

# A Pax by Guglielmo della Porta

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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART owns a rare gilt-bronze pax representing the Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles (Figure 1), which has been associated with the northern Italian sculptor, architect, and draftsman Guglielmo della Porta (before 1506–77). Paxes were used occasionally from the thirteenth century onward as part of the Roman Catholic liturgy, to extend to the congregation the *osculum pacis*, the kiss of brotherhood and peace. After kissing the altar, the officiating priest embraced his co-celebrants, who in turn offered the pax to the people attending Mass.

At the height of their popularity in Italy in the sixteenth century, paxes were usually made of silver or gilt-bronze and consisted of a tablet with an architecturally framed central scene and a handle on the back, which also functioned as a stand. By far the most frequent image on paxes was Christ on the Cross, sometimes flanked by Mary and St. John, but other scenes from the Life and Passion of Christ occurred as well.<sup>1</sup> Subjects such as these, including the Risen Christ, were particularly appropriate, since the pax substituted for the altar, which itself is a symbol of Christ. The theme and composition of the Museum's *Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles*, with its handsome, towering figure in the center surrounded by the disciples, emphasizes the sacrament of the Eucharist, in addition to the peace and redemption gained through Christ's death and resurrection.<sup>2</sup> These eucharistic allusions are, of course, thoroughly in keeping with the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, which was gaining momentum at this time during the second half of the sixteenth century. The unblemished, victorious Redeemer was usually represented after the Resurrection with one arm raised, wearing a (red) mantle, and holding a long-stemmed, flagged cross. The figure on the Museum's pax belongs to a sculptural tra-

dition that culminates in Giovanni Bologna's *Christ the Redeemer* of 1579 on the Altar of Liberty in the cathedral of Lucca.<sup>3</sup>

Olga Raggio was the first to point out the pax's connection to drawings by Guglielmo della Porta, in a note written in 1959 for the curatorial files. Her opinion found confirmation later in an article by Ulrich Middeldorf, who mentioned this pax in passing and described it, without further explanation, as close to the artist himself rather than by a follower.<sup>4</sup> Yet the partly documented, partly exaggerated popularity and influence of Guglielmo's compositions have led scholars, including Middeldorf, to attribute a wide range of objects to the master himself or to his circle, often on very slim grounds and superficial similarities. A closer examination of the pax and a comparison with drawings by Guglielmo resulted in the affirmation of the above-mentioned views regarding the Museum's piece. It also spurred attributions of three other related objects.

Guglielmo della Porta, active in Rome from 1537 until his death in 1577, is best known for his tomb of Pope Paul III in St. Peter's (begun 1547). However, we know that he and his busy foundry workshop also produced a number of prized, smaller figures and plaquettes.<sup>5</sup> Teodoro della Porta, Guglielmo's son, even mentions a pax among the pieces in his father's workshop, but he does not describe it further.<sup>6</sup> From about 1555/56 on, we know that Guglielmo worked on a series of drawings and models representing events from Christ's Passion and this may well have included the image of the Risen Christ that appears on the Museum's pax. The artist tried in vain to secure commissions for various ideas involving this group of designs, at times supplemented by other scenes from the Life of Christ, but none of these projects was ever realized. Fortunately, a substantial number of Guglielmo's drawings related to the Passion series have survived in a sketchbook, now housed in the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum.<sup>7</sup> While none of these exactly matches the scene on the Metropolitan's pax, unexpected and

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Figure 1 (enlarged). Guglielmo della Porta (before 1506–77), *The Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles*, 1566–77. Gilt bronze, H. 14.4 cm, W. (at base) 10.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Friedsam Collection, Bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931, 32.100.168



Figure 2. Guglielmo della Porta, *The Resurrection*, after 1555/56. Pen and brown ink, 228 × 164 mm. Düsseldorf, Graphische Sammlung, FP 6419 (photo: Landesbildstelle Rheinland, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf)



