

TOMASSO BROTHERS

FINE ART



Lorenzo Bartolini (1777 - 1850)

'The Forbes of Pitsligo Vases', with Corresponding Plinths
Circa: circa 1815 - 1830

circa 1815 - 1830

Marble

51.5 x 77 cm (20 1/4 x 30 1/4 inches)

This pair of neo-classical marble vases appear to have an intriguing and singular history. One of them is copied faithfully from the Warwick Vase while the other appears to have been an invention of the sculptor himself. For this second vase the sculptor has devised a frieze of heads of Apollo and the Muses selected from familiar prototypes from Antiquity. The bold plastic modelling of these heads, the emphatic knurled rims of both vases, their writhed, entwined handles and squat fluted stems demonstrate the hand of a carver of particular competence and precision. They stand on tall rectangular marble pedestals designed and sculpted in the same workshop, their front face carved with crisp anthemions above wreaths of fruiting laurel and vine, both tied with fluttering banderoles.

The vases used to stand in the main hall of the Forbes' home, Fettercairn, Aberdeenshire, an antiquarian Scottish pile re-designed by William Burn (1789 - 1870). They were almost certainly bought by Sir William Forbes, 7th Baronet of Pitsligo (1773 - 1828) the Edinburgh banker, who towards the end

of his life amassed an extraordinary collection of old master paintings, drawings, and prints. These he acquired on the Grand Tour in Italy, some in 1827 and many bought expressly for him by James Irvine in Florence. Sir William wrote to Irvine in Florence 2 May 1827: 'I have found a wish to be possessed of some pictures, which is a thing I have hitherto studiously avoided and I now much regret.' He initially put up the some of £10,000 towards the collection but died tragically only days before much of this new collection had arrived in Scotland. This happened on 20 November 1828 and so sadly he never was to have the delight of even unpacking his 11 cases of furniture delivered from London to Leith docks in December 1828.

Recently it was suggested that the Forbes vases were carved in Rome by the likes of the workshop of Bartolommeo Cavaceppi (c.1716 - 1799) or even by his pupil Carlo Albacini (fl.1770 - 1807), but this cannot be substantiated and neither were they made rather later by Benedetto Boschetti in his distinctive studio in Via Condotti (active in and after 1820). The style indeed does not seem to be Roman but Florentine and points to a date c.1815 - 30. It was in Florence that Irvine was making purchases for Sir William. Another pair, from precisely the same studio, were in the collection of Lord de Saumarez. These vases faithfully copied the celebrated Medici and Borghese vases. The pedestals appear to have been of identical size and proportions with similar anthemion decoration to the Forbes vases but lacking the garlanded wreaths. They were sold in the current Lord de Saumarez Sale, Shrubland Park, Suffolk, Sotheby's, 19-21 September 2006.

Another two-handled vase but of alabaster exquisitely carved with a bas-relief of Orestes and the Furies and Electra in Mourning signed: BARTOLINI FECIT is in a private collection in Buckinghamshire. It is nice squat that the other four vases. Both vase and pedestal are clearly from the same workshop and the vase in the neo-classical taste is highly original and the idea of Bartolini himself. Corresponding drawings for both the composition and the vase shape are in the Museo Civico, Prato. The vase is unrecorded in Bartolini literature but was with P&D Colnaghi, London in 1983.

A pair of chimneypieces from the same studio are in the drawing room of Tynninghame House, Dunbar, East Lothian purchased by the Countess of Haddington, incidentally also in a Scottish house redesigned, like Fettercairn, by William Burn. These have, in the styles, flambeaux, their sticks ornamented with a rich variety of exotic antique foliage issuing from trapezoid pedestals decorated with rams' hooves and masks. The chimneypiece lintel is decorated by a central anthemion flanked by stylised scrolling acanthus. An identical chimneypiece was with N. Gifford-Mead, sold Christie's, London, 29 October 2009, (lot 104, with my suggestion of the workshop of Bartolini) and another, rose festooned, flanked with terms fruit bedecked, supporting Ionic capitals, was sold, ex Mallett's, Ely House, London, Dreweatt's, 22 March 2016, (lot 124).

