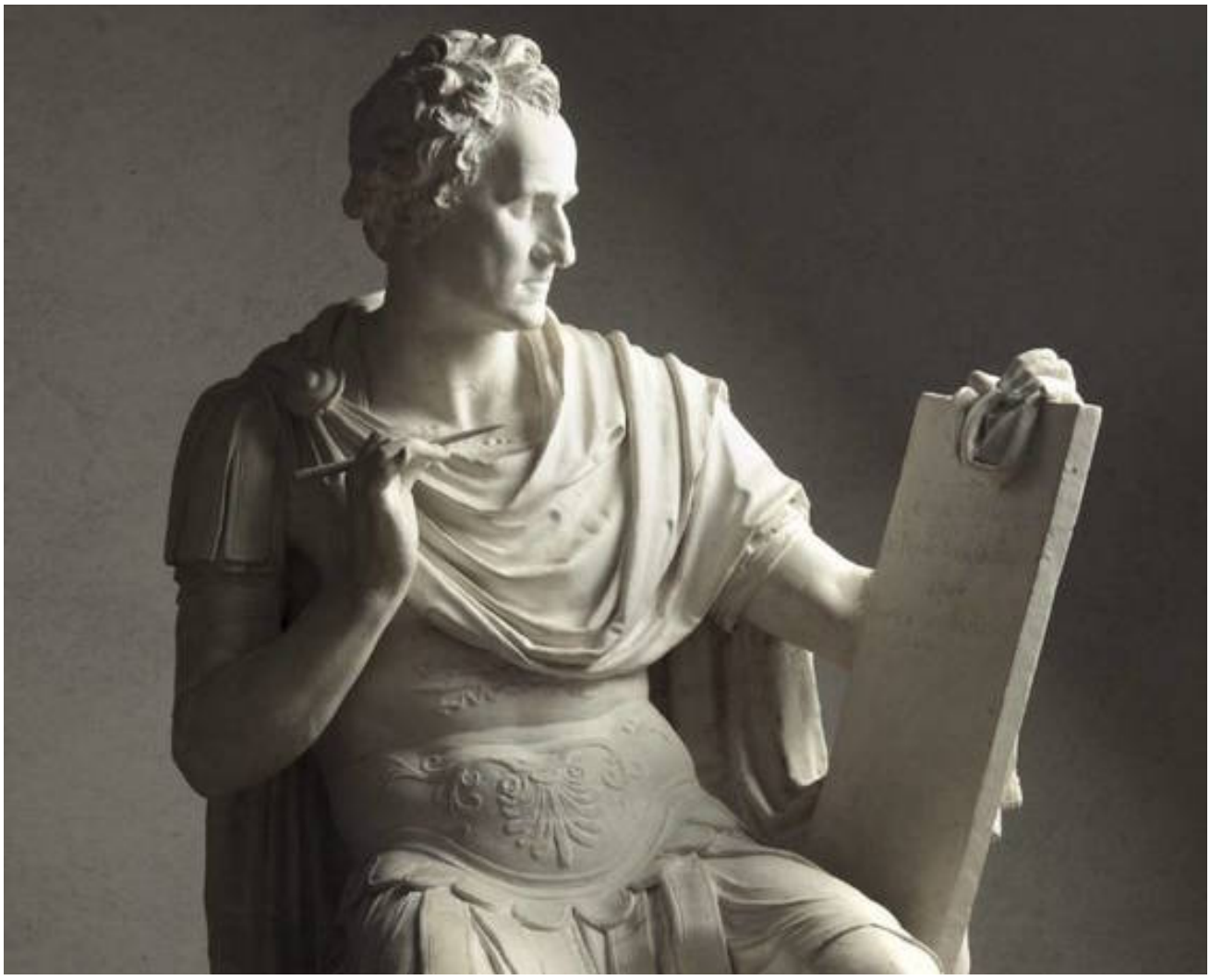
Canova Storms New York

Renato Miracco (June 20, 2018)



An insightful excursus on the greatest interpreter of Neoclassicism

Who was the first Italian artist involved in restoring artworks who wrote a treatise that today forms the foundation of an agreement shared by many countries for the preservation of artistic patrimonies? Don’t sweat it too hard; I’ll give you a hint: Antonio Canova [2].

His name came to mind recently as I was cobbling together the preface of a volume jointly issued by the State Department, FBI and Homeland Security regarding the results of the Memorandum of

Understanding, an agreement outlining concerning the responsibilities and requirements of archaeological property signed in 2001 by the government of Italy and the American State Department. (By the way, the volume, edited by Catherine Foster, the State Department and myself, will come out next September.)