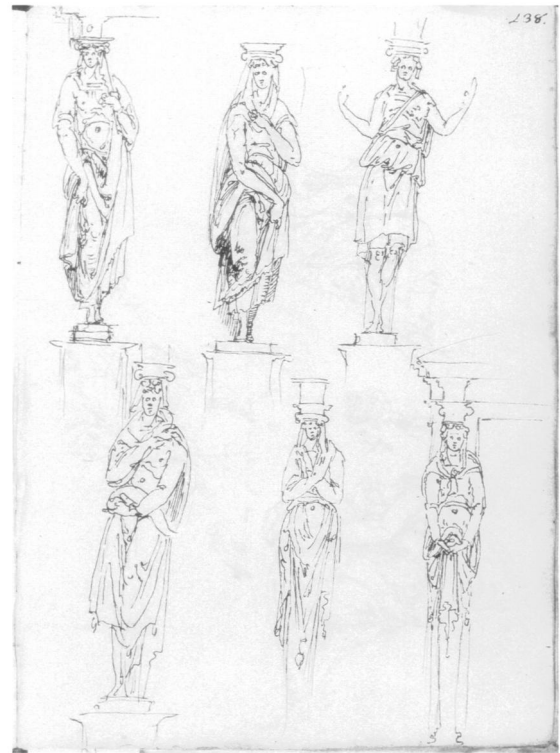
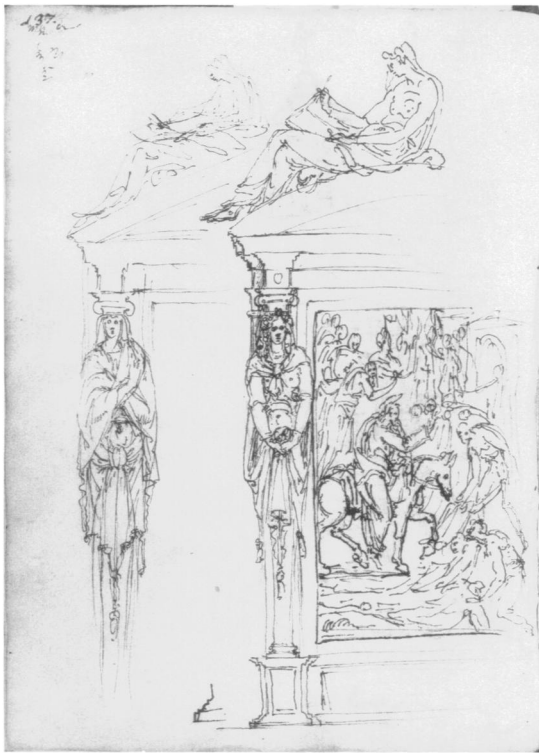
Figure 3. Guglielmo della Porta, *Four Apostles*, after 1555/56. Pen and brown ink, 228 × 164 mm. Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Graphische Sammlung, FP 6419 (photo: Landesbildstelle Rheinland, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf)

sometimes startling parallels can be drawn regarding both Guglielmo's style and his figural invention.

The whole surface of the pax conveys the same dazzling, flickering effect of Guglielmo's autograph sketches. This is mainly the result of a highly unusual manner of chasing: certain areas are deliberately left less defined, and the polishing of the richly colored mercury gilding is used selectively to achieve an even greater contrast of shining and matte surfaces.<sup>8</sup> The hair is modeled into flaming curls; muscles and draperies ripple with nervous energy. The quick pen strokes and elongated figures in Guglielmo's *Resurrection* drawing (Figure 2), for example, seem to be translated literally into relief form in the pax. In particular, the figures of the Risen Christ are so much alike in both pose and proportions that the figure on the pax must have evolved directly from the drawing. Clearly, the tall,

slender figure was intended to stand out and tower above the others in both versions. Slight variations occur in the drapery and the inclination of Christ's head and right hand, but the elegant curve of the contrapposto and the left arm are practically identical in pax and drawing. Even details of the exaggeratedly modeled torso of the drawn Christ are echoed in the relief figure. This degree of agreement is astonishing, when one considers that the pax's figures had to be adapted somewhat for execution in a fairly small metal format.

