

Vincenzo GAJASSI

Italian sculptor and printmaker
(1811-1861)

Son of Antonio, he was born in Rome in 1811. Very early, therefore, is his debut as an engraver: in 1826-27 he made thirty tables to illustrate Alessandro Tassoni's *Secchia rapita*. Distributed in fascicles, as shown in the manifesto of association, the engravings show Gajassi emulo, if not directly a pupil, of Bartolomeo Pinelli, according to the most hasty and grotesque vein of *Meo Patacca* (1825). Gajassi was bound by close friendship with Pinelli, as evidenced by an acute essay on his work which he published shortly after the death of the Roman artist on the *Tiberine*. The contemporaries praised Gajassi as "worthy successor of Pinelli"; but, although there is in him the imitation of a certain joking spirit typical of Pinelli, the difference in style is enormous, which in Gajassi results from different influences, for example the protoromantic Luigi Sabatelli and the neoclassical John Flaxman.

Similar to Pinelli was, if anything, in the nonconformism of attitudes, if the news reported by Silvagni (1883-85) that he was the head of a band of artists, to whom young offshoots of the rich bourgeoisie and nobility were united, is true. devoted to mockery of all sorts: tie the carriages to the exit of the theaters, simulate fires, or dye the white horse of some elegant in black. Another strange trait of Gajassi reported by Silvagni concerns a tame snake that he kept at home and that would have made a confessor escape when, during an illness, the artist believed he was dying. On the bad health of Gajassi is found in letters of 1834 and 1839 of Giuseppe Gioachino Belli to Iacopo Ferretti, who were friends. Regarding the tame snake, it should be noted that Gajassi has included a representation of this animal in many of his sculptures, even when his presence does not seem to be necessary to the subject, as in the case of the *Monument to Palladio* in Vicenza (1859).

The anti-conformism of Gajassi appears reflected in his work, as shown by the illustrations of the poem *S. Benedetto* by Angelo Maria Ricci. The publication was interrupted in 1828, the first two songs, perhaps because Gajassi chose to insist on the horror and grotesque ideas of the argument. The success of these publishing companies, made in Rome, was not obvious: as early as 1826 Gajassi submitted a petition to the cardinal camerlengo to protect himself from the illicit publications of his *kidnapped Secchia* and an "Ossian del Cesarotti", which obviously did not follow.

Some posters of association, published by Gajassi on *Tiberino*, for "all the tragedies of Alfieri", or for the "Florentine Stories expressed in 50 prints", do not seem to have found underwriters.

Most fortunate was the publication of the *Roman Nights* by Alessandro Verri (Rome 1832), with a dedication to B. Thorvaldsen, a true imitation of Flaxman's periodic compositions. Of 1833 is the collective work *Scene of society or Pleasant collection of... illustrations taken from human customs*, printed in Rome at the Salviucci, in twenty-four plates, a timid attempt to social satire of contemporary Rome; of the artists who worked there, including Pinelli, Gajassi was the author of the greatest number of tables. In the same year Gajassi also began the series, continued until 1835, of the *History of modern Greece from 1803 to 1832*, illustrating some of the most cruel and bloody episodes of the liberation struggle by the Turks. Of the work, of which are preserved the plates and preparatory drawings in a private collection in Rome, only ten tables were published, probably for reasons of censorship. Perhaps for this reason Gajassi dedicated himself to illustrating an irreproachable text like *The Martyrs or The Triumph of the Christian Religion*, by F.-R. de Chateaubriand (1834-35), of which only thirty of the fifty plates were published.

After this, Gajassi did not illustrate more extensive works, dedicating himself above all to the activity of sculptor, of which, however, we do not know evidence before the mid-thirties. It is not even known where he has learned the art, although it is probable, also for reasons of style, his presence in the study of the Thorvaldsen. First and, at least initially, the exclusive commissioner of Gajassi sculptor was Prince Banker Alessandro Torlonia who, starting in 1833, began his campaign of

renovation and beautification of the palace in Piazza Venezia and of the villa on Via Nomentana, in addition to the construction from *scratch* of the family funeral chapel in S. Giovanni in Laterano. Gajassi participated in all three projects, but, dismantled and destroyed the building in 1901-02, disfigured by vandalism the villa in more recent years, many of his works have been lost or lost.

Probably the first work realized for the Torlonia, original union between sculpture and engraving, was the realization of forty slabs of marble that adorned the floor of the atrium of the palace, engraved and inlaid with lead so as to draw "here the various cherubs with tigers", with dogs, rivers, animals, and as many whims "; following the example of these, another series of slabs was commissioned to Gajassi by the Duchess of Sutherland. Outside the second courtyard of the Torlonia palace, there were eight medallions, it is not clear whether of stucco or marble, with as many allegorical figures greater than the truth, among which the *Magnificence of the princes* and the *Intelligence*.

