

T O M A S S O



Massimiliano Soldani-Benzi (1656 - 1740)

Ganymede and the Eagle

Bronze

31.5 cm (12 ½ in.) high

38.5 cm (15 ¼ in.) wide

Massimiliano Soldani-Benzi (1656-1740) was Master of the Mint in Florence, but extended his range beyond the coinage of Tuscany to making portrait medallions that were cast, rather than struck, so that they could be of a good size to hold in the palm of one's hand. Between 1694 and 1706, Soldani also encroached as a foundry-man on the role more proper to his court sculptor by producing three casts in bronze of full-size ancient and Renaissance statues for the Prince of Liechtenstein. They are expertly finished with great precision. By November 1702, he had also modelled two elaborate mythological subjects of his own, the Judgement of Paris and Diana and Callisto, which have only recently turned up as casts in bronze. They give a premonition of the sculptor's 'pictorial' style of composition and suave modelling, with strong diagonals animating the groups of figures, which are laden with exquisitely rendered details. This Soldani had learned at the short-lived Medicean Academy in Rome, where one of his instructors had been Ercole Ferrata, a follower of Algardi. Soldani was thus a leading member of the third generation of sculptors in the tradition of the Roman Baroque, of which the present group is typical. However, it was probably statuary after the Antique and his splendid portrait medallions that initially attracted the British 'milordi' to Soldani's studio at the Mint,

which was conveniently situated opposite the entrance to the Uffizi Gallery.

A letter of 22 November 1707 from the Grand Ducal chamberlain, Lorenzo Magnolfi, who also acted as a high-level art agent for grantees, furnishes the names of three pioneer patrons among the British for Soldani in the role of sculptor. It was addressed to one of these, Sir John Perceval of Burton, County Cork (1683-1748), later Earl of Egmont and a founder of the Colony of Georgia. Perceval spent six months in Italy while on his Grand Tour. Magnolfi wrote as follows:

"... you may order Mr Arundel and Mr Bates [shipping agents in Livorno] to reimburse me for the said heads, and for the busts and statues you did order to Signor Massimilano Soldani which are already done and packed up; and there are twenty-four heads and three statues, and I hope you will be pleased with them since they are very well done"

Judging from this bald description, as well as from Perceval's intention expressed elsewhere that his works of art be for "the use of an accademy (sic) of painters which he purposed to forward the erecting in Ireland", one might infer that they were after ancient prototypes. The large, even, number of twenty-four indicates probably that a set of the normal Twelve Caesars and their wives were being supplied. However, though Soldani did indeed produce a few busts after the antique, so high a number suggests that they could not have been life-size, and no such busts on a reduced scale - suitable for the tops of desks, cabinets or bookshelves in libraries - are at present known to be by his hand, and so they may have been in the form of medallions. Alas, disaster befell both of Perceval's shipments, for they were captured by French privateers in 1707 and 1709: the spoils presumably would have been fed into the art market in France (unless they were melted down to make cannon!).

Soldani's intimate relationship with several other British "milord" has been confirmed by the discovery of four hundred folios of correspondence between Soldani and a certain Signore Zamboni in London. Unfortunately, Zamboni's replies have been lost at the Florentine end, though a few of his draft letters from the 1720s do survive in the Bodleian Library. The correspondence begins on 15 October 1716, just after the visit to Florence of the twenty-year-old Earl of Burlington (1694-1753) and covers the latter half of Soldani's career, until his death in 1740.

The sculptor's correspondent, Giovanni Giacomo Zamboni, began his business career with various merchant bankers in Livorno, becoming a clerk and agent in London between 1711 and c. 1719, when his employers went bankrupt. Even so, by 1720 Zamboni had personally amassed enough money to purchase £5,000 worth of ill-fated South Sea stock, which - like Sir Isaac Newton - he shortly lost when the 'Bubble' burst. Thanks to his business acumen, which comes across forcibly by inference in Soldani's letters, in 1723, when Zamboni was forty, he obtained the post of Agent for the Landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt. This was to prove very advantageous and he promptly proceeded to make full use of - if not to abuse - the diplomatic bag between London, Livorno and Florence. Service as a go-between, middle-man or commission agent was the essence of the unscrupulous Zamboni's career.

