

SOLDANI

*Bacchus*



Carlo Orsi

Massimiliano Soldani Benzi

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**Carlo Orsi**  
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**MASSIMILIANO SOLDANI BENZI**

(Montevarchi, 1656 – 1740)

*Bacchus* (after a sculpture by Jacopo Sansovino in the Bargello)

Bronze, height 33.4 cm (13¼ in)

**Origin of the work**

In a letter sent from Vienna on 9 July 1701, Johann Adam, first Sovereign Prince of Liechtenstein and a close associate of the Habsburg Emperor, requested that Massimiliano Soldani make him several scaled-down replicas of some of the (mostly Classical and almost exclusively marble) statues in the Uffizi, a gallery visited without fail by gentlemen and connoisseurs of Europe travelling in Italy since the late 17th century. The Prince wished these models (“two palms in height or less”) simply to be in “fired clay” (rather than in bronze like the earlier works he had commissioned from Soldani) because they were intended for use by the sculptors employed by the Prince to decorate his residences in Vienna as models for the large statues with which he wished to adorn the garden of his Palais Liechtenstein in der Rossau, just outside the walls of the city. At the same time, however, Johann Adam may have considered displaying the terracotta statues in his painting and sculpture gallery once they had served their purpose as models – a rather early example of appreciation for the sculptural model in clay outside Florence,

**Provenance**

Massimiliano Soldani for the Salviati ducal family. From the Salviati, by inheritance, to the Colonna family.

**Related Literature**

K. LANKHEIT, 'Eine serie Barocker Antiken-nachbildungen aus der werkstatt des Massimiliano Soldani,' *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung*, vol. 65, 1958, pp. 186-198; C. AVERY, 'Soldani's Small Bronze Statuettes after 'Old Masters' Sculptures, in Florence', in K. LANKHEIT, *Kunst des Barock in der Toskana*, Munich, 1976, pp. 165-172; H. KEUTNER, Introduction to: Appendix. Modern Bronzes, in *Catalogo della Galleria Colonna in Roma. Sculture*, Rome-Busto Arsizio 1990, pp. 279-280; D. ZIKOS, 'Antikenkopien in Bronze des Massimiliano Soldani Benzi', in: *Von allen Seiten schön. Rückblicke auf Ausstellung und Kolloquium*, ed. V. KRAHN, Cologne 1996, pp. 125-138.





home to the first and, for a long time, the only collections of models for sculptures in marble or metal. Soldani, however, who was only interested in producing bronzes for the Prince for obvious financial reasons, proposed an alternative. What he suggested shipping to Vienna instead were wax



casts taken from terracottas that an unspecified pupil of his just happened to have made some time earlier. Johann Adam acceded to the proposal and so Soldani shipped him “twelve models of figures in wax, some of which are dressed while some are naked”, adding, however, that he had

**Fig. 1:** Jacopo Sansovino, *Bacchus*, Florence, Museo del Bargello

“not taken great care to chase them”. His poor excuse conceals the real reason for his failure to chase the work, namely his interest in proposing only metal statues. He argued that imperfectly chased wax models would lend themselves better to the needs of the Prince’s sculptors “in scaling down to whatever proportion Your Most Serene Highness shall choose”. Yet in the same letter, the sculptor hints that he is interested primarily in Johann Adam purchasing bronze castings taken from the wax models. Such small bronzes, he adds, would be ideal for a cabinet, and he lists their prices: forty piastres for scale models of figures with drapery and thirty for those that are naked. The wax models, which reached Vienna not only unchased but in pieces and requiring assembly *in situ*, were not to the Prince’s liking. Thus Soldani’s scheming achieved the opposite effect, for when he revived his proposal to cast small bronzes for the Prince from the Uffizi’s celebrated statues three years later, Johann Adam was to show little interest. This, among other reasons, because he already owned some exquisite small bronzes after Classical statuary cast by Antonio Susini, Soldani’s illustrious predecessor in this sphere, with which he may well have compared the unchased wax scale models that Soldani had sent him. While Soldani failed to name the prototypes of the scale models that he was offering the Prince (aside from Giambologna’s *Virtue*), Klaus Lankheit<sup>1</sup> and Hans Robert Weihrauch<sup>2</sup> succeeded in reconstructing the series (Lankheit on the basis of historical considerations, Weihrauch on the strength of stylistic comparisons). The series, which Soldani reproduced on more than one occasion, no longer for Liechtenstein but for the Medici and for numerous Florentine, English and German aristocrats, includes scale models of the so-called *Apollino*, an *Apollo Sauroctonus* restored by Giovanni Caccini, an *Athlete with a Vase*, the so-called bronze *Idolino*, Michelangelo’s *Bacchus*, Jacopo Sansovino’s *Bacchus* (Fig. 1), *Mercury*, the so-called *Dancing Faun*, *Flora*, *Pomona*, the *Vestal Virgin*, the *Medici Venus* and Giambologna’s group depicting *Virtue*, all of them then part of the