Between 1835 and 1836 he executed the marble sculpture of one of the nine *Muses*, less than the truth, which together with an *Apollo* still adorn the niches of the hall of Alexander frescoed by F. Coghetti at Villa Torlonia. The *Melpomene* of Gajassi, posed as a Medea by tragedy, has more character and movement than the other sculptures of the room, performed mostly by young people of the study of P. Tenerani: one understands how in 1843, having to make four plaster statues for the inside the theater adjacent to the villa (*Shakespeare, Racine, Euripide* and *Rossini*, now destroyed), Gajassi received a double payment compared to all the other sculptors. In 1837 he had already executed the large terracotta tympanum that adorned the pediment of the *Temple of Saturn*, architectural bizarre that is found in the park of Villa Torlonia; the bas-relief depicts Saturn as the god of time surrounded by the four seasons, the personifications of Pleasure and of Studio and of Ozio and of Vigilance at opposite ends.

Around 1840 he modeled thirty-five bas-reliefs in stucco that adorned the vestibule of the villa of Marino Torlonia, brother of Alexander, near Porta Pia (completely destroyed by an attack in the post-war period). In 1841 he took care of setting up an ephemeral honorary column, built on the model of the Traiana, which had a statue of *Religion* on its top and paintings on the stem in fake bas-relief of the facts of the life of Gregory XVI; the general aspect of the singular monument, elevated on the square of Ponte Milvio for the return of the pope from his journey in the Comarca, is preserved in an engraving by Gajassi himself.

Of these years are also the many stucco medallions with mythological subjects (many traced by JB Hartmann in Roman collections and the Museum of Rome) that completed, in Palazzo Torlonia, the decoration of the Psyche room, frescoed by Coghetti, and of the Diana, painted by F. Podesti. Some similar reliefs and others prepared for the occasion make up the plastic decoration of the stages of the Teatro Nuovo di Spoleto, whose construction began in 1853.

In 1844 Gajassi signed the marble bust of *Benvenuto Cellini* donated to the Capitomothek of the Capitoline by Lady Eleanor Butler. Of a singular bust of *Andrea Doria*, taken from the portrait painted by Sebastiano del Piombo, commissioned in two copies by Prince Filippo, a copy is in the Doria-Pamphilj palace at the Collegio Romano, while the replica is kept in Campidoglio; of the same kind it would have been most likely the bust of Michelangelo that Gajassi offered to make free for the Fabbrica di S. Pietro in 1855, provided that it was placed in the chamber of access to the ball of the Vatican dome; but the offer was rejected.

Last work for the Torlonia was the marble statue of *Justice* (1847), more than 2 meters high, which is located in one of the niches of their chapel in S. Giovanni in Laterano. With a bizarre iconography, the remarkable sum of 1000 scudi was paid.

Michelangelo Lanci, orientalist and poet friend of Gajassi, in 1861 listed in verses numerous portraits in bust of contemporaries, especially virtuosi of music, song and dance, like that of the famous Cassandrino, namely the actor and marionette Filippo Teoli, as well as that of the Lanci

himself and the self-portrait of the artist (all works of unknown location). Among the other works of which there is no trace there are a bas-relief, depicting *Napoleon* "who in a dream sees the shadows of all those who died for him"; two versions of an *Eve* carved for an English gentleman and for Prince Galitzin; a natural all-round statue of the *Madonna of S. Sisto* by Raphael sculpted by Countess Alessandra Potocka (1853) and a colossal statue of *Socrates* executed for Leopold Kronenberg (1856), both sent to Warsaw.

Of 1846 is the *funeral monument of Caterina Maria Bryant*, married Borghese in that year and died shortly after the wedding, at nineteen, which is located in the Roman church of S. Isidoro: the whole and lying figure of the deceased, is a romantic medieval exercise; another funeral monument for the Marquis *Enrico Forcella* (1858) was performed for the Capuchin church in Palermo.

In 1848, before the flight of Pius IX from Rome, Gajassi, being part of the artistic circle, was chosen by Ciceruacchio as a member of the War committee, but does not seem to have been otherwise involved in the events of the Roman Republic.

His last and most important work was the aforementioned *Monument to Palladio* (1859), placed next to the Basilica of Vicenza, committed by Francesco Bressan and donated to the City Hall of the city.

Gajassi died in Rome on 20 October. 1861.

He left only one sister, Anna, widow Savetti. The artist had two studios, one in the plaza square of the Tribuna di S. Carlo, at number 3, and another at number 504 in via del Corso.

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