Benvenuto Cellini's Bid for Membership in the Florentine Confraternity of San Giovanni Battista detta dello Scalzo

Douglas N. Dow

Summary: *An unpublished notice in the records of the confraternity of San Giovanni Battista detta dello Scalzo reveals that Benvenuto Cellini initiated a bid for membership in the company in 1557. Although Cellini seems an unlikely* confratello*, membership in a confraternity would have proved especially attractive to him during the difficult times he faced from 1555 to 1559. Sponsored by Roberto di Filippino Lippi, Cellini shared professional and social ties with several of the company's members, and he may have hoped that his affiliation with the confraternity would improve his position in Florence, which had deteriorated after 1555. Cellini, beset by legal troubles and convicted a second time for sodomy in 1557, did not follow through on his initial acceptance into the organization.*

On 2 February 1557, the Florentine confraternity of San Giovanni Battista detta dello Scalzo approved Benvenuto Cellini's bid for membership by a vote of forty-two in favor and four against.[1] The record of this vote describes Cellini as a 54 year-old goldsmith and identifies his sponsor within the organization as the painter Roberto Lippi, son of Filippino Lippi.[2] Despite the fact that Cellini's sponsor was an active member of the confraternity,[3] Benvenuto does not seem to have followed up on his membership bid and it is unlikely that other references to him in the

1 This article grew out of research I conducted for my dissertation on the art patronage of the company of San Giovanni Battista dello Scalzo. Support for that project was provided by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the Renaissance Society of America and the Pennsylvania State University. All dates have been changed to conform to the modern practice of marking the new year on January 1.

2 "E piu se vi[n]to ne modi consueti ch[e] bevenuto di g[iovann]i ceninj orafo [illegible; suggested read: deta] di annj 54 condoto p[er] ruberto di filippo dipintore e no[n] a benefizio vinse p[er] fave 42 nere 4 b[ianch]e." Florence, Archivio di Stato (hereafter ASF), Compagnie Religiose Soppresse (hereafter CRS), vol. 1195.13, fol. 125r. A duplicate entry, where Cellini is called "Be[n]venuto di G[iovan]ni celinj orefice" is found in ASF, CRS, vol. 1197.21, fol. 82v.

3 The confraternity elected Roberto Lippi to office six times. He served twice as the company's governor, ASF, CRS, vol. 1195.14, fols. 11v (09-01-1560), 20v (03-01-1563); twice as *infermiere,* ASF, CRS, vol. 1195.13, fol. 135v (01-02-1558), vol. 1195.14, fol. 33r (01-06-1566); once as master of novices, ASF, CRS, vol. 1195.13, fol. 117v (05-01-1556) and once as the guarantor (*mallevadore*) for the sacristan, ASF, CRS, vol. 1195.14, fol. 22r (05-02-1563). From the late 1550s until the early 1570s, records of payments to Roberto from the Scalzo for painting the company's emblem on processional candles and the company's robes can be found throughout ASF, CRS, vol. 1199.30. On 19 July 1574, the confraternity said an office in his memory. ASF, CRS, vol. 1195.14, fol. 73v. For more on Roberto, see Zambrano and Nelson, *Filippino Lippi,* 47.

confraternity's records will be discovered. Even though the vote to approve Cellini's membership represents the extent of his involvement with the Scalzo, it provides an entry point for an examination of what might have motivated the goldsmith to join the confraternity and allows for speculation about Cellini's life during the trying period between 1555 and 1559.

Founded as a flagellant company in 1376, San Giovanni Battista initially met in the church of San Jacopo in Campo Corbolini before taking up residence on a plot of land along Via Larga (now Via Cavour) that belonged to the Celestines of San Pietro del Murrone (now San Giovannino dei Cavalieri), where the confraternity is recorded in a document from 1401.[4] Over the course of the fifteenth century, the company built an oratory in this location, much of which was destroyed after the suppression of the Tuscan companies in 1785.[5] Today a small entrance (fig. 1) leads to what remains of the complex, the cloister frescoed by Andrea del Sarto and Franciabigio in the early *Cinquecento*.[6]

The company's records demonstrate that the *confratelli* of San Giovanni Battista came largely from the ranks of Florence's artisans and shopkeepers and included stonecutters, bakers, furriers, tailors, masons (*muratori*), painters, woodworkers, and weavers among others,[7] and the prevalence of artisans in the Scalzo may have been what drew Cellini to the company. Like many others who joined these types of sodalities, Cellini shared personal and professional relationships with men who were already in the brotherhood. His sponsor, Roberto Lippi, was the brother of Giovanni Francesco Lippi, a man with whom Cellini formed a close partnership early in his career,[8] and it is likely that his acquaintance with Roberto grew out of his friendship with Giovanni Francesco. In addition to personal ties to members of the Scalzo, Cellini also had professional relationships with some of the *confratelli.* For example, when Cellini cast the bronze *Bust of Cosimo I* (1545–48), he relied on the facilities and expertise of the bronze-founder Zanobi di Pagno,[9] a man who took an active role in the governance of the company of San Giovanni Battista.[10] Another founder, Zanobi Lastricati, who was employed by

