

“Man’s first mother stands facing the observer, clutching in her left hand a branch of the fateful tree around which the serpent is coiled and proffering the forbidden fruit to Adam with her right. Her face is beautiful, her head inclines sweetly to one side, her lust-filled eyes look longingly at Adam and her lips, a smile playing on them, urge him to sin again. Adam, with manly features and robust limbs, is seated in profile on a stone, looking at her with affection as he raises his hand to receive the fruit.”

(L. Venturi, 1985)





Ettore Spalletti
GIOVANNI DUPRÈ
**THE TEMPTATION
OF ADAM**

FRONT COVER AND PREVIOUS PAGES

Giovanni Duprè (Siena, 1817 - Florence, 1882)

The Temptation of Adam

Marble relief, 94 x 70 cm

Signed and dated on the bottom left-hand side: **G. Duprè 1853**

Signed on the front, bottom left: **G. Duprè**

PROVENANCE: Mario Bianchi Bandinelli, Villa "Il Pavone", Siena; Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli (archaeologist), Siena; Alessandro Santucci, Milan (1950); Luigi Santucci (writer), Milan; Santucci heirs, Milan.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Giovanni Duprè, *Pensieri sull'arte e ricordi autobiografici*, Florence 1879 (ed. cons., Florence 1882), p. 200; *A Giovanni Duprè. Siena nel centenario della sua nascita*, Siena, Samperia Lazzeri 1917, p. 42, plate IX; Amalia Duprè, "Un fiore sulla tomba paterna" in Giovanni Rosadi, ed., *Giovanni Duprè scultore 1817-1882*, Milan 1917, p. 44; Ettore Spalletti, *Il secondo Ottocento*, in Carlo Sisi, Ettore Spalletti, *La cultura artistica a Siena nell'Ottocento*, Milan 1994, pp. 320-324, fig. 13; Ettore Spalletti, *Giovanni Duprè*, Milan 2002, pp. 41-42, figs. 42, 43.

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GIOVANNI
DUPRÈ

**THE TEMPTATION
OF ADAM**

RIGHT Giovanni Duprè,
The Temptation of Adam,
detail.

1. G. Duprè, *Dying Abel*,
marble. St. Petersburg,
The State
Hermitage Museum
(photo The State
Hermitage Museum).

In the wake of the triumphant reception afforded his celebrated *Dying Abel* (Fig. 1) when he showed a plaster version of it at the Accademia Fiorentina's exhibition of 1842, where the statue aroused a great deal of enthusiasm but the warmly natural character of its nakedness caused something of an uproar, Giovanni Duprè continued to produce a series of works (for instance his *Cain*, or the statue of *Giotto* that he carved for the Uffizi Loggia) which, while they accounted for the young sculptor's rapid rise to fame, also drew frequent criticism for their excessive naturalism and lack of formal control. He was to recall those years in his autobiography several decades later:



“My workshop, [...] was the haunt of many literati at the time [...]. All of these gentlemen, discussing and debating their theories on art with me, caused a certain amount of confusion to cloud my judgment.”





1 G. Duprè, *Pensieri sull'arte e ricordi autobiografici*, Florence 1879 (ed. cons. 1882), pp. 140-141.

My workshop, [...] was the haunt of many literati at the time [...]. All of these gentlemen, discussing and debating their theories on art with me, caused a certain amount of confusion to cloud my judgment. [...] Yes sir, my little head started to become muddled, to view nature, its flaws and its vulgarity with suspicion¹.

This criticism clearly triggered doubts in the mind of the young sculptor, who must have felt confused and incompetent in the face of the erudite discussions of literati and critics on the proper way to imitate nature, on Natural Beauty and on the study of the ancients and the sculptors of the 15th century. Duprè was thus prompted to reflect on precisely those themes which, up until that moment (the mid-1840s), had been totally absent from his simple, spontaneous approach to art. And those reflections were to be further fuelled some years later, in 1850, when he was commissioned by Lorenzo Bartolini's widow to complete two statues that her husband had left unfinished, the *Nymph with a Scorpion* (Fig. 2) for the Czar of Russia and the *Serpent Nymph* for the Marchese Ala Ponzoni of Milan. This hands-on encounter with two unfinished masterpieces by the recognised master of "Natural Beauty" were to propel him even further and more firmly towards the search for a more contrived formality expressing a less direct and tranquil beauty, towards the search for forms whose surfaces and anatomy he was to handle with almost sterile purity. In

