

# T O M A S S O



**French, late 17th / early 18th century**

Bust of Apollo

Marble

98 x 72 cm (38 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 28 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches)

This finely carved, monumental marble bust of the ancient Greek and Roman god Apollo, represented with his head turned to one side and his hair tied in a knot over his forehead, is inspired by a famous ancient statue in the Belvedere Courtyard of the Vatican, known as the Apollo Belvedere. A full-length representation of the god, the statue in the papal collection portrays Apollo wearing only a cloak fasted across his shoulders and draped around his left arm, and is considered by scholars to be a Roman, Hadrianic-era, copy of a lost Greek bronze original. First recorded in the Vatican by 1509, the Apollo Belvedere soon came to be considered one of the most exquisite examples of Graeco-Roman statuary, and a paragon of anatomical perfection.

As Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny write in *Taste and the Antique* - their seminal study on the enduring influence of classical antiquity on Western art - from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth century no sets of prints or casts or copies claiming to represent the most famous works of antiquity failed to include the Apollo Belvedere, and numerous passages of rapturous prose were inspired by it (p. 148).

The Apollo Belvedere's fame reached well beyond the confines of Papal Rome, and already in 1540 King François I of France (r. 1515-47) had moulds taken from the original and a bronze version cast for his residence at Fontainebleau. In the following century, Rome and its antiquities increasingly came to be considered vital to the training of French artists, a notion sanctioned by the founding in 1666 of the Académie de France à Rome. The institution was established under the aegis of Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), one of King Louis XIV's (1638-1715) most prominent ministers. The monarch's reign, known as the Grand Siècle, or Great Century, has long been synonymous with the splendour of Versailles and the glory of France, which under Louis enjoyed a period of political stability and exceptional patronage of the arts.

In this light, it is interesting to note that the image of the monarchy carefully crafted and promoted by Louis and his court drew consistently on ancient Roman art, literature and history, as the King sought to establish a parallel between his rule and the vast, powerful Roman empire. It is no coincidence that, in 1686, following an unprecedented struggle between Louis and Pope Innocent XI Odescalchi (1611-1689), France welcomed its first two major ancient sculptures from Rome. Known as Cincinnatus and Germanicus, they were installed to great acclaim in Versailles, where they were surrounded by an array of ancient deities, nymphs and emperors. This imagery soon came to inform representations of the king himself. Indeed his monumental bronze equestrian statue by François Girardon (1692-99), once located in what is today Place Vendôme in Paris, is modelled after the Marcus Aurelius on Horseback in the Capitoline, and depicts Louis as a Roman emperor wearing a voluminous contemporary curly wig. Similarly, the marble Louis XIV by Jean Warin in the Salon de Vénus at Versailles (1671-72) presents the monarch dressed like an ancient warrior, complete with helmet shaped like a lion and shield bearing the head of Medusa.

An early sign of Louis' adoption of a visual narrative based on antiquity was his choice, at the start of his reign, of the Sun as his emblem. A direct reference to Apollo, the powerful deity who rides the chariot of the Sun and presides over the arts, this decision clearly expressed how the young King wished to be perceived by his court and his subjects. The Palace of Versailles is thus replete with representations and allegorical allusions to Apollo and the Sun, often combined with royal portraits and emblems. One such example is the marble bust of Louis XIV by Jean Warin (1666, fig. 2), in which the monarch is represented wearing a breast plate emblazoned with an anthropomorphic sun, not dissimilar to the one featured on the present bust of Apollo.

The fact that our bust, contrary to the Apollo Belvedere, sports a cuirass and that the latter is decorated with a Sun, which shows an iconographic insistence on the god's identification with the star, suggests our marble was connected to Louis XIV's court, a hypothesis corroborated by stylistic evidence, such as the surface's high level of finish and the sternly classicising, regular lines of the figure's face, which contrast with the more flamboyant nature of the drapery. Comparable examples from the period of Louis' reign, at Versailles, include sculptures by Jean-Baptiste Tuby (1635-1700), Jean Raon (1630-1707) and Jean Cornu (1650-1710), all of whom executed statues representing ancient gods, combining a classical aesthetic with the lesson of the Italian baroque.

## **Literature:**

### Related Literature

F. Souchal, *French Sculptors of the 17th and 18th centuries*, 4 volumes, London, 1981

F. Haskell and N. Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500 – 1900*, Yale, 1981, pp. 148-151