<sup>1</sup> LANKHEIT, see related literature

<sup>2</sup> H.R. WEIHRACH, *Die Bronzsbildwerke des Residenzmuseums*, Munich 1956





Uffizi collection. These small bronzes are roughly 30 cm. in height, in other words less than the two (Roman) palms (approx. 44 cm.) specified in the Prince's request. The Museo della Manifattura di Porcellana di Doccia also has a terracotta series formerly owned by the Conti Ginori, who acquired them along with other collections of models and forms by Florentine late Baroque sculptors to serve as prototypes for Doccia porcelain pieces. Klaus Lankheit identified them as autograph work by Soldani.

### **The question of the autograph nature of scale models such as the *Bacchus***

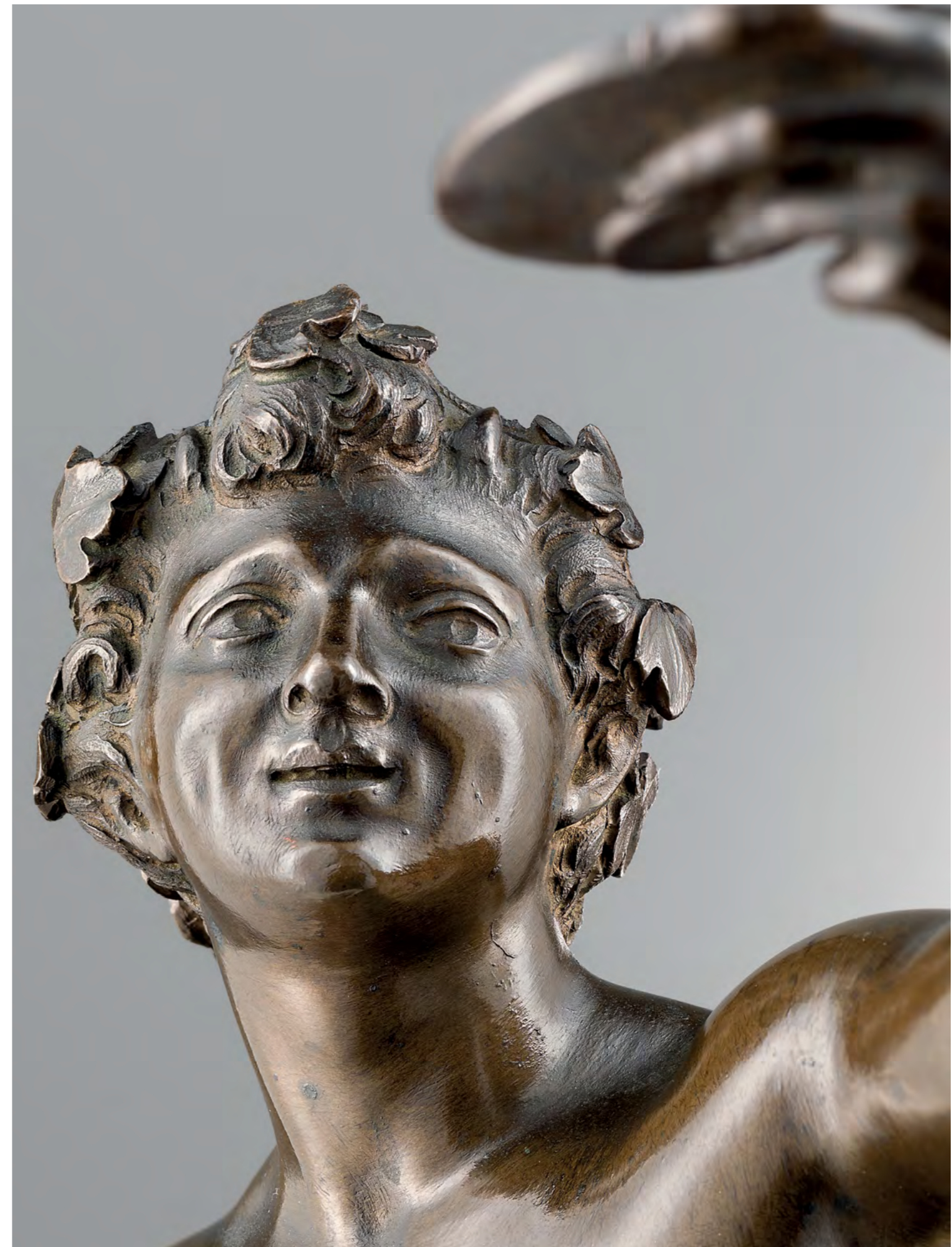
In order to gain a proper understanding of the value assigned by the sculptor himself to the various stages in the creative process underlying these scale models and thus to have a basis on which to judge their autograph nature, it is important to look at the wording of Soldani's excuse for supplying the terracotta works requested: "To have the groups and the figures which are in this Gallery [the Uffizi] in a smaller size, I would point out to Your Most Serene Highness that it will be difficult for me to model them by my own hand," the sculptor wrote to Johann Adam, "because they need time, and it would be most inconvenient for me to abandon my quarters and go to model in the Gallery inasmuch as once you start on a figure you have to carry on until you finish it, so that it maintains its proportions as the clay dries". These words – which suggest that, contrary to Lankheit's claim, the Museo di Doccia terracotta works are not by Soldani – are borne out by another enlightening remark in another letter in the correspondence which the artist and the Prince exchanged for many years (and from which the above quotes are taken), when Soldani states that chasing his works was his prerogative alone and their most important feature. His words confirm that the scale models are fully autograph works because he reserves the right to perform the final chasing himself after supervising the

