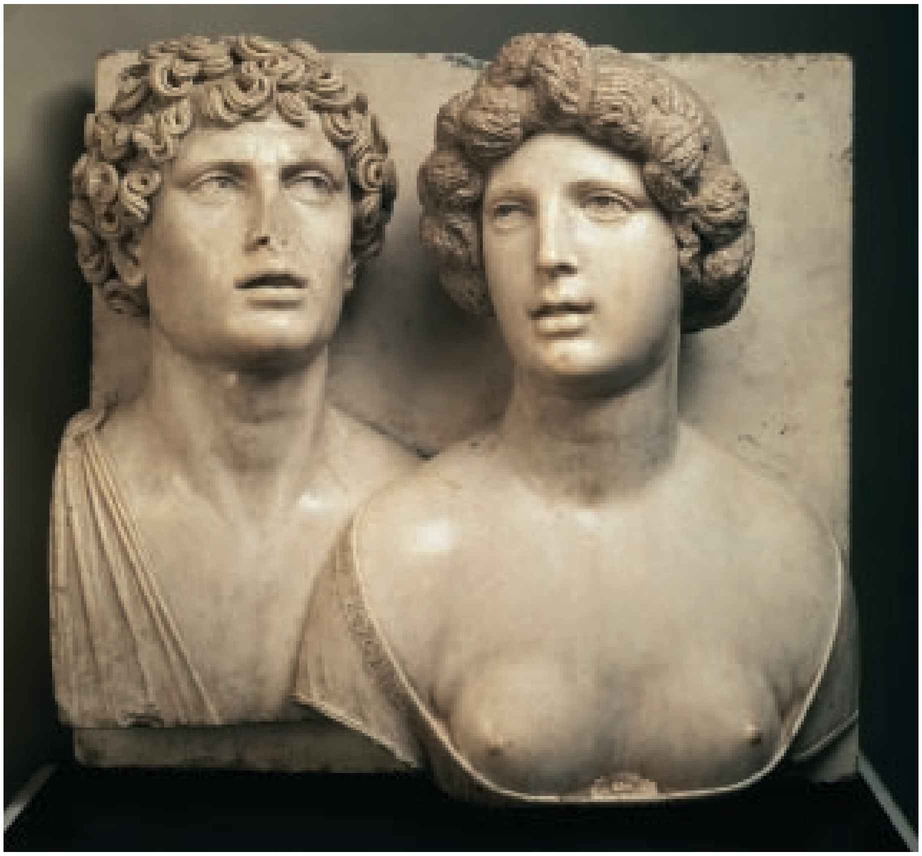
The Great Debate

THE RENAISSANCE ARGUMENT BETWEEN PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS IS REVIVED.

BY JONATHAN LOPEZ



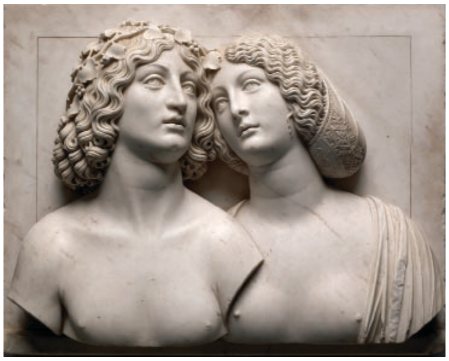
WHICH ART FORM is superior, painting or sculpture? On the face of it, this question might seem futile, since there is no right answer. But for artists in Renaissance Italy, the comparison, or *paragone*, of the arts was a matter of spirited and often invidious debate. The argument usually centered on a single issue—whether a two-dimensional representation could ever be as faithful as a three-dimensional one—but sometimes a kind of class warfare also intruded into the debate. In a famously vain passage from his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci observed that painters are free to pursue their art in a leisurely manner, like gentlemen, while sculptors must labor in dirty ateliers, choking on marble dust, no better than bakers toiling in a cloud of flour.

When conceived more soberly, though, the *paragone* wasn't just a pretext for intemperate put-downs. It was an intellectual challenge that affected the very themes and styles of Renaissance art itself. The 16th-century writer Paolo Pino describes a lost painting by Giorgione of St. George, whose shiny armor both reflects and is reflected in nearby mirrors and pools of water. The artist was thus able to show all sides of the dragon-slaying saint at once, "to the perpetual confusion of sculptors," wrote Pino.

An Antiquity of Imagination, a small yet elegant show on view through Nov. 1 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., astutely employs the *paragone* as one of its organizing themes. It is also the first exhibition ever devoted to the Venetian sculptor Tullio Lombardo (1460–1532). "Throughout his career," says curator Alison Luchs, "Tullio was a champion of sculpture in the *paragone*," adding that, as often as not, he was aesthetically one step ahead of such painters as Giovanni Bellini and Giorgione, respectively the elder statesman and the rising star of the Venetian school.

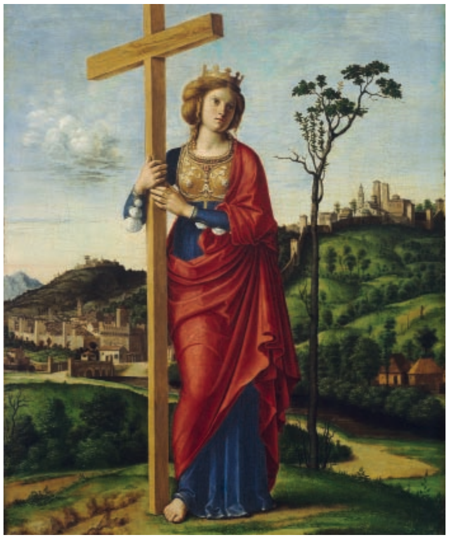
The main attractions of the Washington show are two high-relief double-figure busts, one from the Ca' d'Oro in Venice, the other from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Each depicts a man and woman in what appears to be a state of profound reverie. Moody, evocative and deeply enigmatic, these works are not easy to categorize. For instance, it remains a matter of considerable debate whether they represent specific likenesses, narrate a mythological scene or simply evoke a state of mind.

