

Salvatore Revelli

Italian Sculptor (1816-1859)

He was born in Taggia (Western Ligurian Riviera, Kingdom of Sardinia since 1814) on 1 September 1816, the second of four brothers, to Giovanni Battista and Caterina Arrigo, both farmers. In his hometown he showed a precocious artistic talent and received a basic education thanks to the erudite canon Vincenzo Lotti, who in 1836 introduced him to Maurizio Littardi (1790-1858), a member of a family that animated an intellectual circle with progressive and liberal openings in Porto Maurizio.

The letters sent by Revelli to Littardi document a long and regular relationship, interrupted only by the death of the latter, and a process of artistic maturation that was initially slow, then otherwise rapid and intense starting from the mid-1840s.

Littardi immediately sent Revelli to Toulon to his brother Tommaso (1789-1871), a French tax administration official, an intellectual with broad views and acquaintances, an art collector and correspondent of the historian Carlo Botta. In Toulon the young man entered the carving school of the Maritime Arsenal and attended the workshop of François Rossi, a sculptor originally from Carrara. From September 1836 to July 1839 he was paid by the Arsenal, where he learned the practice of wood sculpture, well documented by the reliquary bust of *St. Benedict Revelli*, in neo-Baroque style (1838; Taggia, parish church), but he also worked in marble and terracotta; with the guidance of Rossi, he devoted himself to the Salasc Tomb in the cemetery of Toulon (1838).

In the summer of 1839, also encouraged by Salvatore's older brother, Giovanni Battista, a Capuchin friar with the name of Father Felice (1811-1880), Tommaso Littardi offered him the opportunity to continue his studies in Rome. The choice proved decisive for his maturation also because the alternative considered by Revelli and Littardi involved Paris, therefore the possibility of a completely different career, crossed by other romantic inspirations. With the intercession of the Secretary of State, Cardinal Luigi Lambruschini (who was among his first clients), Revelli entered the studio of Pietro Tenerani, but also began to study drawing with Tommaso Minardi. He opened an independent studio only in December 1844, but continued to work for Tenerani for several more years (in 1845 he helped him on a large-format statue, probably the *Simon Bolivar* for Bogotá): an indication of a long formative path, but also of his fidelity to a classicist cultural climate, nourished by a neo-Guelph political line, which he pursued with varying intensity throughout his career.

In 1840, with a copy of the *Belvedere Torso*, he won first prize in the annual competition of the Insigne e Pontificia Accademia Romana. In the meantime he had worked on several busts and small-format sculptures, especially for the Littardi family, and tried to curry favor with the Savoy court with an *Empress Madonna*, which was however rejected. However, in 1845 the Queen of Sardinia Maria Cristina, widow of Carlo Felice, commissioned a marble bas-relief of the *Deposition of Christ* for the church of San Massimo in Turin, a subject on which Revelli had been working on his own for at least a

year: completed in 1851, the work proclaimed a strong sensitivity for the purist interpretation of the religious theme and marked a turning point in his career. Revelli remained very attached to it, so much so that two plaster versions were donated by him to the Accademia Ligustica in Genoa when he was designated an academician of merit (1850), and in the same year to the Academy of Perugia, which appointed him professor in 1851; a third plaster is in the oratory of the Trinità in Taggia, where it arrived after the sculptor's death on the initiative of his brother Giuseppe (1819-1881). The solemn expressive temperature of the *Deposition* distinguishes other works executed in the fifth decade for the Littardis or through their mediation, such as the busts of the *Evangelists* (Imperia, cathedral of S. Maurizio).

In August 1846 he received his second major commission: the relief depicting *Columbus*, who in chains boards the ship that is to take him to Europe, intended for the monument to Christopher Columbus to be built in Genoa, which involved some of the most important Italian sculptors of the time, from Lorenzo Bartolini to Giuseppe Gagini. The gestation of *Columbus* was elaborate and tormented: only in January 1851 was the marble presented in Genoa, to strong acclaim, together with other works by Revelli. The artist's first public appearance on the Genoese horizon (where, although Ligurian by origin, he was always considered a Roman sculptor) however took place already in September 1846, when he participated in the exhibition organized for the eighth Congress of Italian Scientists, exhibiting a bronze *Cardinal Lambruschini*, a marble *Madonna* and some daguerreotypes of other sculptures. Revelli's appearance on the Genoese scene coincided with a moment of particular favor towards a noble classicism inspired by Lorenzo Bartolini. Thus at the end of the fifth decade Revelli worked on many portraits for Ligurian clients, among whom, in addition to the Littardis, the Pallavicinos stand out: Teresa Corsi Pallavicino, Maria Spinola Pallavicino; Tommaso Littardi, his wife Anna Corvetto.