Finally, in a more general sense, the crowded figures below Christ in the *Resurrection* drawing crane their necks in a fashion similar to the apostles on the pax. One of the studies of standing prophets, sibyls, and apostles can serve as an example for the close connections of Guglielmo's drapery style in both pax and drawings (Figure 3).<sup>9</sup>



Figures 4, 5. Guglielmo della Porta, *Studies for a Frame and Caryatid Figures*, after 1555/56. Pen and brown ink, 228 × 164 mm. Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Graphische Sammlung, FP 6419 (photo: Landesbildstelle Rheinland, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf)

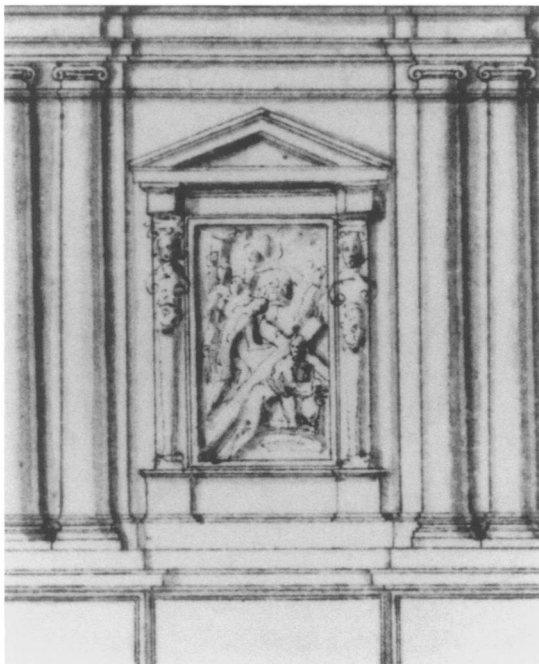


Figure 6. Giovanni Antonio Dosio (1533–1609), after a scheme by Guglielmo della Porta, detail of project for San Silvestro al Quirinale, Rome, about 1556/57. Pen and brown ink and wash, 560 × 434 mm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Largest Talman Album, fol. 37 (photo: Ashmolean Museum, Oxford)

Similar constructions for a centralized perspectival setting or “box” for the figures can be found in various sketches by Guglielmo, for example, his *Flagellation* (Figure 14) or *The Last Supper*.<sup>10</sup> The background space of the Metropolitan’s pax connects directly to its elegant frame, which is also in keeping with Guglielmo’s individual style. Two leaves from the sketchbook (Figures 4, 5) show a series of comparable caryatid and frame studies,<sup>11</sup> although the finished pax retains only female busts with their headdresses knotted on their breasts and larger Ionic scrolls curling by their temples. Closer to the pax are the frames Guglielmo designed for a series of Passion reliefs on the lateral walls of San Silvestro al Quirinale, Rome, in about 1558/59 (Figure 6).<sup>12</sup> The moldings of the *aediculae* in the elevation drawing (executed by Giovanni Antonio Dosio after Guglielmo’s instructions) are kept simple and the pediment is unbroken, but the caryatid terms on their tapering bases now have similar scrolls instead of arms and more pronounced Ionic crowns, like the figures on the pax.

The elegant handle on the back of the pax (Figures 7, 8)<sup>13</sup> is composed of a fanciful female torso and an S-curved scroll. There can hardly be any doubt that this figure belongs to the same family as





Figure 7. Rear view of Figure 1

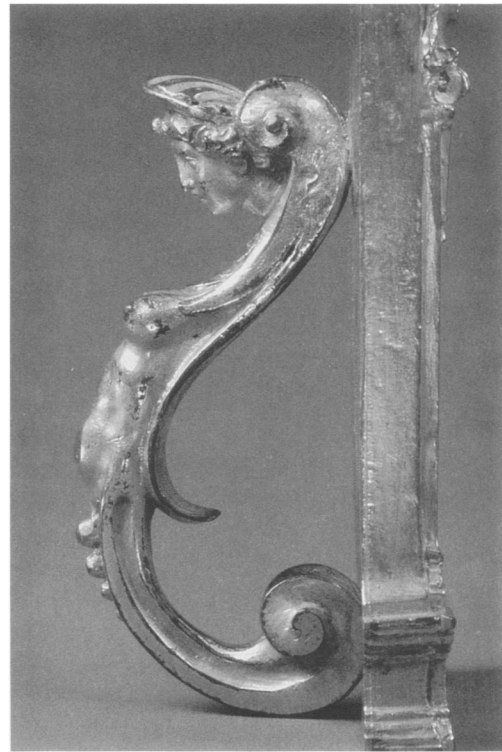


Figure 8. Side view of Figure 1

the caryatid terms on the front and that it is related to yet another sketch by Guglielmo (Figure 9). On the left side of the page the foot of a candlestick is shaped into a similar, if more specifically harpylike, figure with a claw foot, a protruding belly, and a C-scroll in its back. The version at the lower right on the page is closer in proportion and detail to the pax handle: the figure is more elongated and wears a similar diadem, and the curve of its back is opened and more elastic. Finally, the quick sketch in the top right corner shows a similar, knobby modeling of the breasts and belly as executed in the handle. Although not identical, these figures all seem to have sprung from the same creative mind that developed the paper sketches into a beautiful and functional sculptural form.

