

Canova Compendium

Unless otherwise stated, most of this text is adapted and abridged from:

Albert Boime, Art in an Age of Revolution 1750-1800, 1987 University of Chicago, pp.138-145.

With additional information added from:

Christopher M.S. Johns, Antonio Canova and the Politics of Patronage in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe, 1998, University of California Press

Plant, M., Venice, Fragile City: 1797-1997, 2003, Yale University Press

Introduction

One of the youngest artists directly linked with the first generation of neo-classicists and who bridges the second is the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova. Canova arrived in Rome in 1779 as a twenty-one-year-old prodigy and four years later obtained the most important commission available to a sculptor in Rome, the Pope Clement XIV monument for the church of SS. Apostoli. By 1792, when his second papal monument was unveiled, Canova had acquired a European reputation such as no other Italian sculptor had enjoyed since the seventeenth century. His mercurial rise to fame occurred within a little more than a decade, but it seems less astonishing when we learn that he had the backing of abbé Filippo Farsetti, Giovanni Falier in Venice, and Gavin Hamilton and Girolamo Zulian in Rome.

Early Life and Patrons

Canova was born at Possagno in the province of Treviso, one of the Venetian mainland dominions. He descended from a long line of stonecutters, and he grew up under the tutelage of his grandparents. While assisting his grandfather in refurbishing country residences, he came to the attention of their patrician client Giovanni Falier, a member of the old Venetian aristocracy. He took on the young Canova as his protégé and apprenticed him out to a local sculptor named Torretti, who had a studio in Venice. After his death, Canova studied at the Venetian Academy and also at Palazzo Farsetti, which contained an immense collection of casts and ancient masterpieces in Rome. Filippo Farsetti was the cousin of the future Clement XIII, and they (as well as their wider family members) gave Canova early commissions. Farsetti dealt in antiquities and could introduce Canova to Gavin Hamilton.

The Influence of Girolamo Zulian and Gavin Hamilton in Rome

On the basis of his early notable sculptures *Euridice and Orpheus* and *Daedalus and Icarus* Falier promoted Canova as a national genius, and put him in touch with Girolamo Zulian, Venice's ambassador to the Holy See (The Vatican). Like Falier, Zulian was anxious to demonstrate that Venetian culture was still capable of producing outstanding talent, and he seized the opportunity to bring the young sculptor to Rome. At this time Canova made a pilgrimage to Gavin Hamilton's studio, still the *doyen* of neo-classicism.

On seeing the plaster cast of *Daedalus and Icarus* in Rome, Hamilton responded enthusiastically to the group but advised Canova to temper his realism with the Greco-Roman ideal. Hamilton won Canova's confidence, becoming a close friend and trusted adviser. Hamilton made Zulian see the importance of giving effective assistance to Canova, and the latter promptly purchased a block of

marble for the young sculptor without stipulating the choice of subject. Canova chose *Theseus and the Minotaur*.

Antonio Canova, *Theseus and the Minotaur*, 1782, marble, 145.4 × 158.7 × 91.4 cm. Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (A.5&A-1962)

Theseus and the Minotaur, 1782

Marble. Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Materials: Marble

Size: 145.4 × 158.7 × 91.4 cm

Scope of works: Leader or Participant, pre-1850:

Greek Hero, future King of Athens, overcame enemy

Strong interpretation linked to conflicts between Venice and Ottoman Empire

Patron: Girolamo Zulian

Original Location: When Canova asked his patron where he wanted the group the ambassador replied 'I did not carve the group, you did, therefore make of it what you think best: I wish you well and good luck.'¹



Subject

When Theseus arrived in Athens after a long journey, he heard the unexpected sound of weeping and mourning throughout the city. He learned that the price of the recent Athenian defeat at the hands of the Cretans was an annual tribute of fourteen victims to feed the monstrous Minotaur. The Minotaur belonged to the tyrant King Minos, who kept the beast in the elaborate labyrinth designed by Daedalus. Theseus determined to rid the world of this monster, and it is the hero's moment of triumph that Canova intended to portray.

Form and Style

It might justly be considered the first neoclassical statue.² Canova began with the idea of representing the antagonists in violent combat, but Gavin Hamilton recommended that he show Theseus seated triumphantly on the body of the dead monster, contemplating his deed, thus making it conform more closely to the Greco-Roman ideal of calmness.

- Theseus appears noble and the perfection of his body indicates heroism and virtue.³
- White marble unifies figures and is associated with nobility and heroism.
- A work produced in emulation of antiquity - rather than copying it.
- Form of seated Theseus borrowed from antique statue of Hercules.
- Dominant figure, open pose, leans back with right hand on Minotaur's left thigh.
- Seated contrapposto with engaged and relaxed arms and legs, slight twist in torso.

¹ Quoted in Hugh Honour, 'Canova's Theseus and the Minotaur', *Victoria and Albert Museum Yearbook*, I (1969), (note 28), p.5.

² Johns, p.53

³ These bullet points mostly come from AQA HART4 Mark Schemes of June 2013 and 2015.