He also devoted himself to mythological themes (*Young Bacchus with a Panther*, 1848; the plaster cast is preserved at the Accademia Ligustica in Genoa) and historical-allegorical ones, in line with the political climate of the time: in 1848 the Pallavicinis asked him for a statue depicting the Risorgimento of Italy, which was considered lost; the Brave Carlo Alberto in the act of freeing Lombardy from the talons of the double-headed eagle was praised by Vincenzo Gioberti (who visited his studio with Minardi and Tenerani in June 1848), but was destroyed in 1850 by the artist himself, disappointed by the sovereign's story. He had also offered Carlo Alberto the busts of the *Angel of the Annunciation* and the *Annunciation* (Turin, Palazzo Reale) in vain, which were purchased by the court in that very year. The cultural orientations of the monarchy now gave space to the delicate purism of Revelli, who was commissioned to make a life-size statue of Maria Adelaide, wife of Vittorio Emanuele II. Revelli, who arrived in Turin with the *Deposition*, modelled the bust of the queen from life in Moncalieri in February 1851 and finished the marble statue, with the sovereign in modern dress and seated on a neoclassical throne, in the summer of 1855 (Turin, Basilica of Superga; a version of the bust alone, from 1855, is in the royal castle of Racconigi; a second bust was ordered by Archduke Ranieri, brother of Maria Adelaide, in 1855). In 1856 Vittorio Emanuele awarded him the Knight's Cross of Saints Maurizio and Lazzaro.

Revelli's updated classicism was also appreciated in the Genoese environment, where the Duke Raffaele De Ferrari commissioned the *Oppressed Innocence* (1851, Genoa,

Palazzo Bianco; destroyed during the Second World War), with the half-naked young woman who took up the lesson of Tenerani and Bartolini; and the Marchesa Teresa Corsi Pallavicino two large and magnificent statues of *Helen* and *Paris* (1854) for the atrium of the Pallavicino Palace in Piazza Fontane Marose. In Genoa he participated in the exhibition of the Società promotrice di belle arti in March 1854, presenting the *Oppressed Innocence* and two busts.

The parallel cultivation of religious themes did not cease, which brought him fame not only artistically: a small *Madonna of the Sacred Heart* in plaster, colored like a wooden statue, and donated by him to the parish church of Taggia in 1851, was the protagonist of a supposed movement of glassy eyes in 1855, officially recognized as a miracle. The occasion was exploited politically to reaffirm the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, proclaimed by Pius IX on 8 December 1854: the *Madonna of Taggia* was crowned in 1856, and in parallel the mythology of an artist who precisely by virtue of his faith knew how to interpret the sacred theme with added value, so much so as to shape miraculous images, as the *Immaculate Conception* (1857) in plaster for the Capuchins of Loano would later be considered. His assiduous frequentation of sacred themes, or in any case those characterized by a strong moral rigorism, led him in some cases to assume attitudes of radical intransigence: in 1858, for example, he tore to pieces a *Birth of Venus* modeled in 1853, which no longer corresponded to his high ideals. The journey that in 1856 took Revelli to Turin, Toulon, Taggia, Porto Maurizio and Genoa was therefore a revisitation of his path and the verification of a success that reaped institutional and popular recognition.

In Rome, Revelli was directly involved in the construction of a rhetoric of images of dogma and, at the same time, of consensus around papal power. Not so much with the relief, now lost, of *Pius IX proclaiming the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary* (1855), although the pontiff himself had praised him during a visit to the studio where the artist was admitted to kiss the foot (13 August 1855); but above all with the colossal statue of the *Prophet Isaiah* (1855-57) for the column of the Immaculate Conception and with the no less grandiose *St. Paul* for St. Paul Outside the Walls (1855-58: left unfinished, it was completed by Ignazio Jacometti), where in 1855 Revelli had already received the commission for an *Angel holding a coat of arms* to be placed on the counter-facade. The same language, in a less monumental and perhaps happier declination, also inspired the notable funerary monuments, such as those for Adele Ravina Lomellini in the Staglieno cemetery in Genoa (1852-54), for Giuseppe Littardi, elder brother of Tommaso and Maurizio, for Cardinal Giacomo Luigi Brignole in S. Cecilia in Trastevere in Rome (*Jesus blesses the children*, 1855), and again that of the Marquises of Lugros in S. Maria di Montesanto in Rome (with the statues of the *Catholic Religion* and *Family Love* flanking the portrait busts of the two deceased, 1856-59); or works of liturgical decoration, such as the baptismal font of the parish church of Finalmarina (1853).

In his works of contemporary or historical-celebratory subjects of the 1850s, Revelli instead opened up to historicist and veristic positions that allowed us to glimpse the possibility of linguistic developments that had been interrupted by his early death: this was already the case in *Columbus in Chains*; but even more so in the monumental group of *Columbus and America*, commissioned by the Peruvian government on 20 July 1853, shipped in June 1857 and inaugurated in 1860 (Lima, Paseo Colón).

Highly praised by critics (especially by Federigo Alizeri), the grandiose marble initiated the long season of monumental statuary proposed by Genoese and Ligurian artists in Latin America, and at the same time provided a paradigm of moderate historicism, tempered by a subtle ideological vein: the hero was not a conqueror, but a civilizer who brought about the resurrection of the continent, represented in allegory by a beautiful half-naked young woman. The same slow tempo, with a more frankly realist feel, distinguished the full-length statue, in contemporary clothing, of the benefactor Giuseppe Pozzo (1858-59; Genoa, Albergo dei Poveri), marked by a non-idealized portrait vein that is also found in the plaster bust of the artist's first mentor, Canon Lotti (1858; Taggia, parish church).

Now well established on the international circuit, Revelli opened a new studio in June 1857 in via S. Basilio, and in November 1858 he became an academician of S. Luca, but poor health slowed his work. He did not marry and had no children.

He died in Rome, from the consequences of malaria fever, on 14 June 1859, and was buried in the church of Ss. Luca e Martina.

by Raffaella Catini

Translated from:

[Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani - Volume 87 \(2016\)](#)