These comparisons indicate to what a great extent the Metropolitan's pax captures the style, spirit, and effect of Guglielmo's autograph drawings. The artist himself must certainly have made the wax models for its central scene, frame, and handle. The chasing, polishing, and punching—which in the scene only appear to be sketchy—are, in fact, extremely confident and may even be by the hand of the master, or at least by one of his closest and most talented collaborators. Three other casts after models by

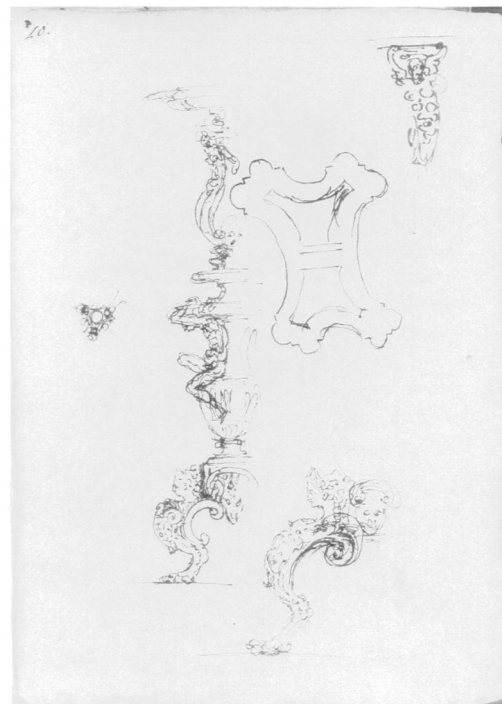


Figure 9. Guglielmo della Porta, *Studies for a Candlestick*, after 1555/56. Pen and brown ink, 228 × 164 mm. Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Graphische Sammlung, FP 6419 (photo: Landesbildstelle Rheinland, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf)



Figure 10. Teodoro della Porta (1567–1638), *The Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles*, late 16th or early 17th century. Silver, 21 × 30 cm. Florence, Museo degli Argenti, 820 (photo: Gabinetto Fotografico, Soprintendenza ai Beni Artistici e Storici di Firenze)



Figure 11. Design by Teodoro della Porta, *Monument to Lucrezia Tomacelli*, 1625. Bronze and marble. Rome, San Giovanni in Laterano (photo: Archivi Alinari, Anderson)



Figure 12. Probably by Teodoro della Porta after a model by Guglielmo della Porta, *The Flagellation*, early 17th century. Silver, 19.1 × 13 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Michael J. Connell Foundation and Museum Acquisition Fund, 1984, M.85.103 (photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

Guglielmo also reflect the singular quality of the Museum's pax and suggest its proximity to the artist's own works.

The only other known pax depicting the Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles is a silver example in the Palazzo Pitti in Florence (Figure 10).<sup>14</sup> Although its frame is larger and more complex than the Metropolitan's pax, the central scenes of both must have been cast from the same model or from very close copies of it; their measurements are the same,<sup>15</sup> and no major alterations to the composition have been made. The finish of both casts, however, is strikingly different. The Pitti pax has been cleaned and planed meticulously. The draperies and locks of hair have been calmed and smoothed and the outlines of the figures simplified. The floor below Christ has been incised in an effort to create a more solid and clearer perspectival recession. The profile of the disciple facing right, just visible in the Metropolitan's pax to the right of Christ's head, has

been removed in the Pitti example, which creates a slightly awkward gap in the crowded row of heads. While the execution of the Pitti pax is competent and painstaking, it cannot match the lively, scintillating surface quality of the Metropolitan's version.

