

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Tommaso Righi (Rome 1727 - Varsavia 1802)

Hercules supporting the heavens

29.5 cm (11 ⁵/₁₆ inches)

In the present terracotta relief, Hercules, with his lion skin draped over his head and back, is depicted crouched, almost bent-double, under the weight of the globe which he supports above him. Head bowed, beneath raised arms which hold the earth aloft, his feet struggle to rest on a rock or cloud beneath. His tense body is represented in an awkward, extenuated pose – its serpentine shape reflecting the difficulty of the task.

The scene portrayed was a popular one from the Twelve Labours of Hercules – a theme admired for its moralising nature. It portrays the moment, during Hercules's eleventh task, when he tricks Atlas into retrieving the golden apples from the garden of Hesperides, by offering to hold up the heavens in his absence.[1] The subject became a popular allegory for astronomy in the 16th century as, according to ancient mythographers, Atlas had taught Hercules astronomy; and the latter's bearing of the globe was therefore a symbol of his receiving the weight of learning.

A sculptor of singular personality and great invention Tommaso Righi's first commission had been the stucco decoration of the abbatial church of Grottoferrata outside Rome in around 1754. The commission is likely to have been received through connections to his Florentine master, Filippo Della Valle (1689-1768); of whom he had been a student in Rome. Righi's career is particularly interesting as it is defined by a move away from the prevailing taste for the theatricality of late Roman Baroque, toward a more enunciated sobriety that imparts the beginnings of Neoclassical tendencies - as is typified by the monumental and classicizing form of Hercules in the present work.

The collection of the late Federico Zeri (see lit) includes four reliefs signed by Righi which are now in the Accademia di Carrara, Bergamo (fig. 6). These along with a similar relief, also ascribed to Righi, in the collection of the Palazzo Venezia, Rome (fig.3) serve as pertinent comparative material to the present relief.

These reliefs have been stylistically dated to early in Righi's career, in the 1750s, when he began training to join the Academy of Saint Luke, which he achieved in 1760.[2] These works convey Righi's interest in the classicising anatomical form that would have been a paramount feature of his early years whilst studying at the academy. Indeed, the academies promoted the modelling in clay of nude studies in much the same way as they did with academic nude drawings (see fig. 1 and fig. 4, in which a pupil is shown sculpting a relief from the round on the left and on the right, pupils are shown copying drawings).

Our work, like the aforementioned works, is also characterised by an underlining interest in anatomical models as used in painting schools. Like those in the Accademia Carrara, the present work, possibly a modello, shows Righi's fascination with the naked human body in complicated positions and powerful musculatures. Directly comparable are the handling of the hands, the feet, the simplified background with striations, and in particular, the bent arm and lowered head which recalls at least one of the Zeri reliefs and also A drunken satyr (formerly with Daniel Katz Ltd, fig.5). Also interesting of note is the way that Righi focuses on the figure, pairing back the background almost to an abstract degree, reducing it to the bare essentials.

Righi was clearly committed to the rigorous training in anatomy offered by the academies, having himself studied in the 1750's at the l'Accademia del Nudo di Campidoglio and Accademia di San Luca (see Fig.1. a chalk academy drawing by Righi which secured him second prize in January 1755). Becoming a member of the Accademia di Belle Arti e Letteratura dei Virtuosi al Pantheon in 1757 and subsequently a member of the prestigious Accademia di San Luca in 1760 before also becoming the teaching professor of the l'Accademia del Nudo di Campidoglio - a post he held eight times between 1762 and 1782.[3]

By the 1770s Righi had achieved a good degree of fame for his work in Rome. Having produced several sepulchral monuments, portraits and memorials in marble as well as stucco decorations for Santa Maria del Priorato (1764) and some in the Sala d'Oro in the Chigi Palace (also 1760's). His most notable commission came in 1777 when he had a prominent role in the building works conducted at Villa Borghese, including eight bas-reliefs in the Sun Room and eight stucco rounds in the entrance hall.[4] Rarefication of commissions in Rome however led him in 1784 to leave the city for Poland, where he obtained the protection of King Stanislas Augustus and worked in Vilna and Warsaw.

[1] The Garden of Hesperides was Hera's garden in the far west on the slopes of Mt Atlas and which contained an orchard producing golden apples that grant immortality when eaten. It was tended by the Hesperides, nymphs of the sunset or 'daughters of the evening', often cited as the daughters of Atlas.

[2] At around the same time, c. 1754, he was also working on stucco reliefs for the Abbey of Grottoferrata near Rome.

[3] See A. Negro, op cit.

[4] Ibid.

Literature:

Comparative Literature:

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