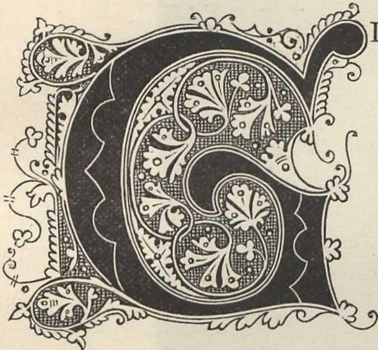
Originalveröffentlichung in: The magazine of art (London), 9 (1886), S. 503-508

THE ROMANCE OF ART.

THE FORGERIES OF BASTIANINI.



GIOVANNI BASTIANINI was born in 1830, at Ponte alla Badia, close to the convent of St. Domenico, between Florence and Fiesole. His father was a poor peasant, living the hard hand-to-mouth existence common to his class in Tuscany; and the boy, during his earliest years, had no prospect of a wider life for himself. A scanty subsistence on dry bread, beans, figs, or water-melons, according to the season, days spent in and out of the stable with a mule or two and a rough pony—the most precious of the family possessions—then, after a time, work in the stone quarries up on the hill-top—this was Giovanni's life till he reached his thirteenth year. Of education, properly so called, he had none; but he must have very soon opened his eyes to the beauty and wonder of changing human expression, and made some attempt at giving form to his ideas, for we hear that at thirteen years old he attracted the notice of Professor Inghirami, who was then printing his work on the Etruscans. Seeing evident traces of talent in the boy, he took him into his printing-office, where he learnt the elements of drawing. Later on he was employed as "facchino" and errand boy by the sculptor Torrini, and in his studio, though Giovanni's mission was merely to sweep the floor or other such menial work, he began to manipulate the clay, and even surreptitiously to work at bits of marble. He had no definite teaching from Torrini. The technical part of the work he learnt by watching his master's process: his own quick perceptions of truth and beauty, fed by observation of the living types around him, and also of the works of Della Robbia and Donatello in the galleries and piazzas of Florence, grew and developed wonderfully day by day.

He also worked for a time in Signor Fedi's studio; but the turning-point in Bastianini's life came in his twentieth year, when Freppa, the antiquarian and ex-charcoal-seller, cast his eye upon the youth and marked him for his own. For a man who made his living by the selling of old bas-reliefs, busts, or fragments, genuine or otherwise, what a treasure was this! Here was a simple-minded peasant boy, ignorant, unquestioning, and poor, yet apparently gifted with a quite phenomenal sense of form, daring skill of handling, and above all, what was most useful for Freppa, an intense sympathy with the great masters of the Renaissance. What gems of Cinque-cento work could he not produce if only this brain and these hands could be induced to work for him and him alone! It was not difficult to compass this. The offer of two francs a day, and all material and facilities for work, was a sufficiently tempting bait. It was, at any rate, a steady certainty, and would with care perhaps enable Giovanni to provide bread for his father. Thus the poor boy, not knowing the power that was in him, entered the bondage that was his doom.

He was now installed in Freppa's dingy workshop in the Borgoguissanti, bound as a galley-slave to his bench. All facilities for work were indeed given him, and he could now mould his ideas in clay, or chisel them in marble, to the joy of his soul; but not for his own profit or fame were these things to be made. For him the pittance of two francs a day—for Freppa, the antiquarian, was the credit of *discovering treasures of ancient art*, for Freppa the money of rich collectors. And as a slave-owner so feeds his human machines as to extract from the thew and sinew the utmost amount of labour profitable to himself, always stopping short of developing a power in his victim which might lead to rebellion, so Freppa, with well-calculated prudence, having acquired for himself this living artist brain, began to feed it in order to stimulate its creative power. Bastianini was provided with books, and he read eagerly the history of Florence, of her great men, patriots, poets, saints—the history of her art from its first root to its final flowering in the Renaissance, and upon this culminating phase his imagination rested. The fruits of those years of patient, arduous, and ill-paid toil may be seen in every museum in Europe, for there is scarcely one that cannot show some bas-relief, or some portrait-bust, ascribed to one of the great masters, but really due to the hand of Bastianini. In the South Kensington Museum there is a panel representing the Virgin and Child in very low relief, with two winged cherubs in the background. It is labelled Rossellino, but the fact of its having been procured from Freppa, combined with the existence of an antique fragment exactly resembling the lower half of it, and of a complete bas-relief, from which the upper half is copied, would seem to afford abundant