previous phases in the creative process. Thus Soldani approaches Antonio Susini on an ideal plane, when the matter of the fully autograph nature of, for instance, Giambologna's or the Taccas' work, not to mention that of Giovan Battista Foggini, is still unresolved (and that is without venturing outside Florence). But how can we be certain that works of this kind really are by Soldani? Scholars tend to be excessively generous in attributing works to him in a genre that seems to have been extremely widespread in Florence at the turn of the 17th century, right up to the prevailing



popularity of scale models initially in porcelain and then in plaster in the middle of the 18th century. The Galleria Corsini in Rome has a number of scale models which Antonio Montauti produced for the Corsini family, and Montauti's master Giuseppe Piamontini, a younger contemporary of Soldani, also turned his hand to the genre. In fact it is symptomatic that a bronze scale model he made of the celebrated *Queen of Sweden's Faun* (now in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello) was attributed to Soldani until the discovery of a record of payment for it to Piamontini. Also, many of the minor bronzesmiths then working in Florence must have specialised in scale models of Classical

works. The only way to ascertain that Soldani's hand is indeed responsible for works of this kind – in other words, smaller works for which one can easily surmise workshop intervention, given that the master himself was constantly involved in more demanding projects – is by carefully sifting through all the available information. Doing so in this case will allow us to identify the *Bacchus* after an original by Sansovino (Fig. 1) as being, beyond all question, a fully autograph work by Soldani.







