

# Gustav von Benda's Bequest

'On 7 February 1932, Gustav von Benda, one of Vienna's most refined and cultured art collectors of the last fifty years, passed away at a ripe old age' ('Am 7. Februar 1932 ist Gustav von Benda hochbetagt gestorben, einer der feinsinnigsten Wiener Kunstsammler der letzten 50 Jahre').<sup>1</sup> This is how Hermann Julius Hermann, at the time the director of the 'Collection of Decorative Arts' ('Sammlung für Kunstgewerbe' – today's 'Kunstammer' of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna) as well as the museum's 'First Director' ('Erster Direktor'), began his announcement that the Kunsthistorisches Museum had accepted the Benda Collection as a gift, and to introduce and describe a selection of its sculptures (the paintings were discussed by Ludwig Baldass in the same article – see the essay by Guido Messling). At the time, the Benda Collection was regarded as 'Vienna's foremost private non-aristocratic collection' ('die bedeutendste Wiener bürgerliche Privatsammlung').<sup>2</sup> It comprised numerous sculptures, paintings, pieces of furniture, Renaissance parade arms, gold- and silversmith works, majolica and other artefacts. In keeping with his noble public spiritedness, the single and childless connoisseur Gustav von Benda (1846–1932) decided to leave everything to the Republic of Austria upon his death. In his will he stipulated that the majority of the works in his collection should go to the Kunsthistorisches Museum. His collection of porcelain, ceramics and pieces of furniture went to the 'Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie' in Vienna ('Austrian Museum of Art and Industry', today's MAK – Museum of Applied Arts).

Gustav von Benda was the scion of a wealthy merchant family in Prague. We know very little about his childhood and youth, but around 1870 he moved to Vienna, where he took charge of the local branch of 'Waldek, Wagner und Benda', suppliers of 'technical commodities for Austrian industry'.<sup>3</sup> Business was good, and around 1880 Benda began to collect art.<sup>4</sup>

Being offered this collection was a piece of good fortune for the Kunsthistorisches Museum; 265 exceptional artefacts entered the museum's holdings. Benda's taste as a collector is perhaps best described as eclectic. His aim was not to assemble a comprehensive or specialized collection; instead, he acquired outstanding artworks representing various media and produced at different times and in different regions. In a way, he followed the lead of the Habsburg collectors to whom we owe the Kunsthistorisches Museum, but in a more limited, bourgeois way. One focus was on Italian sculpture from the Early Renaissance. In this (too) his collection differed from the grand old imperial collection, in which artworks from the fifteenth century play but a marginal role. But this meant that Benda's collection proved the perfect, complementary addition to the holdings of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, which, following Benda's bequest, boasts sculptures by important artists from the Italian Quattrocento like Desiderio da Settignano and Luca della Robbia, and from the circle of great masters such as Verrocchio and even Donatello (*figs. 1, 2, 3*). The importance of these individual works and their prominent place in the museum's holdings – together with the protagonists' anti-semitism – were presumably the reason why, under Nazi rule and only a few years after Benda's death, the museum management decided to ignore the stipulations of his will and cease to display the artefacts together as the 'Benda Collection', instead dispersing them among the museum's various collections. In his will, Benda had clearly asked that the artefacts should be 'displayed together in their own gallery as the 'Benda Collection', 'if possible in the same way they are at present displayed in my flat (address: Vienna's First District, Opernring 8)'.<sup>5</sup> In 1932, under Director Hermann, this wish had been respected, and the collection was inventoried together and displayed in its own galleries, appointed like living rooms, in the Neue

<sup>1</sup> Hermann Julius Hermann, *Das Legat Benda an das Kunsthistorische Museum in Wien*, in: Pantheon 9, 1932, 152-8, 152.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Wiener Zeitung, 8 August 1903, 86.

