

SAINT PAUL THE HERMIT

RESTORATION AND REDISCOVERY

Acquired by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1973, the statue of Saint Paul the Hermit remained a mystery for the longest time. It was exhibited with an attribution to the 17th-century sculptor Francesco Mochi, when in fact the sculpture was made more than a full century later, by the important sculptor Andrea Bergondi. (Bergondi continued to employ a Baroque visual language despite the dawn of Neoclassicism.) Moreover, the statue had been mounted in an awkward way in the 1960s, tipped forward by about 45 degrees, which impeded its correct reading and understanding. This exhibition documents the research and conservation process that took place during the past year, restoring this statue to its original position and glory. It also sheds light on other aspects, from carving technique and construction to the sculpture's original context, meaning, and history.

The conservation was carried out by senior objects conservator Donna Haberman and associate objects conservator Nicole Grabow of the Midwest Art Conservation Center (MACC).

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts allocates funding for the care, restoration, and conservation of the works of art in its collections. This annual commitment ensures that precious objects are preserved for future generations to enjoy and study.

The estimated cost of repairing and restoring Andrea Bergondi's *Hermit Saint*, however, was beyond the museum's budget. Fortunately, a group of dedicated museum volunteers, the Friends of the Institute, came to the rescue and provided the money necessary for the sculpture's restoration.

Founded in 1922, the Friends organization is now celebrating its 90th anniversary. Comprising nearly 1,000 hardworking members, the Friends of the Institute is one of the nation's largest and most active art-museum volunteer organizations. Over the course of its long history, the group has contributed more than \$6 million to support the MIA's mission.

The museum gratefully acknowledges the Friends' important role in returning the *Hermit Saint* to its original orientation and glory.

FRIENDS 
OF THE INSTITUTE

Saint Paul: The First Hermit Saint

Saint Paul the Hermit (not to be confused with the Apostle Paul, after whom Minneapolis's twin city, Saint Paul, is named) was the first hermit saint of the Christian church. Born in Thebes (now Luxor), Egypt, Saint Paul fled into the desert to avoid the persecution of Christians, and to dedicate his life to the solitary worship of God. Saint Paul became a model for successive hermit saints, as well as for the institution of Christian monasticism. According to legend, the saint was born in the year 228 and lived for 113 years until his death in 341. He resided in a desert cave, where he followed a rigorous routine of constant prayer and meditation. His nourishment consisted of the dates of a palm tree (which also provided shade outside the cave) and a daily half-loaf of bread sent by God via a raven. A freshwater spring provided the water necessary for survival.

For their contempt of worldly goods and pleasures, and their concentrated and undistracted worship of God, hermit saints were very much venerated throughout the Middle Ages and Early Modern times. Some of the most popular hermit saints are depicted in paintings and etchings in the collection of the Minneapolis

Institute of Arts. Like Saint Paul the Hermit, Saint Humphrey (Onuphrius) dedicated his life to solitary prayer in the Egyptian desert near Luxor. Onuphrius was particularly venerated in the Byzantine church and is often seen with a very long beard, in some images covering his entire body. In his painting at the MIA, Salvator Rosa shows the saint seated and absorbed in prayer.



Salvator Rosa, Italian (Naples), 1615–73, *Saint Humphrey (Onuphrius)*, c. 1660, oil on canvas, The John R. Van Derlip Fund, 64.2

A painting in the MIA's collection attributed to Paolo Pagani shows Saint Jerome in the desert grasping two of the chief utensils of every hermit saint—a skull (symbolizing the transitory nature of life and the vanity of worldly pursuits) and a crucifix (symbolizing salvation)—while a large book refers to the saint's translation of the Bible, and a red cardinal's hat identifies his office in the church.

Whereas Saint Paul the Hermit was the first Christian saint to lead a solitary life of divine devotion in the desert or wilderness, Saint Anthony Abbott established the first monastic community. As the legend goes, Saint Anthony Abbott traveled through the desert to meet Saint Paul, encountering various fantastic animals and beasts on his way. After Saint Paul's death, Saint Anthony had a vision of angels accompanying the hermit saint's soul to heaven. Returning to Saint Paul's cave, Saint Anthony found the hermit saint's body frozen in prayer, as though still alive. But having ascertained his death, he bade two lions to dig a grave, in which he buried his friend.



