

ANTONIO CANOVA IN THE VATICAN AND ROME

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

During the winter of 2019 at the Palazzo Braschi, just outside the Piazza Navona, the city of Rome hosted the temporary mega-exhibition “Canova. *Eterna Bellezza*.” Many of the 170 artifacts on display were sculptures by **Antonio Canova**. The intent was to show the sculptor’s deep attachment to Rome and to the city’s ancient art as the inspiration of his sculpture.

Presently on display until January 31, to mark the 100th anniversary of Canova’s death, is the exhibit “**Antonio Canova in the Vatican Museums.**” Made possible thanks to the generous support of the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums, specifically **Rick and Lisa Altig** of the Northwest Chapter, it’s not a typical temporary exhibition shown in chronological order or by theme in several connecting rooms, but rather a “Canova Itinerary” in four widespread areas of the Museums (the Hall of the Ladies, Hall XVII of the Pinacoteca, the Octagonal Court, and the Chiaramonti Museum), and is included in the Museums’ entrance fee.

The Museums’ director **Barbara Jatta** and the “exhibit’s” curator **Alessandra Rodolfo**, the Museums’ curator of the Department of 17th- and 18th-Century Art, intend the exhibition to be a tribute to this great artist, who also was a key figure in the cultural policy of the papacy.

Canova received commissions from Pius VI (r. 1775-99) and VII (r. 1800-23), who in 1801 bought from Canova



Detail of the boxer *Damoxenos*, commissioned in 1806

France as war booty. The mission was a success and in 1816, as a reward, Canova was appointed President of the prestigious Academy of St. Luke, inscribed into the “Golden Book of Roman Nobles” by the Pope’s own hand, and given the title Marquis of Ischia, alongside an annual pension of 3,000 crowns.

The first of the four sections of “Antonio Canova in the Vatican Museums” is in the Hall of the Ladies. On

display here are sketches and plaster casts of sculptures by Giuseppe De Fabris and Cincinnato Baruzzi, friends of the “new Phidias” or the “new Praxiteles,” as Canova was proclaimed, as well as Canova’s religious sculptures donated to the Museums by Cardinal Placido Zurla (1769-1834).

Perhaps even more important than the artworks is the fact that for this event the Hall of the Ladies has been open to the Museums’



Antonio Canova’s self-portrait, 1792

his *Triumphant Perseus*, the first contemporary work of art to enter the Vatican Collection.



Detail of the *Triumphant Perseus*, the first contemporary work of art to enter the Vatican Collection, in 1801



From left, funerary monument of Clement XIII in St. Peter's Basilica and, center, of Clement XIV in the Church of Santi Apostoli. Right, bust of Pius VII

visitors for the very first time. Commissioned by Pope Paul V (Camillo Borghese) between 1608 and 1609, Guido Reni decorated its vaulted ceiling with frescoes of the Pentecost, the Transfiguration and the Ascension.

In Room XVIII of the Pinacoteca, Canova's first studio (1783) between Via delle Colonnate and Via San Giacomo, today Via Antonio Canova, has been reconstructed. It was a must-visit for travelers on the Grand Tour, diplomats, aristocrats, intellectuals and artists who wanted to learn from Canova. On display here is Canova's bust of Pope Pius VII, his bust of sculptor Antonio D'Este, who worked with Canova, and a ceramic roundel portrait of Canova by Luigi Ontani, also a Canova collaborator.

Located in the Octagonal Courtyard and sculpted in 1800 and 1801 on his personal initiative, without a papal commission, is Canova's splendid statue of *Triumphant Perseus*, the hero of Greek mythology who beheaded the gorgon Medusa. Next to Perseus are Canova's two famous statues of the boxers Creugas and Damoxenos, inspired by the match narrated by Pausanias in his work "Hellados Periegesis" ("Description of Greece"). They are displayed just as Canova conceived them, facing each other.

No works by Canova are on display in the Chiaramonti Gallery, which got its name from Pope Pius VII, who was born Barnaba Niccolò Maria Luigi Chiaramonti. Rather,

here Canova, with the help of his trusted collaborator **Antonio D'Este**, set up and organized the display of over 1100 ancient Roman artifacts, many of which, as I mentioned before, Canova had recovered and brought back to Rome after Napoleon was deposed in 1815. This section emphasizes Canova's attachment to Rome and ancient Roman art.

Canova's aim was for ancient art to be born again in his contemporary sculptures and to model contemporary artworks through a filter of the ancient. Thus, he can be considered the last of the ancient and the first of the modern sculptors.

Canova's only work in Vatican City not in the Museums is the tomb of Pope Clement XIII (r.1758-69) in St. Peter's Basilica. Ignoring fatigue and the criticism of his belittlers, Canova took four long years to complete this work, which was inaugurated on the eve of Holy Thursday in 1792 in the presence of Pope Pius VI.

Canova disguised himself as a mendicant friar to better overhear the comments of the onlookers, so he could discover the consensus on his work.

Elsewhere in Rome, between 1783 and 1785 he arranged, composed and designed the funerary monument dedicated to Clement XIV (r. 1769-74) in the Church of *Santi Apostoli*, which at the time was acclaimed "a new example of Classical perfection."○

A glimpse of the Hall of the Ladies in the Vatican Museums, open to the public for the first time

