



Vatican Notes

The Journal of the Vatican Philatelic Society

The Only Society Devoted Exclusively to Vatican City and Roman States Philately

Volume 56, No. 4

www.vaticanphilately.org

January 2008

'Le Forme Belle' of Antonio Canova

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*In this beloved marble view,
Above the works and thoughts of man,
What Nature could, but would not, do,
Beauty and Canova can!¹*

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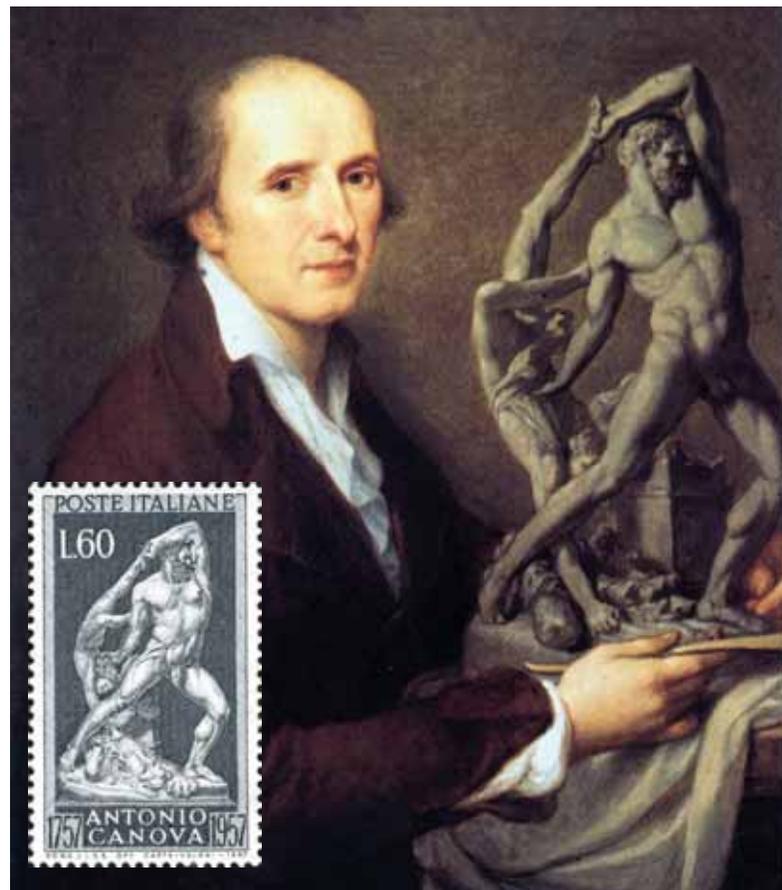


Fig. 1: A 1796 oil portrait of Antonio Canova (1757–1822) by Angelika Kauffman (1741–1807); the sculptor was about forty years old. He is shown with a small clay model of *Hercules and Lichas*. The finished work—which is nearly eleven feet high—may be seen on a £60 Italian stamp celebrating Canova's two hundredth birthday (Inset, Scott #723).

Author's note: Antonio Canova's 250th birth anniversary was noticeably absent from Vatican City's 2007 philatelic program, a lapse that became even more striking when Italy and San Marino released stamps for the occasion. (Carlo Goldoni merited two Vatican singles and a souvenir sheet even though his plays often attacked Catholicism and mocked the clergy.) When rumors of an unannounced Vatican stamp issue reached America in November, I hoped that it was for Canova; alas, it was not. The present article attempts to rectify what I believe was a serious omission by presenting a complete survey of Canova's sculpture on stamps.²

Early life and works

Antonio Canova was born on November 1, 1757 at Possagno in northern Italy. He trained with his grandfather, a moderately talented Baroque sculptor, until he was apprenticed to Giuseppe Torretto at age 13. He followed his master to Venice, where he won his first competitions and was hired to decorate the villas of the Venetian aristocracy. His breakout work, a portrayal of *Daedalus and Icarus* (1779), won him membership in the *Accademia di Belle Arti* and an invitation to study in Rome under the patronage of Girolamo Zulian, Venice's ambassador to the Pontifical State. Zulian promoted Canova's career and ordered from him the work that established his reputation in Rome, *Theseus and the Minotaur* (1783).

