



NICOLÒ
ROCCATAGLIATA

SAINT GEORGE
AND THE DRAGON

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(Genoa, circa 1570 – Venice, 1629)

SAINT GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

Venice, circa 1600

Bronze

60.5 × 44 × 36 cm

Spear modern replacement

PROVENANCE

Allegedly sold by Count Alvise Giustiniani to the
Roman dealer Costantini

Heim Gallery, London

Sold to Arthur M. Sackler, New York, in 1986/7

Sotheby's New York, 29 January 2010, lot 413,
sold to present owner.





A SECOND SAINT GEORGE BY NICOLÒ ROCCATAGLIATA

CLAUDIA KRYZA-GERSCH

The statuette of *Saint George* in classical armour, sitting on a stool while coquettishly teasing a small, pet-like dragon is not an entirely unknown work of art. It belonged to the eminent American philanthropist and collector Arthur M. Sackler (1913–1987) who shortly before his death decided to start a major collection of Renaissance and later bronzes, similar to his celebrated collection of terracottas.¹ With this bronze Sackler had acquired a piece that certainly would have done honour to his intentions, but he was unfortunately never able to enjoy it.

The figure seems to be a second cast of a documented work by Nicolò Roccatagliata (1560–1629),² which is still in the church for which it was made, San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. The artist received the commission to execute a *Saint George* as well as a companion *Saint Stephen* on January 31, 1594.³ Both statuettes were executed by 1595⁴ and today sit on a marble balustrade behind the high altar that leads to the choir for the monks.

What Dr Sackler had acquired was thus another cast of one of these small sculptures for San Giorgio Maggiore. However, due to the untimely demise of the collector the exciting bronze spent the next years in storage and oblivion. It reappeared as one lot of many at the Sotheby's sale of the Sackler Collection where it was cautiously called 'after Nicolò Roccatagliata,' without specifying when the cast could actually have been made. It was generally assumed – and I am embarrassed to say that I was of this opinion, too⁵ – that the Sackler *Saint George* could only be a later cast (by later meaning, without having to say so, the 19th century). Somehow, the Sackler *Saint George* seemed too good to be true and in such circumstances it can happen that perfectly fine works of art that do not seem to be fitting into existing notions are dismissed too quickly. In the meantime I had the opportunity to study the figure carefully and came to the conclusion that it is not only a genuine piece but also a very important one that has the potential to make us see some aspects of Venetian bronzes in a new light.

In a case such as this, the first thing to do is a thorough comparison of the non-documented work with the documented one. In our instance this exercise demonstrates that the composition and size of both Saint George figures are more or less identical. Where there are divergences they are minor and reveal what actually might be considered flaws in the statuette in Venice. There is, for example, a tassel missing from the flaps connecting the Saint's cuirass with his leather-strip-skirt (in the centre front, between his legs) that is, however, present in the Sackler *Saint George*. The proper left foot of the saint, which is positioned in such a way that the toes are protruding over the socle, features the sole of the boot in the Sackler version, but is unsupported in San Giorgio Maggiore. The element that differs the most is the dragon. While the tip of the coiling tail of the Sackler dragon is unlike its Venetian counterpart perfectly rendered, the beast lacks

the incised scales of the latter and has a smooth skin. The dragon was – not surprisingly – in both cases cast separately and attached to the socle with screws. These devices are not very well disguised in San Giorgio Maggiore, where even the wings of the small monster were done individually. The dragon of the Sackler *Saint George* appears to be – like the entire figure – a much more carefully executed cast. Every detail that did not come out perfectly in the statuette in Venice was corrected in this replica, which is modelled and chased with great virtuosity. The congruent measurements of the figure in Venice and the Sackler *Saint George* exclude furthermore that the latter is an after-cast, i.e. a cast made from a new mould taken from an existing bronze. Since bronze shrinks when it cools, after-casts are about five per cent smaller than the original.⁶ It appears instead that the Sackler *Saint George* is a genuine replica, cast from the same mould as the figure in San Giorgio Maggiore.⁷

The extraordinary quality of the Sackler *Saint George* became somehow also its drawback. Its crisp appearance seems to have little in common with a typical Venetian bronze, which is characterised by a black and often rough surface. This distinctive appearance of Venetian bronzes is due to something which is not so much a patina but rather a sort of protective coating, consisting of a drying oil like walnut or linseed, sometimes cooked down with pine pitch, and a pigment based on carbon such as soot.⁸ The aesthetic effect of this opaque finish is quite a different one from that of the translucent, lacquer-like varnishes of Florentine bronzes from the Giambologna school, but they made a lot of sense in the moist and saline

