

Antonio Canova, (1757-1822)

'Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker' 1802-6

Christopher M. S. Johns, *Portrait Mythology: Antonio Canova's Portraits of the Bonapartes*

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Key Facts:

Size: 345cm

Materials: White marble. Gilded bronze

Patron: Napoleon Bonaparte

Location: Apsley House, London



1. Patronage

- Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker was the result of a portrait commission given to Canova by Napoleon in 1802, when the latter was still First Consul.
- The sculptor resisted French approaches, stating flatly that he could not cooperate with the man or the government that had destroyed the independence of the Republic of Venice and looted so many Italian masterpieces.
- Napoleon was equally resolved to have Canova execute his portrait as a symbol of cultural ambition to crown political and military achievement.
- Finally, at the urgent pleading of Cardinal Consalvi, the papal Secretary of State, and Pius VII, who did not want to antagonize Napoleon during the negotiations for the Concordat, Canova agreed to go, arriving at the chateau of Fontainebleau in October for a number of life sittings.
- The result was a bust portrait now existing in several versions, which was used as a model for the head of Napoleon as Mars. Bonaparte was pleased with the bust modello, which the sculptor completed before his return to Rome.

2. Subject, Form and Style²

- A full-length portrait of a powerful ruler, carved in marble and attached to a base; rendered with great carving skill and a smooth finish.
- Napoleon's features are idealised, carefully rendered and recognisable, but also portray his power as a statesman.
- Napoleon's body is clearly idealised, the musculature carved with anatomical accuracy with an implied movement that animates the whole portrait giving a sense of 'higher authority'.

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² AQA HART2 Mark Scheme, June 2014

- References to classical sculpture: his face similar to that of a Roman statesman or emperor, and inspired by Greek figure carvings and *The Spearbearer*, ancient copies of which existed in several Roman collections.
- His nudity is intended to make him look god-like, and elevate him to the status of the divine, directly referencing classical sculpture.
- The figure is supported in a way that shows the character of the individual: Napoleon raises his left arm and grasps a staff, giving the character authority and power.
- Canova's depiction of Napoleon is of the whole figure twisting to the right, his right arm outstretched, looking over his right shoulder, and his body in a slight contrapposto pose.
- The carving is smooth and finished and clearly designed for public display. Canova refers to the finish of marble typically found in classical sculpture.
- Canova's depiction expresses the Romantic cult of the individual.

3. Nudity

- The choice of Mars the Peacemaker was Canova's, but his decision must have been influenced by the recent peace treaties of Luneville in 1801 between France and Austria and of Amiens in 1802, the year of the commission, that briefly halted the war with Britain.
- As Canova was a peace-loving conservative who shared Pius VII's wish to prevent future wars, the choice of a pacifying Mars as a mythological referent to Napoleon was both logical and appropriate.
- While in France for the sittings, Canova discussed his conceit for the portrait statue and expressed his intention to present the modern Mars in the "heroic altogether." Napoleon's initial reaction to the proposed nudity was negative; he preferred to be represented in his regimental uniform.
- Contemporary dress for historical subjects in painting had been popularized in the previous generation by Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe*, but Canova dismissed this suggestion, arguing for the authority of the ancients in the use of nudity to immortalize superior achievement.
- In addition, the sculptor insisted that the sophistication of the concept and the self-conscious appeal to history that Napoleon himself desired could be achieved by the classic, universal quality that only nudity could express. In rejecting modern dress, the sculptor told Bonaparte that "God himself would not have been able to create a beautiful work of art if he had represented Your Majesty as you are, dressed in the French fashion."
- After a great deal of persuasion, Napoleon acquiesced to what he described as the artist's supreme understanding. Bonaparte lived to regret the decision.
- Although Italians had long been used to representations of rulers in mythological guise and to nudity in public sculpture, the French public was not so inured.
- The First Consul's initial squeamishness on the question of nudity may have been partly motivated by an appreciation of French inexperience of public sculpture in the buff, for he was certainly not lacking in personal vanity.
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- When Canova received the commission for the original Napoleon as Mars, it had not been determined where in Paris the statue would be erected, but the ancient sculpture gallery in the Musee Napoleon, where the spoils of Italy were on display, seemed a likely place.
- In addition to Canova's wish to have his work seen as a modern masterpiece among its ancient counterparts, might the artist not also have been subtly parodying Napoleon, making him a contemporary, uncomfortable presence among his subjects because of his nudity? Surely such a monument, with its pretensions to deified status and its connections to august artistic lineage, must have been recognized as a rejection, in cultural terms, of the achievements of the Revolution.