Attributed to Paolo Pagani, Italian, 1661–1716, *Saint Jerome in the Desert*, c. 1700, Gift of Richard and Martha R. Olson, 2009.63

Bergondi's statue shows Saint Paul as he was when Saint Anthony last saw him. According to the influential *Legenda Aurea* (Golden Legend, written by Jacopo de Voragine in the 13th century), when Saint Anthony Abbott returned to his friend's cave after having had the vision of his death, he found "his body upright on its knees as though praying, and he thought him to be still alive. But having realized that he had died, he said: 'O saintly soul, you show in your death what you did throughout your life.'" Saint Paul had virtually become a statue of himself, and conversely, the statue of marble evokes the living saint.

San Paolo Primo Eremita: Rome's Last Baroque Church

In January 1775, the church of San Paolo Primo Eremita was consecrated in Rome. In a most unusual manner, the architect Clemente Orlandi (1694–1775) turned to examples by Francesco Borromini (1599–1667) as inspiration for the church's plan and for the elevation of its façade, which is animated by the interplay of concave and convex shapes.



This image shows the façade of the deconsecrated church of San Paolo Primo Eremita in Via Agostino Depretis in Rome. The building is situated on the important thoroughfare, which connects the churches of Santa Maria Maggiore and San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane.

The church was built by the monastic order of Saint Paul, which had been founded in Hungary in the 13th century, flourishing there and in Poland throughout the following centuries. Just as the architecture of San Paolo Primo Eremita referenced examples from a previous century, this church's interior design was inspired by 17th-century works. This rare revival of the High Baroque style during the period of early Neoclassicism—when European art and culture was dominated to an unprecedented degree by the influence of ancient Graeco-Roman arts—must have been favored by the Polish and Hungarian monks. The patrons clearly preferred to avoid formulas adapted from ancient paganism, instead expressing their identity in the glorious language of the Catholic church in the Roman Seicento.

The decoration of San Paolo Primo Eremita culminated in the over-lifesized marble statue of the church's kneeling patron saint, which was installed immediately behind the high altar within a scenic reconstruction of his cave in the Egyptian desert and its surroundings.



The deconsecrated church of San Paolo Primo Eremita today is owned by the Italian Police, which uses it as an auditorium.

Unfortunately, no drawing of the statue *in situ* has yet come to light, but several descriptions of it give us a clear view of its original context. One, from 1827, enumerates the “statue of Saint Paul of marble” together with the “grotto, tree, cross, putti and raven in stucco.” The presence of *putti* (infant angels) indicates that Saint Anthony Abbott's vision of angels carrying the hermit saint's soul to heaven was almost

certainly part of the depiction, confirming the interpretation of the kneeling figure as the eternally praying body of Saint Paul the Hermit.

Following examples by Gian Lorenzo Bernini—in particular his famous *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa of Ávila* (1647–51) in the nearby church of Santa Maria della Vittoria—builders constructed a light well that provided a spotlight illumination of the statue. The German poet Zacharias Werner (1768–1823), who attended an early morning mass in the church in April 1810, was struck by the light effect: “... even the morning ray played its role, as it beautifully illuminated the statue of the first Christian hermit, Saint Paul (who kneels naked in the desert), sculpted on the high altar.”

Andrea Bergondi: Retro Style and Spectacle in 18th-century Rome



When Bergondi (at left) carved the statue of Saint Paul the Hermit, he was at the peak of his fame. Elected a member of the Roman art academy, Accademia di San Luca, in 1760, he became its *principe* (president) in 1767, re-elected in 1768, 1772, and 1778. The artist's reputation is reflected in his princely payment of 850 *scudi* for the statue.

Other works by Bergondi include the relief depicting Agrippa commanding the construction of the aqueduct (1732–34) on the Trevi Fountain, and many church commissions. Bergondi's retrospective style, which took inspiration from the age of the High Baroque of Bernini and his followers, must have been particularly appealing for ecclesiastical patrons who wished to reconnect with a period of the church's greatest power. In the Pamphili Chapel in the church of Sant'Agostino in Rome, Bergondi's two large, lateral altar reliefs depicting the miracles of Saint Thomas of Villanova show the artist's ability to dramatize narration in a spectacular way.