It is in the frame that the Pitti pax differs most notably from the Metropolitan's. Although certain elements, such as the caryatid figures, are retained, the proportions and the pediment, or rather lintel, of the Pitti pax are completely different in design. The overall decorative scheme is more elaborate and less classical, which indicates a date of at least one generation later, probably around the turn of the seventeenth century. The artist may well have been Guglielmo's son, Myron Teodoro della Porta (1567–1638). Little is known about Teodoro as an artist; he inherited Guglielmo's workshop, which he continued to oversee with considerable success after his father's death. He fiercely protected his exclusive right to reproduce his father's models, as indicated



Figure 13. Guglielmo della Porta, *The Flagellation*, ca. 1575. Gilt bronze, H. 20.1 cm, W. 15.5 cm. London, Victoria and Albert Museum, A.1-1977 (photo: Victoria and Albert Museum)

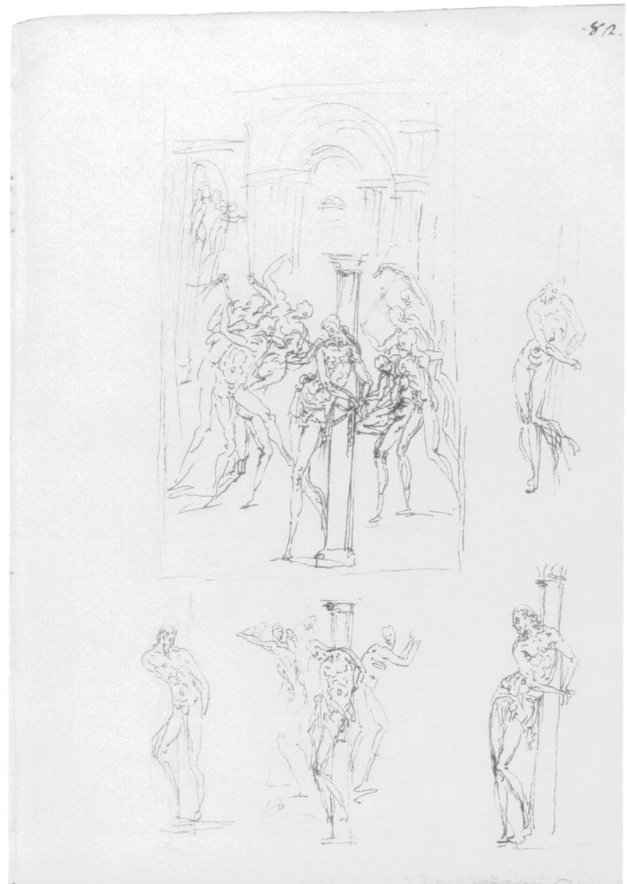


Figure 14. Guglielmo della Porta, *The Flagellation*, after 1555/56. Pencil, pen, and brown ink, 228 × 164 mm. Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Graphische Sammlung, FP 6419 (photo: Landesbildstelle Rheinland, Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf)

by the lawsuit he filed in 1609 against other copyists.<sup>16</sup>

The only significant work confidently attributed to Teodoro, based on Giovanni Baglione's account, is the design for the tomb of Lucrezia Tomacelli in San Giovanni in Laterano, dated 1625 and executed by the founder Giacomo Laurenziani (Figure 11).<sup>17</sup> The rich and technically accomplished bronze decorations are sumptuous and formal, but they lack the grace and the inherent motion of the elder della Porta's art. In spite of the difference in scale of the two works, certain characteristics of the tomb, such as the smooth surfaces, the somewhat swollen faces, the wavy locks of hair, and the leaflike feathers of the angel wings, recur in exactly the same fashion in the frame of the Pitti pax.<sup>18</sup>

The same observations hold true for two plaquettes depicting the Flagellation, a silver cast in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and a gilt bronze in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figures 12, 13).<sup>19</sup> The composition of both is clearly derived from a drawing by Guglielmo in the Düsseldorf sketchbook (Figure 14).<sup>20</sup> The two versions form a compelling contrast, not unlike the Pitti and Metropolitan paxes. The very controlled hand that cast and finished the Pitti pax appears to have worked on the Los Angeles cast as well. The chasing and polish are extremely close; the same tool seems to have been used to create the matte finish on certain draperies, as on the caryatids or apostles in the pax and an observer at the far right or the left henchman in the plaquette. In both pieces the muscula-



ture is similarly smooth, and the figures' locks curl in the same fluid way. The little cherub below the column in the Los Angeles *Flagellation* looks remarkably like the one at the base of the Pitti pax.

