

Nicolò Roccatagliata (Genoa c. 1560 – before 1633 Venice) and his son Sebastian Nicolini (fl. Venice, 1614 – after 1636)

Venice Triumphant as Venus Victrix

Bronze

Height: 38 cm / 15 in (excluding spear)

Overall with socle: h. 48 cm / 19⅞ in

A relief depicting *Venezia in veste di trionfatrice /Venice Triumphant* on the tomb of Doge Leonardo Loredan (1436-1521) in the Basilica of San Giovanni e Paolo in Venice has traditionally been attributed to Danese Cattaneo, who started working on the tomb in 1565, though when he died in 1572 he had only made four allegorical statues for it.[1] It has recently been convincingly identified by Claudia Kryza-Gersch as a work by Nicolò Roccatagliata and his son Sebastian Nicolini.[2] The present bronze statuette, which clearly derives directly from the relief in San Giovanni e Paolo, nevertheless varies in certain aspects: rather than the drapery billowing out to her left and falling on either side, it is here more contained, fluttering around the figure and, instead of the Lion of St Mark, the shield in her left hand bears an image of the head of Medusa.

Here, wearing armour but with a terrapin by her right foot, *Venice Triumphant* is transformed into *Venus Victrix*, the victorious goddess of love. In this aspect, Venus was venerated by the Romans to celebrate their military victories, and Julius Caesar claimed her as his special protectoress. The goddess looks straight ahead as she strides forwards with her left leg, the toes of her left foot curled over the front edge of the base. Depicted in her military guise, chain mail is evident on her upper arms

beneath the partial breastplate that covers her shoulders. Her robe is belted below the breasts, the top layer of the skirts clings to her body and swirls around her upper thighs, while the lower layer splits below a fastening above her left knee, billowing out behind her. Both layers of drapery are meticulously incised with rich brocade design, while the surface of her helmet is also elaborately incised and crowned with an abundant plume of feathers in the classical Roman style. The image of Medusa on her shield contrasts with Venus' unearthly beauty. The present *Venus Victrix* is the only model to have a site-specific, shield-shaped base, which may in time enable its intended location or commission to be identified.

In the four variant examples which derive from the present model as noted above, the terrapin is lacking and a bird or sphinx is placed beside the figure's left foot. The bird, which should be an owl but more resembles an eagle, indicates that due to the armour, this model was subsequently re-interpreted as Minerva.

In its style and modeling, the present *Venus Victrix* clearly derives from the relief of *Venice Triumphant*, which with *Padua in veste di musa ispiratrice /Padua as Muse* on the Loredan tomb in San Giovanni e Paolo have been attributed to Girolamo Campagna,[3] though as Kryza-Gersch has proposed, the case for them being the invention of Nicolò Roccatagliata and of his son Sebastian Nicolini is compelling.[4]

Nicolò's bronze statues of *Sts Stephen and George* (h. 61 cm) commissioned on 31 January 1594 for the choir by the monks of San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice, provide further convincing comparisons.[5] They are also the first Venetian works documented to Nicolò. The modeling of the agitated drapery of the present *Venus Victrix*, swirling as though whipped up by a breeze, is handled very similarly to the vestments worn by *St Stephen*, which flutter around his knees and at his feet. The highly decorated surface and finish of the Saint's drapery compares directly with that of *Venus Victrix*. Her facial features are also very similar particularly to those of *St George*, and are characterised by a slightly open mouth, prominent upper lip, drawn-in cheeks and a small pointed chin. They both have the same heavy-lidded eyes, the pupils are indicated with a dot, and the eyebrows and nose are sharply defined. The philtum between the nose and upper lip is particularly accentuated, as is the middle part of the upper lip.