Particularly similar to the lost decoration of San Paolo Primo Eremita is the *Death of Saint Alexis* behind the altar of the church of Sant'Alessio in Rome (pictured here). The saint, after converting to Christianity, lived as a beggar under the entry staircase of his wealthy parents' mansion. In the sculpture, the staircase is shown being carried to heaven by angels. All the figures in Sant'Alessio were modeled in stucco, but in San Paolo Primo Eremita, only the additional figures and scenery were stucco; the patron saint was carved in marble.



Left: *Death of Saint Alexis*, church of Sant'Alessio, Rome

Above: Altar of the Pamphili Chapel, church of Sant'Agostino, Rome

From Rome to Minneapolis

The church of San Paolo Primo Eremita was deconsecrated in 1873 as part of the secularization of churches and monasteries following the Italian unification, which had virtually extinguished the papal state. In 1884, at the peak of anti-Baroque taste and anti-ecclesiastical politics, Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle (1819–97), who since 1875 was the Inspector General of Fine Arts for the young Italian state, expressed his judgment that Bergondi's sculpture of Saint Paul was no longer relevant ("For the light artificially conducted upon it has a certain decorative effect, but taken out of its place, it would lose even that, having no artistic merit"). The following year it was removed to the church of Santa Bonosa in Trastevere, which was torn down in 1888.

Fortunately the sculpture was saved and probably sold shortly before the church's demolition. But its whereabouts remained unknown until it reappeared in 1965 in the "Exhibition of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Italian Sculpture" at the art dealer Colnaghi's in London. Interestingly, the statue was correctly identified as Saint Paul the

Hermit in the catalogue, but it was vaguely attributed to the "Roman school, end of the 17th century." The catalogue also noted that the figure "was formerly attributed to Bernini, but seems to be by one of his followers and executed about 1790." It appears that the statue was shown at Colnaghi's on consignment from the Roman art dealers Marco and Carlo Sestieri, who, in a letter to former MIA Director Anthony Clark, stated that they had purchased the statue thanks to the advice of restorer Giuseppe Cellini, who had first discovered it. The MIA acquired the sculpture from the Sestieri brothers in February 1973, and it was shipped to Minneapolis in January 1974. At that time, the sculpture was attributed to the early Baroque sculptor Francesco Mochi (1580–1654). As such, it was on view at the museum until 2010. But a handwritten note, which quotes John Pope-Hennessy's opinion expressed in a personal letter to Anthony Clark in 1974, correctly identified the statue as Andrea Bergondi's sculpture for the high altar in San Paolo Primo Eremita.



Above: By 1965 the statue was tipped and wedged between two concrete pyramids in order to hold it in its awkward position. These later additions were taken off mechanically in 2010–11. Solvent and poultices were used to reduce staining, which was caused by water runoff, biological growth, iron, handling, and discolored fill materials.

Stripping Off Later Additions

A photocopy of an old photograph, which has survived in the MIA's object file, shows the statue of Saint Paul the Hermit upright, with his proper left knee propped against a marble rock, on top of which the woven straw mat (made of palm leaves), which the saint wears around his hips, billows in the wind. The lost photograph must have been taken in the early 1960s or before, when the statue was still intact. The parts now missing most probably were severely damaged and lost during transportation, perhaps within Rome or on the way from Rome to London.

Having lost its left end, the statue was mounted with the figure tipped forward by about 45 degrees. This may have been an attempt to better stabilize the sculpture, but it obscured its meaning. Instead of praying upwards to heaven, Saint Paul seemed ready to jump off a rock for a swim.



Far left: The statue is seen from the back after removal of all later additions, and without the proper right foot, which was taken off to be conserved separately.

Left: A photocopy of a lost photograph shows the statue of Saint Paul the Hermit upright, before it lost the rock with the billowing end of the straw mat.

Below: As the presence of a large drilling hole for a rod suggests, the missing end of the statue may well have been carved out of a separate piece of marble, or it may have been broken and reconnected with the main part of the sculpture at an earlier point in its history.

