



DATE: March 23, 2018
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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GETTY MUSEUM ACQUIRES

BUST OF A YOUNG BOY, BY DESIDERIO DA SETTIGNANO, ABOUT 1460–64

The endearing marble sculpture is a rare masterpiece by one of the most skilled and influential sculptors of Renaissance Florence



Bust of a Young Boy, about 1460–1464. Desiderio da Settignano (about 1430 – 1464), marble. 25 x 24.5 x 14 cm (9 13/16 x 9 5/8 x 5 1/2 in.) The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

LOS ANGELES – The Getty Museum has acquired *Bust of a Young Boy*, about 1460–64, by Desiderio de Settignano (Italian, circa 1430–1464). The approximately life-size sculpture is a well-known work by one of the most influential and skilled sculptors in Quattrocento (fifteenth-century) Florence.

“This is an extraordinarily fine work by one of the greatest sculptors of the early Renaissance,” said Timothy Potts, director of the Getty Museum. “In his short but spectacular career (he died at about age 34), Desiderio de Settignano became one of the most renowned

and sought-after artists of his generation, and it is remarkable good fortune that we are able to add such a rare and iconic work of his to our collection. Although sculptures dating from Quattrocento Florence have for museums been among the most coveted trophies for over a century, there is nothing comparable to this bust in any West Coast museum. At the Getty it will be displayed with our collection of Renaissance paintings, where it will complement perfectly the works of great Florentine painters such as Fra Angelico, Masaccio, and Gentile da Fabriano."

Bust of a Young Boy portrays a little boy, probably around three years old. His head is turned slightly to the left, his half-opened eyes appear pensive and his lips are barely closed in a hint of a smile. He wears a fine tunic and sports the chubby cheeks and wispy hair characteristic of his age. The skillfully carved marble evokes smooth skin, a fleshy neck, and silky hair, whose elegantly intertwined locks are masterfully rendered in very low relief.



Detail of *Bust of a Young Boy*, about 1460–1464. Desiderio da Settignano (about 1430 – 1464), marble. 25 x 24.5 x 14 cm (9 13/16 x 9 5/8 x 5 1/2 in.) The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Detail of *Bust of a Young Boy*, about 1460–1464, Desiderio da Settignano (about 1430 – 1464), marble. 25 x 24.5 x 14 cm (9 13/16 x 9 5/8 x 5 1/2 in.) The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

The bust is one of a group of four known closely related marble portraits of children by the artist. Two of the group are in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., and the other is at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Among these, the *Bust of a Young Boy* acquired by the Getty Museum is one of only two with a provenance that dates from before the nineteenth century: it can be traced back to 1776 when the British collector Patrick Home bought it from the heirs of the Gori family in Florence.

"This seductive artwork is a dramatic addition to our sculpture collection," said Anne-Lise Desmas, senior curator of sculpture and decorative arts at the Getty Museum. "It is a rare portrait by one of the most

talented sculptors of the early Florentine Renaissance. In his own time, Desiderio was praised for the grace, delicacy and liveliness with which he depicted youth. I'm sure that his lifelike and charming little boy will quickly become a beloved figure for our visitors."

Marble busts of young boys formed an important Renaissance sculptural genre that originated in mid-fifteenth-century Florence. It is most likely that Desiderio himself invented this type, which, beyond its role as portraiture, may have served to encapsulate the nobility's increasing sense of its social and political identity, especially for patrons who saw their children as future leaders of the republic. These works reflected an awareness of ancient Roman portrait busts of children but are infused with a liveliness distinctive of the early Renaissance.

The five-centuries-old *Bust of a Young Boy* is in remarkably good condition. It will go on view in the Getty Museum's South Pavilion at the Getty Center in May 2018.

About Desiderio da Settignano

Desiderio da Settignano's precise birth date is unknown but was between 1428 and 1431, most likely in 1429 or 1430. He was born near Florence in Tuscany – as his name indicates – on the hill of Settignano, a well-known site of quarries for the *pietra serena* stone used in the architecture of Brunelleschi, and for the harder *macigno* stone used in Donatello's sculptures.

Desiderio's three most important and best documented works are all in Florentine churches. His *Monument of Carlo Marsuppini* in Santa Croce, completed around 1459 and honoring the State Chancellor of Florence, counts among the most elegantly presented and beautifully carved humanist tombs. His wooden statue of *Mary Magdalene* in Santa Trinità, commissioned in 1458 by an important female patron, Annalena Malatesta, the daughter of Count Galeotto, is famous for its compelling naturalistic expression. His sacramental tabernacle for San Lorenzo, completed in 1461, shows an advanced combination of pictorial illusionism, perspective and decorative ornament that was completely new in Florentine marble carving and influenced all subsequent Tuscan tabernacles.

Desiderio was particularly admired for his ability to carve in very low relief, called *rilievo schiacciato* in Italian. This technique allowed him to create illusionistic effects normally reserved for painting and drawing, as illustrated in his marble scene of *St. Jerome in the Wilderness*, in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Rivalled only by Donatello, the inventor of *rilievo schiacciato*, Desiderio became so famous for his many *Madonna and Child* reliefs that he was known to turn down major commissions because of demand.

In addition to his extraordinary skills in the relief technique, the artist was highly praised for his depictions of women and children. His delightful images of youth appear in religious reliefs, such as the tondo with *Christ and St. John the Baptist* in the Louvre, Paris, in small statues, such as the *Christ Child* for the above-mentioned San Lorenzo Tabernacle and putti as shield bearers in the Marsuppini monument, or portrait busts.

Although his career was extremely short—he died in his thirties in 1464—Desiderio proved to be an incredibly accomplished sculptor working successfully in various genres and whose inventions and style had a profound impact on the course of Italian Renaissance sculpture. The humanist Cristoforo Landino (1424–1498) went so far as to suggest that Desiderio was superior to Donatello himself, because, “if death had not snatched him away very young,” he would certainly “have achieved the greatest perfection.”

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