### Cold chasing

Soldani's bronzes are remarkable for their extremely sophisticated chasing, both in engraved lines and with a hammer (*Hammerschlagziselierung*). In the Colonna *Bacchus* the hair (hammer chasing and simple engraving), the ivy wreath, the eyes (eyelids in relief, hollowed-out pupils and tear ducts), the nostrils, the philtrum, the nails on the fingers (all except the little finger) and on the toes (right foot: all the toes except the little toe; left foot: all the



toes, the nail on the little toe being indicated by a simple dot) are defined with a chasing chisel. The bunch of grapes is also finished with a chasing chisel. But while this extraordinarily frequent recourse to cold chasing on such a small item is emblematic of the care that Soldani lavished on the cold part of the creative process after casting, it is the unique way in which the details are drawn that provides us with the most convincing evidence of his style. He was also in the habit of separating the different parts of the

body with a simple, engraved line – an engraved line which we find, in this instance, between the right arm and the body, between the abdomen and the right leg, between the two legs and elsewhere.

### Provenance

The autograph nature of the work is borne out yet further – if indeed any



**Fig. 2:** After Baccio Bandinelli, *Neptune*, bronze, height 52 cm, Rome, Galleria Colonna

further proof were needed – by its provenance. It comes from the Colonna collection, having entered that collection as part of the Salviati inheritance along with a large number of other Florentine works of art, some of which still adorn the Galleria Colonna in Rome to this day. Equally typical of the manner in which the small bronzes from the Salviati collection were displayed in the Galleria Colonna is the 18th century gilded wood base





which we also find, for example, beneath the small bronze after Baccio Bandinelli's (unrealised) model for the *Neptune* in Piazza della Signoria (Fig. 2, we can see this base in the illustration accompanying the entry drafted by Herbert Keutner in: *Von allen Seiten schön*, catalogue of the exhibition held in Berlin in 1995–6, Berlin 1995, pp. 288-291, cat. no. 79, p. 289). Soldani enjoyed a close bond of friendship with the Salviati family, who owned a villa close to his home town of Montevarchi, and indeed it may well have been the Salviati who encouraged Soldani's father to set him on the path to becoming a sculptor. Also, between 1708 and 1709, the Salviati commissioned him to renovate a tabernacle housing a relic of the Virgin's Holy Milk in the collegiate church of San Lorenzo in Montevarchi. But even before then, and above all after this commission of such crucial significance for the bond between the sculptor and the family, they commissioned a broad range of different items from him, ranging from medals and copies of Classical work to wooden frames, bronze adornments for semi-precious stone coffers and bronze reliefs.

