

# CALLISTO FINE ARTS

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Ubaldo Gandolfi (S. Matteo della Decima, Bologna 1728 – Ravenna 1782)

## ***Perseus***

Terracotta, h. 29,3 cm

Expertise by Donatella Biagi Maino

This elegant half-bust depicts Perseus, the hero from Greek mythology who killed the Gorgon Medusa to save from death Andromeda, who later became his wife.<sup>1</sup> This terracotta is an important addition to the catalogue of sculptures executed by Ubaldo Gandolfi, a major Bolognese painter and sculptor.

Gandolfi is mostly known and celebrated for the high quality of his paintings that he created for numerous patrons both in Italy and elsewhere, e.g. in Catherine II's Russia. In the nineteenth century his art was almost forgotten due to the changes in Italian culture and to the dull provincialism of his city. Nevertheless, since then, thanks to the studies on his activity and his culture by Roberto Longhi, Carlo Volpe and the writer of this expertise herself, Gandolfi has always been recognized as one of the greatest Bolognese artists of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The artist gives close interpretations of contemporary sacred art. He was influenced by San Leonardo da Porto Maurizio's preaching and especially by the Pope of his youth, Benedetto XIV. In particular, Gandolfi transposed into very effective and innovative paintings the latter's precepts for a faithful representation of evangelical stories and Saints' mysteries. Moreover, the artist painted apologetic mythological tales respecting the tradition imposed by the Carracci's school, yet obtaining very modern results. This particular character of his

<sup>1</sup> These are only two of his numerous adventures. On this myth, see F. Knatz, *Quomodo Persei fabulam artifices Graeci et Romani tractaverint*, Bonn 1893. Cfr. anche Esiodo, *Teogonia*, VIII sec. A. C., ed. cons. a cura di G. Arrighetti, Rizzoli 1984, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> R. Longhi, *Mostra della pittura del Settecento bolognese*, catalogo, Bologna 1935; C. Volpe, *L'arte del Settecento emiliano. La pittura. L'Accademia Clementina*, catalogo della mostra, Bologna 1979; D. Biagi Maino, *Ubaldo Gandolfi*, Torino 199, Eadem, *Gaetano e Ubaldo Gandolfi. Opere scelte*, catalogo della mostra (Cento), Torino 2002.

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oeuvre is linked to his strong *sensibilité* and his ability to represent antique stories through a tangible lens, always looking for the truth or the verisimilitude (e.g. *Andromeda and Perseus* in the Collezioni Comunali d'Arte in Bologna).

Gandolfi was introduced into the world of sculpture by his last master, Ercole Lelli, an important eighteenth-century Bolognese anatomist and sculptor.<sup>3</sup> He carved at least three statues of large dimensions: *Flora* (destroyed) for the famous Arcadian poet Ludovico Savioli, and the two Prophets *Isaiah* and *Jeremiah* placed in San Giuliano in Bologna in August 1781, less than a year before the artist's death. These magnificent, passionate and pathetic works, a last impetus of the neo-Baroque poetics, were already mentioned by his admiring contemporaries<sup>4</sup> as the 'best sculptures in Bologna for the whole century',<sup>5</sup> testifying the artist's talent also in this artistic field.

Gandolfi created several works in terracotta, some known for a long time and others, as the one presented in this instance, that need to be added to the catalogue of his undisputable sculptures. Only the small group of *Saint Joseph showing the cross to the Child* is initialled by the artist, <U. G. F.>. The others were attributed according to common stylistic characters such as the particular emphasis visible in the rendering of gestures and expressions, detectable also in his painting production. Among the terracotta works known for a long time discovered by Riccòmini, there are the *Pietà*, showing the suffering, but subdued Mother supporting Christ's wonderfully modelled dead body, the little statue of the reading pilgrim who found shelter in tree log and a portrait probably depicting *Henry II of England*. The writer of this expertise also added to this catalogue<sup>6</sup> a *Virile Nude*<sup>7</sup>, and the group of *The Dead Christ supported by a penitent (Saint John?)*, once attributed to Gaetano Gandolfi yet certainly a work by his brother Ubaldo.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, the catalogue includes a terracotta statue of a female figure with a helm sitting on a calm lion at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the artist did not practice sculpture only as a trial for painting – as required by the academic precepts recalled by Lanzi to the Gandolfi brothers<sup>10</sup> –, but for the pleasure gained from modelling and creating three-dimensional figures expressing movements and emotions from shapeless clay. Gandolfi learnt this technique in his youth, but the high quality of his works prove that he never abandoned it. On the contrary, he perfected it and succeeded in obtaining elegant and fine results.

