

Masterpieces by Canova.
A homage on the bicentennial of his death

Galleria Carlo Orsi
Via Bagutta 14, Milan
1–22 December 2022

This exhibition-dossier dedicated to Antonio Canova (Possagno, 1757 – Venice 1822), sculptor of universal renown, celebrated in his own lifetime as a “modern-classic”, is the only event that Milan dedicates to this artist on the occasion of the bicentennial of his death, which occurred in Venice on 13 October 1822.

Canova had a very special relationship with the city of Milan, characterized by large projects that remained unrealised. In fact, it was for Milan that he executed the sculpture of the *Triumphant Perseus*, a very important and pivotal work destined for the Foro Buonaparte and commissioned by Gian Battista Sommariva. But, as we know, the Foro Buonaparte was never built, remaining a splendid theoretical utopia. Moreover, Pope Pius VII refused permission for the *Triumphant Perseus* to leave Rome and it was instead acquired by the Pope himself for the Vatican Museums and placed in the Belvedere courtyard on the pedestal of that ancient masterpiece - the *Apollo Belvedere*, left empty, after the Apollo's transportation to Paris following the infamous treaty of Tolentino.

Another of his most celebrated sculptures *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* was also destined for the Foro Buonaparte, but once again this splendid sculpture never reached Milan and instead was sent to Napoleon himself, to be exhibited in the Louvre. As we know, after the fall of Napoleon, this sculpture was given as war booty to the Duke of Wellington who had defeated Bonaparte at Waterloo and is now located in Apsley House, Wellington's palatial London mansion, which is now a museum. Fortunately, the famous bronze version of that masterpiece, made by Righetti, found its way to Milan. This statue, which immediately after its execution was not exhibited in public and after the fall of Napoleon remained hidden in the deposits of the Brera Academy, was only placed in its current position, at the centre of the courtyard of the Brera, in 1861 to thank France and Napoleon III, who had helped Italy to gain its independence.

Another work destined for Milan was the large marble group of *Theseus defeating the Centaur*, which was instead purchased by the Austrian Emperor Francis I and brought to Vienna, where it was placed in a special temple in the gardens of the Hofburg, called the Theseion. It was later moved to its current position, at the top of the staircase of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Canova maintained good relations with the Brera Academy, thanks to his deep friendship with its secretary, Giuseppe Bossi. The latter is responsible for the presence of many of Canova's plaster casts which are still in the collections of the Academy. Whilst in the Pinacoteca, a large plaster cast of *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* was recently relocated to the entrance of the so-called Napoleonic rooms.

This exhibition, therefore, seeks to make a kind of reparation for all the works and projects that were conceived for but directed away from Milan, by means of a series of the sculptor's works now preserved in the city.

The exhibition has as its centre, one of the most beautiful surviving plaster of the group of *Venus and Adonis* (1794) one of Canova's masterpieces, and an outstanding example of the graceful aesthetic he brought to this genre. The marble version made for Marchese Berio of Naples is now in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva. This plaster is flanked by an elegantly executed preparatory drawing from the collections of the Civic Museums of Bassano.

The exhibition then moves on to the fortunes of the image of Canova himself, represented by two famous and diverse portraits by the Milanese master Andrea Appiani and the English artistic genius, Sir Thomas Lawrence, who had a special relationship with Canova. The sculptor's studio in Rome is evoked by two large paintings by Giuseppe Borsato that represent two ideal views of this famous space.

Among the works on display is the *Herm of Domenico Cimarosa*, a version of the famous honorary bust of Domenico Cimarosa preserved in the Protomoteca Capitolina, in which nature takes over from the usual idealisation referable to the tradition of the antique nude bust.

The exhibition finishes with an important unpublished painting where, inspired by one of his most famous sculptures, the *Penitent Magdalene*, Canova executed a painting of arresting and moving beauty, painted in 1798 at Possagno where Canova had retired to escape the French who had invaded Rome.

