

Information Sheet

Fine and Decorative Art Series No. 3

NEO-CLASSICAL SCULPTURE IN THE USHER GALLERY

Neo-Classicism

Neo-classical art may be understood as an intellectual reaction to the light-hearted flippancy of the early eighteenth century. Rococo artists had been eager to please their aristocratic patrons by producing works of art that induced pleasant sensations and feelings. A good example of this type of art is the delicate porcelain of the Meissen factory (well represented in the Usher Collection). Other examples might include the erotic pastoral paintings of Boucher and the ornate gilded decoration of many Bavarian churches which provided an ideal setting for the music of Mozart. The trend towards a more "moral" art was underway by the 1750's and by the 1770's, Neo-classical art was becoming firmly established in France, Italy, Germany and England.



*The Tribuna of the Uffizi by Johann Zoffany
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The "high priest" of Neo-classicism was the German writer Johann Winckelmann. A unique understanding of ancient Greek and Roman art combined with his knowledge of contemporary philosophy, formed the basis for a coherent Neo-classical artistic theory that could be applied to painting, sculpture and architecture. According to Winckelmann, artists should "dip their brushes in intellect" and strive to realise eternal truths, they should work for the public at large and not solely for private patrons. This meant that in terms of subject-matter they should avoid sensual mythologies and pretty shepherdesses, to concentrate their attention on stoic themes of heroism, abstinence and continence. Classical authors such as Plutarch provided many deeds of virtuous Roman citizens that could be exploited by Neo-classical artists. An "Ideal" standard of anatomical perfection could be realised by a process of selecting only the most perfect examples of human anatomy for representation. Occasionally observations of everyday incidents (such as we may see in John Gibson's "Hunter and his Dog") could furnish the context in which to breathe life into these "Ideal" figures transforming them into representations of pure physical energy. Although Neo-classical art is characterized by its seriousness of intent, it often has an inspirational quality that poses an exuberant challenge to the conventions of the established Christian religion.

The excavations at Pompeii in 1748 provided stimulus for the development of "archaeological classicism", but since excavations at Herculaneum ten years previously had not yielded any really worthwhile results, this enterprise itself must be seen as indicative of a new attitude towards antiquity. Rome, by virtue of the fact that it was the greatest surviving city of antiquity, became the "spiritual centre" of Neo-classical art. Artists such as Jacques-Louis David - who was later to become the Imperial myth-maker to Napoleon - and the sculptor Antonio Canova, came to Rome to study and exchange ideas. In Rome artists were able to examine the ancient monuments at first hand, for the only way an artist could become great, according to Winckelmann, was by imitating antiquity. Theorists laid great stress on "imitating" rather than "copying". Canova would not copy antique statues as he considered this to be beneath his dignity, but many lesser artists were forced by poverty to reproduce well-known classical pieces.

A visit to Italy was not only a mark of good breeding, it was also an essential part of the

education of a young, aristocratic man of the world. In Italy the Grand Tourists were instructed in the appreciation of architecture, statues and paintings; they commissioned portraits of themselves from Pompeo Batoni, collected paintings by Canaletto and etchings of Roman ruins by Piranesi. In Rome the artists' studios were haunted by minor German princes and English "Milords". These wealthy patrons bought antique marbles as well as copies and, in England, these would be exhibited alongside the contemporary works of the greatest British sculptors - men such as Banks, Wilton, Flaxman, Nollekens and Gibson. The Usher Collection includes major pieces by these latter two artists.

Neo-classicism became the "official" art of the Napoleonic regime. In the field of the Arts, Napoleon tended to favour architecture and sculpture rather than poetry or paintings. This may have been because he felt that no human endeavours in these areas could threaten his power in any way; poetry and painting could be inflammatory and therefore needed to be kept under strict censorial control. There are several pieces of French sculpture dating from the Napoleonic period in the Usher collection including a bust of the Emperor himself from the studio of Antoine-Denis Chaudet.