<sup>4</sup> For a history of the collection, the life of Gustav von Benda, and the fate of his Jewish family during the Nazi period, see: Susanne

Hehenberger and Monika Löscher, *Die Sammlung Gustav Benda*, in: Eva Blimlinger and Heinz Schödl (eds.), *Die Praxis des Sammelns. Personen und Institutionen im Fokus der Provenienzforschung* (Schriftenreihe der Kommission für Provenienzforschung 5), Vienna & Cologne & Weimar 2014, 13-29.

<sup>5</sup> Last will of Gustav von Benda, March 1930, quoted in Hehenberger and Löscher 2014 (see note 4), 21.



Fig. 1  
Luca della Robbia, *Virgin and Child*, Florence, 3rd quarter of the 15th century, glazed terracotta, H 53 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, inv. KK 9114



Fig. 2  
Circle of Andrea del Verrocchio, *Putto, or The Infant Jesus with Fig and Grape*, Florence, 4th quarter of the 15th century, polychromed terracotta, H 65 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, inv. KK 9111



Fig. 3  
Follower of Donatello, *Virgin and Child with two Angels Making Music*, Florence, c. 1460, polychromed stucco; frame (modern): polychromed wood, H (incl. frame) 90.3 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, inv. KK 9101

Burg (fig. 4, a view into one of the galleries). In 1937, however, the collection was moved to the Second Floor of the Kunsthistorisches Museum.<sup>6</sup> Following the ‘Anschluss’, Nazi Germany’s occupation of Austria in March 1938, the new, Nazi museum management dissolved the Benda Bequest and incorporated the objects into the appropriate collections in the museum.<sup>7</sup> Even Benda’s name was removed from the labels; this continues to this day.

In his will, Gustav von Benda had identified Desiderio da Settignano’s bust ‘Laughing Boy’ (fig. 5) as his ‘most important and favourite piece’ (‘Haupt- und Lieb-



Fig. 4  
View into Gallery II of the Gustav von Benda collection in its 1932 installation at the Neue Burg. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Archive, inv. AR XV 1713

<sup>6</sup> See Herbert Haupt, *Das Kunsthistorische Museum. Die Geschichte des Hauses am Ring. Hundert Jahre im Spiegel historischer Ereignisse*, Vienna 1991, 108. The 1932 inventory of the ‘Benda Bequest’ is now in the archive of the Kunstammer Vienna. Compiled under the supervision of Director Hermann after receipt of the collection, its datings and attributions better reflect art-historical scholarship compared to the ‘List of objects received from the Benda Collection by the Kunsthistorisches Museum’ (‘Verzeichnis der vom Kunsthistorischen Museum übernommenen Gegenstände der Sammlung Benda’), which had also been compiled in 1932, but earlier, and which reflected the art-historical appraisal of the artworks to which Benda adhered (see note 16).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.; see the essay by Guido Messling, and Hehenberger and Löscher 2014 (see note 4), 23.



Fig. 5  
Desiderio da Settignano, *Laughing Boy*, Florence, c. 1460/64, marble, H 33 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, inv. KK 9104



Fig. 6  
Historical photograph of the *Laughing Boy* by Desiderio da Settignano, published in: Hermann Julius Hermann, *Das Legat Benda an das Kunsthistorische Museum in Wien*, in: *Pantheon* 9, 1932, 152-8, 156



Fig. 7  
School of Desiderio da Settignano, *The Infant St John the Baptist*, Florence, 2nd half of the 15th century, marble, H 23 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, inv. KK 9113

lingsstück'): 'I ask the gentlemen of the museum to look after my artefacts with love, and to display my most important and favourite piece, the charming 'Laughing Boy' by Desiderio (or Donatello), well' ('Ich bitte die Herren des Museums, sich mit Liebe meiner Gegenstände anzunehmen und mein Haupt- und Lieblingsstück, das entzückende 'Lachende Kind' von Desiderio (oder Donatello), gut aufzustellen').<sup>8</sup> Without doubt, this sculpture was the most famous object in the Benda Collection, and it remains a highlight of the Kunstammer of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Small, life-like marble busts of boys, often identified as ideal depictions of the Infant Jesus or St John the Baptist as a child, were a specialty of Desiderio's. The bust now in Vienna is one of the most prominent examples. Note his carefree, unself-conscious laughter that gives the portrait its unrivalled immediacy and vitality. It has even been suggested that this could be a real portrait, and the bust has been described as one of the earliest known portraits of a child in Western art.<sup>9</sup> Benda had acquired the sculpture in 1892 from another private collection in Vienna, the Miller-Aichholz Collection, for 40,000 guilders.<sup>10</sup> An old black-and-white photograph of the 'Laughing Boy', included in Hermann's