- Head of Theseus derived from ancient sources; expression is contemplative and calm, does not engage with viewer; looks down towards defeated beast.
- Theseus's torso based on study of the Belvedere Torso. Muscles activated yet body at rest, exertions over.
- Narrative clues given - the thread used by Theseus to escape from the labyrinth.
- Ancient subject representing reason conquering brute force.
- Minotaur shown in a more realistic way contrasting the idealised Theseus.

Materials and Techniques⁴

- Pyramidal composition with stability provided by the broad base of the single block.
- Theseus's left foot, and Minotaur's head and legs (which are crossed for support) extend beyond the stone base into viewer's space.
- Evidence of rough carving with claw chisel on base to create rock effect.
- Marble is relatively soft to carve allowing close anatomical detail evidenced through smooth carving of muscle definition, knees, and details of hands, feet and hair.
- Undercutting creates definitions and greater dramatic intensity of:
 - his triumph produced through shadowed areas under and around his body;
 - the Minotaur's death throes seen in arched back lifting away from the rock.
- Polish used on skin, so that natural translucency of marble can approximate flesh.
- Marble having a relatively low tensile strength results in arms being supported by falling drapery and club.
- A variety and contrast of textures can be seen:
 - the smoothness of Theseus's skin contrasts with the roughness of the Minotaur's head and chest.
 - folds of drapery across arm and in lap and texture of Theseus's hair.

Political Interpretation

Canova's biographer Countess Albrizzi claimed that the *Theseus* contained a patriotic message; his deed did not merely destroy "a private foe, but his country's" and thereby freed it "from a cruel and degrading tribute".⁵ This didactic meaning is reinforced by the realism of the hybrid Minotaur whose immediacy disturbed some of Canova's contemporaries.

Patriotic Feelings – Historical Context

Falier and Zulian persuaded the Venetian senate to award an annual pension to Canova, certainly an unusually generous gesture from a financially strapped government so that the artist "might in Rome perfect himself in his profession, and reflect honour on the Republic". Thus it would seem that *Theseus* did indeed embody patriotic feelings. Now at the time of its execution it could only have referred to the ongoing conflict between Venice and the Ottoman Empire:

- The Ottoman Empire was exacting from Venice "a cruel and degrading tribute".
- Venice's old colony Crete was conquered by the Turks in 1669.
- Crete was the oldest and last of Venice's Eastern Mediterranean possessions.
- Its loss was a bitter memory for Venice.
- The Ottoman government continued to take bits of Venetian territory throughout this time which substantially contributed to its economic plight.

⁴ Adapted from AQA HART1 Mark Scheme June 2014

⁵ I.T. Abrizzi, *Opere di scultura e di plastic di Antonio Canova*, 4 vols (pisa 1821-1824), I:62.

- Its last remaining stronghold on Crete was seized in 1715.
- As late as 1770 a revolt on Crete against Turkish rule was ruthlessly suppressed.
- “Theseus, in this reading, is a future hero who will lead Venice to reconquer Crete and to destroy its bestial (and infidel) rulers, represented by the Minotaur.”⁶

Austrian Connection⁷

Zulian was transferred to Constantinople in 1783. He gifted the sculpture to Canova and generously allowed him to sell it to the Austrian count Moritz Christian von Fries for 2,000 scudi, which Hugh Honour considered ‘a high price for any modern work of sculpture, and a quite exceptionally high one for the production of a young and relatively unknown artist.’⁸ Why sell it on to this Austrian?

- “In fighting the war that resulted in the loss of Crete, Venice had been rescued by Austria’s decision to ally with the republic and declare war on the Ottomans.”
- The treaty imposed by the victorious Austrians secured some territories for Venice and a general peace for the rest of the republic’s existence.
- “The purchase of a statue by an Austrian aristocrat may give even greater resonance to the work’s political meaning.”

Wider Teaching Ideas

This work’s representation of Islam as bestial and negative could be compared with Gros’s use of Islamic location and light and dark in *Plague House at Jaffa*, as well as with more contemporary Western views of Islam, and conflict in Iraq / the Middle East.

Compare the body of Theseus with that of Napoleon in either *Plague House at Jaffa* or *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker*.

⁶ Johns, p.53

⁷ This section adapted from Johns pp.53-54

⁸ Honour, *op. cit.* (note 28), p.11.

Memorial to Admiral Angelo Emo, 1794

Museo Storico Navale, Venice

Materials: Marble

Size: 285 x 233 cm

Scope of works: Leaders, Memorial, pre-1850

Patron: Zulian, Falier, Republic of Venice

“The most important, and one of the most politicized, commissions Canova executed for the Serene Republic”⁹



Antonio Canova, *Memorial to Admiral Angelo Emo*, 1794, marble, 285 x 233 cm. Collection Museo Storico Navale, Venice. Digital image courtesy of Web Gallery of Art

Subject

- Zulian and Falier were close friends of Admiral Angelo Emo, considered the last of Venice's great naval heroes in its struggles against the Turks. Emo had distinguished himself by his attacks on the pirates of Algeria and Tunisia.
- “He had invented a type of floating battery that could broadside the vessels of the Barbary pirates in shallow water, an invention that effectively ended the seizure of Venetian merchantmen on the seas and the piratical raids on coastal settlements.”¹⁰
- A memorial to Venetian marine strength, as well as their last naval hero.