Theseus' success led to Canova's commission for the *Tomb of Pope Clement XIV* (1787). The Ganganelli pope had

quashed the Jesuit order under pressure from Bourbon princes of Europe, who considered them to be papal fifth columnists. The move polarized public opinion, and when Canova's monument was unveiled the pro- and anti-Jesuit factions eagerly scrutinized it for any hint of favoritism.

They could find none. The late pope is seated on his throne and gesturing indeterminately. Is he giving a benediction? Banishing the Jesuits from his sight? Fending off his many critics? His face is neither cruel nor angelic. The figures flanking his pedestal are withdrawn into deep contemplation, a marked difference from previous papal tombs in which the supporters are either grief-stricken or gaze at the pope beatifically. Conservatives and liberals alike approved of the monument, and even the vociferously anti-modern art critic Francesco Milizia was effusive in his praise:

What repose, what elegance, what disposition!... Canova is an ancient, I know not whether of Athens, or of Corinth...Even the [Jesuits] themselves cannot forbear praising and admiring this marble Ganganelli...During the twenty-six years I have passed here I have never witnessed any work so generally applauded.³

(Continued on page 6)



Fig. 2: The *Tomb of Clement XIV* in the Basilica of the Holy Apostles won over conservatives, liberals, and art critics. Inset, £10 Vatican City stamp (Scott #244) from the Antonio Canova series of 1958, which belatedly marked the artist's 200th birth anniversary.

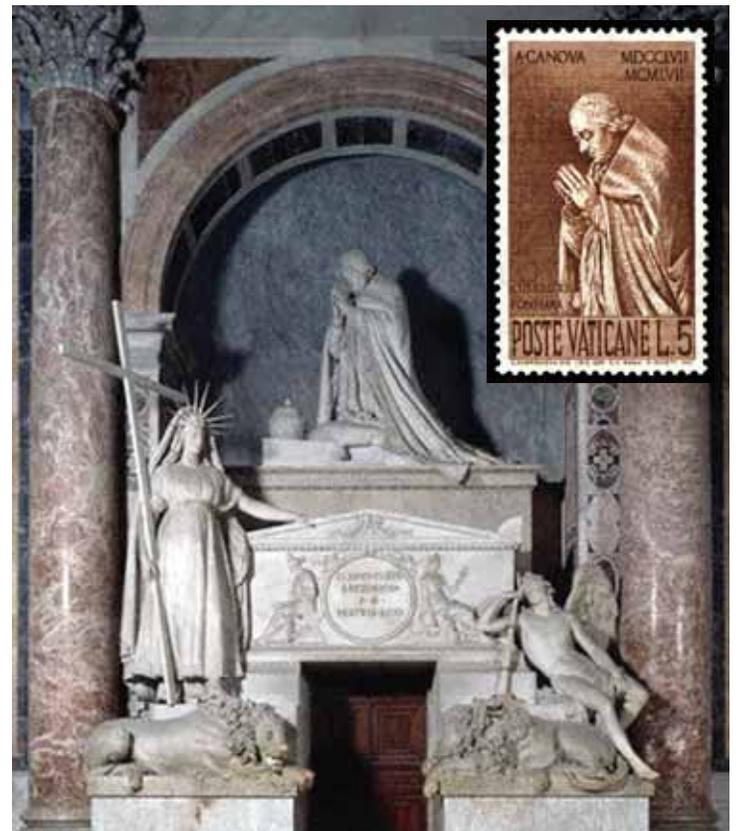


Fig. 3: The *Tomb of Clement XIII* in St. Peter's Basilica was a significant departure from the earlier baroque style in papal funerary monuments, but the nude figure at lower right irked some. Inset, £5 value (Scott #243) of Vatican City's 1958 Canova series.