article published in *Pantheon* 9 in 1932, shows that at the time the bust was partially polychromed and adorned with a necklace of large cheap artificial pearls (*fig. 6*). This hid an old, formerly prominent fracture at the bust's neck. Today, it is barely visible to the naked eye thanks to the excellent work of the Kunstammer's restoration workshop (most recently in connection with the new installation of the collection in 2013). The veristic polychromy – presumably dating from the nineteenth century – has long been removed. However, Gustav von Benda's perception of the bust must have differed greatly from ours. In the Miller-Aichholz Collection, and sometimes later too (see the quote by Benda mentioned above), the bust was regarded as a work by Donatello. It was Wilhelm von Bode, the celebrated art historian and director of the museum in Berlin, with whom Benda corresponded regularly and who advised the collector on his acquisitions, who attributed the sculpture to Desiderio,<sup>11</sup> an attribution that has never been questioned.

Presumably because he liked his 'Laughing Boy' so much, a few years later Benda bought a second marble bust of a boy – St John the Baptist as a child, identified by his camel-skin dress, the Baptist's traditional attribute (*fig. 7*). As mentioned above, this was a popular subject in Desiderio's oeuvre, but expression, animation and the three-dimensional handling in this bust are much less

<sup>8</sup> Last will of Gustav von Benda, March 1930, quoted in Hehenberger and Löscher 2014 (see note 4), 21. Today, the 'Laughing Boy' is listed as inv. KK 9104.

<sup>9</sup> See Sabine Haag and Franz Kirchweger (eds.), *Die Kunstammer. Die Schätze der Habsburger*, Vienna 2012, 88.

<sup>10</sup> Hehenberger and Löscher 2014 (see note 4), 19. 1 guilder is worth c. 16 Euro in today's money – see <https://www.eurologisch.at/docroot/waehrungsrechner/#/> (retrieved 8 Feb. 2023).

<sup>11</sup> For the attribution, see Hermann 1932 (see note 1), 152. For Benda's correspondence with Bode, see Hehenberger and Löscher 2014 (see note 4), 19.

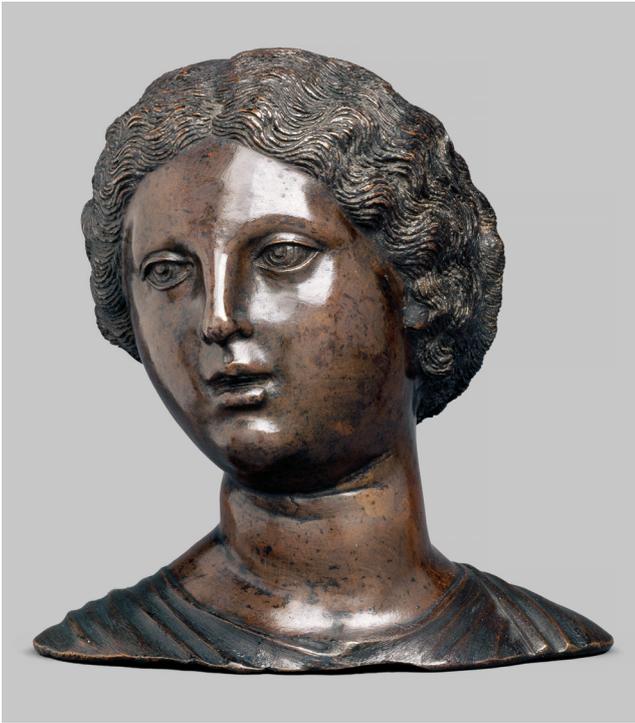


Fig. 8  
Antonio Lombardo (modelling), Severo da Ravenna (cast), *Bust of a Girl*, Venice, c. 1505, bronze, H 17 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, inv. KK 9098

