

TOMASSO BROTHERS

FINE ART



Massimiliano Soldani-Benzi (1656 - 1740)

Charity, circa 1695

Bronze

47 (18 1/4 inches) high

The creation of this masterful bronze involves two of the most important sculptors working in the Italian Baroque style, Alessandro Algardi (1598 - 1654) and Massimiliano-Soldani Benzi (1656 - 1740). It was the Roman sculptor Algardi who first conceived this model of Charity and the Florentine Soldani who later cast it in bronze. This is confirmed in correspondence between Soldani and Johann Adam Andreas, Prince of Liechtenstein (1657 - 1712). The extensive and fascinating exchanges between this artist and patron are held in the princely archive and were published by Klaus Lankheit in 1962. Although it is clear from these letters that the Prince greatly desired copies after antique sculptures for his new palaces, what concerns us here is Soldani's offer to supply him with bronze versions of famous masterworks of the seventeenth century, which had already achieved the status of classics. For example, in a letter dated 23rd March 1694/5, Soldani proposes to cast a version of Algardi's Charity for the Prince:

si trova qui una figura dell'Algardi che rappresenta una Carita, con i tre Putti, che uno e al Petto, e

gl'altri due a i piedi, adattati con bella maniera, e questa figura e tutto rilievo e alta due palmi e mezzo

Here is a figure by Algardi representing Charity, with three putti, one at her chest, the other two at her feet, adapted in a beautiful manner, and this figure is all relief and is two and a half palmi high (Lankheit 1962, doc. 637).

Soldani later corrects his statement of the work's height to "Cinque sestì del nostro braccio" (Five-sixths of our braccio; (Lankheit 1962, doc. 640) and offers the Prince a bronze cast for the sum of 80 Florentine piaster (Lankheit 1962, doc. 640). In Florence, a braccio would have measured 58 cm, five-sixths of which would be around 48 cm, the approximate height of the present bronze - which raises the possibility that this work could be the untraced bronze cast of 'Charity after Algardi, which was ordered by the Prince of Liechtenstein from Soldani on 30th July 1695 (Lankheit 1962, doc. 646). Soldani accepted the commission a month later, stating:

Non mancherò ancora di servire V.A. nel fare la carità dell'Algardi

I will not fail to serve Your Highness in making the charity of Algardi (Lankheit 1962, doc. 647)

However, we read no more of the commission, until mysteriously, a year later, Soldani writes to the Prince, alerting him to a delay to the project:

In ordine alla figura della carità non si può concludere

With regards to the charity figure it cannot be finished (Lankheit 1962, doc. 652)

Since there is no further reference to the Charity in the published correspondence between the two parties, one is unsure whether the work was ever finished, or delivered by Soldani. However, the present bronze clearly displays visual evidence of Soldani's hand in its style, facture and method of production. The bronze is beautifully cast and has a finely worked surface, with an extremely high quality of finish, with evidence of punching around the hair and the garments of the central figure. The complex, translucent, golden patina reveals warm, red undertones, which is highly characteristic of Soldani's bronzes. The present work is the same size as the version apparently ordered by the Prince, which encourages us to believe that this is the bronze that Soldani undertook to make for him on 30 August.

Other versions of Algardi's Charity are included in a handful of museum collections around the world, including the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh (inv. no. 1867.44.1.); Museo Schifanoia, Ferrara (inv. no. C.G.F.8512); formerly the Franzoni collection, Genoa; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (inv. no. A4.1961); and the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight (inv. no. LL122.HH147). The present bronze also has a distinguished provenance, having been on loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, between 1976 and 2014 from the private collection of the esteemed art historian Professor Michael Jaffe CBE (1923 – 1997).

Although devised by Alessandro Algardi (1598 - 1654), this allegorical group portraying Charity accompanied by three clambering putti, one held in the crook of her arm and the other two at her feet, half enveloped in tumultuous swathes of flowing drapery, seems directly inspired by Renaissance representations of the Virgin and Child such as those by Jacopo Sansovino (1486 - 1570) and Girolamo Campagna (c.1549 - 1625). In terms of the composition's pyramidal structure and form, clear comparisons can be drawn with Sansovino's Virgin and Child in the Chiesetta of the Ducal Palace, Venice; Campagna's Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist and Two Cherubim in both the Getty's and the Alexis Gregory collections and also Campagna's Madonna Dolfin in San Salvador, Venice. Interestingly, one could also relate the iconographic and compositional origins of this work to certain medieval representations of the 'Madonna Lactans' (Fogleman, 2002, p. 121). Interestingly, one could also relate the iconographic and compositional origins of this work to certain medieval representations of the Virgo Lactans (Fogelman 2002, p. 121). One could perhaps even make the case that the model for Charity had deeper roots in such draped ancient figures as the Cesi Juno in Rome's Museo Capitolino, or the Venus of Capua in the Vatican's Museo Chiaramonti, or the Flora Farnese, now in Naples.

Born to an aristocratic cavalry captain from Tuscany, Soldani became the finest bronze caster in late 17th and early 18th century Europe and along with Giovanni Battista Foggini, is considered the most significant proponent of the Florentine late Baroque style in sculpture. He studied at the Medici Academy in Rome for four years under Pietro Travani, Ciro Ferri and Ercole Ferrata. He excelled in the field of medal and coin making and soon received commissions from Pope Innocent XI, Queen Christina of Sweden and several prominent members of the papal court. Whilst perfecting his art in Paris, Soldani refused overtures from Louis XIV at the behest of Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici and returned to Florence in 1682, becoming Director of the Grand-Ducal Mint. His workshop sometimes employed over ten assistants and was located in the heart of Florence, on the ground floor of the Galleria degli Uffizi. By the end of his career, his patrons had included the Medici Grand Dukes, Prince Johann Adam Andreas I of Liechtenstein, the Elector Palatine, the 1st Duke of Marlborough and many other prestigious foreign clients.

Literature:

Related literature

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