Fig. 1
Nicolò Roccatagliata,
Saint George and the Dragon
San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice



Fig. 2
Nicolò Roccatagliata, *Virgin and Child*,
Ecouen, Musée de la Renaissance



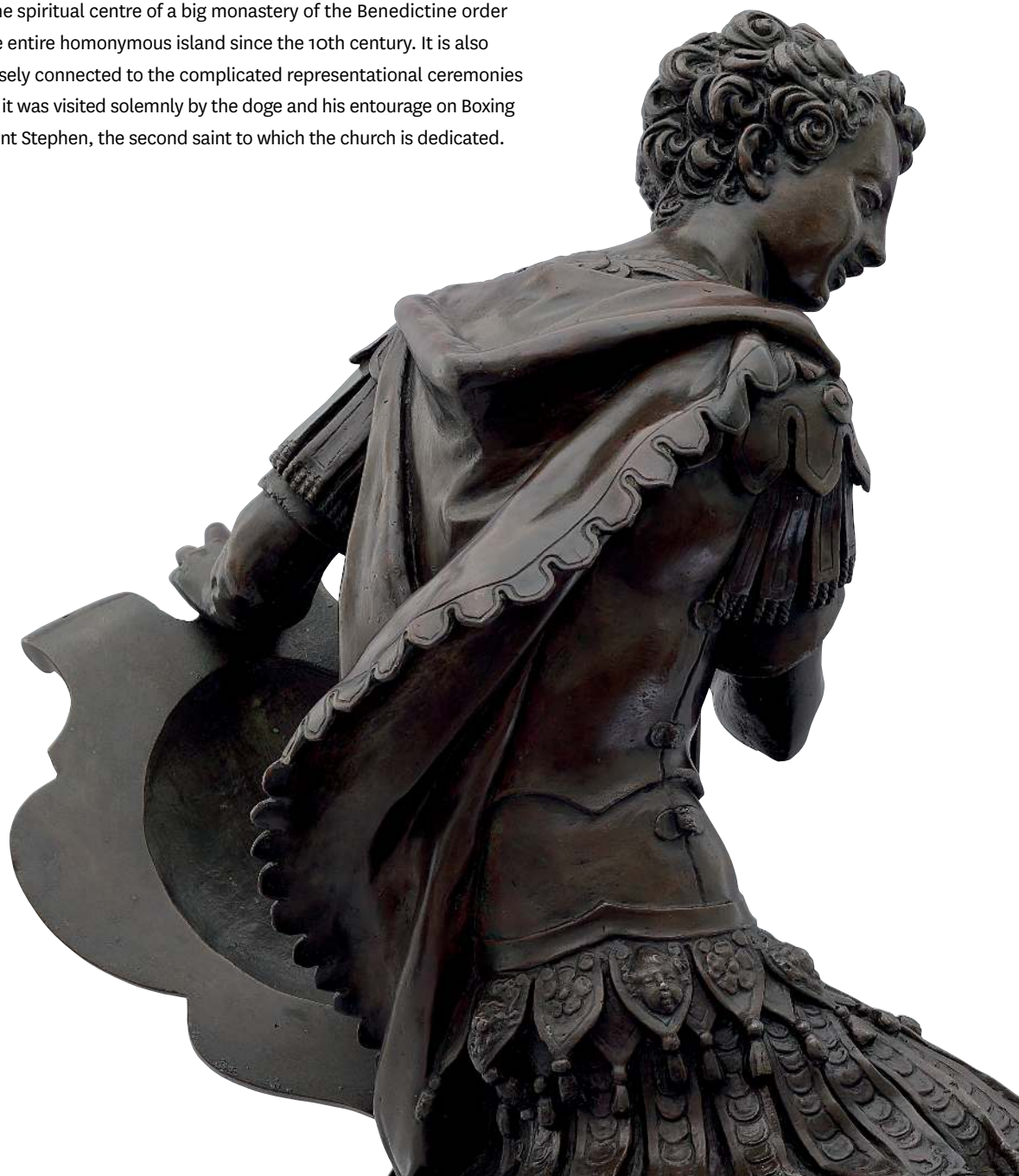
air of the lagoon city. Over time the appearance of every patina changes. Climatic conditions, lack of care, frequent handling, too much cleaning, touching-up or even re-patination transform the appearance of bronzes in very different ways. In the case of the statuettes by Roccatagliata in San Giorgio Maggiore the typical 'black paint patina' of Venice has turned over the centuries into a flaky crust. The Sackler *Saint George* looks quite different in this regard. Although one can never know for sure, it seems that it was stripped at some point of the black paint coating – if it ever had one – and developed instead a sort of natural patina.⁹ However, fundamentally the two casts of *Saint George* must have looked once very similar. The statuette in Venice features a spot on the Saint's proper left calf where the patina has flaked off and where one can see how the bronze looks underneath it, and this is very close to the appearance of the Sackler *Saint George* today.

