



Romano Vio

Dust continues to gather on the silent mass of plaster casts piled together in Romano Vio's studio on the Lido, next door to the old church of San Nicolò. Romano Vio left us almost a year ago: he went silently, in keeping with his character. I make my way between the plaster casts: some are in fragments, others seem to be waiting for a loving hand to come and bring them back to life. There are some which modestly conceal a distant, unreal and bewitching beauty. I ask myself: is it possible that a sculptor of such calibre must fall into oblivion with the passing of time? That no public body intervenes to bring some order to this confusion? Vio was an exagerately unobtrusive man: wrapped up in his world of work and family affections, he never bothered about any "self-glorification". A veil of sadness comes over me. I remember him on the occasion of his last exhibition in the adjoining cloisters of San Nicolò in October 1982. I stood in admiration before his works; and I put this admiration into words. "I have always worked conscientiously..." he replied softly, gesturing with his arms. Conscientiousness – that is to say the integrity he had in his work – has always guided him, and we must also give him credit for this in an age when – on the contrary – presumption and exhibitionism are all too often rewarded.

Romano Vio's life (1913-1984) has been dedicated in its entirety to sculpture. His curriculum vitae abounds in commissions, competitions, prizes, exhibitions, without any interruptions except for the war. He had wrapped himself in a sort of golden cocoon in his beloved Venice. He taught at the Accademia; he retired to work in his studio. He respected work in a traditional way: he considered it almost something sacred. He experimented with every kind of technique and material, from marble to cement, but he was particularly fond of working with clay. He had been in Bellotto's school, and then Assistant to Crocetti who held him in high esteem. Many of his works are enormous, starting with the group of bronzes for the Umberto Giordano Monument in Foggia, from the large marble block for Franco Marinotti in Torviscosa to the enormous bronze "Annunciazione" for the church of Altobello in Mestre. No exertion – even physical – frightened him. He was sustained by an unshakable faith, equalled only by his Franciscan-like modesty.

This publication – in occasion of the exhibition at the San Vidal Art Centre – aims to give prominence to some of his works. Something more than a tribute to a lost master: an incentive to deepen the critics' awareness of him. One consideration seems to emerge immediately: Vio's extraordinary technical ability. Apart from any appraisal of its value, this ability tells us that we are face to face with a sculptor of the old school. His forerunners are naturally enough Trubetskoi, Dal Zotto, Grandi, that is to say those who created the monuments at the time of Italy's Unification. Now that today we are rediscovering late 19th century sculpture with its proud realistic stamp and controversial rhetoric, we cannot but note that at that time the commissions gave sculptors that room to manoeuvre which today is denied them. Vio should have had the opportunity to work on great themes in view of the results achieved when he had been given this type of commission. Arturo Martini himself deeply felt the need to "do things on a large scale" (and his indifference to the political aspects of the themes enforced on him is well-known). Therefore, Vio was slightly restrained by the changing times, as the contemporary sculptors of his character have been in general. Moreover, he regretted the limited space of his studio on the Lido: he was often obliged to work in the open. He felt it was important to match himself against large dimensions.

This is where the second consideration comes in: that is to say, style. Our age seems to be bound to the fetishism of style which, as we well know, is often reduced to a symbol. Vio

does not have one style of his own. His character, which loathed any kind of constraint, led him each time to follow his inspiration, the emotion of the moment. He wanted to be free. Therefore, we find him turning to different ideas and themes, as I mentioned when I wrote a well-known review for the exhibition at San Nicolò in 1982: from 16th century luminarism to a grotesque and expressionist style, from Renaissance modelling to the most turgid Baroque. This versatility has often been taken for eclecticism. In a certain sense it is: but not as subjection to the so called "mannerisms", but rather as restlessness of mind, the desire for an unceasing search for perfection, above all conscious of the continuing need to experiment and, indirectly, to mature.

When it came to sculpture, this man, seemingly so gentle, harboured extraordinary energy which each time gave him the capacity to not let himself be swallowed up by easy fashions. I would say that over the fifty or so year span of his work, there is no lack of inspiration, no repetitiveness. There might have been set-backs, there might have been missed goals, but his spirit always appeared flawless, even youthful I would say.

Moreover, right from the beginning Vio rejected the easy appeal of conventionality. In the high relief which won the gold medal in a competition in Genoa in 1935, the large and classically composed masses denote an opening towards the "modernist" style of the thirties and also an extraordinary attention to the new word which Arturo Martini was preaching in Venice and in Italy. At that time Vio was only twenty-two. Three years later came his "Pugilatore", also showing Martini's influence in the harmonic modelling of the limbs, but rougher, with a genuinely "Roman" stamp. The same dynamic energy is clear in the boy of the "Passo Romano" which won the prestigious Premio Fadiga in 1939.