convincing than in the 'Laughing Boy', which is why it was already attributed to the 'school of Desiderio da Settignano' in the 1932 inventory of the 'Benda Bequest'.<sup>12</sup> Many artists imitated the style of Desiderio, who had died young. Benda believed the infant Baptist to be an authentic work by Desiderio and described this bust as 'truly lovely' ('ganz allerliebste') in a letter to his advisor Wilhelm von Bode.<sup>13</sup> He even paid almost 8000 guilders more for the St John, which he bought from an art dealer in Paris, than he had paid for the 'Laughing Boy' – despite the fact that the latter was then regarded as a work by Donatello. Clearly, the buyer had fallen in love with this St John.

A second focus of Benda's collection – reflecting his profound admiration for the Italian Renaissance – was on sixteenth-century bronze statuettes and reliefs. The inventory lists an impressive 35 objects. In his article in *Pantheon*, Hermann highlights the 'magnificent statue of a woman by Tullio Lombardi, of which the Galleria Estense in Modena owns a second exemplar' ('prachtvolle weibliche Büste von Tullio Lombardi, von der die Galleria Estense in Modena ein zweites Exemplar besitzt')<sup>14</sup> (fig. 8), and the 'statue of a man blowing a horn moving

<sup>12</sup> Inventory of the 'Benda Bequest', 20, no. 145.

<sup>13</sup> See Hehenberger and Löscher 2014 (see note 4), 19-20.

<sup>14</sup> Hermann 1932 (see note 1), 155. Today, this Venetian bust from the early 16th century is regarded as a cast by Severo da Ravenna after a model by Antonio Lombardo.