Canova and Milan

Bonaparte Forum

Milan came very close to becoming one of the cities with the largest number of masterpieces by Antonio Canova. Napoleon's architect Giovanni Antonio Antolini designed the Bonaparte Forum, a huge semicircular square built around the castle, which was to be converted into the Governor's palace. A large number of public buildings and a vast number of statues were supposed to beautify this whole complex, with *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* stealing the show, but also with other statues such as the *Perseus Triumphant* which Canova carved in Rome. Just as he was about to ship it to Milan, however, the Pope banned the statue's export, and in fact, he promptly bought it himself for the Vatican Museums. But then the French carried it off when they looted the Pope's property. With the restoration of the papacy the statue returned to Rome and today we can still admire it in the Vatican Museums. Another masterpiece intended for this complex was *Theseus and the Centaur*. But this time it was Canova's fault, because he was so late in delivering the statue that Napoleon fell from power and the Austrians appeared on the scene, so it was the Austrian Emperor Francis II of Habsburg who had the statue brought to Vienna, and today we can still admire it in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in the Austrian capital.

Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker – The Marble

At the beginning of the 19th century Antonio Canova was the most important sculptor in Europe, but Napoleon Bonaparte was the most important politician in the world. So, it was inevitable that the two men should meet, which they did in Paris in 1803. They chatted about sculpture for a long time, which led to the idea of Canova making a marble statue portraying *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker*. Canova suggested that the statue should look like a figure from the ancient world rather than a modern portrait of Napoleon. Napoleon agreed, albeit reluctantly. Canova returned to Rome and started working on the statue, which wasn't actually, intended for Paris but for the new Bonaparte Forum in Milan which Giovanni Antonio Antolini had designed in the meantime. Things didn't quite go according to plan, however, and when the statue was completed, it was immediately shipped to Paris. But when it got to Paris, it didn't get a very favorable reception. In fact, it came in for so much criticism that it was relegated to a corner of the Louvre. The statue only hit the headlines again, when Napoleon's star had waned. The British Government purchased it and offered it as war trophy to the man, who had beaten Napoleon, the Duke of Wellington, who took it home to London and set it up in Apsley House, where he lived. It can still be seen there today.

Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker – The Bronze

The marble statue of *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker*, which Canova had carved in Rome, caused quite a stir before it left for Paris. In fact, Napoleon's stepson Eugène de Beauharnais, the Viceroy of Italy, immediately commissioned the sculptor to make a version of it in bronze. To find the necessary material Canova even melted down a few canons from Castel Sant'Angelo that the Pope no longer needed. The statue was slow in the making, but on completion it was shipped to Milan. It was set up in the Accademia in 1812. It was then "taken to court", to the courtyard of the Senate building. In the meantime, though, Napoleon's star had begun to wane and the statue had become a bit of an embarrassment, so it was hidden inside the Accademia. With the arrival of the Austrians, anything reminiscent of Napoleon was removed from sight. It wasn't until a new Napoleon, in other words, Napoleon III, came onto the scene, returning to Milan in the wake of the wars of independence, that the statue was set up once again on the site where it still stands to this day in the centre of the courtyard at the Pinacoteca di Brera.

Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker – The Plaster

After completing the marble version of *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* and then the bronze version, Canova made five more versions in plaster for the leading academies and art schools – a common practice at the time. One of these versions was purchased by Eugène de Beauharnais specifically for the Pinacoteca di Brera. It cost him 3,000 lire and was extraordinarily tricky to move, considering that it weighed 1,500 kilos. It was shipped to Milan in separate crates, and the amusing thing is that Canova sent instructions, a kind of assembly kit, along with it so that the huge statue could be easily assembled. It probably wasn't reassembled very well because two years later a guard, doing his rounds in the morning, stumbled upon Napoleon's shattered hand lying on the ground in smithereens. Not to worry! Canova was informed and he hastily sent a new hand up from Rome, which was expertly and correctly reassembled this time around. The statue was then hidden and only returned to lord it over the Napoleonic rooms in the Pinacoteca di Brera in 2009.

