Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Cristoforo Solari (Milan 1468/70 - 1524)

Hercules resting

Alabaster statuette

Signed XPŌFORI GOBI F

21 x 36 x 14 cm (8¼ x 14⅛ x 5½ in.)

PRIVATE COLLECTION, USA

A highly important discovery, this beautiful marble of Hercules - lithe and muscular - is signed by Cristoforo Solari, also known as Cristoforo il Gobbo ('the hunchback'), a Milanese sculptor, some of whose other signed works are in Milan cathedral . The young, beardless Hercules is resting, leaning on a rock covered by the skin of the Nemeian lion that he slay. He is looking over his shoulder, his right arm on his club.

The recent rediscovery of the present sculpture has permitted the attribution of another tour de force in sculpture to Cristoforo Solari: the Hercules defeating Cacus made for Duke Alfonso I d'Este of Ferrara in 1516-1517 now in the Museum für Kunstund Gewerbe in Hamburg. Both sculptures are undoubtedly by the same hand, carved in a similar piece of creamy alabaster, their male figures have the same exaggerated musculature, their bodies pulsing with a fine network of protruding veins and show the same curly lion skin.

Research is currently being undertaken to establish whether the present masterpiece was commissioned by the Sforza in Milan or by the d'Este in Ferrara. Its jewel-like quality and small size are typical of works made for a powerful patron's studiolo, while Hercules was a remarkably popular subject among Renaissance rulers, especially for the d'Este in Ferrara where many members bear the name of Ercole.

Solari was one of the most important Italian sculptors of the late 15th and early 16th century. He lived and worked in Venice, Milan and Rome - some of the most lively and creative artistic centres of his age - and was commissioned by the same patrons as Michelangelo and Leonardo.

In 1494, Cardinal Francesco Piccolomini (1439-1503), the future Pope Pius III, wished to have works by Solari. The Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini, asked by one of the cardinal's agents, praised Solari's marbles and as a consequence Piccolomini, who incidently would commission fifteen marble statues from Michelangelo in 1501, asked for a statue carved by Solari, however the outcome of the commission is not known today. By the beginning of the sixteenth century Solari was so famous that visitors to Saint Peter's in Rome thought that Michelangelo's Pietà was made by Solari thus forcing Michelangelo to carve his signature in the marble. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, Solari moved from Venice to Milan. In Milan he belonged to the same milieu as Leonardo and one of his first works there was the decoration of the palace of Cecilia Gallerani, Leonardo's Dama col Ermellino. In 1494, Ludovico il Moro, Duke of Milan, named Solari Chief Architect of the Certosa in Pavia and commissioned from him in 1497 a funerary monument made of Carrara marble for himself and for his wife Beatrice d'Este for Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Of this monument only the recumbent statues of the duke and duchess remain. In 1501, Solari was hired with privileged contract terms by Milan Cathedral.

During his time in Milan, Solari received so many commissions from private patrons that Milan Cathedral protested that he should attend more closely to his obligations towards them. One of Solari's most famous private patrons was Alfonso I d'Este, duke of Ferrara, who introduced Solari to his sister Isabella d'Este, marchioness of Mantua, one of the most significant patrons of her day. In March 1516 Alfonso commissioned from Solari the marble group of Hercules and Cacus that has recently been identified by Alison Luchs on the basis of comparison with our signed marble. Our Hercules must also date from this period.

Solari's fame was well established in early sixteenth century artistic literature. He is indeed mentioned by Pomponius Gauricus in De sculptura, the earliest treatise on sculpture, published in Florence in 1504, who notes that the artist was known for his athletic figures of Hercules. However as he lived and worked in many different places and because very little of his sculptures survive and none of his small statuary were known until the present marble reappeared, his importance in the history of Renaissance art had hitherto been neglected.

Literature:

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Biographical references:

- Anne Markham Schulz, 'Cristoforo Solari at Venice: Facts and suppositions', Prospettiva, n. 53-56, April 1988-January 1989, pp. 309-316

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