Background

Soldani's first letter, of 15th October 1716, to Zamboni, described Lord Burlington's purchase of two bronze reliefs of The Seasons and his order for the other two (all now in the Royal Collection). It also related how Burlington had commissioned some other groups in bronze, from models that he had seen in Soldani's studio. These had since been cast, but not paid for, and so had not been forwarded to His Lordship. Soldani enclosed for Zamboni's benefit a list of the four compositions in question, with his own loving description, as well as their measurements and prices. It begins with a Venus and Adonis, described as about 18 in. high, of which there is an example in the J. Paul Getty Museum, California; and ends with a splendid, Bernini-esque, group of Apollo and Daphne, which - at 250 gold louis d'or - was the most expensive.

In between them, the sculptor listed casts from terracotta models that the flighty young Lord Burlington had also had seen and commissioned - a matching pair of rather smaller and simpler groups, Leda and the Swan and Ganymede and the Eagle, which - at 35 gold louis each - were valued at only around one third of the price of Venus and Adonis. To Soldani's chagrin Burlington did not honour his obligation, but such a pair was later sent to England (see below) and the present statuette - with its interesting Anglo-Irish provenance that might take it as far back as 1716 - may well be one of them. The only other pair, evenly more finely chased, in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, is from an Italian source.

Ganymede and the Eagle

The history of the present composition and its pair of Venus thus goes further back, to before the time of Lord Burlington's five-day visit to Florence during his Grand Tour of late 1714. He took home with him two of the reliefs of The Four Seasons that he been able to see in the studio, but failed to pay for the bronze casts, which Soldani claimed that His Lordship had ordered, of the four other models that he also admired.

In the list enclosed in with the letter, the sculptor describes the pair to his correspondent in London as "A bronze group of almost the same size, which shows Leda and the Swan, and a Cupid who is unveiling her, and the said group is enriched with drapery etc. and is worth 35 Louis d'or" and as "A companion group representing Ganymede grouped with the Eagle and Cupid who is helping him get on to the back of the Eagle, and the group is enriched with the bow and the torch, and is worth 35 Louis d'or". As one knows from the pair in Cambridge, the groups form a good match, for each is composed as a right-angled triangle, with the protagonist's head at its apex, and with the 'feathered friend' - Jupiter in two of his guises for seduction - filling the vertical side. In each, the attendant Cupid with his spread wings serves to enliven the silhouette and to disguise the fundamental geometry.

The rocky bases are characterised by a series of more or less parallel grooves, like stratification, running at slightly divergent angles: their suggestion of diagonal movement complemented by the sinuous folds of the swirling drapery is typical of Soldani's compositions. All these accompaniments serve as a foil against which is set the voluptuously smooth bare flesh of Leda and of Ganymede. Like most of Soldani's groups they are designed to be seen from in front and from the diagonal viewpoints, for their backs are dull, though finely finished, consisting mostly of large stretches of grooved rockery and swathes of drapery. They are therefore almost as 'pictorial' as reliefs.

Soldani's main thrust in the first letter was to get Zamboni to try and influence his recalcitrant client via suitable intermediaries, such as Sir Andrew Fountaine of Narford Hall, Norfolk, who was about to leave Florence for London, and whom he asked to plead his case with the arrogant and distracted Lord Burlington. Alas, by 4 January 1717, the sculptor was to become disenchanted with Fountaine, though only briefly, as it turned out: "A few days ago I met Lorenzo Magnolfi in the square [Piazza della Signoria] and he told me that Sir Andrew had claimed to have raised a goodly quantity of guineas for the two groups, though I do not recall how many, and that he hoped to get still more. He wanted to know if I was prepared to do the deal through him, but I replied that I did not have any works available, and that I could not get involved because of the delay. You should not believe that I would entertain any sort of bargaining, and I now realise that Fountaine works and schemes - and god knows what he has in mind - all on his own account."