The first documented works by Sebastian are four bronze *Doctors of the Church* (h. 48 cm) commissioned in 1614 by the procurators of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, and dated that year.[6] Indicative of the high esteem in which Sebastian was held, these four bronzes were conceived to accompany Jacopo Sansovino's four *Evangelists* on the balustrade before the high altar of San Marco. However, the relief of *Venice Triumphant*, on Leonardo Loredan's tomb in San Giovanni e Paolo must surely pre-date Sebastian's first documented works. The four *Doctors of the Church* lack the exuberance of the present *Venus Victrix* also evident in the *Venice Triumphant* relief, and of Nicolò's figures of Sts Stephen and George commissioned for San Giorgio Maggiore in 1594.[7] Yet they display the same highly detailed surface seen in *Venus*' partial armour and in the flowing robe that swirls behind her and around her upper thighs. This method of modeling detail with deep linear incisions in the wax would seem to be characteristic of the Roccatagliata. Their fascination with drapery, evident in the handling of *Venus*' robes, is also reflected in these San Marco figures, especially in the rippling contours of the copes worn by *Sts Gregory* and *Ambrose*. Nevertheless, in comparison these *Doctors of the Church* appear somewhat static.

A signed bronze *Virgin and Child* in Écouen is inscribed "NICOLLIN. F",[8] which Hans Weihrauch and Bertrand Jestaz identified as the signature of Nicolò Roccatagliata.[9] This proposal has been widely accepted and, in an article on the Roccatagliata studio, Kryza-Gersch described the *Virgin and Child* statuette, along with Nicolò Roccatagliata's works for San Giorgio Maggiore, as the only certain work from which his style may be deduced.[10] Personally, I find the general consensus regarding the *Virgin and Child* as a work by Nicolò somewhat perplexing as the model displays none of the vivacity seen in his bronzes of *Sts Stephen* and *George* of 1594, nor in his son Sebastian's first documented work, the four *Doctors of the Church* of 1614. The broad, unadorned, swathes of drapery that clothe the static

figure of the Écouen *Virgin and Child* are however found on later works of the 1630s that are documented to both father and son, when it is quite likely that Nicolò, by then in his 70s, left much of the model making and running of the workshop to his son, Sebastian.

Returning to the signature on the Écouen bronze, it could equally well be that of Nicolò's son, Sebastian Nicolini. In support of the argument that this was Nicolò's signature, Kryza-Gersch in 1998 cited Jestaz's observation that a commission for candelabra in San Giorgio Maggiore referred to Nicolò Roccatagliata as "Nicolino".[11] However, Sebastian's second name, "Nicolini", is equally compatible with the signature on the *Virgin and Child*; discarding the last vowel is a convention in Venetian diminutive names. In the commission for the *Four Doctors of the Church*, Sebastian is referred to only as "Nicolini".[12] And when the two sculptors' signatures appear together on the *paliotto* in San Moisè, they read: "1633 / NICOL. ET / SEBASTIANVS / ROCCATAGLIA/TA NICOLINI / INVENTORES / IONNAS CHE / NET ET MARI/NVS FERON GAL / LI CVSORES ET / PERFECTORES".[13]

While it remains difficult to distinguish the styles of father and son, as there are so few surviving works that are documented to one or the other, rather than to both, I do believe that the style of Nicolò can be identified as more exuberant than the more staid and less embellished works of his son, Sebastian. It is evident that Nicolò Roccatagliata and Sebastian Nicolini were both significant protagonists in the Venetian art milieu of the early Seicento.

NOTES

For a discussion of the two sculptors' dates, see C. Kryza-Gersch, "*NewLight on Nicolò Roccatagliata and his son Sebastian Nicolini*" in Nuovi Studi, Rivista d'Arte..., No. 5, 1998, anno III, pp. 111-126. For Nicolò's dates see pp. 111-114, for the first record of Sebastian Nicolini, see p. 115.

1. C. Kryza-Gersch, "Due altari seicenteschi a San Marco: Nicolò Roccatagliata e Sebastiano Nicolini, e la produzione di ornamenti in bronzo per le chiese veneziane" in *L'industria artistica del bronzo del Rinascimento a Venezia e nell'Italia settentrionale. Comitato Nazionale per le Celebrazioni del 550 Anniversario della Nascita di Tullio Lombardo*, eds. M. Ceriana & V. Avery, 2008, pp. 253–272, see p. 267.