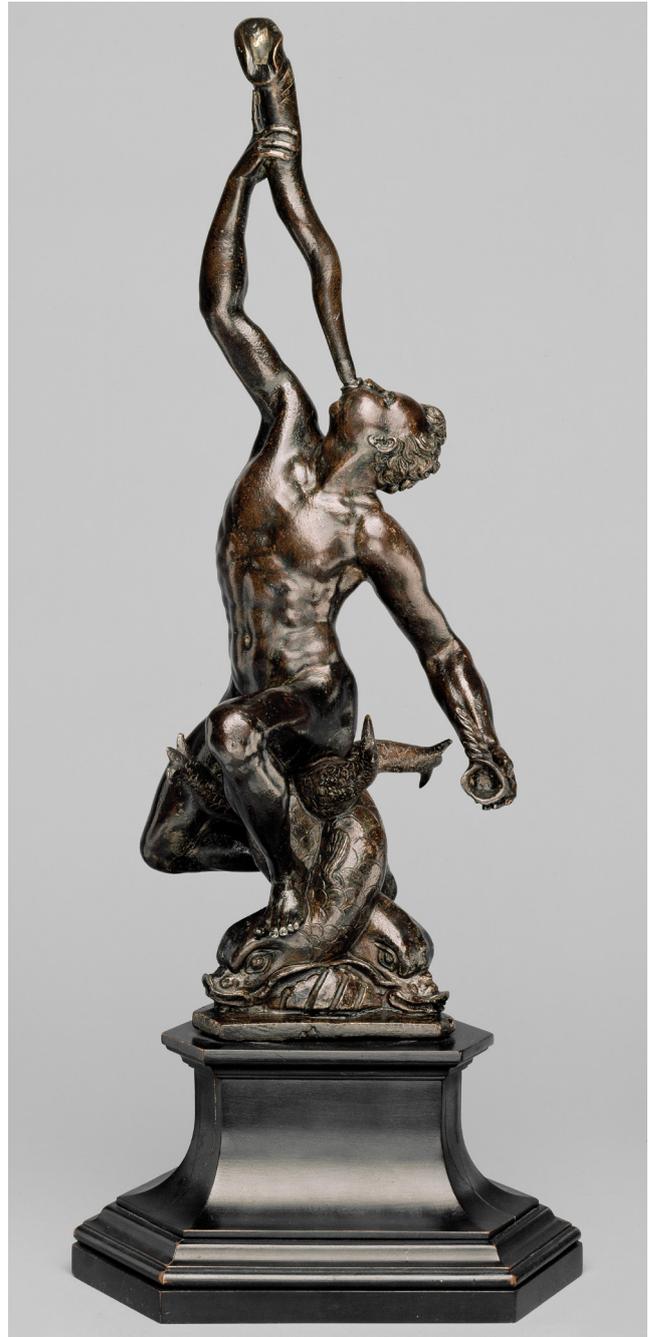


Fig. 9  
Circle of Giovanni Bologna, called Giambologna, *Triton*, Florence, 2nd half of the 16th century, bronze, H 44.8 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, inv. KK 9115

in an interesting way' ('durch ihr Bewegungsmotiv interessante Statuette eines ins Horn blasenden Mannes')<sup>15</sup> (fig. 9). Benda regarded the latter as a work by Benvenuto Cellini.<sup>16</sup> Hermann, however, already voiced grave

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>16</sup> See 'Verzeichnis der vom Kunsthistorischen Museum übernommenen Gegenstände der Sammlung Benda' ('List of objects from the Benda Collection received by the Kunsthistorisches Museum'), 3, no. 80, archive of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, ad Z. 12/I.D. ex 1932.



Fig. 10  
 Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *The Virgin and Child with Three Angels*,  
 Urbino or Siena, 4th quarter of the 15th century, bronze,  
 H 34 cm, W 21.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna,  
 Kunstkammer, inv. KK 9118

(justified) doubts about this attribution.<sup>17</sup> Today, this triton from the second half of the sixteenth century is believed to have originated in the circle of Giambologna.

We should also single out one of Benda's reliefs that is interesting in connection with the panel 'Virgin and Child', the so-called *Benda Madonna*, by the Master of the Benda Madonna (see the essay by Guido Messling): the relief *Virgin and Child with Three Angels* by the Sienese sculptor Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439–1501; fig. 10). Hermann, too, regarded it as a notable work and relates its recent provenance and the remarkable history of its attribution: 'the foremost bronze relief [in the Benda Collection] is a celebrated seated Virgin Mary with two [sic!] angels, which entered the Aynard Collection in Lyon in 1880 from that assembled by Stefano Bardini [then a celebrated art dealer, painter, collector and patron in Florence]; Benda acquired it when the former collection

<sup>17</sup> Hermann 1932 (see note 1), 156.

was put up for auction in 1913. Bertaux (*Revue de l'art ancien et moderne* 1906 I) believed the relief to be an authentic work by Donatello; in the Aynard auction catalogue it is ascribed to the school of Donatello, but Bode identified it as a masterpiece by Bertoldo' ('Unter den Bronzereliefs steht die berühmte sitzende Madonna mit zwei [sic!] Engeln obenan, die 1880 aus dem Besitze Stefano Bardinis in die Sammlung Aynard in Lyon kam, bei deren Auktion sie Benda 1913 erwarb. Bertaux (*Revue de l'art ancien et moderne* 1906 I) hielt das Relief für ein Original Donatellos, im Auktionskatalog Aynard wird es als Schule Donatellos bezeichnet, Bode hingegen hat es als ein Meisterwerk Bertoldos bestimmt').<sup>18</sup> Benda had paid the enormous sum of 48,896.- guilders for it – it was the most expensive work in his collection.<sup>19</sup> Like many of Bode's attributions to Bertoldo da Giovanni, this one too did not convince his peers. Already in 1938, Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti published the still accepted attribution of the work to Francesco di Giorgio.<sup>20</sup>

The relief's modelling is fine and differentiated; the height of the figures varies from shallow to almost three-dimensional. The large circular opening below the Virgin suggests the relief was designed as embellishment for the door of a tabernacle or a reliquary. This circular opening may have contained a differently-coloured, ornamented metal plate. The differences in the execution and differentiation of details on the relief's two sides (on the left, the figure of the putto and the Virgin's robe were clearly reworked after casting, unlike on the right) show that it was never completed. It presumably never served its intended purpose.