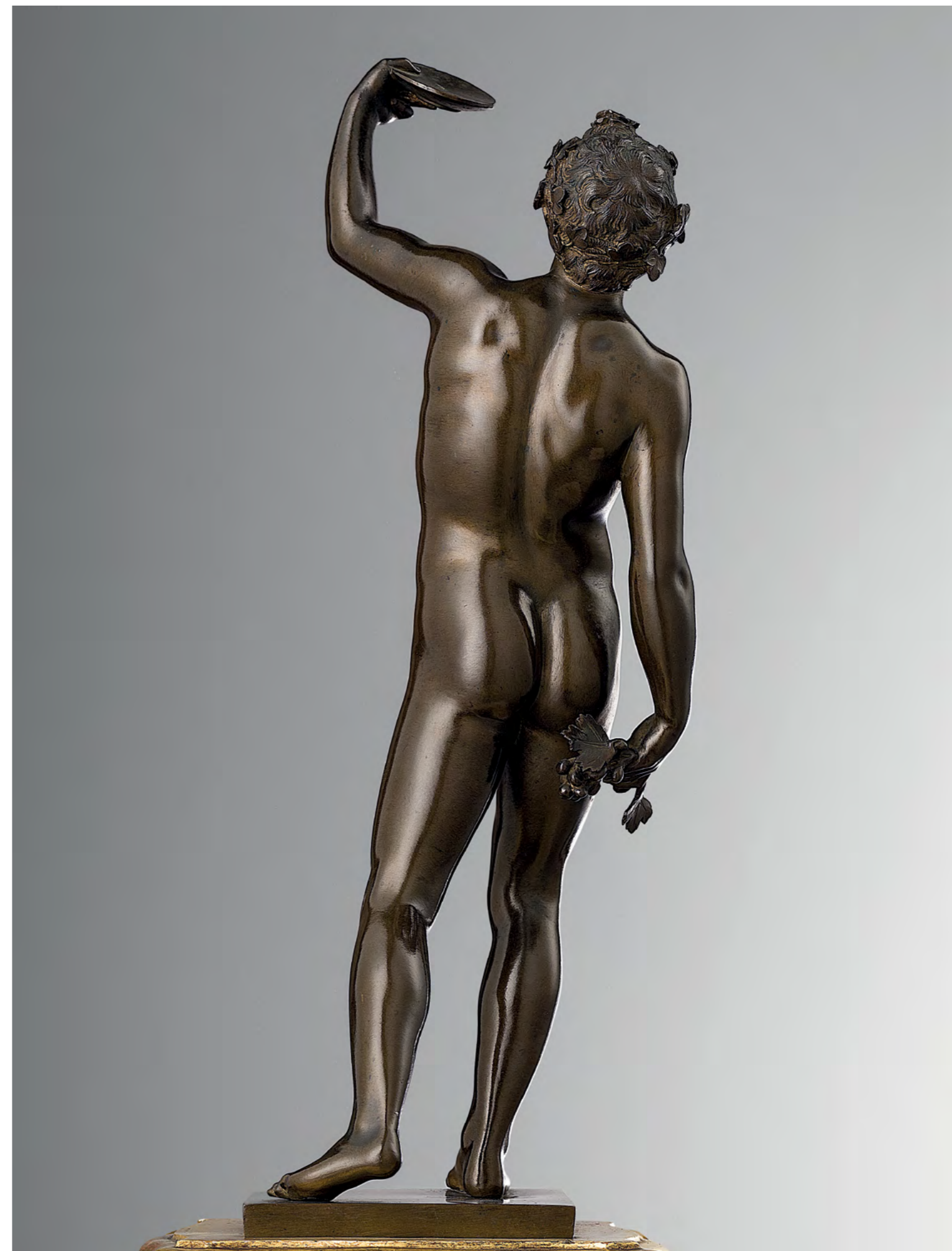
#### **Technical Data**

Soldani was also accustomed to casting his bronzes in individual parts in order to assemble them at a later stage, as in our case. The *Bacchus's* right arm was added later, which explains the elaborate chasing of the hand in areas that the chisel would have had a hard time reaching if the figure had been cast in a single piece from the outset. The cast is of the highest quality, without a single casting error.

We are grateful to Dr. Dimitri Zikos for the information provided in this catalogue