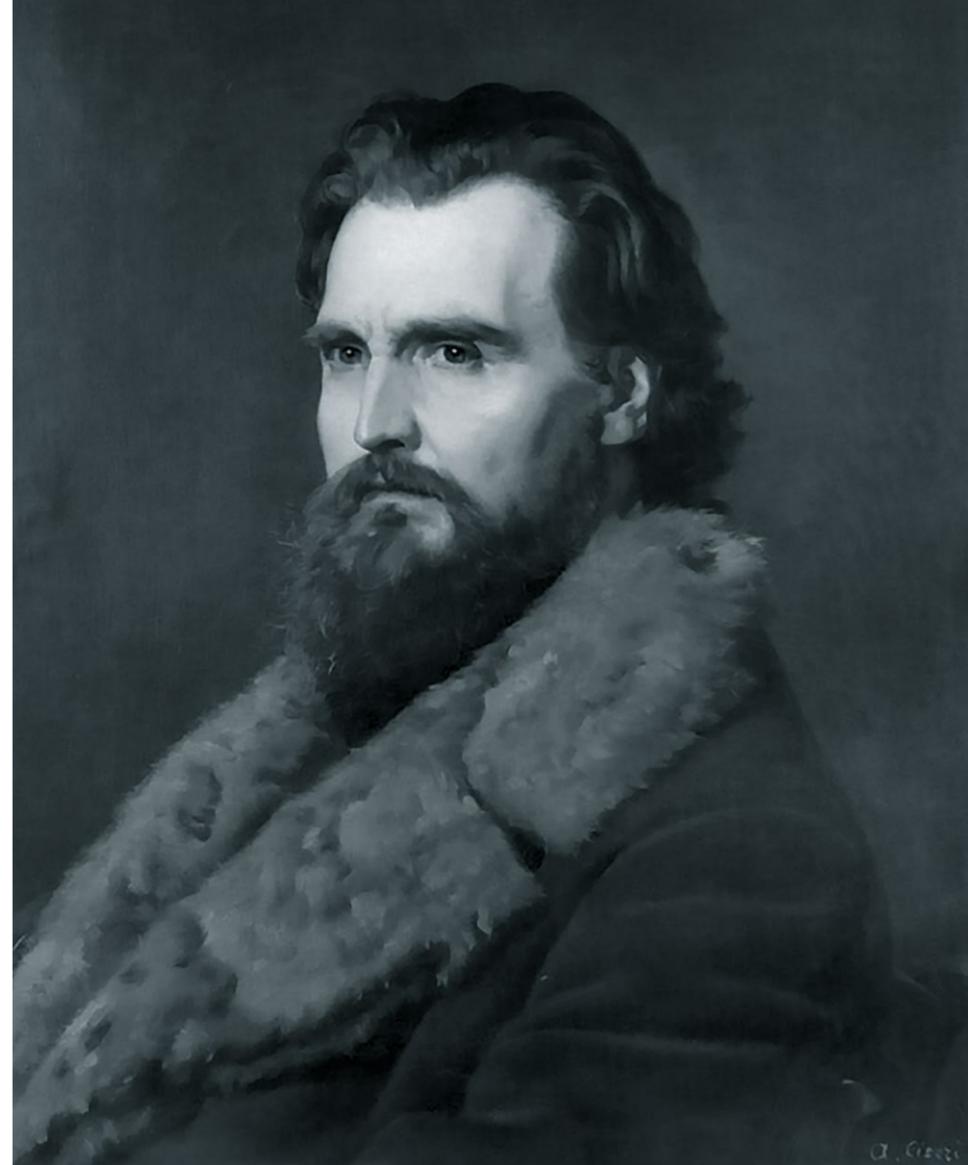
2. L. Bartolini and G. Duprè, *Nymph with a Scorpion*, marble. St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum (photo The State Hermitage Museum).

short, these reflections prompted him to fall back on a stylised purism which led him astray, far from the direct, forthright style of his early years. Thus his output at this point in his career consisted in sculptures which, while unquestionably attractive, are also more conventional in that they are a product of numerous freely confessed doubts and inconsistencies, suggesting an almost frantic attempt on his part to join a traditionalist artistic trend now broadly outdated yet which he must have perceived to be a more ennobling intellectual point of arrival for his art.

Exemplary in that sense are two sculptures commissioned by the Grand Duchess Maria of Russia, the *Fisherman* and *Innocence*, and, to an even greater extent, the *Monument to Pius II* which he carved for Siena (Fig. 3). This latter work admirably highlights his search for abstraction in a Purist, neo-15th century vein, possibly even



3. G. Duprè, *Monument to Pius II*, marble. Siena, Church of Sant'Agostino.



LEFT Giovanni Duprè,
The Temptation of Adam,
detail.

