



LONGARI arte MILANO

Early Italian and European Works of Art



ALFREDO BELLANDI

ALEXANDER THE GREAT
A MASTERPIECE BY DOMENICO PACI



DOMENICO PACI
(Ascoli Piceno 1785 - 1863)
Alexander the Great, 1819

Inscription:
"Alesandro Mag.
Conte Antonio Mora
fece costruire nel 1819
Domenico Paci Fece Ascoli"

Terracotta bust
132 x 67.5 x 42 cm
Private collection

THE SCULPTOR FROM ASCOLI REFLECTED THE ART OF CANOVA IN THE MARCHE REGION

In solemn idealised style, this spectacular portrait represents the Macedonian leader Alexander the Great, who died at the height of his glory when he was just a little more than thirty years old. The slight upward turn of the face gives him decisiveness and firmness of purpose, in tune with the greatness of the deeds that have bestowed such status on the figure from antiquity right up until our own era. The sculpture was modelled at the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century by the sculptor Domenico Paci, as can be seen by the inscription that was made in the fresh clay ("*Alessandro Mag. Conte Antonio Mora fece costruire nel 1819 Domenico Paci Fece Ascoli*"). As studies of eighteenth century Italy have shown, Domenico Paci was a significant figure in a famous family of Ascoli potters and sculptors. The bust, presented here for the first time, was commissioned by Count Antonio Mora and represented a significant stage in the development of the artist's work, in harmony with the neoclassical influences he had absorbed during his stay in Rome.

The proud, intense and piercing gaze towards the horizon illustrates the subject's strong will and defiance of destiny. Alexander's traits are accentuated by the broad orbital arch that frames the eyes, which are themselves framed by arched eyelids, with a well-defined nose and sharply outlined lips. Alexander wears an elegant military robe well suited to his role as leader of men. He wears a helmet with a rounded visor bordered by a laurel wreath, surmounted by a menacing long-tailed dragon. His helmet, from which his hair emerges, also protects the back of the head leaving the ears uncovered.

The Paci family, hailing originally from Porto Fermo, today's Porto San Giorgio, had since the second half of the eighteenth century been the most active manufacturers of majolica in Ascoli Piceno, continuing for three generations. Among the artists working at the factory was Domenico Paci (1785-1863), second son of the founder Giorgio. His artistic education came from Nicola Antonio Monti (Ascoli 1736-1795), Ascoli's most important painter of the eighteenth century, and Agostino Cappelli (1751-1831), who led him to take up sculpture in the late Baroque style of Lazzaro Giosafatti (Ascoli 1694-1781).

Following a period of study in Perugia with the sculptor Francesco Bodi and a number of trips to Rome, Domenico was won over by neoclassical precepts. This can be seen in the *Funerary stele of Giampietro Siliquini* carved in 1822 for the Capuchin church of Ascoli. The terracotta bozzetto for the work in the collections of the Pinacoteca civica of Ascoli (Fig. 1) shows it to be derived from the *Stele of Giovanni Volpato* (Fig. 2) by Antonio Canova in the Roman basilica of Santi Apostoli. Our bust, preceding by three years the Siliquini Stele, thus represents an important stage in the artistic development of the sculptor, being an expression of his adherence at that time to the neoclassical aesthetic precepts of balance and elegance.

The young Alexander is modelled here with the certain tone of a sculptor possessed of a robust and vigorous sensitivity, as seen in the thickness of the hair, the lance-shaped laurel leaves, and the rendering of details like the shoulder brooch. The shadow of the deep visor is cast upon the face, which is characterised by the contrast between the smoothness and softness of the large surfaces, symptomatic of the vision of purified forms typical of the neoclassical style, and the pictorialism of the lush hair with long wavy chiaroscuro locks delineated by vibrant knife strokes.

In developing this theme, the young man who came to Rome to learn about neoclassical art and who admired the sculptures of Canova, would certainly have been influenced by the archaeological collections in the city's museums, while also studying the paintings of Renaissance classicism, which were much appreciated by the neoclassical artists.

