

A NEW MATERIAL LINK
IN THE LIFECYCLE OF A
DONATELLIAN INVENTION

by Michael Riddick



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The sculptural composition of the *Dead Christ Tended by Angels*—characterized by the stark gravity of the Savior’s torso and the poignant gesture of a limp arm resting upon the tomb’s edge—is one of the most emotionally resonant inventions of the *Quattrocento*. Universally traced back to a lost prototype by Donatello, the design achieved widespread success across the Italian peninsula, particularly in the Veneto. Because of its popularity, the composition was primarily disseminated through highly reproducible, inexpensive media, with numerous surviving copies cast in polychrome papier-mâché (*cartapesta*), stucco, and terracotta (fig. 1, cover). The purpose of this brief paper is to introduce a previously unrecorded iteration of this popular motif: a unique version cast in gilt bronze (fig. 2).

Unlike secondary papier-mâché iterations (such as the relief in the Princeton University Art



Fig. 1. Polychrome terracotta *Dead Christ Tended by two Angels* after Donatello (?), second half of the 15th century (*Skulpturensammlung*, Berlin, inv. 2439)

Museum), which betray their status as degraded serial copies through the vestigial “ghost hands” of a missing third angel, the present bronze plaque achieves a complete and coherent presentation of

the original Donatellian motif. The preservation of the full angelic cohort suggests that the modeler had access to a primary prototype. This distinction marks the bronze not as a standard serial product, but as a deliberate and faithful translation of the archetype into a luxury medium.

The physical evidence presented by the bronze plaquette—specifically its unusually large upper register—shifts the inquiry toward the practical exigencies of the Renaissance workshop. The composition occupies only the lower portion of the field, leaving a disproportionate void above the figures. This strongly suggests that the plaquette was not conceived as a standalone cabinet object, but as a bespoke functional component destined for a larger architectural or liturgical ensemble, such as a small chapel predella or a wall-ciborium. In the Paduan tradition of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a discrepancy between the pre-carved open area of a marble surround and the standard dimensions of a popular sculptural model would necessitate exactly this kind of bespoke adaptation (fig. 3).

The application of fire-gilding further confirms a specific liturgical destination, elevating the composition to the status of a precious instrument and ensuring maximum luminous impact within a dimly lit chapel. As no other bronze casts of this exact model are currently known to the present author, it stands as a rare and luxurious material testament to the enduring, malleable legacy of Donatello's invention in Northern Italy.



Fig. 1. Gilt bronze plaquette of the *Dead Christ Tended by two Angels* after Donatello (?), late 15th century (Neil Goodman collection)

While a definitive attribution is beyond the scope of this paper, the present author suggests the plaque's stylistic and technical execution points to the immediate Paduan circle of Antonio Antico (not to be confused with Pier Jacopo Alari Bonacolsi) and his father-in-law, the *coroplasta* Giovanni de Fondulis (whose workshop was instrumental in serializing this Donatellian motif). The translation of this model into metal reflects the early sixteenth-century Paduan shift away from *coroplastica* and toward the *arte fusoria* (the art of casting). Antico's dual identity as a clay modeler and a descendant of a long dynasty of

lapicidi (stone carvers) provides a highly logical framework for this commission; he possessed the exact technical knowledge required to rapidly modify an additive clay *modello* (extending its upper borders) to ensure the resulting bronze cast would flush-fit a difficult, pre-existing stone housing. Furthermore, the sharp delineation of the eyelids on the figure of Christ and the specific geometric treatment of the drapery share persistent stylistic links with Antico's documented works, bridging mid-*Quattrocento* naturalism with a more refined classicism, as seen in his *St. Roch* in Tramonte and the *St. Paul* at the Worcester Art Museum (fig. 4).



Fig. 3. 15th century marble surround for a wall ciborium (collection of Fabrizio Canto)



Fig. 4. Detail of figure 1 (center) alongside the work of Antonio Antico: *St. Roch* at Tramonte (left) and *St. Paul* at the Worcester Art Museum (right)

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