Joseph Nollekens and John Gibson

Nollekens was born in London in 1737 the son of a Flemish painter. In 1760, after obtaining an award from the Royal Academy, he left for Rome where he was to work for the next ten years. Shortly after returning to London he married, his wife bringing him a substantial fortune. In 1771 Nollekens was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy and in the following year, a full Academician. Nollekens was patronized by George III and his commissions were amply remunerated. His busts of Pitt and Fox were particularly well received, the former was reproduced by his workshop one hundred and fifty times, and the latter, one hundred times. After a stroke in 1819 Nollekens was left partially paralysed, severely curtailing his artistic output. Nollekens was well known amongst his fellow artists for his irascible temperament and when he died in 1823 he left his personal estate to his servants, studio assistants, and two friends.

Gibson belonged to a later generation of artists than Nollekens being born in 1791 at Gyffin in Wales, the son of a landscape-gardener. After an initial apprenticeship to a cabinet-maker and then a wood-carver, Gibson eventually achieved his ambition and had his articles transferred to the marble

sculptor Samuel Francis. Under the tutelage of the historian William Roscoe and using his library resources, Gibson studied anatomy and developed a passion for Greek sculpture. At the age of twenty-seven he travelled to Rome having already exhibited at the Royal Academy. By then he had also met the ageing Nollekens, who, according to Gibson himself, "highly approved of my going to Rome". There, he entered the studio of Antonio Canova who told him to "go frequently as you can to Thorvaldsen - he is a very great artist". So Gibson later entered the Roman studios of the great Danish sculptor. During his mature career Gibson was commissioned to produce works for the Grand Duke of Russia and the Duke of Devonshire amongst others. In 1833 he was elected an honorary Associate of the Royal Academy before receiving the titular distinction of full Membership in 1840. Despite the temptation offered by commissions from Queen Victoria, Gibson only rarely returned to England - and then only to supervise the erection of his statues. Gibson died in 1866 leaving several finished works, his work-in-progress and a personal fortune of some £32,000 to the Royal Academy.

CATALOGUE

Nollekens, Joseph 1737-1823

Pieces from the Earl of Yarborough's Collection, Brocklesby, Lincolnshire, presented to the Gallery in 1930.

1. *VENUS CHIDING CUPID* (UG137), plate 1. Marble, signed and dated in Greek, 1778. The pose and proportions of this Venus represent a variations of the famous "Medici Venus" now in the Uffizi in Florence.

(See Zoffany's "Tribuna of the Uffizi" UH131, cover). As this antique piece was badly restored with a stiff neck and arms, Nollekens has effectively recaptured some of her original grace. The softly-curved details (especially the tiny locks of Cupid's hair) simulate exactly "the look of the antique". Behind the Venus is a laurel stump which is rather unclassical in appearance; the lively carving of the laurel leaves is reminiscent of that of Bernini, the great seventeenth-century Baroque sculptor.

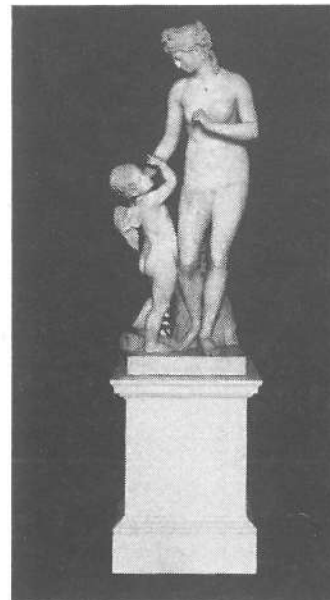


Plate 1 – *Venus Chiding Cupid* by Joseph Nollekens.

2. *MERCURY* (UG140), plate 2. Marble, executed in 1783. A Roman bronze figure of Mercury was discovered in excavations at Herculaneum near Pompeii in 1758. This piece which is now in the Museo Nazionale, Naples, impressed Winckelmann although he noted that it lacked the caduceus rod (the winged staff entwined with serpents) that it was intended to hold. Nollekens, familiar with the bronze, no doubt decided to sculpt a Mercury in which the rod did feature, but rather than place it in the corresponding left hand, he put it on the ground and has Mercury holding a money bag indicative of his role as God of Commerce. The cap, its wings tied with ribbon and set at a jaunty angle, is a typically eighteenth-century response to the more severe cap worn by the famous antique marble Mercury in the Uffizi.



