

**Giorgio Bonsanti**

## ***The Sangallo Crucifix*** **Art Historical Factsheet**

To mark the Salone del Restauro, a trade fair devoted to restoration that is held in Florence every two years, the Friends of Florence not-for-profit association offers a prize for the best restoration project costing within a given ceiling. The prize consists in funding for the project in question in order to enable its implementation. The prize for the autumn 2014 edition went to Francesca Spagnoli, a restorer from the Piedmont region who graduated from the Opificio delle Pietre Dure. Francesca's project focused on the restoration of an almost life-size wooden *Crucifix* (c. 165 x 160 cm.) hanging in the small antechamber, or vestibule, outside the "Cappella dei Pittori", or Painters' Chapel, in the convent of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence.

Scholars have attributed the *Crucifix* to the brothers Giuliano da Sangallo and Antonio da Sangallo the Elder, two renowned Florentine architects and sculptors, suggesting that it is likely to be the product of a joint initiative in which both brothers were involved and dating it to somewhere between 1480 and 1500. Certain stylistic features, however, also point to Giuliano's son Francesco, in which case it would have been carved some twenty or so years later. In any event, it is a splendid product of the Sangallo workshop, one of the most prolific and most celebrated workshops operating in Florence between the late 15<sup>th</sup> and mid-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Scholars have identified a certain number of wooden Crucifixes of various sizes that can be attributed to the Sangallo family's activities in this field.

The *Crucifix* in question originally hung in the church of San Iacopo tra i Fossi in Florence. Vasari tells us: "Having returned to Florence, Giuliano found that his brother Antonio ... had become so excellent, that there was no one in his day who was a better master in carving, particularly for large Crucifixes of wood; to which witness is borne by the one over the high altar of the Nunziata [*now in the second chapel in the south aisle of the church*] in Florence, and by another that is kept by the Friars of San Gallo in San Jacopo tra Fossi", which is the *Crucifix* under discussion here. Vasari's reference to Antonio confirms that the *Crucifix* is a product of the Sangallo workshop, but his assertion cannot of itself be considered decisive evidence with regard to the work's attribution to a specific sculptor. When the church was deconsecrated in 1849, the *Crucifix* was allocated to the Accademia and placed in the vestibule of the Painter's Chapel. The patronage of this wonderful chapel is held by the venerable Accademia delle Arti del Disegno, which owns all the works of art contained in it.

A document printed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century tells us that the *Crucifix* was totally repainted in a dark brown colour to simulate bronze, which was considered at the time to be the most noble material of all. When Francesca Spagnoli's project won the Friends of Florence prize, the artefact was suffering from the devastating effects of woodworm, and indeed the woodworms' neutralisation was the very first conservation measure to be adopted. The restorer's confidence in the possibility of recovering the original polychromy with the assistance of scientific inspections has been fully repaid, and following the removal of the dark patina, the *Crucifix* now sports the colours applied by the sculptor himself (albeit with the natural ageing caused by the passage of time, as is only to be expected). Showing outstanding technical skill, the artist applied the colours with the tip of his paintbrush (the body hairs,

the tears on the figure's cheeks) and these astonishing details have been fully recovered during restoration. It is worth noting that the veins and trickles of blood were carved directly into the wood rather than with the more normal method which consisted in the application of stucco to the surface of the wood. The livid colour of the wounds is also very moving. The figure combines parts executed with meticulous attention to detail with parts left in a far rough-hewn state in an attempt to achieve a captivating degree of expressiveness. The final quality of the work is absolutely superb.

The Accademia delle Arti del Disegno was founded by Vasari in Michelangelo's name in 1563, thus the presence of a work by the Sangallo family in the Accademia's collection is particularly appropriate, because the Sangallo family's members enjoyed very close personal and artistic ties with Michelangelo from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century until well beyond the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The restoration was performed by Francesca Spagnoli, a graduate of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure, under the supervision of Giorgio Bonsanti, a former Director of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure and Professor of Restoration at the Universities of Turin and Florence, who is also the officer in charge of the Accademia delle Arti del Disegno's artistic heritage.