4 Barducci, "Compagnia dello Scalzo," 147; O'Brien, "Andrea del Sarto," 258; Sebregondi, *San Jacopo in Campo Corbolini,* 41.

5 I am preparing an article that traces the building history of this structure and reconstructs its lost rooms. On the suppression of the lay companies, see Eisenbichler, "Suppression of Confraternities," 271–78.

6 For an introduction to the extensive literature on the frescoes, see Proto Pisani, *Chiostro dello Scalzo,* 46–47.

7 Marchi, "Compagnia dello Scalzo," 184.

8 Cellini, *Autobiography,* 18–19; Pope-Hennessy, *Cellini,* 26. On Giovanni Francesco Lippi, see Zambrano and Nelson, *Filippino Lippi,* 47.

9 Cole, "Universality, Professionalism, and the Workshop," 59; Pope-Hennessy, *Cellini,* 181; Trento, *Benvenuto Cellini,* 56–57. It should be noted that Cellini sued Zanobi di Pagno in June of 1559 to recover a debt. Calamandrei, *Scritti e inediti celliniani,* 201.

10 Zanobi di Pagno *fonditore* was elected to office seventeen times between 1540 and 1570, and served as the confraternity's *governatore* in 1568 and 1570. ASF, CRS, vol. 1195.13,

Cellini in 1548 and 1549 when he was working on the *Perseus* (1545–54),[11] was also a member of the company of San Giovanni Battista.[12]

Although Cellini was sponsored by the brother of a close friend and several of his professional acquaintances were inscribed in San Giovanni Battista, Benvenuto seems an unlikely candidate for membership in a lay confraternity. It is difficult to imagine the headstrong sculptor surrendering his sense of individuality and joining the other members of the company as they acted out collective rituals of charity, devotion, and penitence. Furthermore, Cellini's temper and reputation for violence must have been known to some of the men who cast votes on his bid. As recently as August of 1556 he had attacked a goldsmith, Giovanni di Lorenzo Papi, and beat the man severely with a club. In addition to landing four blows on Giovanni's arms, Cellini hit the man in the head and left a wound deep enough to reveal the bone (*che si vide losso*), an offense for which he was imprisoned in the Stinche until 26 October 1556.[13] Considering Cellini's history and this recent event, we might expect that the brothers of the Scalzo would have rejected Cellini as a novice, but he was accepted by an overwhelming majority. From the perspective of the confraternity, Cellini's violent past was not an obstacle to membership.

In addition to the acts of violence he perpetrated, Cellini was also a convicted sodomite. In 1523 he and another man, Giovanni di Ser Matteo Rigoli, were found guilty of committing sodomy on Domenico di Ser Giuliano da Ripa, and Cellini was sentenced to pay a fine of twelve bushels of flour.[14] Again we expect that the brothers of the Scalzo might have had misgivings about accepting Cellini as a novice, especially considering that the confraternity's statutes were adamant that any member who was found to have engaged in that "abominable and cursed and dissolute vice" was to be expelled from the company at the next meeting.[15] Despite widespread condemnation and criminalization of sodomy, the practice was a common feature of male experience in Renaissance Florence.[16] It is likely that Cellini's conviction, which took place years before the votes were cast, had little

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fols. 36r, 41r, 44r, 49r, 50r, 60v, 79v, 91v, 95v, 109r, 130r; ASF, CRS, vol. 1195.14, fols. 12v, 35r, 37v, 40r, 45v, 50v.

11 Cole, "Universality, Professionalism, and the Workshop," 57; Pope-Hennessy, *Cellini,* 181.

12 Zanobi Lastricati was not as active in the company as was Zanobi di Pagno. He never assumed the post of *governatore,* and was only elected to office on four occasions between 1558 and 1563. ASF, CRS, vol. 1195.14, fols. 3v, 9r, 10v, 20v.

13 Rossi, "The Writer and the Man," 173–74; Greci, "Benvenuto Cellini," 514. The severity of the beating is evident from the records of the Otto di Guardia; for a transcription, see Greci, "Benvenuto Cellini," 525.