Likewise, the *Flagellation* in the Victoria and Albert Museum has much in common with the Metropolitan's pax. While the two works described above are silver, these are both gilt-bronze and even show similar types of imperfections in the casting. The *Flagellation* is somewhat larger and thus allows for more detail in the figures than in those of the pax. However, one encounters the same kind of deliberate surface treatment for the sake of lively, even agitated expression. Here, too, the flat parts of the architecture and the moldings ripple, instead of being planed and straightened. Light skips about nervously on the spidery extremities, flaming whips, and writhing ridges of drapery. The background figures are represented more summarily, and Christ and his tormentors stand out with greater force. Again, Guglielmo's characteristic drawing style seems directly transposed into sculpture in the London plaque, while the execution of the Los Angeles version has much more in common with traits ascribed here to Teodoro.

Unlike his father, Teodoro della Porta seems not to have been a highly imaginative artist of many talents, but rather a competent craftsman at the head of a flourishing workshop that capitalized on the value and popularity of Guglielmo's designs and models. Following the taste of his time, Teodoro toned down the vigor and nervous energy of his father's compositions, and he occasionally brought them up to date by setting them into more modern frames. The differences between the two pairs of paxes and plaquettes enable us to distinguish better between works by father and son, and the Metropolitan Museum's piece emerges as one of the rare small-scale objects by Guglielmo himself or by a collaborator who worked in his immediate proximity, close to the origin of the powerful design.

## NOTES

1. Joseph Braun, *Das christliche Altargerät* (Munich, 1930) pp. 559–560. He mentions Charles V's *formula reformationis* of 1548, which demands the reinstitution of the kiss of peace for all solemn masses by means of a pax and stipulates that the image on the pax be a crucified Christ.

2. Certain details of the representation reflect the biblical accounts of Luke and John. The artist depicted the apostles' fear

and amazement at the unexpected sight of Christ as described in Luke 24:37 and 41. The clearly defined interior space may refer to John 20:19 and 26 where Jesus' sudden appearance through closed doors is described; the dove in the pediments of the pax's frame may illustrate John 20:22, when Jesus bestows the Holy Ghost on the apostles through his breath.

3. John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1985) p. 383, fig. 73, pl. 84.

4. Ulrich Middeldorf, "In the Wake of Guglielmo della Porta," *Connoisseur* 194 (1977) pp. 75–84, in Ulrich Middeldorf, *Raccolta di scritti, III, 1974–1979* (Florence, 1981) p. 101.

5. See Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori ed Architettori* (Florence, 1550 and 1568) G. Milanesi, ed. (Florence, 1906) VII, pp. 546–549, and Antonio Bertolotti, *Artisti lombardi a Roma* (Milan, 1881) I, pp. 142–143, for the inventory after Guglielmo's death. For comments by Guglielmo himself, see the publication by W. Gramberg cited in note 7.

6. "... et Pace di bassorilievo ..."; see Bertolotti, *Artisti lombardi*, II, p. 127.

7. The basic reference for Guglielmo's sketchbooks is Werner Gramberg, *Die Düsseldorf Skizzenbücher des Guglielmo della Porta*, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1964). The author discusses all the documents and projects involving the Passion series on pp. 53–56; the equestrian monument for Charles V, 1559/60 (cat. nos. 223, 224); the Passion series offered to Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, ca. 1569 (cat. nos. 225, 226); a project for bronze church doors, probably for the Cathedral of Florence, 1569/70 (cat. no. 228); and the scenes of the Passion "di metallo indorate" offered to Philip II of Spain, 1575 (cat. nos. 200, 201). Carolyn Valone proved the existence of another project involving the Passion series as part of the decoration proposed for the church of San Silvestro al Quirinale in Rome in 1558/59; see her article, "Paul IV, Guglielmo della Porta and the Rebuilding of San Silvestro al Quirinale," *Master Drawings* 15, 3 (1977) pp. 243–255.

8. It is difficult to appreciate these subtle surface effects in photographs, yet we may be certain in this case that they were employed intentionally. Had the piece been left unfinished, it would never have received its complicated hollow backing and handle, nor the extremely expensive gilding.