The statuettes by Roccatagliata in San Giorgio Maggiore are placed on a very exposed position for they can be touched easily by everybody walking up the few steps to the choir. It is fairly safe to presume that they were frequently cleaned and probably not always too gently, which in turn necessitated an occasional fresh coat of wax as a quick fix, which made residues of dirt even more tenacious. Although the *Saint George* in Venice is an obvious comparison in regard to the Sackler statuette, it is perhaps not an entirely reliable source for the actual 'look' of a Roccatagliata bronze. When comparing the Sackler *Saint George* instead with a work like Roccatagliata's signed *Madonna* in the Musée National de la Renaissance in Ecouen, one can see that the typical Venetian patina does not always have to be such a thick and flaky affair. When looking at such a statuette – the *Madonna* measures 93 cm and is thus not exactly a small bronze – one realises furthermore that Roccatagliata was a much more able and serious sculptor than one would deduct from the countless putti and utensils like candelabra or firedogs attributed to him since Planiscig dubbed him 'the Master of the putto'.¹⁰

However, it is clear that Nicolò and his son Sebastiano – called in the documents Sebastian or Bastian Nicolini – headed a very busy workshop and co-operated with many different experts for the casting of their bronzes.¹¹ One still tends to underestimate the implications of such an operation. Producing a bronze sculpture involves not only foundry men who know how to melt alloy and when to pour it how quickly into the mould, but also people who create the moulds as well as the inter-models. While in the Giambologna workshop, which has become in our imagination a sort of the golden standard in the production of small bronzes, all these steps seem to have been undertaken under a tightly run regime. In Venice – or at least in the Roccatagliata workshop – this does not seem to have been the

case. While the stylistic characteristics of a Roccatagliata model are usually easy to spot, the appearance of these bronzes can be quite different, according not only to the importance of the commission, but also to the craftsmen who were employed. When considering all these points it becomes evident that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the Sackler *Saint George*, which can convey perhaps even better than the casts in San Giorgio Maggiore the beauty of Roccatagliata's original model. It is thus not surprising that also the technical examination of the Sackler *Saint George* confirms that it was made in Venice around 1600. Both the figure's low-leaded alloy and the type and percentage of impurities that can be found in it point to the possibility that a Turkish canon was used for obtaining the metal, something which happened often in the Lagoon City.¹²

We are faced thus with the fact that Roccatagliata produced two casts of his model of *Saint George and the Dragon*. That is by itself not an unusual procedure at all, since making replicas of successful models was the business of the day. However, in the case of the *Saint George*, which was made specifically and on order for San Giorgio Maggiore, the questions arise, why, when and for whom did Roccatagliata make this replica? San Giorgio Maggiore is a very important Venetian church, the spiritual centre of a big monastery of the Benedictine order that had owned the entire homonymous island since the 10th century. It is also a church that is closely connected to the complicated representational ceremonies of the Republic, for it was visited solemnly by the doge and his entourage on Boxing Day, the feast of Saint Stephen, the second saint to which the church is dedicated.



It seems therefore doubtful that an artist who had the honour to execute a work of art for such a place could simply reproduce it and sell it at his whim. When he fulfils the commission, he would, of course, assure that his master-model would be preserved in case of unsuccessful casting, but he very probably would not intend this composition for his usual line of reproduction in his shop.