Plate 2 – *Mercury* by Joseph Nollekens.

3. *HELMETED HEAD OF A YOUNG WARRIOR* (UG 286), Plate 3. Marble, signed by Nollekens. This head may represent the wounded Achilles or a young Trojan from Homer's "Iliad". The face is shown contorted with pain or emotion. At one time the head was thought to represent Apollo, but whilst there are certainly helmeted Apollos, they are never depicted with such extreme facial expressions.



Plate 3 — *Helmeted Head of Young Warrior* by Joseph Nollekens.

John Bacon, RA, 1740-1799

4. *MARS* (UG125), plate 4. Marble, unsigned, undated. The figure is based on the famous antique Hercules Farnese in the Museo Nazionale in Naples whose right arm retires similarly behind the right hip. The head however is based on an antique head of Ajax which once belonged to the Earl of Egremont. Bacon, a much admired sculptor was born in Southwark, showed his "Mars" at the Royal Academy in 1771. It failed to find a purchaser, so in 1778 he presented it to the Society of Arts and was awarded their Gold Medal. Benjamin West, the portraitist, exclaimed of the "mars" - "If this is his first essay, what will this man be when he arrives at maturity?". Bacon became a favourite sculptor of George III. The Usher Gallery's marble version of the "Mars" was supplied to Lord Yarborough in 1786.



Plate 4 — *Mars* by John Bacon

Gibson, John, 1790-1866

5. *NYMPH UNTYING HER SANDAL* (UG142), plate 5. Marble, executed in 1831. Signed "I GIBSON ME FECIT ROMA". Commissioned by the Earl of Yarborough. The right hand sandal is not incised with the delightful design on the left sandal. Water gurgles from beneath the rock on the left and envelopes the base of the water jar. This piece took six years to complete due to Gibson's other sculptural commitments. It was eventually exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1830. Nollekens had previously executed a lovely seated Venus, also dealing with her footwear, which was purchased by the second Marquis of Rockingham in the 1770's. It came to be known as the "Slipper Venus" and may well have been the inspiration for the Gibson Nymph.

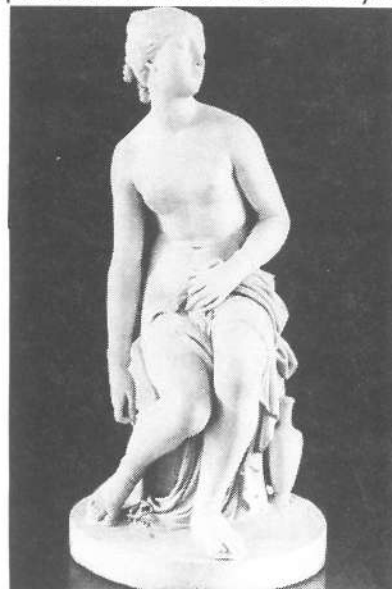


Plate 5 — *Nymph untying her sandal* by John Gibson

6. *VENUS KISSING CUPID* (UG 86), plate 6. Marble inscribed GIBSON FECIT ROMA. Reproduced in Parian Marble; commissioned by the Earl of Yarborough, 1831. The neck and profile of the Venus are reminiscent of some of Canova's female statues but the general pose and the erotic intensity of the lips may be delivered from Agnola Bronzino's "Allegory" in the National Gallery. The rose, so typical of the Victorian age, is also an old attribute of Venus present in Titan's great paintings. A single arrow representing "love accepted" is held up by Cupid. If two arrows had been featured in this piece, they would have corresponded to the ancient meanings of "acceptance" and "rejection".