Accademia di Brera's gypsotheque

There's a secret place that tells the story of Canova's relationship with Milan. That place is the Accademia di Brera's gypsotheque, which was renovated in 2016 but isn't open to the public today. Plaster casts were of crucial importance for training artists in academies, and every academy got hold of as many casts of major sculptures as it could in the 18th and 19th centuries. Brera made sure it got its full complement thanks to Antonio Canova's friendship with Giuseppe Bossi, who was the Accademia's secretary. Several collections of very important casts found their way here, with the result that Bossi was able to set up a spectacular gallery of

plaster sculptures in 1806 in which casts of Classical statues alternated with casts of modern masterpieces, in other words of statues by Canova. So, for instance, people could see the *Belvedere Apollo* next to *Perseus*, while the *Capitoline Flora* stood next to Canova's *Hebe*. Canova also left other plaster works here, for example, a spectacular bust of *Pope Clement XIII* and *St. Mary Magdalen*. Nor did Napoleon neglect Brera either. He endowed it with a considerable number of plaster casts.

Galleria Carlo Orsi

The gallery, located in an eighteenth-century palazzo in the Montenapoleone fashion district in the heart of Milan, is renowned for its rigour, expertise and discretion that has gained the respect and loyalty of clients and colleagues, and earned a reputation as a leading destination for exceptional museum quality artworks which has been dealing in old master paintings and sculpture for over fifty years.

The gallery specialises particularly in Italian paintings, sculptures and works of art from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century and it is now a reference point for private collectors, dealers, scholars and art lovers from all over the world.

It participates in the most prestigious exhibitions and art fairs in Europe and overseas including TEFAF Maastricht and TEFAF New York, The Biennale Internazionale dell'Antiquariato of Florence, Modena Antiquaria and Flashback Turin.

In addition to the brokering, buying and selling of works of art, the gallery also provides assistance in buying and selling through international auction houses, in obtaining estimates, expertise and in handling all aspects of import and export procedures. It can advise on all aspects of the starting and subsequent development of collections, including cataloguing and displaying works of art, framing, restoration, photography and shipping.

Throughout the years the gallery has supported various worldwide institutions, loaning artworks and contributing to the publication of important monographs, and frequently produces its own detailed academic catalogues to accompany its research on specific artists. The gallery actively sponsors cultural associations, public institutions and restoration projects.

Exhibited Artworks

Antonio Canova, *Adonis and Venus*, c. 1794, plaster, private collection

This work in plaster is a cast of the celebrated group of *Adonis and Venus* which Canova gave to the heirs of his first patron Giovanni Falier as a token of his gratitude. Carved by Canova without a specific commission between 1789 and 1794, the marble group was purchased by Marquis Francesco Berio di Salza for his palazzo in Naples, where it proved to be immensely popular. On the Marquis's death, the group was sold to Colonel Guillaume Fabre, and after returning to Canova's workshop for a few minor alterations, it was shipped to Switzerland, where it can be seen to this day in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva. The group was instantly hailed as a masterpiece of Canova's "graceful" genre together with his *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss*, prompting his contemporaries to liken him to Praxiteles and praising his skill in merging the natural with the ideal, and psychological expression with technical prowess based on the use of different tools in combination with one another.

Giuseppe Borsato, *Museum of Works by Canova*, 1805–6, oil on canvas, private collection

This painting was part of the fresco decoration painted by Borsato and Giambattista Canal in Giovan Battista Martignon's palazzo in Treviso. A deep Classical gallery hosts some of the most celebrated sculptures ever produced by Canova, including his *Theseus and the Centaur* now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, his *Boxers Creugas* and *Damoxenos* now in the Vatican Museum and the model for *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker* in the centre of the apse.

Giuseppe Borsato, *Temple of the Arts*, 1805–6, oil on canvas, private collection

This picture is set in a monumental classicising rotunda inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, peopled with figures dressed in the latest fashions conveyed with a rapidity and verve that caused Borsato's contemporaries to praise his "supreme mastery in the handling of caricature which, in certain large pictures, reveals him to be a figure painter". The space is filled with sculptures celebrating Venetian artists from the past such as Giovanni Bellini, Palladio, Sanmicheli, Alessandro Vittoria, Tullio Lombardo and Titian, while Canova is represented by the *Genius of Sculpture* holding a model of *Mars the Peacemaker*.