14 Rossi, "The Writer and the Man," 177; Arnaldi, *La vita violenta,* 32; Greci, "Benvenuto Cellini," 359–63.

15 "E se alchuno e sopra detti chomettesi labominevole e maladetto e disoluto viçio a peccato di sodomia di fatto sia raso e privato alla prima tornata di nostra chompagnia." ASF, Capitoli delle Compagnie Religiose Soppresse, vol. 152, fol. 10r.

16 Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships,* 112.

effect on the group's deliberations because so few remembered it or those who did remember did not assign it much importance.[17] One member of the brotherhood who was in a much better position than most to have an inkling of Cellini's sexual practices was his sponsor, Roberto Lippi. Cellini's description of his friendship with Roberto's brother, Giovanni Francesco, speaks of a close and intimate bond between the two men. Cellini claimed that he and Giovanni Francesco were together both day and night, and Roberto must have been aware of how much time his brother and the goldsmith spent together, even if he was not cognizant of the full extent of Cellini's affection for Giovanni Francesco.[18] For his part, Roberto did not let this knowledge of Cellini's past behavior—no matter how much it ran counter to the comportment of members required by the organization's by-laws—keep him from nominating the goldsmith for membership in the confraternity.

Less than a month after the successful vote on his novitiate, Cellini was arrested in Scarperia on 17 February 1557 and returned to Florence.[19] Ten days later he was charged with committing sodomy on a workshop assistant, Ferrando di Giovanni da Montepulciano; this relationship had lasted for five years and formed a strong enough bond between Cellini and the boy that the goldsmith made a provision for him in his will.[20] Cellini confessed to the crime and was sentenced to four years in prison and a fine of 50 *scudi d'oro.*[21] As a repeat offender, Cellini faced stiff penalties under a law enacted in 1542 that encouraged judges to consider the criminal history of the accused and to impose punishments as harsh as the death penalty on those who had previously been convicted of sodomy.[22] After receiving appeals from Cellini and the Bishop of Pavia, however, Cosimo I intervened and commuted the prison sentence to house arrest.[23] Cellini's autobiography does not mention his

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17 Acts of sodomy committed while young were viewed more indulgently than those perpetrated by men of advanced age. Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships,* 113–14.

18 Cellini, *Autobiography,* 19. For more on Cellini's homoerotic descriptions of friendship, see Gallucci, *Benvenuto Cellini,* 34–35, 130–33. For Cellini's sexual attitudes, see Saslow, *Ganymede in the Renaissance,* 149–57.

19 Rossi, "The Writer and the Man,"178; Pope-Hennessy, *Cellini,* 253–54.

20 *Ibid.* The denunciation stated that Cellini kept Ferrando in his bed and treated him like his wife (*tenendolo in letto come suo moglie*). Greci, "Benvenuto Cellini," 530. For the characterization of the passive member of a stable homosexual relationship as a wife or a woman, see Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships,* 107–09. On Cellini's testaments see Waldman, "A Rediscovered Portrait of Benvenuto Cellini," 828–29; Calamandrei, *Scritti e inediti celliniani,* 81–94.

21 A transcription and translation of the charge and the sentence handed down by the Otto di Guardia is in Gallucci, *Benvenuto Cellini,* 153–54. See also Rossi, "The Writer and the Man," 179; Greci, "Benvenuto Cellini," 530.

22 The threat of these harsh penalties may have convinced Cellini to confess to the crime in order to receive a reduced sentence. Gallucci, "Cellini's Trial for Sodomy," 39–40; Rossi, "The Writer and the Man," 179. On the law of 1542, see Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships,* 232–35.

23 Gallucci, *Benvenuto Cellini,* 27; Rossi, "The Writer and the Man," 180; Pope-Hennessy, *Cellini,* 254.

engagement with the Scalzo because it took place between 1555 and 1559, a period that he does not recount in his *Vita.*[24] These were frustrating years for Cellini. In addition to his legal difficulties and criminal convictions, the salary that he had been collecting was suspended, he was unable to keep reliable assistants and he faced a shortage of commissions that threatened his professional well-being.[25] These must have been especially trying circumstances for the self-assured sculptor who had awed the city of Florence with his *Perseus* (1545–54) and it is not surprising that Cellini's own account of his life glossed over this difficult period.