evidence of its being the result of Bastianini's ingenuity, if not of his artistic skill. Also in the same museum a portrait-bust, in marble, of Lucrezia Donati, attenuated in form, but full of living force and individuality. Bastianini, it seems, would constantly work direct upon the marble, after the fashion of Michelangelo, without any preliminary modelling in clay, and there is now a small unfinished bas-relief of his in Signor Torelli's studio in Florence which is interesting as being a chisel-sketch showing each stroke. The subject is a "Holy Family," simply and pathetically rendered, after the manner of Luca della Robbia.

LUCREZIA DONATI.

(From the Marble by Bastianini. South Kensington.)

By degrees it seems that poverty began to press harder on the Bastianinis. Sons and daughters had increased to five or six, and the father was infirm, and

could earn but little: so, of course, according to the good old Italian custom of the one member who has the talent supporting the rest of the family, our poor marble amongst the straw and the sleeping beasts, by the light of a little dim oil-lamp, and thus feeding the family purse. And these sleepless nights of his

SAVONAROLA.

(From the Bust by Bastianini. San Marco, Florence.)

Giovanni began to steal some hours from his sleep in order to work clandestinely in his father's stable.

His brother, younger than himself by twelve years, is still living in Florence, and he says he can well remember watching Giovanni chipping at his

produced fragments of such strange beauty, that with the help of some little story of a contadino having found them underground he succeeded in cheating even the eyes and suspicious mind of his master, who bought the things of him as real "antichitá."

The individuality of Bastianini would have been lost to us had it not been for his two most audacious forgeries, the busts of Savonarola and of the poet Benivieni, both done by Freppa's orders. The enthusiasm amongst the artists of Florence when the bust of Savonarola first appeared, and their excitement on discovering it to be the work of a contemporary, seem to me so interesting and characteristic that I venture to insert a translation of a letter from Signor Diego Martelli, the Tuscan art-critic, which tells the story of its discovery as Nino Costa told it at a dinner at the painter Cristiano Banti's:—

"'Do you remember,' Costa said, 'the fuss there was that evening at the Caffè Michelangelo, when every one was talking of the discovery of a terra-cotta bust of Savonarola which had been found in a villa of the Inghirami? Well, the next morning Banti comes to me (I was then living in the Via Maggio), wakes me up, and says, "Let us go and see the Savonarola." I agree, and we go off to the shop of the ex-charcoal-seller Freppa, in the Borgoguissanti, and there find him the happy possessor of this wonderful work of art. But we, moved by a scrupulous spirit of research, rush off from there to every gallery and museum in Florence in order to be able to compare the newly-discovered bust with all the other authenticated likenesses of the monk; and, after having examined the portrait by Fra Bartolommeo, in the possession of the Rubieri, and the Corniola of Giovanni delle Corniole, as well as everything else that was to be seen, we came to the conclusion that none showed such evidence of veracity as the bust in the Borgoguissanti.

"'Thus convinced of its genuineness, and hearing it vociferated on all sides that the bust would most surely be snatched up by some of our neighbours across the Alps, Banti and I each collected half the necessary money, returned to the ex-charcoal-seller, and bought the bust for 10,000 francs. Having concluded the purchase and carried the bust to Banti's house, we told Campani, the Inspector of the Galleries, and also Marchese Ferrani, that we had possessed ourselves of the terra-cotta in order to prevent its leaving the country, and that we would hold it at the disposal of the Royal Galleries for the same price we had given for it. Campani and Ferrani then hinted that there were many forgeries going about, and that one must keep one's eyes open.