It is now 15 years since the "MoU" was first signed, and as a result a good 375 works of art have since been returned to Italy thanks to the Carabinieri [3]and the aforementioned American Institutions. It has been a huge success and is based on ideas of preserving and contextualizing archaeological artifacts, ideas that have deep roots and stretch back to the diplomatic and legislative work of Canova, who is now famous in New York for his sculptures.

As Consul General Francesco Genuardi rightly put it in a recent speech, "Canova has folded the City of New York in a warm cultural embrace."

In fact, right now you can visit three exhibits. The first, "Canova's George Washington" (Frick Collection, 23 May – 23 September) [4]celebrates the vicissitudes of the Statue of George Washington, which was commissioned by the General Assembly of North Carolina in 1861 [5] for the Rotunda of the then-State Capitol in Raleigh.

When asked, Thomas Jefferson claimed that no American sculptor had the competence to sculpt the American president and hotly argued in favor of the Italian sculptor—one of the most famous sculptors of his day.

The second, curious exhibit, "Canova e la Danza," [6]runs from 22 May – 28 June at the Italian Cultural Institute.

The third exhibit focuses on photos of Canova's sculptures, lovingly housed at the Gypsotheca and the Museo Antonio Canova di Possagno [7]under director Mario Guderzo [8]. The photos were taken by the important photographer Fabio Zonta [9]and are on view from 22 May – 23 September in the rooms of the Italian Consulate on Park Avenue.

But let's back up a moment (we'll get to the exhibits shortly). I would like to underscore the civic and moral consciousness of Canova the man before we take the measure of his indisputable stature as an artist.

In fact, few people know about this aspect of the life of Canova, and we need to recognize his contribution to the formation of modern ideas of protecting and safeguarding artistic patrimonies.

We must remember that, in strictly artistic circles, over the course of the 1700s, there was great interest in the harmony and composition of ancient art. This was in the wake of Joachim Winckelmann's theories of modern archaeology and after the first major museums were opened to the public, who from then on could admire the masterpieces of the past. Regarding the past and believing in its importance and the message it might send to younger generations—these are givens now, yet they didn't exist until, as I said, then.

Take for example the time Antonio Canova was called to London at the end of 1811 because he was one of the few to understand the real worth of the marbles that Lord Elgin [10] had removed from the Parthenon. In 1801, Thomas Bruce, the Seventh Count of Elgin, had been granted—very controversially—permission by the Greek government to "not remove statues but only that which was uncovered from a specific excavation site."

From 1801 to 1812, Elgin's men removed about half of the remaining sculptures from the Parthenon along with architectural and sculptural elements from Erechtheum and Propylaea. Though he feared that it would compromise the integrity of the Parthenon, Canova came out in favor of transporting them to England.

He chose what seemed to him, at the time, the lesser of two evils. His decision proved decisive; it convinced the British government to acquire them and place them in the British Museum. And it's a matter of history that after Lipsia, when Napoleon's [11]luck was on the wane, Canova – who had

long criticized the plunder of artwork perpetrated by the French Emperor to satisfy the demands of Vivant-Denon for the nascent Musée Napoleon in Paris – was charged with traveling to Paris to recuperate all of the artwork stolen as part of the terms of the Treaty of Tolentino.

It wasn't easy. The situation in Paris was "desperate" to say the least, given that the French and Russians were categorically opposed to how it would be carried out. Thanks to the intervention of Klemens von Metternich, in the summer of 1815 Canova did a masterful diplomatic job and negotiated the return all artworks to Italy.

He was the most famous and beloved sculptor in the world, and even if Talleyrand disparagingly dubbed him "Monsieur L'Emballeur" (Sir Moving Man), he enjoyed the friendship and admiration of Sir William Richard Hamilton, the secretary of the English delegation.

Furthermore, the professional competency of Canova and the unanimous prestige bestowed on him by the sovereigns of Europe, from Metternich to the Russian Czar, played a key role in what was considered a nearly impossible mission.

His mission done, Canova returned to Rome on the evening of January 3, 1816, and was promptly received by the Pope. To thank him for having recovered the stolen Italian artwork, the Pope gave him the title "Marques of Ischia" and wrote his name into the "Libro d'Oro del Campidoglio." For his coat of arms, Canova chose the lyre and snake (symbols of Orpheus and Eurydice, respectively). "[They are] in honor of my first Statues," wrote the sculptor to a friend, "I must recognize [them] as the start of my civil existence."

"Wake up the dead since the living sleep," wrote Leopardi [12]in his "Ode to Angelo Mai." And that is exactly what happened in Italy and Europe during the Restoration. "The dead" – the masterpieces of the past – served to wake up the living and made them conscious and proud of their national identity. The sense of injustice and privation that swept over the people of Europe after Napoleon's plundering of their patrimony significantly contributed to transforming heritage from something traditionally considered of mercantile/antiquarian or literary/erudite importance to something of national-political importance.