In order to more fully understand the possibilities offered by membership in the confraternity of San Giovanni Battista, Cellini's bid must be seen in the light of his professional and legal difficulties. According to the confraternity's statutes, the nomination process required several time-consuming steps. First the potential novice was put forward by a member in good standing to an advisory council comprised of the company's governor, the two masters of the novices and nine *arroti.* If the candidate was acceptable, his bid was taken under consideration by the council, which would vote at the next meeting. If the candidate was approved by the council, his bid was made known to the general membership and then put to a vote at the following meeting.[26] The confraternity held its regular meetings twice each month,[27] and several weeks could elapse between the initial nomination of an individual and the vote on his bid by the entire body of the company. Cellini was approved on 2 February 1557, which suggests that Lippi would have put Benvenuto's name forward in November or December, shortly after his release from the Stinche where he had been imprisoned for assaulting Papi.

Confraternal membership offered an array of benefits that ranged from access to modest dowries and burial in company tombs to the expansion of one's network of social and professional contacts. Cellini had little need for the dowries offered by the company and he had much more ambitious plans for his final resting place than the confraternity's tomb,[28] but he might have seen membership in the Scalzo as a means to ameliorate his professional reputation in Florence, which had been damaged by his recent imprisonment for assault.[29] When he composed his autobiography, Cellini remembered fondly the happy times he spent in Florence as a young man

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24 Waldman, "A Rediscovered Portrait of Benvenuto Cellini," 823; Trento, *Benvenuto Cellini,* 48–49; Cellini, *Vita,* 401 n. 1.

25 Cole, "Universality, Professionalism and the Workshop," 61; Cole, "Benvenuto Cellini's Designs for his Tomb," 798.

26 ASF, Capitoli delle Compagnie Religiose Soppresse, vol. 152, fol. 9r-9v.

27 ASF, Capitoli delle Compagnie Religiose Soppresse, vol. 86, fol. 2v.

28 On the fluctuating plans and negotiations for the installation of Cellini's tomb, see Waldman, "A Rediscovered Portrait of Benvenuto Cellini," 828–29; Cole, "Benvenuto Cellini's Designs for his Tomb," 800–803; Calamandrei, *Scritti e inediti celliniani,* 81–94. The Scalzo buried its dead in the church of San Piero del Murrone (now San Giovannino dei Cavalieri) until the middle of the sixteenth century when the confraternity secured a sepulcher in Santissima Annunziata. O'Brien, "Andrea del Sarto," 262.

29 Wisch, "Incorporating Images," 245–46.

with Giovanni Francesco Lippi. Perhaps his bid to join the confraternity of San Giovanni Battista, under the sponsorship of the brother of the beloved companion of his youth, was a nostalgic attempt to return to a period that Cellini, seeing it from the vantage point of the late 1550s, viewed as a happier and more promising time. Even casual membership in a confraternity would allow a man such as Cellini to make contacts that could be used to revitalize his career. Finally, in addition to reintegrating himself into a network of artists and artisans in place at San Giovanni Battista, Cellini might have also joined to express some degree of repentance. This motivation is less suspect when seen in the light of the analogous—if more emphatic—step that Cellini took in the summer of 1558 when he received his first holy orders.[30]

If Cellini's bid for membership in the Scalzo was an attempt by the sculptor to mitigate his reputation for difficulty and to reintegrate himself into the Florentine network of artists, his second conviction for sodomy must have been disheartening. Not only did it come on the heels of his recent imprisonment for assault, but it punished the goldsmith for an affair that had ended almost eighteen months previously when Ferrando left Cellini in June of 1556.[31] After being sentenced for the crime, Cellini channeled his energy into more solitary pursuits like the carving of his marble *Crucifix* (1555–62), the planning of his tomb and the writing of his *Vita,* which became an outlet for Cellini's criticism of artists and patrons.[32]

Perhaps Cellini saw membership in the confraternity of San Giovanni Battista as a way to distance himself from his recent difficulties and to establish himself more firmly within the social and professional milieux of the artists of Florence. Faced with house arrest and dogged by his legal troubles, Cellini most likely lost interest in pursuing membership in the company, and he abandoned his bid in much the same way that the *Vita* omits the period from 1555 to 1559. The only evidence of Cellini's interest in the confraternity of San Giovanni Battista detta dello Scalzo is the record approving the vote of the *confratelli* to accept him as a novice. However slight, this notice not only sheds some light into a corner of Cellini's life that the sculptor himself preferred to keep in shadow, but also provides an example of how confraternal membership could offer useful benefits to an artist in sixteenth-century Florence—even one as headstrong as Cellini.

Kansas State University

30 Rossi, "The Writer and the Man," 180; Cellini had the orders revoked in 1560, Pope-Hennessy, *Cellini,* 255.

31 Rossi, "The Writer and the Man," 178.

32 Gallucci, "Cellini's Trial for Sodomy," 43–45.

Fig. 1. Entrance to the Chiostro dello Scalzo, Via Cavour, Florence (Photo: author)

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