Antonio Ciseri
(1821-1891),
Portrait of Giovanni Duprè,
oil on canvas. Florence,
Galleria d'Arte Moderna,
Palazzo Pitti.

more austere than Bartolini's own lofty style of Purism on account of the almost naive poise with which his figures play out their role and, above all, on account of the accentuated stylisation of his carved surfaces. Duprè was clearly aware of this, and indeed in his autobiography he described the work thus:

After Giotto I turned my hand to Pius II, and with my head ringing with the criticism of the Academics, with the praise of the Naturalists and with the contempt of some who disliked the subject matter [...] I grudgingly set to work and endeavoured (oddly, for me) to win the Academics' approval, copying nature with timid diffidence where I should have been bold and faithful: bold in honestly portraying the pope's crumpled cope and faithful in portraying the pope himself. The upshot was a wishy-washy result which pleased neither the Academics nor the Naturalists, and which pleased me even less².

² G. Duprè, *Pensieri sull'arte*, cit., p. 147.

In connection with his output at this time, and in particular with his *Pius II*, it is worth pointing to the highly likely influence of Pietro Tenerani, an artist whom

he had met (and admired as a great master) while wintering in Rome in 1844–5. Tenerani's work reflected a very different kind of Purism from the analogical variant espoused by Bartolini, a Purism austere of form and close to the ideas of the Nazarenes. In fact Tenerani even joined Friedrich Overbeck and Tommaso Minardi in signing Antonio Bianchini's famous "Manifesto of Purism" which voiced the hope that modern art would soon return to the much-cherished stylistic severity of the Italian Quattrocento.

The relief with the *Temptation of Adam*, carved between 1851 and 1853, was commissioned by Mario Bianchi, not by the Governor of Siena Giulio Bianchi as Duprè mistakenly reports in his autobiography³ on the sole occasion in which he mentions the work. Mario, however, was an equally influential member of Sieneese society and wished to own a work by his fellow countryman Giovanni Duprè to grace his suburban villa called "Il Pavone", designed and built for him by Agostino Fantastici between 1825 and 1828. We read in Duprè's autobiography that a few years earlier, "with the intention of portraying the first family", thus without being commissioned to do so, he had in fact prepared a model of Adam and Eve⁴ which Luigi Venturi was later to describe thus:

joined in a group and girt with fig leaves, they feel the burden of their remorse, almost trying to hide for shame over the sin that they have committed. And [Duprè] subsequently devised another model, more vigorous in style and in form, in which Adam and Eve, seated, make as if to rise yet remain bowed in terror at the voice of the Eternal Father⁵.

⁵ *Scritti minori e lettere di Giovanni Duprè con un'appendice ai suoi "Ricordi autobiografici" per Luigi Venturi*, Florence 1885, p. 24.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 175.



4. G. Duprè, *Adam and Eve after their Sin*, plaster bozzetto. Fiesole, Villa Duprè.

"...I must confess to you that I can no longer countenance this arrangement (though it pains me to say so), and given that the first design, the Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, as we agreed, did not lend itself to a fine, broad composition, I would propose the other, namely the Apple, for the same sum of two hundred monete"

I am not familiar with the first model that Venturi mentions, but I think that the second can safely be identified as one of those now in the Villa Duprè in Fiesole which he made in late 1850 or in the early months of 1851, showing Adam and Eve in the round in the pose described by Venturi, displaying their terror and shame at the sin they have committed – a sin alluded to by the serpent beneath Adam's left arm – and at the thought of the divine punishment awaiting them (Fig. 4). The concept was discarded, however, and Duprè very soon turned to the idea of making a bas-relief, initially toying with the *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden* (although he may never even have produced a model for this) and eventually plumping for the *Temptation of Adam*, as we read in a letter which Duprè addressed to his patron on 4 June 1851 (now in the Bianchi Bandinelli archives in Geggiano, on the outskirts of Siena):

Most esteemed Mr. Mario [...]. Regarding the reminder for the bas-relief that you so kindly commissioned from me through the most excellent Milanese [Carlo], I feel it is incumbent upon me to remind you of the conversation which we had and in the course of which we omitted to agree on an estimated price because you had the kindness to tell me to complete the work and that only then would we come to an agreement, nor

FOLLOWING PAGES
Giovanni Duprè,
The Temptation of Adam,
detail.