A physician remembered thanks to the work of the Renaissance Florentine sculptors

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Giovanni Chellini was born around 1372 in San Miniato al Tedesco, a little town sited between Florence and Pisa. He studied medicine and after his degree became member of the Arte dei Medici e Speziali (the Physicians and Pharmacists Association) in Florence. His professional value is documented by several events: in 1402 he became lecturer of Philosophy and Logic at the Florentine Studium that at the time was assimilated to a Postgraduate School, with a salary of fifty florins. In the following years he covered prestigious positions up to the election as vice-Rector of the Studium. He belonged to a rich family and had the possibility to collect old manuscripts and precious objects. At the same time Chellini was a devout and generous man building in his native town a hospital for pilgrims and in the Saint James Church a chapel dedicated to the Saints Cosma and Damiano, patrons of the Physicians and Surgeons.

In Florence Chellini practiced medicine with great success. The most famous among his patients was Donatello who he cured when the sculptor came back to Florence from Padua. The devotion of Chellini as doctor was the reason for their friendship. In 1456 Chellini wrote in his book of memories (Libro dei debitori, creditori e ricordanze) that was very proud to receive from Donatello as remuneration of his cares “a rounded bronze as big as a touchier on which was sculptured the Virgin Mary with the Child at her neck and two couple of angels. On the other side the bronze was hollowed so that melted glass could be poured on to it, evidencing the same figures as those of the other side” (Figures 1, 2).

The Virgin Mary is leaning against an elegant rail, holding the Child with maternal gentleness. The conception of Donatello was certainly singular, confirming his interest for new solutions and materials. Thinking to use the glass for making a mould it is extremely suggestive. The figures could obtain a particular transparency on the basis of the different deepness of the diggings of the bronze so that the devotional aspect of the holy representation was intensified. Offering the original piece to Chellini, Donatello gave up the possibility to reproduce it. This increased the value of the present.

Thanks to the friendship with Donatello, Chellini was in good terms with other Florentine emerging artists realizing the quality, the value and the endurance of their works.
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Probably Donatello itself suggested Antonio Rossellino when in the year 1456 Chellini decided to have a portrait in marble. Rossellino was 29 years old and not fully independent having until that time aided the brother Bernardo in his work. The two brothers were part of a family of quarry owners living in Settignano, a little village on the hills close to Florence, and were trained to stone masonry. Their nickname Rossellino (the little red) came from the color of the hairs of their master, the sculptor Nanni di Bartolo. Antonio decided to carry out the Chellini’s portrait at the manner of the Roman busts. At that time this model had become popular in Florence and other young refined sculptors, as Desiderio from Settignano and Mino from Fiesole both growing on the hills near Florence, had begun to create busts. Roman busts had been brought to the city by the Florentine humanists who had the passion of collecting old things and discovering old manuscripts. Especially Poggio Bracciolini was important for educating the Florentine aristocracy to the values and virtues of the distinguished old Greek and Roman persons. Their glorious life was remembered through the representation of their portrait in marble busts. This concept of praising people with a document not only after their death, but also during their lives for looking their images as examples of virtuous men rich of ethical principles was the reason of the development of this type of art in the Florentine sculpture.

So, it was in the consideration for the individual value that Antonio Rossellino set to mould the bust of a person who was not a member of the aristocracy of the city, neither a military leader or a cardinal or a pope, but only a living private citizen, who had gained a great reputation for his medical profession. A life-like portrait was made characterizing the face with wrinkles and falling skin typical of an eighty-five year old man. The suit is proper for his profession: simple, but tidy and austere. The appearance is a mixture of melancholy, humor and benignity. The face expresses attention and respect in the spectator, as the doctor was taken while he was listening the patient, in the attempt to make the right diagnosis of his ailments. The facial features were ever more evidenced by just signing the neck and the arms (Figure 3).

In the following years, this particular modality of portrait will be chosen by other famous Italian painters. Examples are the portrait of a young man painted by Antonello from Messina (around 1475) or that of doge Loredan painted by Giovanni Bellini (1501-4), both at the National Gallery of London. Smart, sharp, far-sighted this physician of a little Tuscany town realizing he would have been remembered by the posterity thanks to the fine work of the Florentine artists.

Chellini died the 4th of February 1461, almost ninety years old. His nephew Bartolomeo who was the last heir of his possessions, honored his memory building a funerary monument in the chapel of Saints Cosma and Damiano at San Miniato. Chellini has been represented in natural size living and in the serenity of the death. Also this work is fine and the Author was the major brother of Antonio the architect and sculptor Bernardo Rossellino.