4. Critical Reception

- Long before the arrival of Napoleon as Mars in France, Canova correctly predicted a hostile reaction from the French critics: "The statue of the Emperor will one day come to Paris; it will be criticized without pity, and I know it: it will certainly have its defects, above all the others it will have the disgrace of being modern and by an Italian."
- Of all the French critics, the one who really mattered was Napoleon, and Canova must have felt the irony of the patron's rejection of a sculpture that the artist had been less than enthusiastic about making. On 12 April 1811, the emperor finally came to see the statue and decreed its immediate banishment to storage, specifically ordering that access be limited only to a handful of artists.
- Napoleon, when directly confronted by the image, must have realized that the changes that had taken place in his physical appearance during the last nine years would preclude display, thus avoiding public scrutiny and possible derision.
- A war-weary France was demanding a new image of its ruler as a statesman and benevolent father, rather than as a superhuman warrior.
- Hostile reactions in Paris notwithstanding, the mythological disguise and the emphatic nudity of Napoleon as Mars did achieve one of Canova's goals: critical reaction was almost entirely limited to aesthetic rather than to political issues

5. The Political Use of Mythology and Nudity

Canova recognized the vulnerability of works of art, especially politically compromised public sculpture, and took positive steps to neutralize, as far as possible, the politics of his Bonapartist portraits. Mythology was the camouflage.

- The French Revolution had formed an immediate and compelling precedent that systematically attacked politically unpopular art, especially portraits.
- The widespread destruction of royalist portrait sculpture and ecclesiastical imagery in all parts of France was a source of deep concern to Canova, and to many other artists.
- Based on his first-hand experience of the destruction of art in Italy and his knowledge of government-sponsored iconoclasm in Revolutionary France, it seems reasonable to assume that the sculptor would take precautionary steps when creating images of so controversial a regime as that of the Bonapartes.

- Quite possibly, this suggests the artist thought that portrait statues of the Imperial family might prove attractive targets for popular violence at some future date. Considering recent events in France, Italy, and elsewhere, this was not a particularly remarkable conclusion. Subsequent events proved Canova to have been prophetic.
- After its acquisition from France, the Napoleon as Mars was presented by the British government to the Duke of Wellington, the victor of Waterloo, and it is still a "captive" of the stair balusters in Apsley House.
- This prominent place for the statue of his arch enemy is often interpreted as a form of schadenfreude, but the opposite is true. Wellington had a tremendous respect for him. When asked whom he considered the greatest general of the age, he answered: 'In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon'.

6. Conclusions

- In sum, mythology successfully triumphed over the political possibilities and helped limit discourse to artistic qualities. In separating aesthetics from politics, Canova departed decisively from the traditions of patron-imposed iconographies and interpretations, allowing meaning to devolve onto the artist.
- Although the monument was not a success for either the artist or the patron, it stands as a milestone in the reformulation of the traditional relationship between the patron and the artist. In breaking with past practice, Antonio Canova made a vital contribution to the development of modern art.

7. Critical Text Extract from Johns, p.119

Portraits form a very small percentage of the sculptor's prodigious production, and mythologised portraits are a small minority even of these. Why, then, are his best-known Bonapartist portraits executed in mythological guise? Or might not "disguise" be a more accurate description?

The traditional response to this question has been that in making portraits with a mythological referent, Canova was attempting to elevate the work beyond portraiture to approach the more exalted excellencies of history. The desire to elevate portraiture in this manner is seen to advantage in the work of many of Canova's contemporaries, a good example being Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing To The Three Graces* is intentionally suggestive of mythology. [...] As the demand for portraits increased dramatically almost everywhere in Europe during the eighteenth century, and as portrait artists predictably rose in social status and professional visibility, it became increasingly difficult to reconcile academic belief in the relative inferiority of portraiture with the financial success and increasing public reputation enjoyed by its practitioners. This is what led to academic attempts to impose price ceilings on portraits, strictures designed to maintain the hegemony of history. Despite persisting prejudice, such artists as Rosalba Carriera, Pompeo Batoni, Jean-Marc Nattier, and Thomas Gainsborough, to mention only a few, rose to positions of prominence in the academic system; all were primarily, if not exclusively, portrait painters. Such career paths would have been all but impossible for portrait specialists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Portrait mythology, then, was not only a compromise with the hierarchy of the genres but was also an assertion of the inventive capacities and new-found confidence of portraitists. But to return to the main question: Was the elevation of portraiture a central tenet of Canova's agenda when he selected a mythological premise for his portrait statues of Napoleon and Pauline? There is much evidence to indicate that it was not. I believe that Canova's reasons were essentially political, a motivation that places him into a different context from the majority of artists working in the mythological portrait genre.