The Oxford sculpture, *Felsina* or *Fortitudo*, is still immature in some ways, even though it presents an amazing profile similar to *Perseus'* one. The above-mentioned *Supported Christ* and the *Virile Nude* (at Sotheby's in 2019) are works executed during the artist's maturity, close in the effective overall rendering of features and in the formal elements to the *Perseus*, which opens up, as the *Virile Nude*, to the Neoclassical movement. The latter's declamatory gesture, recalling Alfieri's poems, and his coruscating expression are juxtaposed to a sense of becoming due to a style developed from antique models and examples from the near past (e.g. Giuseppe

<sup>3</sup> E. Lelli sculpted the statues for the Istituto delle Scienze under Benedetto XIV's patronage. They show human bodies, male and female, in their totality and as skeletons in a series of sculptures with very elegant postures that avoid the macabre sensations that would arise from the depiction of muscles, bones and integuments (today Musei Universitari); on his relationship with his pupil Gandolfi see Biagi Maino, *Ubaldo Gandolfi, cit.*

<sup>4</sup> In the very short note *post mortem* about the artist, wrote by the abbot Pietro Landi and today in the Acts of the Accademia Clementina di Pittura, Scultura e Architettura dell'Istituto delle Scienze di Bologna, there is a part reading "non si debbe passare sotto silenzio la sua valentigia nella scultura, e le due statue de Profeti fatte da esso nella Parrocchiale di S. Giuliano abbastanza lo manifestano" (P. Landi 1782, in Biagi Maino, *Ubaldo Gandolfi cit.*, p. 91).

<sup>5</sup> E. Riccòmini, *Vaghezza e furore. La scultura del Settecento in Emilia Romagna*, Bologna 1977, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, *Mostra della scultura bolognese del Settecento*, catalogo, (Bologna 12 dicembre 1965 – 12 gennaio 1966), Bologna 1965, pp. 144 - 147, nn. 117, 122, 118, 120: all works in private collections except for the *Saint Joseph with the Child* in the Museo di San Giovanni in Monte.

<sup>7</sup> In *Ubaldo Gandolfi cit.*, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> This terracotta work was in the 18 June 2019 auction at Sotheby's, London, Lot 90, with wrong attribution to Gaetano Gandolfi, Ubaldo's younger brother.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *l'Annual Report* of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1960, p. 66. There the subject is indicated as *Fortitudo*.

<sup>10</sup> L. Lanzi, *Storia Pittorica dell'Italia...* Bassano 1809: Gaetano Gandolfi, but we can extend this kind of exercise to his brother as well: after studying the invention in drawings, he "modellava in creta le figure e vestivale", before enlarging the drawing and proceeding with the actual painting – this was an ancient practice.

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Maria Mazza's works), but open to stylistic and literary contemporary suggestions. *Perseus* reflects this concept even further, being an *all'antica* bust respecting antiquarian rules but whose forms are created following an elegance, *finesse* and grace typical of the *ancien régime*.

This is an extraordinary work. Not mentioned by the sources, as for all the other medium-sized sculptures created for private collections gathered by educated patrons with refined taste. It is hence possible to suppose that the *Perseus* was probably situated in a space dedicated to intellectual conversations, such as the studio, keeping guard to rare books and drawings. It is nice to imagine it in the house of Count Cesare Massimiliano Gini, an educated collector and bibliophile, who commissioned a fresco decoration of his little palace to Gaetano Gandolfi and some other artists from the Accademia Clementina, and had them put niches in the walls with window doors for his numerous volumes of prints and drawings. Alternatively, the *Perseus* could have been in the room of one of Institute professors studying mythology, or in many other places like these. These are only hypothesis, but the attribution is undoubtedly certain for the high quality reached in the handling of the material and for the perfect ornaments of the *kunée* (the obscurity helm worn by the hero)<sup>11</sup>, whose fine shoots with leaves create a contrast with the masks on the sides and the face of the hound on the top. Moreover, the attribution is supported by the elegance of the decoration on the chest of the hero, who is slightly turning his face to the left showing an absorbed expression. The high cheekbone represents one of the artist's marks and can be seen not only in the other sculpted characters mentioned above, but also in most of his canvases. The profile reflects classical sources, yet it does not present the cold perfection of the Neoclassical examples, maintaining a harmonic relationship with the everyday life in its sharp and cultured wit blurring into haughtiness. To sum up, a masterpiece.

<sup>11</sup> The legend says that the helm was fabricated by the Cyclops and donated to Ades for the war against the Titans. Its strength was making whoever wore it invisible, and it was given to Perseus to defeat Medusa.