Museum's $225 Bust Credited to Leonardo

By SANKA KNOX

After four years, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has attributed a plaster bust that it purchased at auction for $225 to Leonardo da Vinci. It will go on exhibition at the museum today.

The attribution to Leonardo has been made by John G. Phillips, chairman of the Metropolitan's department of Western European art. His findings are set forth in the museum's Bulletin, issued today.

John V. Noble, the museum's vice director for administration, said that no formal announcement would be made "because of the complex nature of Mr. Phillips's findings. Other museums are involved," he said, "so we felt it best to let the Bulletin article give us all the relevant facts."

Mood of the World

Mr. Phillips based his findings in part on the mood and features of the piece. Nearly 26 inches high and entitled "The Lady With the Primroses," it was auctiioned at the Parke-Bernet Galleries in 1965.

The purchase of the figure, holding a posy at her breast, had been generally regarded as a calculated risk. As a possible "sleeper," the piece for all its promise, might have vanished quietly into the museum's study recesses. But Edward Fowles, the former owner of the Duveen Brothers art gallery, declared almost immediately after the auction that the sculpture was from the 15th century, either by Leonardo or his teacher Andrea del Verocchio, and worth at least $500,000.

Mr. Fowles's judgment created a sensation and revived a controversy; some applauded found treasure, others cried "fake." Years before the auction, Mr. Phillips and James J. Rorimer, late director of the Metropolitan had seen the "Lady Withe the Primrose." They recognized it when it was displayed before the auction, as did Mr. Fowles who had once bought the piece. He attended the sale with the intention, as he then said, of buying it for the Metropolitan. He bid until he realized that he was competing with the museum and then stopped.

In 1920—the year to which the sculpture's pedigree has been traced—experts disagreed on its authenticity. In 1923, as agent for Duveen Brothers, Mr. Fowles paid about $40,000 for the piece. Soon afterward it was sold for $200,000 to Mrs. A. Hamilton Rice of New York. It remained in the Rice family until its auction on Oct. 22, 1965. Parke-Bernet made no claim of 15th-century authorship in its catalogue description, and after the sale was nouncement about Mr. Fowler's appraisal.

The Metropolitan will display the bust in its Great Hall, with a descriptive label reading: "The Lady With the Primroses, after the marble in the Bargello attributed to Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), Italian Executed in Verrocchio's workshop about 1475 or shortly thereafter. Plaster with a stucco surface, painted and gilded, height 25½ inches (including base)."

Mr. Phillips said it has never been questioned that the bust in the Bargello, or National Museum, in Florence, Italy, is from Verrocchio's workshop, where Leonardo worked from about 1467 to 1477.

Cast From the Bargello

Mr. Phillips believes that the Metropolitan bust was cast directly from the Bargello marble piece and, in making his identification, has also reattributed the Bargello bust to Leonardo.

Mr. Phillips has identified another Verrocchio the "Bust of Medea Colleoni" in the Frick Collection, as being a Leonardo.

A bequest in 1961 by John D. Rockefeller Jr., the piece has not yet been exhibited there. Harry D. M. Grier, director of the Frick, found Mr. Phillips's identification "highly interesting," and said that it would be compared with findings of John Pope Hennessey, who is scheduled to catalogue the Frick's sculpture collection this year. Mr. Hennessey is director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Mr. Phillips said, "There is no documentary evidence of Leonardo's productions in Verrocchio's workshop." However, he added, "It is hard to believe that in a shop so definitely oriented toward sculpture Leonardo would not have received solid training as a sculptor."

While looking for a job in Milan in the 1480's Leonardo wrote, "I am prepared to make anything that can be made in sculpture, whether in marble, bronze or clay."

In reaching his conclusion Mr. Phillips noted that Leonardo's "Ginevra de Benci," recently acquired by the National Gallery of Art for $5-million, was once attributed, along with other works, to Verrocchio.

"An amazing consistency in execution and expression" exists, he said, in the National Gallery's, the Frick's, the Bargello's and the Metropolitan's painted or modeled works.

In an analysis of hands executed by Leonardo and Verrocchio, Mr. Phillips found that those by Leonardo "have the same loose-jointed fingers, alive with an intense and almost feline awareness. In comparison, the hands executed by Verrocchio must be described as casual and pedestrian." The hands of the Bargello's and the Metropolitan's pieces, he said, compare with those of Leonardo works.

Mr. Phillips also found "a marked resemblance of mood" and similarity of facial features in the Frick bust and the National Gallery painting. In both, he said, "the eyes are almond-shaped and heavy-lidded, and the mouth is a thing of extraordinary sensitivity."



"The Lady With the Primroses," a bust done in plaster with stucco surface, painted and gilded. Executed in the Verrocchio workshop about 1475, work is 25½ inches high.

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