### Massimiliano Soldani Benzi: a short Biography

Counter to claims made by the artist himself and thus also by Gabburri, Soldani is unlikely to have been born in Florence but in Montevarchi, on 5 July 1656. While the “extremely noble” family origins of which he constantly boasted are not borne out by any historical sources, we know that he lived a very comfortable life. In any event, he was granted the title that he so ardently wished for in 1693. After involuntarily slaying a peer, Soldani was forced to seek refuge in the church of Galatrona where his natural penchant for sculpture was stimulated, in particular, by the presence of numerous Della Robbia works, which he was able to study and to copy. Supporting his son’s passion for art, Soldani’s father decided to send him to Florence in 1675 to pursue his studies there. On reaching the city, he was immediately introduced to Il Volterrano who introduced him, in turn, to the Galleria del Granduca’s school of drawing. Benefiting from the patronage of two important mentors, Count Ludovico Caprara and Marquis Cerbone Bourbon del Monte, Soldani was introduced to Grand Duke Cosimo III, who commissioned him without further ado to produce drawings for medals and portraits to be cast in bronze. By early March 1678 he was studying at the Accademia di Palazzo Madama in Rome, having been personally despatched to the capital by the Grand Duke, who was subsequently to appoint him to the post of Master of the Mint. While in Rome, he studied in accordance with Cosimo III’s express wishes under the painter Ciro Ferri and under the engraver Giovanni Pietro Travani to learn to work with steel. He spent roughly four years in Rome before being called home by Cosimo III in 1681, striking numerous medals in the papal capital which he then sent back to Florence, including medals of his masters Ciro Ferri and Ercole Ferrata and many more for Queen Christina of Sweden whom he had met through the painter Giovan Battista Gaulli in Rome. In an effort to perfect his minting skills, he was sent that same year to Paris where he spent ten months studying under



the medallist Joseph Roettiers. For this period we still have the letters that Soldani wrote to the Grand Duke informing him of his progress. While in Paris he was introduced to Louis XIV, for whom he struck a medal which he completed in Florence and whose stylistic features form the basis of the Florentine medallist tradition. Soldani's privileged treatment by the Grand Duke is borne out by the fact that he was granted the right to affix his own signature to a silver plaque minted in 1684 for which he devised a new portrait of Cosimo III. He went on to produce a number of important portraits of members of the Medici family in the years immediately thereafter, and in the same decade (in 1683) he was appointed Professor of the Accademia del Disegno and received numerous commissions from Cosimo III to design and produce reliquaries and other religious trinkets. Grand Prince Ferdinando was also especially fond of Soldani's work and commissioned several bronze groups and bas-reliefs from him, including in particular a series of bronze reliefs with *Allegories of the Four Seasons*, modelled between 1708 and 1711 as a gift for the Elector Palatine and the terracotta *bozzetti* for which are now in the Museo degli Argenti in Florence. There are two known versions of the series, the earliest in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum in Munich and the second, modelled c. 1715, now in the Royal Collection in Windsor Castle. Soldani had already executed a number of relatively important commissions for the Grand Prince towards the end of the century (1689–93), for example the four urns with putti and swans in touchstone, bronze and silver now in the Galleria Palatina in Florence. For the Feroni Chapel in the church of Santissima Annunziata, where he worked with Foggini, he produced two bronze medallions with a portrait of Francesco Feroni and with Feroni's device, the image of ship, in 1691–3, and he also cast a medal for Feroni himself. He was involved in the construction of the high altar in bronze for the church of Santa Maria di Carignano in Genoa from 1695 to 1699. He produced five reliefs with *Stories from the Life of Blessed Ambrogio Sansedoni*

for Palazzo Sansedoni in Siena between 1692 and 1700, while his work for the collegiate church in Montevarchi, where he is responsible for the high altar, a metal and stonework crucifix with putti and a *Reliquary of the Holy Milk*, was executed in the first decade of the 18th century. His growing reputation as a bronzesmith earned him numerous commissions also from foreign princes, including the Prince of Liechtenstein for whom he carved a series of portraits of emperors and statuettes based on Classical and other prototypes; Queen Anne of England for whose court physician, John Inglis, he made a medal; and the Duke of Marlborough who commissioned a series of bronzes inspired by Classical work from him in 1711. Over the following decades Soldani devoted an increasing amount of his time to monumental work, producing the *Funeral Monument of Marc'Antonio Zondadari*, a Grand Master of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, for Valletta Cathedral between 1722 and 1725, followed by the *Monument of Manoel de Vilhena*, another Grand Master of the Order, between 1727 and 1729. In the final decade of his life he cast a number of important medals, such as the medal commemorating the ascent to the papal throne of Pope Clement XII and a medal struck for Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI to mark the peace treaty between France and Austria. After his death, Marquis Carlo Ginori acquired many of Soldani's moulds from his heirs and used them to produce copies in both wax and porcelain.

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