

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo (Asti 1745 - Torino 1820)

The Abduction of Ganymede

71 x 50.5 cm

The Bonzanigo family were one of the foremost names in Italian furniture design in eighteenth century Italy and the present work is a virtuoso carving by Giuseppe Maria (1745-1820). Trained as a cabinetmaker and sculptor under his father in their home of Asti, he was greatly influenced by the town's Neoclassical Italian style of furniture and architecture. The present carving is typical of his style - a delightful Neoclassical fusion of decorative and fine art.

Bonzanigo's early success permitted him to move to Turin, and in 1773 he started working for the House of Savoy. He is known to have supplied ornamental panels - similar to the present sculpture - as well as chairs, armchairs, benches, sofas, screens, prie-dieux, beds and mirrors to the royal residences at Moncalieri, Rivoli, Venaria, Govone but most notably Stupingi. It was there at the hunting lodge, that he produced arguably the finest expression of his style in his decoration of the State Rooms[1]. Indeed significantly, the border designs of the present work relate closely to those used on a larger scale on the furniture at Stupingi.

In 1774 he gained admission to the Accademia di San Luca, Turin and subsequently became Royal sculptor in 1787 to Victor Amadeus III of Sardinia, Duke of Savoy (1726-1790). He served in this position, producing his singular masterpiece *Il Trofeo Militare* until the French invasion in 1796 whereby his Neoclassical style made him a favourite of Napoleon. Patronage from the Emperor did much to build his reputation even more, and after 1815 he returned to work for the Savoy family. (see Grove)

The source of *The Abduction of Ganymede* is taken from Ancient Greek mythology, as told by Ovid, (see Met 10:152-161) in which Jupiter, transformed as an Eagle, carries off the exceptionally beautiful young shepherd Ganymede to Olympus to be his cup bearer. The story took on allegorical meaning in medieval times in the *Moralized Ovid* with Ganymede seen as a prefiguration of John the Evangelist – with the eagle representing Christ. Moreover, Renaissance humanists developed the theme into an allegory of the progress of the human soul towards God[2] and it is this interpretation of the subject matter which Bonzanigo and his patrons would have understood. Indeed, the allegorical nature of the scene would have suited the neoclassical taste - as would Bonzanigo's vigorous yet elegant handling.

Whilst the artist is well-known for his bas-relief '*microscultura*' in ivory or wood, the present relief is quite exceptional. Not only is it one of the best examples of the type - with exquisitely intricate carving in the elaborate frame decoration, and deep, bold under-carving around the figures - it is also uncommon in presenting a mythological scene, rather than a portrait or architectural design. The only comparable carving of such quality to have come to the market by the artist's hand is his *Portrait relief of Napoleon*.

The relief is realised with great skill and effect. Bonzanigo has depicted the pair on Mount Olympus, enveloped in cloud, with Ganymede's foot placed on the wing of an Eagle; which emerges from beneath Jupiter. The shepherd pulls his attribute, a cloak, over his head, his youthful body in great contrast to the idealised musculature of Jupiter. The God's body is turned and taut, his right arm wonderfully portrayed resting on his leg, with veins visibly running over his sinews.

The ornate frame is equally as impressive as the scene depicted within with its extraordinary complex carving and charming details. Expressive portrait vignettes - reminiscent of sibyls or prophets - enchanting examples of his skill and ingenuity, are placed at intervals. They peer out of a richly decorated grotesque border with an extraordinary mixture of minute architectural elements, trophies, swags, acanthus leaves, flowers, cherubs and creatures. The overall impression is a bold yet sophisticated expression of Bonzanigo's Neoclassical style.

[1]See "Bonzanigo, Giuseppe Maria." *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. (Accessed:1 Feb. 2018.) <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00022981>.

[2]James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*(Murray, 1995), p.135

Provenance

Provenance:

Private Collection, Madrid, until 2017

Literature:

Comparative Literature:

C. Berlotto, et al., *Giuseppe Maria Bonzanigo: intaglio minute e grande decorazione* (exh. Cat.),
Pinacoteca civica, Asti, 1989.

G. Ferraris, *Giuseppe Bonzanigo e la scultura decorative in legno a Torino nel period Neoclassico*
(1770-1830), Turin, 1991.