However, it will have functioned as a devotional image. The Tuscan artist strove for a realistic depiction of the Virgin as a simple young woman and mother: she is humbly seated on the ground – although slightly elevated on a pedestal-like platform (a fold of her robe is draped over the edge, as over a parapet, suggesting height). Embracing her son, she is suckling the Infant Jesus, making this a conflation of a *Madonna humilitatis* and a *Madonna lactans*. Only the three angels flanking the central motif and clutching a garland indicate the divine nature of mother and child. This invites a charming comparison with the more or less contemporary *Benda Madonna* from north of the Alps, although the latter represents a different medium and artistic tradition. Altarpieces and devotional images remained the most im-

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-3.

<sup>19</sup> See the list of prices paid for many of the works in the Benda Bequest – 'Verzeichnis eines grossen Teiles der gekauften Werke' ('List of a large part of the acquired objects') – 6, no. 68, archive of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, ad. Z. 12/I.D. ex 1932.

<sup>20</sup> See Manfred Leithe-Jasper, *Renaissance Master Bronzes from the Collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna*, Washington D.C. 1986, 65, no. 5.



Fig. 11  
Hans Daucher, *Emperor Maximilian I on Horseback as St. George*, Augsburg, c. 1522, limestone, H 22.9 cm, W 15.6 cm.  
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, inv. KK 7236

portant motifs in fifteenth-century art. Like many late-fifteenth-century artists, the Master of the Benda Madonna, too, aimed for verisimilitude in his depiction of the Virgin, but he relied on very different means (see the essay by Guido Messling). This perfectly illustrates similarities and differences between the Early Renaissance in Italy and contemporaneous Late Gothic art north of the Alps.

Interestingly, figurative depictions of the Virgin also constitute a focus of the Benda Collection. The inventory lists a total of 17 objects depicting her in different media – paintings, bronzes and wooden sculptures. No other iconographic motif is represented as frequently. However, we cannot say with certainty if this devotion to the Virgin Mary reflects the personal preference of the collector, who converted from Judaism to Catholicism.<sup>21</sup>

Benda's contributions to the collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum did not begin with his bequest. Even before the outbreak of the First World War, he had bequeathed a number of works to the museum (for the paintings, see the essay by Guido Messling). Among the sculptures, the most important and interesting is Hans Daucher's limestone relief 'Emperor Maximilian I on Horseback as St. George' (fig. 11).

On the one hand, the object expands the Museum's small but exquisite holdings of Renaissance sculptures from southern Germany. On the other hand, it is the earliest work in a long line of small-scale Habsburg equestrian monuments, most of which are now in the museum for dynastic reasons. Benda gifted the relief in 1911 when the 'Imperial Court Museum' ('Kunsthistorisches Hofmuseum') still housed the 'Collections of the Most Serene Imperial Family' ('Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses'). At the time, the fall of the Habsburg monarchy presumably seemed inconceivable. With his carefully considered gift, Benda enriched the emperor's art collection, which probably reflects the ambition and pride that motivated this bourgeois collector and connoisseur.

<sup>21</sup> In 1895, Benda left the Jewish religious community and was baptized later that year into the Catholic Church in the St Leopold parish in Vienna's Second District – see Hehenberger and Löscher 2014 (see note 4), 15, and the relevant entries on Benda, Gustav in the genealogical databank GenTeam: <https://www.genteam.at> (retrieved 3 April 2023).