2. Ibid., p. 269, fig. 22.

3. See M. Rossi, "Danese Cattaneo" in "La bellissima maniera". *Alessandro Vittoria e la scultura veneta del Cinquecento*, exh. cat., ed. A. Bacchi, et al, Trent, Castello del Buonconsiglio, 25 June – 26 September 1999, pp. 237-243, see p. 240.

4. Kryza-Gersch 2008, pp. 267-269, figs 22-23.

5. Kryza-Gersch 1998, p. 111, pls. 192, 193, p. 122, n. 9. 6. Dated 20 June 1614, the document naming Sebastian Nicolini and Gabriel Orlandini, specified that Sebastian should personally create the wax models for casting. The bronzes are dated "·M·D·C·X·IIII", Kryza-Gersch 1998, pp. 115-116 and figs 202-205.

7. See notes 7, 11 & 12.

8. Écouen, Musée National de la Renaissance, château d'Écouen (inv. E.C1.13272). See Trent 1999, pp. 448-449, no. 102, the entry by C. Kryza-Gersch.

9. It might be interpreted as "*NICOLL IN.[venit et] F.[ecit*]". Jestaz's later reading of the inscription rightly took into account that there is only a single dot which divides the inscription into two words thus: "N*ICOLLIN. F.[ecit]*": see B. Jestaz, "Travaux récents sur le bronzes – I. Renaissance italienne", *Révue de l'art*, vol. 5, 1969, pp. 79-81, p. 81, cited in Kryza-Gersch 1998, p. 123, n. 23.

10. Kryza-Gersch 1998, p. 116, pl. 196.

11. Ibid., p. 123, n. 23.

12. Ibid., p. 124, n. 37.

13. Ibid., pp. 112-113.

Exhibitions

Facture: Cast by the lost wax method in a single piece, with the exception of the shield, and the spear, which is a later replacement. Typical of Venetian bronzes, the base metal appears to be fairly brassy. The surface of the bronze is exceptionally highly worked, both in the wax prior to casting and in the subsequent cold chasing of her armour, chain mail and of the fabric design on the drapery. The fine detailing on her helmet is also incised and the background of the shield is punched. The two end joints of the index finger of her right hand have been restored. The figure retains traces of the original lacquers, and where these are worn the surface of the bronze is revealed. The multi-faceted, thickly-cast shield-shaped bronze base is unique to this cast.

Literature:
No other statuette of this model is known

Other variant casts known with the subject Minerva:

New York, Quentin Foundation, h. 38.4 cm; **Paris**[1], Delorme & Collin du Bocage, Hotel Drouot, 8 June 2012, lot 294, h. 37.5 cm; **Paris**[2], Sotheby's, 20 April 2012, lot 23, h. 38 cm; **Paris**[3], Ratton & Ladrière, March 2006.[4]

1. Purchased 2005 by Patricia Wengraf Ltd., from Antony Embden, Paris, by whom purchased at Semanzato Florence, Carlo di Carlo sale, 18 October 2000, lot 246, attributed to Sebastian Roccatagliata. Minerva's helmet is crowned with a sphinx, the shield bears a Medusa mask and an eagle stands to the left of her left foot, on a square bronze base, the surface is not incised.

2. Catalogued as Nicolò Roccatagliata. Minerva's helmet is crowned with a sphinx (lacking

its head), and on her shield is a Medusa mask. Only the armour above her breasts is engraved. An eagle stands by her left foot on a square bronze base with a bevelled upper edge.

3. As circle of Tiziano Aspetti. Minerva has a sphinx (lacking its head) on her helmet, a sun burst on her shield, and a sphinx is seated to the right of Minerva's right foot on a shallow square base. Minerva's right hand is very similarly damaged to that of the cast sold by Delorme (see note 4), which appears to

be a late cast and the drapery at the back is very coarsely finished.

4. The helmet of this very brassy cast is engraved. There is a large hole in the base for attaching the figure to an andiron. It is of very similar size to the other casts noted above.