Form and Style

- “Government ordinances forbade the erection of a full-length, life-size representation of patricians, so Canova chose the **stele** format”:
 - The format is taken from Classical Greek funerary monuments.
 - A stele is an upright stone monument with inscriptions, used as grave markers, for dedication, commemoration and demarcation. They were usually rectangles carved in relief.
 - People were portrayed on the stele as highly idealised and with their name inscribed.
 - People are pictured according to the specifics of their role and what labours they are associated with.
- Diagonals and echoing forms of Victories counterbalance the stolid verticality of Emo and the column.
- The bust, with its “eyes closed in death, [is] raised upon a column in the midst of the sea. Two Victories are in attendance: one – of consummate elegance – winged and hovering to

⁹ Johns p.54

¹⁰ Ibid.

crown him; the other kneeling at the foot of the stele, about to spell out the victorious name.”¹¹

- The kneeling figure before him seems to be on a floating battery, while Venetian ships are in the background behind the column.
- The battery is made of wood lashed together, has a cannon and bags of shot.
- A winged Fame/Victory crowns the hero in his moment of apotheosis.”¹²
- “All the marks of Canova’s sensuality in the handling of marble are present in the stele:
 - In the Victories, whose drapery folds around genitals and, while covering, enhances;
 - In the fingers that arch before they touch with relish, and precision;
 - In backs that are flexible – that of the girl curved as she bends toward her work of inscription, the boy’s arched as he hovers to bestow the wreath.
 - Amid the scrolls of the wondrously worked waves, the female Victory kneels on... his invention of the floating battery.
 - The mid-ocean cenotaph is embellished with the jutting prows of ships bearing the lion of St Mark, the still-proud sign of the Republic.”¹³
 - Mid-ocean position – protecting Venice, still. Canova shows waves crashing against the column.
- Victories’ bodies are idealised, showing similar proportions, similar drapery.
- Victories do not engage with the viewer but focus on memorialising Emo by crowning him and writing his inscription.
- Victories shown in profile while Emo is in a frontal pose.
- Emo’s portrait is realistic yet classically idealised, representing him as a patrician statesperson, his cloak with acorn buttons over the top of his armour, showing both his naval and political roles.

Materials and Techniques

- Shallow relief carving used for ribbons on crown, wings of flying Victory and some waves.
- Undercutting shows where arms and legs, for example, are separated from the block and add movement and drama to the scene and create space.
- The low relief of the ships suggests space; a sense of scale suggested by different sizes of ships, but no indication of them being in water or a horizon line above them.
- Fragile thin forms of wings and trumpet extend out of the block, to the limits of the material’s tensile strength.
- Rough chisels used to show waves at the base of the memorial.
- Finer chisels used for fine detail on battery, figures, drapery, for example.
- Drilling evident in the hair of both Victories.
- Contrasts in textures of water, wood, sack, metal, skin, hair, feathers, stone.

Political Interpretation

- “Emo was widely mourned when he died in 1792, and a wave of patriotic nostalgia ensued, driven by the increasingly uncertain political situation.”¹⁴

¹¹ Plant p.17

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Johns, pp.56-7. The Republic of Venice was on the verge of being taken by France, who would install a puppet government.

- “The republic awarded Canova a pension to demonstrate to the world the ‘unequivocal esteem and the protection accorded by this government to those among its subjects capable of winning universal recognition in the fine arts’”.
 - “Or, more accurately, it would reflect glory on a government fortunate enough to have as a subject a cultural celebrity of the first rank.”¹⁵
- Canova had little time to enjoy this – Venice lost its independence to Napoleon in May 1797. It then became an Austrian territory in October 1797. Neither Napoleon nor Emperor Francis II of Austria continued the pension.
- Before the French evacuated the city, Napoleon ordered Venice be thoroughly sacked. The looting appalled and infuriated the patriotic artist.
- “The only other work by Canova in the city, *Psyche*, had originally been made for Girolamo Zulian, who died before it could be delivered, so it was in the palazzo of its owner Count Giuseppe Mangilli.
- Accompanied by the Queen of Bavaria, Napoleon called there, and the queen was deeply impressed by *Psyche*. With typical impulsiveness Napoleon embarrassed the count by demanding to buy it, even though its owner had no wish to sell, especially since he did not want to see the statue leave Venice.
- Mangilli had to yield to persistent imperial pressure, consoling himself with a very high price... The artist must have been chagrined to learn that a work he had executed with great affection had been alienated from his homeland through the agency of Napoleon Bonaparte.”¹⁶
- Canova never forgot it or forgave Bonaparte.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.