An intervening letter from Zamboni sent on 27 November had meanwhile arrived and on 7 January Soldani replied "... I am more than persuaded to have nothing further to do with My Lord Burlington, in order not to find myself under any embarrassing obligations and unable to get hold of the money when he has decided to take something. When the knowledgeable Fountaine makes his arrival there [in London], maybe he will explain to Milord as clearly as he has

promised me that when one orders a work of art, it is customary to pay the money before taking delivery and that this is a universal custom applying to everyone and that I have never experienced any difficulty with anyone and indeed that he himself satisfied me, before taking away the four bas-reliefs that he now has in his hands.” Soldani, however, continued to have an eye to the main chance, adding, “... if the said Milord has begun to build there in London, he will need many more things to enrich and furnish the rooms, and I would like to hope that with a little management, I might be able to lay hands on even a tiny little part of his huge income. However, seeing that this gentleman has many wishes, it could be that some will be abandoned: perhaps he has fallen out of love with my pieces, which do not merit any attention.”

The last paragraph was, of course, merely courtly self-abasement. The sculptor went on, now turning directly to Zamboni as a possible buyer: “As to the description that I had given you of the works in my other letter, which I have rediscovered, I see that you might be interested in the two Groups, which are fully in the round and of a good size, just right to set on tables, once they have had a base to go under them, for at the moment they just rest on rocky masses and terrain. Leda is sitting and embracing Cupid, who is stretching his neck over her bosom, while she is smiling and uncovering herself and Love is helping her to undress. The said group is well set out. The other, matching, group shows Ganymede embracing the Eagle, which is looking at him, while Love is shown pressing him to mount the Eagle. Furthermore, there is Ganymede’s dog, and the rest is as well composed as my feeble powers permit.”

“I think that my price of seventy Louis d’or was rather high, on account of the amount of work involved in them, so I would accept anything over fifty Louis that you cared to let me have, for I want to continue a good relationship with you. I assure you that here in Florence they are worth one hundred piastres each, but over there they ought to be worth a lot more. So I shall go on preparing them and it will take about another month, or a little more, to finish them. Once I have sent them to Mr Fredoli in Livorno, I shall write to you. Meanwhile, you might deign to reply to the same gentleman whatever you like about this matter, and then write to me again.”

“In the meantime, see what reaction you get to these two groups in order to see what can be hoped for the other one that I have of The Death of Adonis and of yet another very rich one with an ornate pedestal that depicts Apollo and Daphne with putti and other things – this is a work that is quite extraordinary.”

“At present I have nothing else more suitable for you than the above-mentioned ones: these will be crated by me with every care, covered with waxed paper and with strut between one and the other group, in such a way that I hope that they will arrive safely, as has happened when I have sent things to Germany, Spain and elsewhere, as well as to England. I am really trying to do everything possible over the prices, but as they are works that have been studied and polished to the highest degree that art demands, it takes a long time and great expense to bring them to completion. I wish to God that it was easier, for then I would have hoped to get some profit out of them, which I will not at this price, believe me, upon my word of honour.”

Three weeks later, on 31 January 1717, Soldani continued the narrative: “I have written to Gian Giacomo Fredoli at Livorno to tell him that I have received your order to have me paid 50 Louis d’or for the aforesaid two groups of Leda and of Ganymede in accordance with the note and description that I sent you. He replied that he had the assignment in hand but that he wanted to draw up a proper account before disbursing the above-mentioned money.” Fredoli seems then – in the way of shrewd bankers – to have dragged his feet over the payment, and so Soldani continued, “... meanwhile the final touches will be given to the said groups, which in 15 or 20 days will be ready to be packed. You will have read my wish to receive something over and above the offer of 50 Louis d’or that you made me for the two groups, because they are actually worth a lot more. But to satisfy the great wish that I have to be of service to you, I am throwing myself entirely on your mercy, in order to give you the incentive to procure me some opportunity to make a profit – both for you and for me – so please let Mr Fredoli and me know your final decision on this matter.”