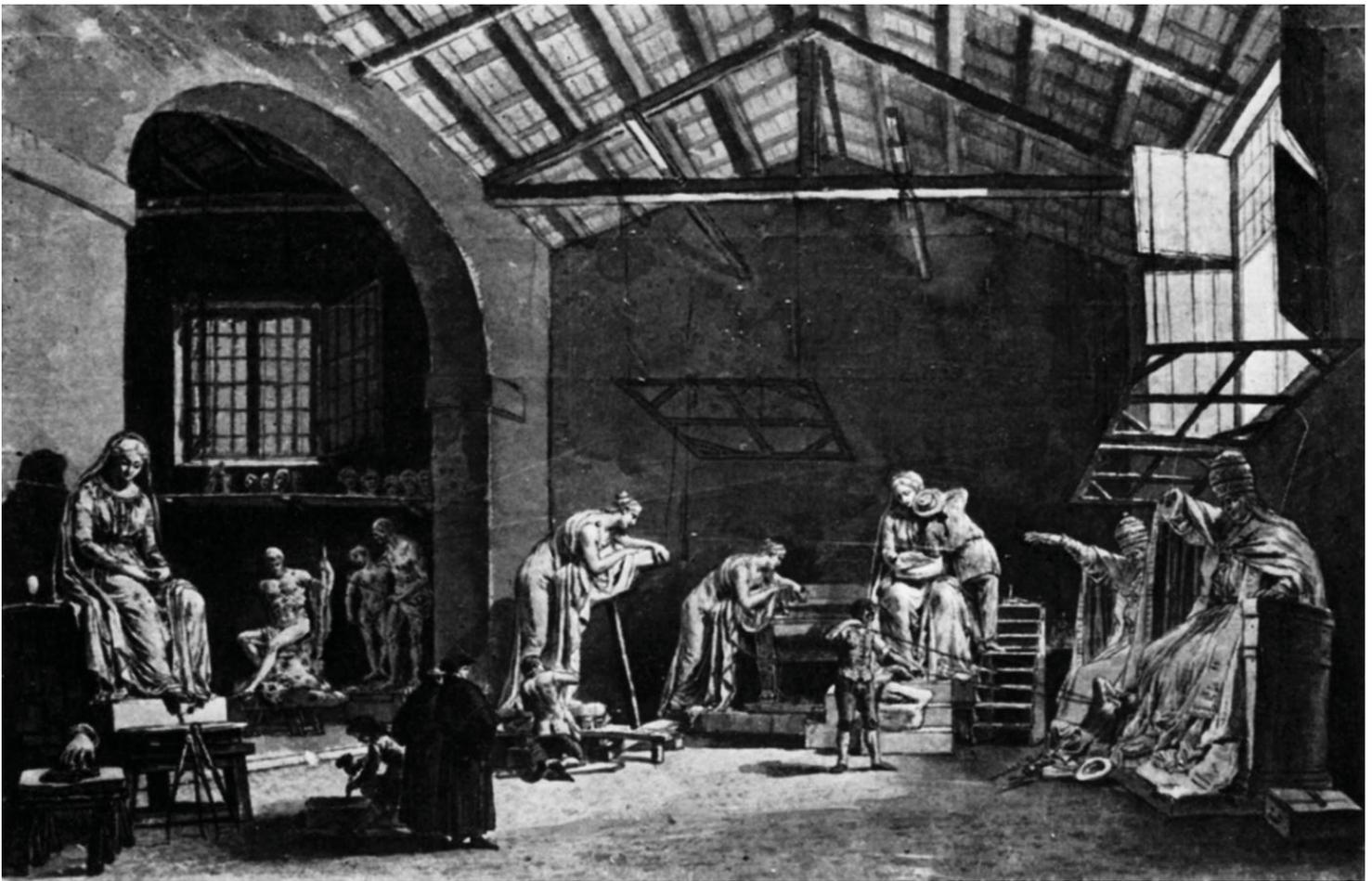


Fig. 4: A line-and-wash drawing by Francesco Chiaruttini shows *Canova's Studio* circa 1786. Models and marbles for the *Tomb of Clement XIV*, *Theseus and the Minotaur*, and *Daedalus and Icarus* are clearly visible.

(Continued from page 2)

Well before Clement XIV's tomb was completed, Canova was already at work on the *Tomb of Clement XIII* (1792), which deviates even further from the baroque style. The pope is bareheaded, the papal tiara on the ground beside him. He kneels on a cushion, head bent and eyes lowered in meditative prayer. He embodies piety and humility rather than rococo ostentation.

