

T O M A S S O



Gérard van Opstal (1594 - 1668)

Putti with the infant Bacchus riding a panther led by a young satyr

Ivory relief

12.5 cm (4 7/8 in.) high

26.5 cm (10 1/2 in.) wide

A playful interpretation of the celebrated mythological subject of the Bacchanal, this exquisitely carved ivory relief is a superb example of Gérard van Opstal's work. Born in Flanders at the very end of the 16th century, the artist rose to prominence precisely thanks to his mastery in the carving of this most delicate material, so much so that by 1633 he moved to Paris at the invitation of Cardinal Richelieu, the King's chief minister (see P. Malgouyres, 'La collection d'ivoires de Louis XIV', p. 46). There, van Opstal executed decorative cycles for the Louvre and Tuileries royal palaces, the Hôtel Carnavalet, the Hôtel Lambert and the now demolished Porte Saint-Antoine. Cardinal Mazarin, Richelieu's successor, owned four mythological scenes by van Opstal, and in 1669 King Louis XIV acquired no less than sixteen ivories by the artist from his heirs. It is also recorded that the court sculptor François Girardon possessed an ivory by van Opstal of Apollo and Marsyas (Collection Émile Lévy in 1900, now untraced), and that van Opstal's atelier was the only one the famed Gian Lorenzo Bernini graced with a visit during his 1667 stay in Paris. Notably, in 1648 van Opstal had been amongst the founding members of the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture.

Characteristic of van Opstal's style are the putti's rotund and dimpled frames, their vivacious interactions, the closely set composition and the soft yet detailed quality of the carving – as visible in the pictorial definition of the figures' eyes, their windswept strands of hair and the ruffled fur of the panther. Comparable narratives and examples of surface treatment can be found in van Opstal's ivory carvings now in the Louvre Museum – presenting bacchic revelries and other mythological subjects such as cupids, tritons and nereids – or in the bacchanals of putti now in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London and in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. A very fine marble plaque in low relief by the artist, depicting The Triumph of Silenus, is now in the Art Institute of Chicago, whilst an alabaster Marine Scene is in the collection of the Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Van Opstal's evocations of the ancient world, featuring spirited deities and mischievous putti, responded to the nobility's taste for precious objects of curiosity, which combined at once erudition and aesthetic pleasure. As mentioned above, the Bacchanal has its roots in the myths connected to the Greek god Dionysus (Bacchus in the Roman tradition), which survived from antiquity through to the modern era thanks to both literary and visual sources. In the present composition van Opstal depicts the infant god astride a panther whilst holding a bunch of grapes, thus directly referencing antique prototypes, such as sculptures and sarcophagi reliefs, that he would have known through prints, editions of the several guides to the antiquities of Rome published at the time, and the work of his contemporaries.

An inspiration parallel to antiquity for van Opstal was his fellow countryman François Duquesnoy (1597-1643), who had moved to Rome as a young artist and had soon become one of the city's most sought after sculptors. Eager to study antiquities, early in his career Duquesnoy accepted various commissions to restore ancient statues - including the Rondinini Faun now in the British Museum, London, and the Giustiniani Bacchus sitting on a Panther now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York - and produced painstaking models of others, such as a terracotta version of the Nile in the Vatican Museums, a monumental river god surrounded by sixteen frolicking putti, a reference to the numbers of cubits the watercourse would rise by during the rainy season, as recounted by Pliny. In the same period, Duquesnoy first saw Titian's *Worship of Venus* canvas, then at the Villa Ludovisi in Rome. The biographer Giovanni Pietro Bellori tells us that the sculptor "fell in love" with Titian's infant cupids and "translated them into various groups of mezzo rilievo, and together with Nicolas Poussin modelled them in clay". As amply recorded by Bellori, his fellow biographer Giovanni Battista Passeri and Duquesnoy's pupil Orfeo Boselli, the sculptor's putti at play, also executed in ivory, soon became greatly admired and influential in the artistic circles of the city and beyond.

Crucially, reading such works as light-hearted decorative exercises would not do them justice: through their character and direct iconographic reference to antique and Renaissance models Duquesnoy's putti represent cultivated, lyrical and witty inventions. This quality would certainly have been appreciated by Duquesnoy's patrons and, in the decades to come, by artists and collectors across Europe eager to establish a connection with the literary and artistic splendour of the papal court.

This brings us back to van Opstal and Paris in the middle of the 17th century. As mentioned above, the young artist would certainly have known Duquesnoy's celebrated putti, all the more so given that the King of France had repeatedly invited the Fleming to his court at the beginning of the 1640s. With the present relief, therefore, van Opstal simultaneously pays homage to and places himself in line with one of the great masters of his time and the tradition for playful yet learned objects of virtue.

Intriguingly, in the 1872 Christie's catalogue this relief was described as "from the frieze of the chimney in the Colonna Palace". Whilst such provenance remains to be investigated, it is fascinating to note that a closely comparable composition appears on the early 18th century wainscoting on the first landing of Salter's Folly at Maldon, England. Such evidence suggests the composition must have been famous and well-known at the time, possibly originating in a now lost prime by Duquesnoy at Palazzo Colonna in Rome. A comparable plaque is in the Duke's Study at Alnwick Castle, Northumberland.

Provenance:

Francis Broderip, and sold by his executors, Christie's London, 8 February 1872, lot 402, as 'by Fiammingo' Viscountess Hambleden, née Countess Maria Carmela Attolico di Adelfia (b. 1930), Hambleden Manor, UK

Literature:

RELATED LITERATURE:

A. Colantuono, "Titian's Tender Infants: on the Imitation of Venetian Painting in Baroque Rome", in *I Tatti Studies*, 3, 1989, pp. 207-34

E. Lingo, *Duquesnoy and the Greek Ideal*, New Haven & London, 2007, pp. 11-63

P. Malgouyres, "La collection d'ivoires de Louis XIV: l'acquisition du fonds de l'atelier de Gérard van Opstal", in *La Revue des Musées de France: Revue du Louvre*, 5 December 2007, pp. 46-54.