



This Photo is available in the  
print version of Forgiveness

The artist rivets our attention on the startling mystery of the father's unconditional forgiveness and its momentary effect on all of the characters in Jesus' story of the return of the prodigal son.

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# A Startling Mystery

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**W**hat biblical story first comes to mind when you think about forgiveness? The return of the prodigal son. Luke 15:11-32 describes the well-known scene for us: The younger son has taken his inheritance and squandered it, but now he returns to seek forgiveness. His father is elated! But their joyful reunion dismays the older son who has remained at the father's side both in work and in life.

Artists throughout history, with a variety of media and techniques, shed light on this image of unconditional forgiveness.

Antonio Montauti, trained as a medalist in Florence, depicts the story in this small bronze sculpture. This signed and dated piece, about 25 inches high, is one of 12 bronzes commissioned by Anna Maria Luisa de'Medici. But this sculpture is his masterpiece! It powerfully displays his skills as an Italian Baroque master and as an interpreter of biblical narratives. Florentine artists in the 1720s, especially sculptors, used heightened drama to depict figural groups. Movemented figures and their exaggerated poses increase the theatricality of the event.

Montauti incorporates several different segments of the story into his composition. In the center, the father rushes toward the returning son as if about to embrace him (15:20). This younger son may be asking forgiveness of the father as he kneels before him (15:21). The older son has hastily come in from working in the fields (15:28); his left leg is still extended behind him. A servant, ordered by the father to bring the finest robe (15:22), has just arrived and he offers the drapery in both of his outstretched arms.

What a collision of personalities! The Baroque artist dispenses with linear narrative. He rivets our attention on the drama and its momentary effect on all the characters. The father's startling, unconditional forgiveness is the focal mystery—both for his sons and servant, and for us, the viewers who now observe it.