The commission to execute the statuettes of *Saint George* and *Saint Stephen* for San Giorgio Maggiore seems to have been – at least according to the surviving documents – the first which Nicolò Roccatagliata received in Venice. The sculptor actually came from Genoa, where he also had received his first training in the workshop of the silversmith Agostino Groppo.¹³ Since it is reported by his first biographer, Soprani, that Nicolò made little models for Tintoretto,¹⁴ who died in 1596, one may assume that the sculptor's arrival in Venice took place during the late 1580s. In these years Venice knew with artists like Alessandro Vittoria (1525–1608), Girolamo Campagna (1549–1625) and Tiziano Aspetti (1559–1606) no shortage of talented sculptors, but these masters were mostly interested in working in marble and on a large scale. There was thus open a niche for a sculptor who was good in modelling figures of a more intimate scale and who knew how to cooperate with foundry men – both skills he would have learned through his training with a silversmith. Eventually Roccatagliata would make the production of small bronzes – in particular for the use in churches – his specialty, but how he



obtained the commission for San Giorgio Maggiore, which apparently triggered his successful career in Venice, is a mystery. One possibility for explaining Roccatagliata's initial success in Venice is the presence of a powerful protector. Who that might have been is entirely subject to conjecture. Into this informational vacuum the name of the vendor of the Sackler *Saint George* bursts therefore like a flame of hope, for Count Alvise Giustiniani (1909–???)¹⁵ descended from an old and illustrious family which had provided Venice not only with two doges, but also with its first Patriarch, Saint Lorenzo Giustiniani.¹⁶ Via him and other members of the family such as the Blessed Nicolò Giustiniani, a Benedictine monk, the ties of the family with this order were strong and so it is at least theoretically possible that a member of the family, who after all also had a branch in Genoa, had been in a position to recommend an artist to the monks of San Giorgio Maggiore. Since Roccatagliata and his son received a series of other commissions for San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice as well as for the Benedictine church of San Giorgio in Braida in Verona,¹⁷ it appears that the relationship with the order was a good one. The monks therefore would have been grateful to the person to whom they owed him – and might have given him another cast of Roccatagliata's *Saint George* out of gratitude. If this was the case, such a cast would probably have been executed in a manner fit for close inspection, since it would have been more a collector's item than a piece of decoration in a huge church. Perhaps even the kind of surface treatment would have been a different one, since the figure would be less exposed. If this theory is correct, it is furthermore likely that the execution of the replica happened not at the same time that the *Saint George* for San Giorgio Maggiore was made, but rather later, when Roccatagliata had proved himself to the order.

In the context of the possible use of a Turkish cannon for the cast of the Sackler *Saint George* it should be pointed out that in 1594 procurator Alvise Giustiniani¹⁸ held the office of *Provveditore sopra le Artiglierie*¹⁹ which means that he was in charge not only of maintaining the Venetian artillery but also of the state foundries of the Arsenal. This opens the way to an alternative possibility – perhaps this Giustiniani helped the Benedictine fathers of San Giorgio Maggiore in obtaining the metal for executing the many sculptures made of bronze that went into their church.²⁰ All these bits and pieces of enticing information do need, of course, further study and verification, but it is worth mentioning them nevertheless since they demonstrate that there are scenarios which make the existence of a second cast of Roccatagliata's *Saint George* perfectly plausible. Sooner or later the open questions surrounding its creation will be enlightened by new archival discoveries. For the moment one can state in any case that the Sackler *Saint George* is an important addition not only to the oeuvre of Nicolò Roccatagliata but also to the history of Venetian bronzes in general.