As you can see, these beginnings were those of a superb sculptor. Vio immediately began to exhibit at the Biennali; in 1940 he joined the teaching staff of the Accademia in Venice; the following year he was nominated Assistant to Baglioni and won the competition for the obelisk lions in the square at Traù. The war, of course, interrupted his artistic career but in 1946 he returned to the Accademia as Assistant to Crocetti.

It is well-known that the post-war period was a traumatic time for many artists of his generation. The cultural climate changed in the brief space of a couple of years. The Neo-Cubist stylistic elements prevailed; and sculptural abstraction was also imminent. In Venice Arturo Martini left a void and new artists like Alberto Viani began to assert themselves. Vio neither knew how to nor wanted to conform, and slowly he became cut off even though he continued to be surrounded by great esteem. His works during these years show a simple, classical style, in some ways close to that of Crocetti with whom he collaborated several times. We have the design (c. 1948) for a holy portal with Pope Pius XII; we have the beautiful relief bronze for "Gesù lavoratore" which was awarded a prize in the Pro Civitate Christiana competition in 1955; we have the inspired San Benedetto. They are works of rare purity and feeling. They alternate with moments of greater plastic virtuosity ("Nudo di donna" in 1952, "Dana" in 1954), and also with others of more austere expressiveness, like the magnificent "Testa" exhibited at the Quadriennale in 1951.

His talent came out best of all in commissions for religious works. In 1955 his "Assunta" won a competition in Rome: an exquisite harmony of shapes and drapery in Neo-Settecento style. The following year (1956) his large relief won first prize in Savona in a competition for a Monument to the Resistance: a work in many horizontal sections which shows a clear and

successful balance of composition. However, over the years, the artist's expressive tendency increasingly emerged: sometimes turned towards a sort of lyrical intimism (his splendid "Simonetta" was exhibited at the Biennale in 1956), sometimes towards livelier and almost animated forms. This is the case with the complex monument to Umberto Giordano carried out for a competition in Foggia in 1956: a series of lively scenes of extraordinary vivacity which in certain moments borders on the grotesque. It is a method of sculpting which has no true stylistic influences: Vio knew how to be realist and lyricist, purist and expressionist. There can be no doubt that the skill of his workmanship is extraordinary, even though marked by the great 19th century current.

In another important commission, the one for the Monument to Franco Marinotti in Torviscosa, Vio created a relief which started from a mere line which, as it rose, created clearly defined and compact relief figures, beautifully inserted into the large, marble parallelepiped. These large works alternated with exquisitely made panels which reveal a gentle and, at the same time solemn intimism, which could be said to be of 15th century Tuscan quality (like the "Artigiano" in 1957). Sometimes old themes were re-elaborated (the "Pugilatore" with its splendid plastic torsion); in other moments the expressionist aspect surfaced again. In the "Fuga in Egitto" (1960), the composition is modelled according to a remarkable archaism of Gothic origin. In "Nostro vessillo" (1969) the theme of the Crucifixion is innervated by an expressive force which heightens the verticality of the theme with even primitive elements.

In other words, the inspiration is always different. Vio closely studied 13th and 14th century sculptures from which he drew perfection of form, as in the charming model for the competition for the "Partigiana" in Venice (certainly far better idealized than Murer's bronze which emerges today on the surface of the water along the Riva dei Sette Martiri). Neither must we forget his intense work as a portrait sculptor as shown by some examples especially from the sixties. However, as the years passed, it was in religious works that the artist increasingly gained perfection. There are many works and there is no point in recalling them all here one by one. It is sufficient to mention the magnificent bronzes for the church of Fossò, two of his last works: especially the group depicting the three Cardinal Virtues, inserted into an elegant 15th century triple arch, has a grace and elegance of exquisite taste.

Up until the end, despite the weight of years, Vio worked with a sense of unchanged spiritual purity, outside of any movement or fashion. When he was not carrying out large, important works, he was engaged in modelling small terracottas: figurines, nudes, scenes of lively and spontaneous expressiveness. And each time it seemed that inspiration was being born for the first time: such was the freshness which guided his hand.

The impressions gained from this series of works (most of which, unfortunately, in reproductions), only serve to confirm that it is time for a wider and more systematic review of all Romano Vio's work. Three years ago, after visiting the exhibition in the monastery of San Nicolò, I wrote: "You leave the cloisters with a feeling of peace and serenity". This is my wish to all those who come to see the works by this Venetian master in this posthumous exhibition at San Vidal. Peace and serenity: that is to say the antidotes for the fast-moving and neurotic age in which we live.

*Paolo Rizzi*