"'In the meantime Fra Girolamo, resuscitated by the magic power of art, received many visits from the lovers of the beautiful. Amongst these visitors was Dupré, who was so overwhelmed with admiration that he said he could only attribute this work to Michelangelo for its force and to Luca della Robbia for its exquisite handling; at any rate, he considered it the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and went so far as to say that it determined him to attempt a fresh departure in art. He took his young daughter to see it, and showed her how the clay had been divided into two parts to ensure greater security in the baking; and, in observing this, he praised the skill and patience and the wise methods of the old masters. Frederick Leighton, the celebrated English painter, sent a telegram to Costa, who was then out of Florence, asking for permission to make a drawing of it, and for answer received a photograph, which he placed, like a sacred image, at the head of his bed; and there it still remains. The Grandduchess Marie of Russia and Lippart meditated the construction of a temple for its reception.

"'All this crowding of visitors, though admirable in itself as a sign of artistic enthusiasm, was yet not convenient to the master of the house whose guest the Frate had become, and we determined to exhibit him in the Palazzo Riccardi for the benefit of the Infant Asylum, asking half a franc entrance. Thus curiosity was appeased, and the children of the Asylum gained some thousands of francs.

"'In those days I had, as you know, my heart in the arts and my feet in politics. The capital was not for ever to be Florence, paralysing the Administration with the same narcotics that Rome had given the Romans, preparing for revolution and for Italy. I had then to leave Florence, my friends, and Savonarola, and go to Rome. Whilst there I received certain nebulous letters from Banti, letting fall hints and warnings that this work was probably modern. Being occupied with other things, I did not pay any attention to this, when, in either '64 or '65, having gone to Naples to consult with the Prefect Gualterio on Roman affairs, I came across Alessandro Castellani, and was invited to dinner with him and his wife. During dinner the conversation turned upon the "Bienvieni" that had been bought by the Louvre as an antique, and the jokes that had arisen from the discovery that the real author of it was Bastianini. The most laughable thing was when Alessandro said to me, "This bust is beautiful, it is true, but it is nothing to a bust of Savonarola that I saw in his workshop. I wonder what has become of it." "I can tell you all about that bust," I answered; "it is mine, and I paid such and such a price for it." "We are giving Signor Costa a very poor welcome," said Castellani's amiable wife, to whom I replied that I was very glad to find that such a distinguished artist was living, and not dead, and that as soon as I could investigate the case I would make it known to the world. Castellani then told me that the antiquary Gagliardi was in the secret, and that *he* could point out the furnace that had baked the bust and the model that had posed for it to Bastianini.

"'Meantime the years were passing, the affairs of Rome were swelling in magnitude, and the Bastianini matter slumbered. But after Mentana I came to Florence with Banti and Giulio Poli, and on the 5th of November went together to Bastianini's workshop. I asked him abruptly whether it was he who had done the bust of Savonarola. "Yes, I am sorry to say," he answered, with much agitation. "It was not intended to deceive you; it was to satisfy Neuwekerke." "A pity," I said, "that with your talent you should only make forgeries."

"'Having thus proved the fact, we rushed off to the *Riforma*, and published a declaration announcing to the public that the bust of Savonarola, hitherto supposed to have been the work of an old master, was by the living sculptor Bastianini. Tableau!'

"Many years," continues Signor Martelli for himself, "after the marriage of King Umberto, Raffaello Foresi, a great friend of mine, took me to Bastianini's workshop, and I thus made acquaintance with this singular man, who for so many years had lent his genius and his skill to the frauds of his employer, receiving a mere pittance himself. There stood upon his shelves busts in various styles, from the delicate characteristics of Mino da Fiesole to those in which the treatment was more *baroque*, such as a Bianca Capello, which was to be or had been a Gian Bologna. On the easel was a half-length figure of an English diplomat in a frock-coat, who had ordered his own image to be produced in the style of the Fifteenth Century, combined with modern costume—an effectual encouragement to the freedom of art. We spoke of things artistic—Raffaello Foresi with his usual emphatic veracity, and Bastianini with the simplicity of a potter from Impruneta. *Apropos* of the real old masters, Bastianini remarked, and illustrated his meaning as he spoke—that Donatello put a certain touch of feeling in the nostrils thus, whilst Luca did it in such and such a manner; in the hair Mino had usually a certain method of treatment, Benedetto da Rovezzano another; and so from sentiment to sentiment he commented, analysed, anatomised, all the most celebrated works of the best masters, until he concluded by informing us that one of them, I forget which, showed great individuality in his treatment of the nails of the toes."

