

The Louvre is currently hosting a mind-bogglingly wonderful exhibition devoted to the art of the Early Renaissance, above all but not quite exclusively as it was practised in Florence. Many of the most spectacular loans come from Florence itself, which may mean that the impact it made at its previous venue, that city's Palazzo Strozzi (where I did not see it), was fractionally less dazzling. On the other hand, even there it is not usually possible to admire Ghiberti's *Saint Matthew* (Orsanmichele) and Donatello's *Saint Louis of Toulouse* (Santa Croce) cheek by jowl, nor indeed to see them in the company of all manner of major pieces both celebrated and obscure from both sides of the Atlantic.

The simple thesis of the show's curators, Marc Bormand and Beatrice Paolozzi Strozzi, which few would wish to contest, is that the Renaissance – whatever precisely we take that to mean – was initiated by a handful of sculptors in Florence (the extraordinarily gifted Jacopo della Quercia only gets a walk-on part here), and that even the most forward-looking and at the same time classically-minded painters lagged behind.

The exhibition's organisation is simultaneously chronological and thematic. By drawing it to a close around the 1460s, and thus omitting the final decades of the 15th century, the dice are arguably stacked against painting, but more tellingly the fact that large-scale panels and frescoes cannot be moved was always going to create an imbalance. It is good to be able to see fine works by Masaccio, Masolino and Fra Filippo Lippi on display, but the Brancacci chapel they ain't. Happily, a number of frescoes both sacred and profane by Andrea del Castagno do give a sense of the power of first-rate Quattrocento painting on a monumental scale.

Some will not unreasonably object that priority is not of overwhelming significance anyway, and that great art should not be reduced to the level of some sort of crude arm-wrestling match or argument about who came first. In fact, of course, the whole process of transformation is universally agreed to have been kick-started by what in professional terms was nothing less than a fight to the death. In the competition to win the commission for the North Doors of the Florentine Baptistery, there were initially seven entrants, but only the two finalists – Brunelleschi and Ghiberti – appear to have produced full-dress and partially gilt bronze panels of the *Sacrifice of Isaac*. Both are here on loan from the Bargello, and it is not hard to see why the latter's crowd-pleasing if less murderously dramatic relief won out. The result was that the rest of Brunelleschi's career was devoted almost exclusively to architecture.

Ghiberti and Donatello are the twin heroes of this feast for the eyes, and it is impossible not to be struck by the differences between them, with Ghiberti – in Isaiah Berlin's formulation – playing bronze-total hedgehog to Donatello's jack-of-all-media fox. Alongside his bronzes, the two very different marble reliefs of the *Madonna and Child* from Berlin and the *Feast of Herod* from Lille bear startling witness to his technical and emotional versatility. However, this is the very opposite of a monographic show, and sculptors such as Michelozzo (the two marble angels from the Victoria and Albert Museum), Filarete (his bronze statuette of *Marcus Aurelius on*

*Horseback* from Dresden), and – towards the end of the period covered – Desiderio da Settignano and Mino da Fiesole all shine too.

The exhibition catalogue is a massive and authoritative combination of excellent essays and expansive entries, but in the case of these latter I wish they had broken with what might be described as the current industry standard and promoted hard looking as well as historical learning. Perhaps the real problem is that scholars tend to be viscerally averse to admitting there are things they do not know. The kinds of sins of omission I have in mind may be illustrated by means of three very different examples.

Donatello's *Saint Louis* has a gloved right hand floating free, but no right arm connected to it, which surely deserves to be pointed out. It arguably exemplifies his determined focus on the big picture, just as the sinuous beauty of the lacing of the sandals of Ghiberti's *Saint Matthew*, which would have been invisible when he was in his niche at Orsanmichele, testify to his almost obsessive concern with detail and perfection of finish. In his *Shrine of Saints Protus, Hyacinth and Nemesius*, which is based on classical prototypes, and very possibly a detail on the Roman sarcophagus from Cortona exhibited beside it, the similarities are fascinating but well known, whereas the difference tends to be overlooked. Unlike their ancient precedents, Ghiberti's flying angels have stylised clouds beneath their feet. I can offer no explanation for them, nor indeed for the weirdly extensive growths of wing-feathers and hair on the back of the gilt-bronze *Spirit* from the Metropolitan, which must come from the immediate circle of Donatello, but that is surely a bad reason for passing over them in silence.