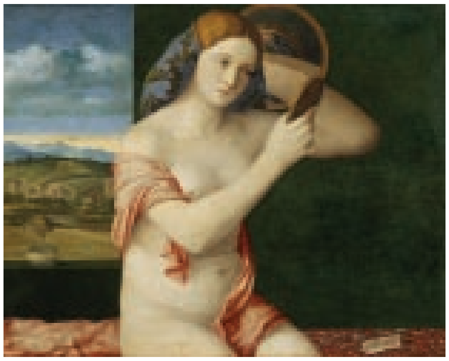
The Ca' d'Oro relief, which dates to sometime between 1490 and 1495, is the earlier of the two works. Although the female figure wears a 15th-century Italian *camicia*, or chemise, the facial types, proportions and poses on display in this relief appear to derive fairly directly from Tullio's study of classical statuary, which was then coming into vogue with collectors amid the increasing pace of excavations and discoveries. Tullio, who is said to have restored and sold antiquities, might well have under-



From top: Tullio Lombardo, *A Couple*, circa 1490–95; *Bacchus and Ariadne*, circa 1505, marble.

GALLERIA GIORGIO FRANCHETTI ALLA CA' D'ORO, VENICE; CAMERAPHOTO / ART RESOURCE





From top: Cima da Conegliano, ***Saint Helena***, **circa 1495, oil on panel; Giovanni Bellini,** ***Lady With a Mirror,*** **1515, oil on panel.**

taken this project to show himself the equal of the ancients and might have intended to imitate Roman funerary reliefs, which sometimes took the form of double portraits. But as the son of Pietro Lombardo, the dominant Venetian sculptor and architect of his era, Tullio operated in a milieu where the most sophisticated currents in taste, patronage and technical innovation converged. It is therefore not surprising that he was able, in the Ca' d'Oro relief, to synthesize an antique precedent into something distinctly new and influential in the development of Venetian art.

What is surprising, though, is that Tullio had more influence on painters than on sculptors. As Luchs explains, the Ca' d'Oro relief was a pioneering work of secular, private art, dramatically at odds with the devotional images and family portraits that had dominated the interests of individual collectors in Venice up to that point in history. As such, it set the stage for the pictorial innovations achieved a short time later by Giorgione, Titian and the painters in their circle. Although an early 16th-century painting like Giorgione's *Tempest*, with its full-length figures set in a verdant landscape, might seem wholly unrelated to Tullio's self-consciously fragmentary relief, the two works actually have much in common. In particular, Luchs notes a series of developments that would emerge, collectively, as hallmarks of the new Venetian style: the mix of ancient and contemporary references, the mysterious faces, the hazy sense of erotic tension and the overall impression of a transient, dreamlike atmosphere.

This latter quality might actually be one that Tullio bestowed upon painters like Giorgione after having first absorbed it from other painters himself. In the exhibition at the National Gallery, on a wall adjacent to the two reliefs, Luchs has hung Cima da Conegliano's depiction of St. Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, who converted to Christianity in middle age but with formidable devotion. Cima provides visual evidence of Helena's inner spirituality through her transfixed expression and parted lips—the very features that distinguish Tullio's tender pairs of otherworldly dreamers. Here, the influence of painting on sculpture was probably not a consequence of directed study, but rather an unconscious borrowing on Tullio's part, one that might well have disturbed his sensibilities if he had recognized it explicitly as a marriage of the sacred and the profane.

Prescient though the Ca' d'Oro relief was with regard to the unfolding development of Venetian painting, the circa 1505 Vienna relief—sometimes called *Bacchus and Ariadne* due to the grapevine-like garland in the male figure's hair—engages far more emphatically in the dialogue of the competing art forms. In the 10 years since the Ca' d'Oro relief, Tullio had, as Luchs says, "learned from the paintings of Giorgione and his circle, taking up their quieter, dreamy mood." But it would seem that Tullio, who probably competed for the same patrons as his brush-wielding colleagues, intended this later relief almost as a boast that he could do everything painters could do and more. Although the figures project forward from the wall in a way that a painted image never could, they are best observed from a single, frontal viewpoint, thereby drawing an immediate comparison with two-dimensional imagery, and a thin borderline has been incised around them, as if to suggest a frame.

How appropriate, then, that this conceptually provocative work resides where it does, in Vienna, in close proximity to a painting that answered its challenge: Bellini's sumptuous *Lady With a Mirror* (1515), whose eponymous sitter, with her elaborate, bound hairdo and ethereal countenance, provides, in Luchs' words, "a painted equivalent of Tullio's Ariadne." Paying tribute to his sources, as well as to an established tradition of rivalry, the aged Bellini, then 85, even deployed mirrors "to demonstrate how a painter could match the sculptor's ability to show a figure from multiple viewpoints," much as Giorgione had in his lost St. George. Staring at each other from opposite ends of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Bellini and Tullio will, with any luck, remain locked in their ongoing *paragone* for quite some time to come. A

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