A letter of 15 February [folio 607] indicates further delays, and the sculptor writes that once he has received the 50 Louis, he is ready to crate and ship the pair of bronzes. A month later, on 18 March, he reverts to the matter: "As far as concerns the two aforesaid groups of Leda and Ganymede, I intend to give you priority over anyone else and will now accept your offer of 50 Louis and will not ask for anything more from Fredoli." Even so, Soldani, ever hopeful, reverted once again to the delicate matter of the 'tip': "... after you have seen them, you will wonder if you think that I deserve something extra, but I am relying entirely on your courtesy and kindness." Then the long suffering sculptor returned to safer ground, describing how, once Fredoli had made the payment, he would forward the said groups well crated and packed, but – in order not to prejudice the delivery of further works that might be sent over - he was still hoping for a bonus from Zamboni! Alas, the matter dragged on with mutual distrust building up between sculptor and banker until, in a letter of 12 April, Soldani in desperation decided to send the groups to Livorno into the care of a personal friend, who would hand them over only when the money was forthcoming. This finally took place a few days before 25 May [folio 617]. On 8 July Soldani wrote hoping that the groups had arrived in the port of London and had met with Zamboni's satisfaction: he suggested that they would look better once they were mounted on pedestals. In fact they had still not arrived by 15 July, nor by 10 August, but they had by 15 October, when Soldani wrote [folio 27v.]: "It is with feelings of great consolation that I hear that finally you have received the two groups and that you have found them to your taste, but what upsets me is that you will have to have bases made there, when I could have had them made here to my own satisfaction and more cheaply; or I could at least have sent you designs for them."

Nothing further of any significance is heard of them and one is left to suppose that Zamboni managed to sell them on from his fashionable address in Golden Square, Soho, possibly – and directly or indirectly - to Theophilus Butler, or another, intermediate, owner. In a Christmas letter, date 23 December 1717, the sculptor does mention in passing that "... it only remains for me to finish another Leda and another Ganymede, matching those that you have received, for I cast them all together, in order to melt a lot of metal in the furnace at once. I have it in mind for those two to make them bases out of some stone and keep them by me until an occasion offers itself."

This may be the pair that has finally come to rest in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, and the extra degree of chasing and stippling on the surface may be due to the fact that they were made to satisfy the hyper-critical eyes of native purchasers in their city of origin, where Soldani had to withstand direct comparison of his bronzes with those by his great rival, the court sculptor Giambattista Foggini.

The Provenance

The work was previously at Swithland Hall, Leicestershire. The present Swithland Hall was built for George John Danvers-Butler, later Earl of Lanesborough. Designed by the architect James Pennethorne, it was complete enough to be occupied by 1834, and was finished by 1852. The Earl of Lanesborough was a title in the Peerage of Ireland. It was created in 1756 for Humphrey Butler, 2nd Viscount Lanesborough. The Butler family descended from Theophilus Butler, who represented County Cavan and Belturbet in the Irish House of Commons. In 1715 he was raised to the Peerage of Ireland as Baron Newtown-Butler, of the County of Fermanagh, with remainder to the heirs male of his father. It may have been he who acquired the present bronze, probably with its pair of Leda and the Swan (now missing), from Soldani's representative G.G. Zamboni in London. Theophilus was succeeded according to the special remainder by his brother, Brinsley, the second Baron. He had previously represented Kells and Belturbet in the Irish Parliament. In 1728 he was created Viscount Lanesborough in the Peerage of Ireland. He was succeeded by his son, Humphrey, the aforementioned second Viscount, who was elevated to an earldom in 1728. The first Earl was succeeded by his son, Brinsley (1728-1779), the second Earl, who went on the Grand Tour to Florence, Rome and Naples in 1752-1754. He represented County Cavan in the Irish House of Commons. His grandson, the fifth Earl, sat in the British House of Lords as an Irish Representative Peer from 1849 to 1866. It was he who acquired in Rome c. 1850 Bernini's marble bust of Pope Gregory XV (1554-1623) that was offered for sale at Christie's, New York, in 1990, and is now in the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada. Thus, the 2nd or 5th Earls may also have acquired the present bronze in Italy, or in London. The titles became extinct on the death of the 9th Earl in 1998.

Provenance:

The Collection of the Late Countess of Lanesborough, previously at Swithland Hall, Leicestershire, likely by descent from 1st Earl of Lanesborough;
probably acquired by Theophilus Butler, Baron Newtown-Butler, of the County of Fermanagh

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Related Literature

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