

Cellini's Salt Cellar

by James Greer

The Sea is represented by a figure of Man, the Earth by a figure of Woman. The legs of the two figures are intertwined, the way the artist imagined the limbs of land and sea are conjoined. Ten thousand gold crowns were melted to supply the metal from which these two figures are cast, or rather molded free-hand from rolled gold. The gold has been covered in enamel in some parts, and there is a base, too, carved from ebony and adorned with more figures, meant to represent the four winds, the times of day, and emblems of human activity. To the Sea's right is a golden ship, intended to hold salt. To the Earth's right is a golden temple, intended to hold pepper. The finished item, which took four years and the labor of many workshop assistants to complete, was commissioned by the King of France, Francis I, in 1540. From his possession the salt-cellar passed to King Charles IX and then to Archduke Ferdinand, an Austrian, which is how in due course the piece ended up at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, KK Inv. No. 881.

An old man writes the story of his life into a book. In the story he presents himself as hero, the fulcrum of the world, fording a torrent of troubles, and receiving for his pains the envy of his peers and a comforting foretaste of immortality. He tells the world he's the greatest goldsmith in history, and so he becomes the greatest goldsmith in history. He tells the world that his art has raised him to the level of divine Michelangelo, and the world places his name alongside Michelangelo, and Da Vinci, and anyone else he cares to suggest. He has outsmarted Popes, and out-dueled princes, and reaped from the courts of kings his just reward in riches and praise. An extraordinary character, his story encompasses the spirit of an age: its devotion to transcendence in all things, especially beauty, and more especially in aesthetic accomplishment.

Over time, the examples that the old man provides or references in the book of his work -- his enduring, fame-bestowing, unparalleled artistry -- disappear one by one. Some are melted down

for use as coinage in currency-starved principalities, some are destroyed accidentally, some on purpose, some succumb to age or weather, some simply fall out of fashion and are moved from backroom to backroom, acquiring a lacquer of grime their maker never foresaw. The sculpture, or plate, or fountain, or bust, is forgotten, is lost: has unmade itself through some unknown agency of fate.

So that at present, and for a very long time now, the only evidence of our artist's prowess is this salt-cellar. And this book -- yes, the book, because unlike the goldsmith's artifacts he trumpets with immodest vigor, the book survives. More than survives: the book remains one of the most popular literary works from the period we still call the Renaissance. Popular, perhaps, for a reason that its author had not intended: for its catholic view of the social lives of those we would otherwise little know. The author does not stoop to ignore the least significant detail of his life, out of faith that future generations will be instructed or entertained by his example. We have feuds with innkeepers and insults traded with mountebanks and a parade of whores and grubby business dealings with the disreputable commercial classes who would eventually inherit the earth. We have, in short, a vivid, panoramic account of a time and a place inaccessible to us, which teaches that even the great and lordly artists of the Renaissance had lives not dissimilar to our own. And if that is true, then all things are possible. In the end, therefore, the author's greatest extant achievement -- the one, at least, responsible for whatever measure of immortality he will retain in the memory of humankind -- is the one over which he took least pains.

We invite you now to look at the salt-cellar, sole remaining example of the goldsmithing genius of Benvenuto Cellini. It is remarkable. Remarkable. A true work of art.