The governance of culture exercised by Pius VII [13]did the rest. This is on display in the protection laws of 1802 (which Canova helped author) concerning the conservation of art work and monuments. It is the seed of Cardinal Bartolomeo Pacca's 1820 edict and certainly the forerunner of Italian protection laws, from Rava-Rosadi in 1909 to Bottai in 1939, which still partially inspires modern law.

For Pius VII, cultural patrimony had a moral and spiritual worth that belonged to all, and because of that, countries had the right/obligation to intervene wherever it was concerned and however possessed. Modern protection laws begin here. We're well aware of them and proud.

But let's get back to the exhibits: Curated by Xavier Salomon [14], head curator of the Frick Collection, in collaboration with Mario Guderzo, "Canova's George Washington" is the first exhibit of its kind, the brainchild of Franca Coin, President of the Canova Foundation, [15] after a recent trip to the United States.

The exhibit tells the story of the first and only statue made by Canova for the United States. On the suggestion of Jefferson, the sculpture was commissioned by the American consul in Etruria Thomas Appleton at the end of the Revolutionary War to celebrate the respect the American nation now commanded in the world.

In order to get his facial features right, Canova was given a copy of a bust of George Washington sculpted by Giuseppe Cerrachi [16]in 1795 and currently housed in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Nantes.

After thousands of false starts, he portrayed the American President in the clothes of a Roman condottiero, replete with cuirass, writing his farewell address on a tablet held which he holds in his left hand. The words inscribed in the tablet read: "George Washington, to the People of the United

States, Friends and Fellow Citizens."

This pose is believed to be based on a statue of the Roman Emperor Claudius, today found in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

The original work was unveiled in 1821 and was an immediate hit. Only a decade later, on January 21, 1831, a tragic fire broke out in the State House, reducing the statue to an ash heap.

But in 1970 the sculpture was remade by a Venetian sculptor, Romano Vito, thanks to the existence of a model at the Gypsotheca and Antonio Canova Museum in Possagno. Vito's replica was subsequently sent to Raleigh.

"Canova's George Washington" retells the story of this lost masterpiece, probably Canova's least well-known public statue. The exhibition also reunites the life-size plaster model—which has never before traveled outside Italy—with four preparatory sketches and other drawings and incisions.

The little model makes a major impact. Called the "First Thought," it bears the artist's handprints and reflects the first of the poses Canova had studied to represent the President. Also moving is the nude model, which was necessary, according to the sculptor, to determine the right anatomical posture before being covered up.

On display is a portrait of Canova in 1816 painted by Thomas Lawrence [17], also on loan from the Gypsotheca and Antonio Canova Museum in Possagno. (The museum is the house where the sculptor was born.)

The interesting, handsome catalog includes his correspondence about the commission, as well as essays by Salomon, Guderzo and director of the Palladian Museum in Vicenza Guido Beltramini.

"The statue embodies the early relationship between Italy and the US, and through this exhibit we're happy to renew our vow of friendship," affirmed Xavier during the press meeting. The museum director followed up by saying, "Finally this international initiative will return the great Italian sculptor Antonio Canova to his rightful place: as the greatest interpreter of neoclassicism."

In the spirit of full disclosure, one of the reasons I'm very fond of this exhibit is because in 2013, when I was among the organizers of the 2013 "Year of Culture in the United States," I was in contact with Mount Vernon, Washington's house in Virginia, to discuss the exhibition. Now I'm truly happy that it was so well conceived and, who knows, the idea of a future tribute in the house of George Washington is lurking in my mind.

The other exhibit, on view in the rooms of the Italian Cultural Institute on Park Avenue [18], focuses on the subject of Canova and dance [6]. Curated by Mario Guderzo, the exhibit presents sixteen works in tempera made between 1799 and 1806 and shown for the first time since their recent restoration.

The portraits are of nymphs and dancers, subjects inspired by Pompeian figures which represent a study (they conserve his artistic originality, though) for larger-scale bas-reliefs and sculptures.

The third event at the Italian Consulate [19] (an ideal space, in my opinion!) features the Italian photographer Fabio Zonta's giant "Gigantrofie," which invite us into the Gypsotheca of Possagno [7] (the word 'gypsotheca' comes from Greek and means "collection of plasters") to look at the most important plaster casts made by the maestro.

In fact, the works were transferred from Rome to Possagno beginning in 1826, four years after the sculptor's death, when his Roman studio was closed and sold off.

The museum houses 236 works by Canova, including drawings, sketches, plaster casts, and large sculptures. The only thing "missing" is the sculpture of Love and Psyche, which was later given to one of his apprentices and is now at the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

Visiting the museum is really an unforgettable experience, and I strongly urge you spend a few hours there. You'll thank me!

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