

By Eike D. Schmidt,  
PhD, James Ford  
Bell Curator of  
Decorative Arts  
and Sculpture, and  
department head

# SAINT PAUL THE HERMIT

## RESTORATION AND REDISCOVERY

**THE MIA'S MARBLE STATUE HAS BEEN RESEARCHED, REATTRIBUTED, RESTORED, AND REPOSITIONED, AND IS NOW ON VIEW.**

UNTIL LAST YEAR, a familiar sight above the staircase leading to the third-floor galleries at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts was a huge marble figure of an aged, yet muscular, semi-nude bearded man, who seemed to be dangerously hovering above a crevice, clasping his hands symmetrically as though about to jump off the rocks for a dive. A closer look revealed the statue actually represents a hermit saint—but which? And why was he in such an awkward position? Where was the over-life-sized sculpture installed originally, and most of all, who created it?

When the work was acquired by the museum in 1973, hopes were high that it might be a work by the Italian sculptor Francesco Mochi (1580–1654), who competed with Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) during the early Baroque period. But stylistically, the imposing saint doesn't seem related to Mochi's other known works. Moreover, no written documents record any commission for an over-life-sized hermit saint by Mochi. A handwritten annotation in the MIA's old index-card catalogue bearing John Pope-Hennessy's attribution of the sculpture to Andrea Bergondi provided the clue for the correct identification.


The statue was actually carved in 1775, more than a century after Mochi's death, for the Roman church of San Paolo Primo Eremita. It represents the first hermit saint of the Christian church, Saint Paul (not to be confused with the Apostle Paul), who in the third century retreated to the Egyptian desert near Luxor to live a solitary life dedicated to the worship of God. Saint Paul the Hermit became an inspiration for a plethora of later hermit saints, as well as for the institution of Christian monasticism. In the church dedicated to Saint Paul in Rome, the statue now at the MIA was installed behind the altar within an illusionistic, scenic, stucco landscape representing the saint's desert cave. A light well in the church's wall, constructed in order to shine a natural spotlight onto the saint's figure, must have further enhanced the theatricality of the sacred scene. None of these surroundings has survived. Most probably they were destroyed after the church was deconsecrated in 1873. It now serves as an auditorium for the municipal police. The statue of Saint Paul was moved to the church of Santa Bonosa in Trastevere in 1885, but it disappeared when that church was torn down three years later. It reappeared on the London art market in 1965.

The church of San Paolo Primo Eremita has been called the last Baroque church built in Rome; accordingly, the statue now in Minneapolis was arguably the last large-scale Baroque statue made in Rome during the early age of Neoclassicism. In fact, unlike most sculptors of his time, Bergondi consciously continued to work according to Baroque principles, such as theatricality, abundance, asymmetry, and movement, and frequently sought inspiration from examples of Baroque sculpture created in the previous century. This revival of earlier models helps explain why

### **"SAINT PAUL THE HERMIT: RESTORATION AND REDISCOVERY"**

Now through April 15  
Cargill Gallery (103); free

*This exhibition is  
supported by the Samuel  
H. Kress Foundation.*

*Generous support for  
restoration provided by*  
**FRIENDS**   
OF THE INSTITUTE



**Left to right:** Associate objects conservator Nicole Grabow applies steam with gentle pressure to the marble during the final cleaning phase. The cleaning process involves damp cotton swabs and poultices. New fill material in the gap between two parts of the beard is carved with a scalpel. The marble surface is cleaned with a soft brush.

**Below:** Andrea Bergondi, Italian, 1722–89, *Saint Paul the Hermit*, marble. The Putnam Dana McMillan Fund, 73.2

it was possible to mistake his *Saint Paul the Hermit* for a work by Mochi. Bergondi's retrospective sensibilities made him particularly popular among ecclesiastic patrons, who sought to reconnect with the glorious age of the Roman Seicento.

Thanks to the generosity of the Friends of the Institute, Donna Haberman and Nicole Grabow of the Midwest Art Conservation Center were commissioned to remove all the later restorations from the sculpture—most notably the two concrete blocks of about 1965, which wedged the statue in its unnatural position, tipped downwards by almost 45 degrees—and to clean it and to fill in any gaps using state-of-the-art techniques. A wonderfully powerful and pristine statue came to light, showing the traces of different carving instruments on its back.

Liberated from its later additions and put back into its original upward-praying position, the statue was connected with its new steel mount, which was developed by MIA technicians Bill Skodje and Brian Stieler. Thanks to the generosity of the Friends of the Institute and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, which funded the exhibition display and its related Web treatment, the freshly cleaned statue, back on its knees, is being showcased in a special exhibition in Cargill Gallery through April 15. It is now possible to walk around the statue and to further explore the various aspects of its iconography, history, and conservation.

Coincidentally, the Pop-Up Park erected outside the Cargill Gallery serves as an oasis outside the saint's cave, complete with the palm trees that are traditional attributes of Saint Paul the Hermit, and mechanical birds that recall the raven, which, according to legend, brought a daily loaf of bread to feed the Hermit Saint. ■