A young, winged male nude—the angel of death—reclines against the sarcophagus. Critics praised this figure for giving the illusion of real flesh, achieved in part by selecting intensely white Carrara marble, polishing it highly, and

then applying a wax and stain patina. Artistically it was Canova's finest creation to that point, but it horrified traditionalists. There is no foundation in Christian theology for the existence of such an angel (though death is often personified in literature and folklore), and to some the subject seemed inappropriate for a papal monument. Others were predictably disturbed by the nudity and pressured Canova to clothe the figure. The artist, however, regarded the role of nudity in art as sanctifying:

When nudity is pure and adorned with exquisite beauty, it deflects us from mortal preoccupations and transports us to those early times of blessed innocence...elevating us to the contemplation of things divine. These latter, since they cannot be manifested to the senses because of their spirituality, can only be indicated to us by the excellence of form...⁴



Fig. 5: Details from the *Tomb of Clement XIII* reveal Canova to be a master of realism. Far left, a lion (modeled from life) guards the entrance to the tomb. Left, the angel of death that ran afoul of the traditionalists who thought its nudity was unfit for St. Peter's Basilica.



Fig. 6: Canova's *Hebe* was one of his earliest female nudes. Left, a full face view. Middle, a side view showing the statues gilded pitcher of ambrosia. Left, The €0.01 value of Italy's current definitive series, *La Donna nell'Arte*, was introduced in 2002 (Scott #2436). Two separate printings of the stamp, which uses a side view of *Hebe* as its vignette, have been identified.

He repeated the theme of the youthful nude in his depiction of *Hebe* (1796). The daughter of Zeus and Hera, Hebe dispensed ambrosia—the nectar of immortality—to her parents' divine companions on Mount Olympus, hence the statue's gilded ewer and chalice. The gown that covers her lower half gives the impression of gossamer though it is solid marble, and below her knee it mingles with equally diaphanous clouds. During his lifetime, Canova filled three orders for copies of the sculpture, but none of them capture the metaphysical perfection of the original, which Licht regards as the last Western sculpture that retains an "eighteenth-century airiness."⁵

Fame at home and abroad

These three marbles solidified Canova's reputation as Italy's foremost Neoclassicist—an artistic movement characterized by a return to the "calm simplicity and noble grandeur"⁶ of Greek and Roman art. Neoclassicism emulated the ancient mosaics, frescoes, and sculptures unearthed daily at then-newly discovered archeological sites such as Pompeii and Herculaneum. Canova's work took its inspiration from these finds and made him a celebrity in his

own time. Catherine the Great wished him to move to Russia, Francis II invited him to Vienna, and the house of Bonaparte patronized him. His fame eventually spread to America and won him a contract to sculpt George Washington for the state house at Raleigh, North Carolina.⁷

Indeed, the commission for Canova's next great work—*Cupid And Psyche* (1793)—came not from an Italian but from the Scottish nobleman Lord Cawdor. The protagonists are joined in a complex interplay of limbs and gazes that have no beginning and no end. Tender yet passionate, languid yet alive, it is among Canova's most erotically charged creations. When the French author Gustave Flaubert first saw it, he was captivated:

I returned to it several times and at last I kissed the armpits of the swooning woman who stretches her long marble arms toward Love. And the Foot! The head! The profile! May I be forgiven. It was my first sensual kiss in a long while....I kissed beauty itself.⁸

Cawdor never took possession of his sculpture; Joachim Murat, Napoléon's brother-in-law and cavalry commander, seized it during the 1798 French occupation of Italy. It was removed to Paris, where it remains in the Louvre Museum.

The age of Napoléon

The theft of *Cupid and Psyche* was typical of Italy's patrimonial losses as Austria and France looted its fine art during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Pontifical State was the only Italian kingdom that made a serious and concerted effort to stem the exodus: archaeological digs were strictly regulated, the Pio-Clementino and Chiaramonti museums were founded to house the fruits of these excavations, and Secretary of State Bartolomeo Cardinal



Photo: Réunion des musées nationaux



Fig. 7: The sight of *Cupid and Psyche* drove the French author Flaubert mad with passion. Left, the statue was the subject of Italy's stamp issue for Canova's 250th birth anniversary,

released on October 10, 2007. Center, a detail of the statue capture its emotional intensity. Right, the first day cancel for the stamp also featured an outline sketch of the work.

Pacca forbade the exportation of art and artifacts without government approval. As part of this effort, Pius VII knighted Canova and conferred on him the title ‘Inspector General of Antiquities and Fine Arts.’⁹ His duties included selecting art for the Vatican museums and preventing the exportation of cultural heritage; on one occasion he vigorously (but unsuccessfully) opposed the purchase of the *Barberini Faun* by Crown Prince Ludwig of Bavaria.