In Rome, privileged location for the study of antiquities, there is a bust of Alexander the Great in the likeness of Helios, the sun god, being a Roman copy of a Hellenistic original of 3rd-2nd century BC, kept in the Musei Capitolini. The work is notable for the refined clarity of the face and thick wavy hair, which are also present in ours here. A *Head of unconquered Alexander the Great* (Fig. 3) at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens includes, for its part, headgear with a lion's head. This reminds us of the helmet in this example of ours which comes alive, like an ancient bucranium transformed into a face, with menacing eyes carved with a knife, furrowed eyebrows, nostrils, and bulging cheekbones. The imagination and the skill that has gone into the creation of the helmet gives the work a spectacular aspect that is accentuated by the threatening dragon with eyelashes and eyes that mimic those on the headdress (Fig. 6). Its claws cling with difficulty to the smooth helmet while the figure of the beast recalls the dragon of St George in Raphael's painting in the Louvre (Fig. 5). During the Renaissance it was in fact Raphael who devised a series of paintings centred on *The Wedding of Alexander and Roxane*, executed in 1519 by Sodoma on the walls of the Farnesina Palace for the banker Agostino Chigi; and, as testimony to the strength of the Alexandrian myth, Perin del Vaga painted the *Histories of Alexander the Great* (1548) in the Sala Paolina in Castel Sant'Angelo. In this latter series a helmet with a lion's head similar to ours here is seen in a fresco depicting *Alexander the Great places Homer's works in safe keeping* (Fig. 4).

It is quite possible that Count Antonio Mora commissioned the artist to create the bust of Alexander the Great for his palace according to the antiquarian taste that was so popular in the neoclassical period. The favoured ornamentation of villas at that time, set off against the background of frescoed walls, took the form of archaeological objects such as busts of Roman emperors or, as in our case, famous figures from ancient history. Their particular energy reverberated in the private rooms of patrons and collectors and their aesthetic and ethical values amounted to a true celebration of antiquity.

Our classical and heroic bust of Alexander the Great is a very beautiful testament to Domenico Paci's adherence to the neoclassical canons that he developed during his studies of Greek and Roman antiquities, as also reinterpreted by Raphael, and, most of all, from the lesson of Canova.

Alfredo Bellandi



A close-up photograph of a stone inscription on the base of a bust. The inscription is carved in a serif font and reads: "ALESSANDRO MAG." in large, bold letters. Below this, in a smaller, more decorative script, it says "Conte Antonio Mora" and "Fecit Sculptore nel 1819." To the right, it says "Domenico Paci" and "Fecit Arco".



Reference bibliography:

- R. Gabrielli, *Una famiglia di artisti: i Paci*, Ascoli Piceno 1929.
- C. Frugoni, *Historia Alexandri elevati per griphos ad aerem: origine, iconografia e fortuna di un tema*, Roma 1973.
- S. Cuppini Sassi, *L'Ottocento e il Novecento*, in P. Zampetti, *Scultura nelle Marche dalle origini all'età contemporanea*, Firenze 1993, p. 459.
- *Alessandro Magno. Storia e mito*, Fondazione Memmo, 1995.
- S. Papetti, *L'arte della maiolica ad Ascoli Piceno. Dal Neoclassicismo al Déco*, Colledara 1998, p. 35.
- S. Papetti, in *Il Tempo del bello: Leopardi e il neoclassicismo tra le Marche e Roma*, catalogue for the exhibition by C. Costanzi - M. Massa - S. Papetti, (Recanati), Venezia 1998, pp. 156-157.
- S. Papetti, *Da Canova a Tenerani: aspetti della scultura marchigiana del primo Ottocento*, in *Quei monti azzurri*, Conference proceedings, Ancona 2000, by E. Carini - P. Magnarelli - S. Sconocchia, Venezia 2002, pp. 835-843.
- C. Paolinelli, *Regesto delle principali manifatture ceramiche italiane dell'Ottocento*, in "DecArt", 7, 2007, p. 84.
- S. Papetti, s.v. *Paci e Domenico Paci*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 80, Roma 2014.

Credits:

Fig.3 © 2015. DeAgostini Picture Library/Scala, Firenze

Fig.4 Under licence from Italian Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali

Fig.5 © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)/Jean-Gilles Berizzi

Fig.6 and all images of Alexander the Great © Ottaviano Caruso

Design by Francesco Vitali

Printed in Milan, September 2015 by MiStampa

© 2015 Longari arte Milano all rights reserved

6



Fig. 1 - Domenico Paci,
Bozzetto for the funerary
stele of Giampietro Siliquini, 1822,
Ascoli Piceno, Pinacoteca Civica.



Fig. 2 - Antonio Canova,
Stele of Giovanni Volpato, 1805,
Rome, Basilica dei Santi Apostoli.



Fig. 3 - Head of unconquered Alexander the Great, 4th century BC, Athens, National Archaeological Museum.



Fig. 4 - Perin del Vaga, Alexander the Great places Homer's works in safe keeping, 1548, Rome, Castel Sant'Angelo, Sala Paolina, detail.

7



Fig. 5 - Raphael, Saint George and the dragon, circa 1505, Paris, Louvre Museum, detail.



Fig. 6 - Domenico Paci, Alexander the Great, 1819, private collection, detail.

LONGARI arte MILANO

Via Bigli 12/15

20121 Milano

info@longariartemilano.com

www.longariartemilano.com

Tel. +39 02 8969 7848