There is yet another of these chimneypieces with flambeaux in the styles, issuing from different pedestals, the frieze inhabited by scrolling foliage, the branches supported by putti, the putti walking away from a central anthemion, sold Christie's, London, Interiors, 13 March 2012, (lot 312).

All these vases, pedestals and chimneypieces seem to have issued from the same studio between c.1815 - 30 and stylistically combine the extraordinary elegance and delicacy of the Florentine Quattrocento tradition (Desiderio, Verrocchio, Rossellino) with the crisp cutting edge geometry of Attic Greece. That combination is also found in the sculptures of Lorenzo Bartolini (1777 - 1850) who in his lifetime was nicknamed the 'Tuscan Phidias'. The sculptor was trained in the workshops of Pietro & Giovanni Pisani and then of Giovanni Andrei of Carrara. Like Leopoldo Cicognara was an early, knowledgeable and enthusiastic admirer of 15th century Tuscan sculpture. His long artisan training in carving ornament reached its zenith in the virtuoso monument to the Polish, Sophia Zamoyska, Countess of Czartoryska in the Basilica of Sta. Croce, Florence (1837 - 44). Here there is a veritable masterclass demonstration of carving acanthus on the tomb chest, the bier and the elaborate anthemion at the apex of the composition.

The Bartolini's studio also produced elaborate column plinths, like that supporting the bust of Czar Alexander I of c.1816 - 17 which was sold, Sotheby's 12 June 2007, where the crisp cutting of the marble provides analogies to the pedestals of the Forbes vases.

We recall that Bartolini was not only a very close friend of the painter Ingres who painted two

magnificent portraits of him (Montauban & The Louvre) but Bartolini was a most loyal supporter of Napoleon. Indeed when the Emperor was exiled to Elba, Bartolini accompanied him to share in his fate. However, when Napoleon escaped, Bartolini returned to Florence opening a studio in Via della Scala. We hear official patronage was denied to him so he was forced to produce more commercial work: ornament, architecture, vases, tazze and chimneypieces. Judging from his drawings he also designed a table clock, a surtout de table (with the subject the Death of Niobe) and some hanging lamps. Much of this work that was not statuary, funerary monuments or portrait busts has been overlooked and is missing. We do however know that Napoleon commissioned from Bartolini a series of vases to decorate his house on Elba. A set of such vase designs by Bartolini are now at the Museo Civico, Prato along with many of the other Bartolini designs and certain of these may have been connected with Buonaparte's order. However it is equally possible that four of the five vases discussed above, that is the Forbes pair and the de Saumarez pair were originally intended for Buonaparte. We know that furnishings decorated with wreaths were rejected by the British Governor, Sir Hudson Lowe, when Buonaparte was imprisoned again.

Bartolini was much admired and patronised by British tourists to Florence. He designed for them three funerary monuments, some twenty portrait busts and ten or more statues including, for the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth, an even larger copy of the Medici Vase (1819) and a marble bath all'antica (1822).

If we examine a photograph taken after 1850 but before 1857 of Bartolini's studio, unaltered since his death (collection Fondo Fagnani Cardi Rimini) we see prominently in the centre a single pedestal which supports a bust (? Pope Pius IX). That pedestal is of identical form and proportion to those supporting the Forbes and de Saumarez vases, although apparently lacking in any relief ornament.

To sum up the pair of Forbes of Pitsligo vases were almost certainly carved in Bartolini's Florentine studio. They certainly form a recognisable group of marbles including other vases, pedestals, chimneypieces and funerary monuments. Many of these were bought by British patrons. The Forbes pair may have been intended to decorate Napoleon's house when he was exiled on the island of Elba, but were never delivered. They appear to date from in or after 1815 but before 1827, for in that latter year they were purchased through the agency of James Irvine in Florence for Sir William Forbes, 7th Baronet.

Sir Timothy Clifford

Former Director of the National Galleries of Scotland