In 1802, Canova went to Paris to sculpt Napoléon Bonaparte—then calling himself ‘first consul’ after his overthrow of the revolutionary government—who saw *Cupid and Psyche* and invited its creator to Paris. Canova at first demurred because he genuinely disliked the man, but he finally acquiesced when Pope Pius VII asked him to help keep the peace with Napoléon.



Fig. 8: This 2000 Monegasque stamp (Scott #2147) features Canova’s bust of Napoleon. The artist disdained most portraiture as unoriginal and regretted creating a popular image of the French usurper.

The artist executed a *Bust of Napoléon* (1803) in preparation for a colossal, 11-foot statue depicting *Napoléon as Mars the Peacebringer* (a double irony in view of the fact that the future emperor stood 5 feet, 2 inches tall and had engulfed the entire continent in constant war). The bust “became one of the canonical images of the Napoléonic legend,”¹⁰ much to Canova’s chagrin, but the full statue did not fare as well. The body overwhelmed rather than complemented the highly successful bust. Critics

number it among Canova’s rare failures, and the artist himself considered it a “disgrace” because it was “modern and by an Italian.”¹¹ It arrived at Paris just as Napoléon’s fortunes were taking a turn for the worse, and was never publicly displayed in France. After the emperor’s final defeat in 1814, his conqueror, the Duke of Wellington, displayed it as a trophy in his London residence. It remains there, metaphorically imprisoned by a narrow stairwell.

Canova created his *Bust of Pius VII* (1807) as a personal gift to his papal patron, and it is a sympathetic portrait of the shy and retiring man who unwittingly became an international symbol of resistance to Gallic tyranny. The first ten years of his reign were spent maintaining the fragile independence of the Pontifical State, which Napoléon restored to papal rule in 1800 after three years as a puppet ‘Roman Republic.’ Although Pius reluctantly attended the

emperor’s gaudy self-coronation in 1804, the Chiaramonti pope finally excommunicated him when in 1808 he invaded Rome for the second time in a decade. In retaliation, Napoléon took the sexagenarian pope hostage and shuttled him all over Italy and France—including captivities at Grenoble, Savona, and Fontainebleau.



Fig. 9: A portrait of Canova in 1806, about the time he created the bust of Pius VII.

Despite Napoléon’s many injustices toward him, Pius never manifested any bitterness. He did not encourage revolt against the French-imposed regime, even famously admonishing his people to be ‘good Catholics and good democrats’. After 1814, when the tables were turned and Napoléon found himself a prisoner of the British, it was Pius—his former captive—who penned pleas for clemency to King George III. To use a modern analogy, Pius played the Dalai Lama to Napoléon’s Chairman Mao, and in the process became an international symbol of saintly passive resistance. Even the French painter Jacques-Louis David, Napoléon’s ardent propagandist, regarded Pius as “a real pope [and] a real priest.”¹² Canova’s portrait, which conveys humility and kindness but also determination, did much to propagate this reputation.



Fig. 10: Left, Canova considered himself to be a peace-loving conservative and sincerely admired Pius VII, his pope and king, for whom he carved this bust as a gift. Right, £100 value (Scott #246) of Vatican City’s 1958 Canova series.

The *Venus Victrix*

Paolina Borghese as *Venus Victrix* (1808) is perhaps Canova’s best-known work. Its subject was Napoléon’s beautiful but brash younger sister, who often embarrassed her brother by sleeping indiscriminately with his staff. In



Fig. 11: Three details of *Venus Victrix* testify to Canova's immense talent. Cold, unyielding marble gives the illusion of warm, supple flesh, left and middle, and a soft mattress and pillows, right. The artist turned a potentially scandalous commission into an aesthetic victory.

1803 she married Prince Camillo Borghese, the richest man in Italy, and thus became mistress of the Villa Borghese with its fabulous art collection and phalanx of servants. Paolina also acquired a reputation for spending lavishly and not allowing marriage to curtail her train of lovers.

The prince commissioned from Canova a full-length marble portrait of his impetuous new wife. Paolina insisted on being portrayed as Venus, goddess of love and beauty, painting the artist into a corner. Since ancient times, Venus had been portrayed in the nude. Canova, as we have seen, was comfortable using nudity when he felt it conveyed purity and virtue, but the Principessa Borghese's aim was to precipitate a scandal. How would he satisfy his impulsive client's vanity while protecting his artistic reputation and integrity?