NOTES

- 1 See the reminiscences by Andrew S. Ciechanowiecki, the former owner of the Heim Gallery, in the Sotheby's sales catalogue, *Important European Terracotta and Bronze Sculpture from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections Including Drawings Related to Sculpture*, New York, 29 January 2010, p. 9.
- 2 The year of Roccatagliata's death is often given as 1636, however, he died actually on October 22, 1629, having reached an age of approximately 70 years; for the relevant document see Claudia Kryza-Gersch, 'Due altari seicenteschi a San Marco: Nicolò Roccatagliata e Sebastiano Nicolini, e la produzione di ornamenti in bronzo per le chiese veneziane,' in Matteo Ceriana and Victoria Avery (eds.), *L'industria artistica del bronzo del Rinascimento a Venezia e nell'Italia settentrionale* (Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Venezia, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 23 e 24 ottobre 2007), Verona 2008, pp. 253-272 (here p. 262 and p. 272, n. 42).
- 3 For the document see Claudia Kryza-Gersch, 'New Light on Nicolò Roccatagliata and His Son Sebastian Nicolini,' in *Nuovi Studi V*, 1998, pp. 111-126 (here p. 111 and p. 122, n. 9). For a discussion of the two figures in San Giorgio Maggiore see also the entries by Kryza-Gersch in Andrea Bacchi, Lia Camerlengo and Manfred Leithe-Jasper (eds.), "*La bellissima maniera*". *Alessandro Vittoria e la scultura veneta del Cinquecento*, exh. cat., Trent 1999, pp. 444-447.
- 4 Tracy Cooper, *The history and decoration of the church of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice*, Princeton University, Diss., 1990, p. 179, n. 4, drew attention to a manuscript in the Library of the University of Padua dated 1685, presumably written by Marco Valle, one of the first historians to write about San Giorgio Maggiore, in which one can find the note of an otherwise not documented payment recording the completion of the two figures in 1595.
- 5 Claudia Kryza-Gersch, 'The Production of Multiple Small Bronzes in the Italian Renaissance: When, Where and Why - I. From Antico to Roccatagliata,' in *Ricche Minere I*, 2014, pp. 21-41 (here p. 40, n. 69).
- 6 See Richard E. Stone, 'Antico and the Development of Bronze Casting in Italy at the End of the Quattrocento,' in *The Metropolitan Museum Journal XVI*, 1982, pp. 87-116, (here p. 89).
- 7 The original mould was used for creating the so-called inter-model, a replica in wax of the original model. Since the inter-model was made of wax, minor adjustments can be done easily. The inter-model was then used for making the mould for the actual casting in bronze according to the method of cire-perdue; for further explanations see Stone 1982, pp. 96-103.
- 8 Richard Stone, 'Organic Patinas on Small Bronzes of the Italian Renaissance,' in *The Metropolitan Museum Journal xxxv*, 2010, pp. 107-124 (here pp. 108-109).
- 9 By the current owner the surface of the bronze was only cleaned with white spirit, some minor green corrosion was removed and a new wax layer applied.
- 10 Leo Planiscig, *Venezianische Bildhauer der Renaissance*, Vienna 1921, pp. 597-628.
- 11 For the functioning of the Roccatagliata workshop see Kryza-Gersch 1998, pp. 120-121 and Kryza-Gersch 2008, pp. 267-270.
- 12 For the custom of recycling artillery see Victoria Avery, *Vulcan's Forge in Venus' City. The Story of Bronze in Venice 1350-1650*, Oxford 2011, pp. 21-22.
- 13 For the biographical data see Kryza-Gersch 1998, pp. 111-113 and the entry on Nicolò Roccatagliata by Kryza-Gersch in Antonia Boström (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Sculpture*, New York and London 2004, pp. 1436-1438.
- 14 Raffaele Soprani, *Le vite de pittori, scoltori et architetti genovesi*, Genoa 1674, p. 88.
- 15 Count Alvise Giustiniani Recanati was the last representative of the noble Venetian family of the Giustiniani delle Zattere. His heir was his goddaughter Countess Cecilia di Collalto, who inherited also the palace in Venice and what remained from the famous art collection. Further investigations into the family's archive have so far unfortunately proved unsuccessful.
- 16 See the entry by Giuseppe Del Torre in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 66, 2006 (<http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/santo-lorenzo-giustinaia>)
- 17 Kryza-Gersch 1998, pp. 118-120.
- 18 According to the website <http://www.giustiniani.info/venezia.html> Alvise Giustiniani (8.4.1522-13.8.1601) was the son of Bernardo (+1528) and Elisabetta Gritti di Omobon. He belonged to the branch of the Giustiniani del Calle del Ridotto.
- 19 Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Ms. It. cl. VII n.831 (=8910), reg. 19, c. 449. I am grateful to Dr Vittorio Mandelli, Venice, for this information.
- 20 That this was not an easy undertaking shows an unpublished document regarding the execution of the two big bronze angels for the high altar in San Giorgio Maggiore which were modelled by Roccatagliata's son Sebastiano and cast by Pietro Bosello with the help of the French chasers Jean Chenet and Marin Feron, for which the Benedictine fathers had to obtain the permission of the *Provveditore sopra le Artiglierie*, so they could be cast in the public foundry outside the Arsenal (Venice, Archivio di Stato, Senato Terra, Reg. 123, f. 349r. The document is not dated but must have been issued before March 17th, 1645, when the angels were placed on the altar).

PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS

Principal photography of the works
by Todd White Art Photography