9. Gramberg, *Die Düsseldorf Skizzenbücher*, cat. nos. 145–146, 164–166, 169 (ill.).

10. Gramberg, *Die Düsseldorf Skizzenbücher*, cat. nos. 109, 124, 131–132, 136, 139.

11. This connection, noted in the Museum's curatorial files, was repeated and published by Timothy Newbery et al., *The Italian Renaissance Frame*, exh. cat., MMA (New York, 1990) no. 29.

12. Valone, "Paul IV," pls. 1 and 3.

13. The engraved arms on the rear are those of the Dainelli and Albergotti families from the early 18th century. See Vittorio Spreti, *Enciclopedia storico-nobiliare italiana* (Bologna, 1928–35) I, p. 335; IV, p. 465.

14. Museo degli Argenti, no. 820, 21 x 30 cm; see Cristina Piacenti Aschengreen, *Il Museo degli Argenti a Firenze* (Milan, 1968) p. 175. The scene on both paxes has sometimes been called *The Incredulity of St. Thomas* instead of *The Risen Christ Appearing to the Apostles*. In fact, it is unclear whether Christ is merely raising his right hand in a gesture of blessing or displaying the wound on his

side as well. The gesture of the purported St. Thomas (or St. Peter), standing on the left, is more timid than probing, and it may just signal surprise or amazement. In the clearer, smoother Pitti version the apostle on the left does stretch out two fingers, but Christ's wound is not visible at all. It would seem that Guglielmo, who favored compositions of many figures arranged around one central figure or group (e.g., the Flagellation, Resurrection, Kiss of Judas, some of the Lamentation drawings, Mar-syas), would have chosen to organize his actors differently had the emphasis been intended for an Incredulity scene.

15. Both are  $8.8 \times 6.3$  cm.

16. In 1586, nine years after Guglielmo's death, his son Fidia, the black sheep of the family who had been disinherited, broke into the workshop and stole a number of pieces and models. Sebastiano Torrigiani, Guglielmo's former first assistant and guardian of the young Teodoro della Porta, brought Fidia to court whereupon the unhappy outcast was condemned to death. But enough damage had already been done; in 1609 Teodoro felt compelled to bring up the whole issue before court again and unsuccessfully accused several artists and craftsmen in Rome, among them Antonio Gentili da Faenza, of illegally reproducing his father's dispersed models. For a publication of the surviving documents, see Bertolotti, *Artisti lombardi*, I, pp. 143–144; II, pp. 119–161. This historical occurrence has complicated the already thorny issue of originals and copies and may help explain why scholars have had such difficulties in questions of attribution.

17. Lucrezia Tomacelli, duchess of Palliano, was married to Filippo Colonna. See Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et*

*architetti* (Rome, 1649) p. 325; Middeldorf, *Raccolta di scritti*, p. 97, n. 21.

18. I am much obliged to James David Draper for his advice on several points in this article, and especially for bringing to my attention a pax with a Doubting St. Thomas in the Casa del Camerlengo, Sezze (Lazio); it is brass, with the central scene silver-plated and measures  $15.5 \times 10$  cm. The pax has been catalogued and illustrated in *Tesori d'arte sacra di Roma e del Lazio dal medioevo all'ottocento*, exh. cat., Palazzo delle Esposizioni (Rome, 1975) cat. no. 105, pp. 46–47. Although less elaborate, the frame has several aspects in common with the Pitti pax, such as the scrolled lintel with a large central cherub and the scrolled lateral ornaments above a horizontal molded pediment. The central composition, elongated and crowded but with static figures and no architectural setting, cannot be attributed to Guglielmo della Porta. On the basis of the frame, the late-16th-century dating given in the exhibition catalogue should be pushed up to the first decades of the 17th century.

19. London: A.1–1977,  $20.1 \times 55.5$  cm; Los Angeles: M.85.103,  $19 \times 13$  cm. Other versions are known: a bronze at the Staatliche Museen, Berlin (see E. F. Bange, *Die Bildwerke des Deutschen Museums*, II: *Die Bildwerke in Bronze und in anderen Metallen* [Berlin/Leipzig, 1923] no. 1863, p. 57); and a silver example at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence (see Gramberg, *Die Düsseldorfer Skizzenbücher*, p. 69).

20. See Gramberg, *Die Düsseldorfer Skizzenbücher*, cat. no. 109; see also *ibid.*, cat. nos. 115, 138.