Plate 6 — *Venus Kissing Cupid* by John Gibson

7. *THE HUNTER AND HIS DOG* (UG139), plate 7. Marble, signed "JOANNES GIBSON FACIEBAT ROMAE". Lady Eastlake, in her biography of John Gibson, says that there is "little doubt that "The Hunter" is the sculptor's best work in the round". This piece is a replica of a work exhibited in the Great Exhibition, made for the Earl of Yarborough. The idea for the subject was based on an incident that Gibson witnessed in the street: "My eye had been caught by a big boy holding a dog by the collar at the moment the animal was about to fly at an object". Gibson went home and made a clay model on which the finished marble was later to be based. Unlike Canova's smooth, highly-polished surfaces the texture of the marble is roughened giving it the appearance of an unearthed antique.

The "blank eyeball" is a classicizing element further suggesting the notion of antiquity. Such things were typical of the practice adopted by Bertel Thorvaldsen, in whose studio Gibson worked.



Plate 7 — *The Hunter and His Dog* by John Gibson

Antoine-Denis, Chaudet, 1763-1810

Chaudet was born in Paris and studied in Rome from 1781, becoming a member of the Institute in 1805. In 1810 he executed a statue of Napoleon as Caesar which was placed on top of the Vendome column in 1814. Other busts of Napoleon by Chaudet are in Museums in Etampes, Lille, Tours and Valenciennes.

8. *NAPOLEON* plate 8. Bust, marble, unsigned. Loaned by Mrs Tennyson D'Eyncourt. The bees carved on the lower sections of the ribbons binding the laurel crown have an interesting history. In 1653 the tomb of the Merovingian King Childeric I (one of the ancient priest-kings of France) was excavated. In this tomb were found three hundred solid gold bees - a sacred Merovingian symbol. Napoleon was crowned Emperor in 1804 and some of these bees were attached to his coronation robes. Thus Napoleon compared himself to these ancient rulers that legend endowed with mystical powers. The honeysuckle motif is typical of the Empire Style inspired by Napoleon.

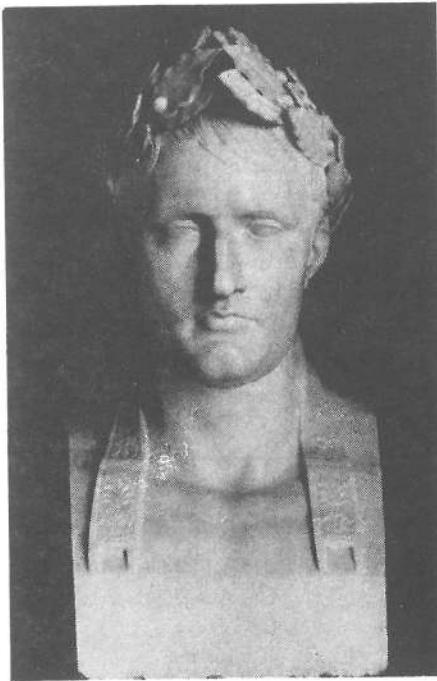


Plate 8 — Napoleon by Antoine-Denis Chaudet

9. **FRENCH 19th CENTURY PORTRAIT BUST** plate 9. Loaned by Mrs Tennyson-D'Eyncourt. A very high quality portrait bust, possibly by Joseph Chinard (1756-1813) a sculptor favoured by the Empress Josephine. The Greek inscription on the headband reads "PHAON". In Greek legend Phaon was the boatman who rowed Venus to Asia. As a reward she gave him an ointment which, when applied, made him into one of the most beautiful men of his age. Sappho, the great poetess, fell in love with him. Phaon scorned her and she threw herself into the sea. The lyre carved on the side of the bust is the attribute to Sappho.



Plate 9 — French 19th Century Portrait Bust

GENERAL READING

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Honour, H *Neo-Classicism* (London, 1979)

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FURTHER READING

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This catalogue of sculpture was compiled by Edward Mayor, Senior Lecturer in the Art History of Sheffield City Polytechnic, with valuable help from John Kitby and Kevin McSwiggan.



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