The second forgery stirred even a wider sea of controversy, and to its author brought bitterness, despair, and death. In 1867 an Exhibition of Ancient Art was opened in Paris, and one of the objects that attracted most attention there was a terra-cotta bust of Benivieni, the Florentine poet of the Sixteenth Century. The masterly treatment of the head, its strange modelling, and the living personality expressed in its somewhat rugged features, all pointed to its being an authentic contemporary portrait from one of the great master-hands.

This bust was then the property of M. de Nolivos, an art-collector; but some months afterwards, his whole collection being offered for sale at the Hôtel Drouot, the "Benivieni" was bought by the Director of the Louvre for 13,000 francs, and placed in the centre of the room containing Michelangelo's "Captives," a nymph by Benvenuto Cellini, a bust by Desiderio da Settignano, and other works of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries. Hither connoisseurs of all nations thronged to admire the newly-found treasure. Historians and archæologists expatiated on the look of concentrated thought in the strangely-marked face, and affirmed that such was indubitably the face of the poet who sang the "Divine Love," the platonic philosopher, friend of Pico della Mirandola and of Savonarola. Art-critics marvelled at the technical skill it displayed, compared it with other works of the Renaissance, proving it equal to the best among them; and rejoiced in it as a rare specimen of the art that is no more.

Suddenly an impudent rumour ruffles the complacency of the savants of Paris. Whence it came first does not seem quite clear. Some say that the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* was the first to hint at anything wrong. Then, again, there is a story of how Dr. Foresi (a well-known art-collector in Florence) carried certain undoubtedly genuine antiques to Paris and offered them to the Louvre; how M. de Neuwekerke declined to give the prices demanded, adding a disparaging doubt as to their authenticity; how Foresi, indignant and wounded, flared into wrathful plain-speaking: "You will not give the just value for real objects of antique art, and yet you pay 13,000 francs for that 'Benivieni,' which is a thing of to-day!" Then followed storms, protestations, offended dignity, and utter refusal on the part of the Paris connoisseurs to accept the truth. Freppa, when appealed to, made no attempt to claim antiquity for the bust, declaring that he had sold it for 700 francs on its own merits (having given Bastianini 350 francs for the commission), and that if the purchaser chose to consider it old it was no affair of his.

The controversy grew hotter and hotter. There were angry hints at a Florentine intrigue, gross imposture on the part of the pretended author of the masterpiece; finally, the settled determination that the "Benivieni" had been bought as Cinque-cento, and Cinque-cento it should remain. And all this time there was old Giuseppe Bonaiuti, the tobacconist, whose head had served as a model for the cultured man of letters of three centuries ago, sitting in his little shop in the narrow Florentine Street, chuckling with his customers over the newspaper gossip from deluded Paris;

while Bastianini himself, sore wounded, was calling upon Heaven and earth to witness that the bust was the work of his own hands.

The world was indeed out of joint for poor Bastianini. After so many years of patient toil, in which he asked for nothing but bread for his father, loving the work for his work's sake, now at last the fire of ambition kindled in his heart, and he began to realise the supreme joy of the artist whose name shines for ever on the historic page. But it was too late. Always of a nervous, excitable temperament, working with fury one day and the next, perhaps, languid and dispirited, the Benivieni question, with all the doubts thrown upon his word, the insults heaped upon him by the French press, had so crushed and consumed him, that at the very moment when he began to understand what possibilities life might have had for him, he fell, worsted in the hopeless struggle. His health rapidly declined, and he died of a low fever at the age of thirty-eight.

NINA BARSTOW.