Sir Thomas Lawrence, *Portrait of Antonio Canova*, c. 1815, oil on canvas, private collection

This painting is a replica of the celebrated *Portrait of Antonio Canova* in the Gypsotheca in Possagno. Lawrence and Canova first met in Paris in 1815 when the works of art which Napoleon had seized in Italy were being returned under the sculptor's watchful eye. This portrait, however, was painted while Canova was in London, where he had travelled to view the marble friezes from the Parthenon known as the Elgin Marbles. Painted in a single sitting, the picture acquired

considerable fame after being shown at the Royal Academy; indeed so much so that Canova was to write to Lawrence that the painting “never stays in my house for a whole month at a time because people are constantly asking me for it so that they can copy it”.

Antonio Canova, *Penitent Magdalen*, 1798–9, oil on canvas, private collection

This painting addresses the theme of the *Penitent Magdalen*, a subject to which Canova devoted a celebrated sculpture, producing two versions of it in marble. The first, carved in 1796, was owned by Count Giovanni Battista Sommariva and is now in Genoa, while the second, a replica, was made in 1809 for the Viceroy Eugène de Beauharnais and can now be admired in the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Canova painted the picture between 1798 and 1799 while seeking refuge in his native Possagno, after Rome had been invaded by the French. Being deprived of the opportunity to sculpt during this brief spell in his life, he turned to painting, although it continued to be an absolutely private activity for him.

Antonio Canova, *Herm of Domenico Cimarosa*, 1816, marble, private collection

This marble herm is the second version of a famous *bust of Domenico Cimarosa* now in the Protomoteca Capitolina, but originally displayed in the Pantheon. Formerly owned by the celebrated Cardinal Consalvi, a friend and admirer of the sitter, it turns to a Classical model to portray the Neapolitan composer. It is considered to be one of the masterpieces of Canova’s portraiture, “modelled with softly sloping surfaces” where “the weighty material is transfigured by the force of art and where the marble, swollen with hidden resonance, appears light, transparent, suspended like the sitter’s distant gaze on the verge of an enchanting melody”, as Valentino Martinelli put in, writing in 1955.

Andrea Appiani, *Portrait of Antonio Canova*, 1803, oil on paper glued onto canvas, private collection

Appiani painted the sculptor’s portrait while he was staying in Milan on his way back from Paris in December 1802. Appiani here provides us with one of the least official portraits of the artist, in which the elimination of the bust allows him to focus more completely on the sitter’s face, producing a kind of “snapshot” only moderately idealised, yet fated to enjoy immense popularity in the shape of engravings and replicas.

Antonio Canova, *Twin study for the group of Venus and Adonis*, 1789–90, charcoal pencil and pastel on paper, and *Two female nudes*, c. 1800–5, pencil on paper, Bassano del Grappa, Museo Civico

This sheet with its *Twin study for the group of Venus and Adonis* is part of an album containing an assortment of drawings. It has two studies for the group of Venus and Adonis which Canova carved in 1789 and which was purchased by Marquis Francesco Berio. The work was slightly modified in its drapery at a later date, when it was sold to Colonel Fabre. Generally considered to be preparatory studies for the

sculpture, these two drawings have also been thought (by Mellini in 1984) to be based on the first version, thus testifying to the changes that Canova was to make prior to the Berio sale. The back of the sheet has a drawing depicting a Classical statue known as the Belvedere Antinous.

The second drawing in the exhibition, depicting *Two female nudes*, is part of an album with studies of the female nude by Canova. The sheet has two studies from life which are unique in Canova's graphic output on account of the astonishing softness and elegance with which he enhances the grace of the female body through his nuanced and delicate use of the pencil, in contrast to the strong, sharp lines of the pen that he used to produce his studies of male nudes. Their exceptional sweetness and sophistication have caused Canova's female nudes to be likened to the great Emilian Renaissance and Mannerist masters Correggio and Parmigianino, or to his contemporaries Prud'hon and Ingres.

[Artworks Images available at this link](#)

Exhibition Catalogue

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