Venus Victrix is the result of that tension. She is indeed unclothed from the waist up, and possesses the delicately rendered flesh that is usual of Canova's nudes. Yet, she is more aloof than sensual. She reclines, but on a couch

rather than a bed like Goya's *Maja Desnuda* (1800) or Ingres' *Grand Odalisque* (1814).¹³ She does not meet the viewer eye-to-eye but gazes off into the distance, unaware of the visitor's presence and uninterested in seducing him, eliminating any element of voyeurism. As the twentieth-century art historian Fred Licht put it, "Canova managed to take on a commission of unparalleled vulgarity and to give Paolina a kind of chastity and virtue that she did not herself possess."¹⁴

Marchese d'Ischia

After the Congress of Vienna restored the Pontifical State to Pius' rule in 1815, Canova—who still held his post as Inspector General of Art—was sent to Paris to sue for the return of artworks stolen by Napoléon's armies. This was no easy task, since France's conquerors—especially Russia, Prussia, and Austria—regarded them as spoils of war to be divvied up among them. The British, however, were sympathetic to Canova's mission, and by courting their influence he was ultimately able to recover many pieces. After a sojourn in London to study the Elgin Marbles, his return to Rome on January 5, 1816 was fêted with a Roman-style

Fig. 12: *Venus Victrix* pictured on a £80 Italian stamp of 1957 (Scott #724), left, and a €0.65 Sammarinese issue released December 3, 2007, middle. Right, generations of art history students know this full-length view of the statue, which is widely reproduced in textbooks.





Fig. 13: Left, a medal minted in 1816 to commemorate Canova's triumphal return from his papal mission to Paris. Right, this £10 Vatican City stamp of 1944 (Scott #90) portrays Canova as a member of the *Virtuosi* of the Pantheon. The vignette is a self-portrait from the Canovian Temple at Possagno.

triumph in which the redeemed works of art were carried in procession before him through the streets. Pius VII named him to the *Accademia dei Virtuosi* of the Pantheon and raised him to the peerage as Marquis of Ischia with an annual pension of 3,000 *scudi*.

The Three Graces

Canova's last Bonaparte commission was completed after Napoléon's dramatic fall. The former empress Josephine commissioned *The Three Graces* (1817) shortly after her divorce from the emperor, but she died before it was finished. Her grandson, Maximilian, brought it to Russia in 1839 when he married the Grand Duchess Maria Romanov; it was seized from her descendants during the Russian Revolution and is now in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

Balancing three isolated figures in a single sculpture is a difficult enough task, but the challenge is even greater



Fig. 14: *The Three Graces* has been on a stamp (Italy Scott #1076, £50), top left, and a coin (San Marino 2006, €10), left. Top right, a photographic detail highlights the delicacy and tranquility of the group, which is Canova's most widely reproduced work.

when they are as deeply entwined as these. They are totally absorbed in a mutual embrace and their shared drapery emphasizes their unity. The figures are delicate and peaceful, bordering on angelic. The Duke of Bedford saw the unfinished marble during a visit to Canova's studio and commissioned a copy for himself on the spot. The Bedford copy¹⁵ was only the first of many; even today *The Three Graces* is Canova's most widely reproduced work.

Last works and death

The *Tomb of Pius VI* (1822) was one of Canova's last monumental works. As with the *Tomb of Clement XIII*, the pope has cast aside his tiara and is kneeling in prayer; the similarities, however, end there. Pius's face is turned toward the sky and the expression on his face is more religiously ecstatic than contemplative. Pius has asked for his tomb to be placed in the *confessio* of St. Peter's Basilica, a darkened sunken chapel in front of the high altar, meaning that the viewer would be looking down into Pius's upturned visage, a poignant incarnation of Psalm 130: "*De profundis clamavi ad te Domine*"—"Out of the depths I cry unto thee, O Lord." Licht suggests that if it were not the tomb of a pope, the monument would work equally well as a representation of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane.¹⁶



Fig. 15: The *Tomb of Pius VI*, one of Canova's last works, on a £35 Vatican City stamp of 1958 (Scott #245).

Shortly after completing Pius VI's tomb, Canova set out on his annual journey to his hometown. He had plowed most of his papal pension into a new parish church for Possagno, and the cornerstone was finally laid in 1819. Every autumn thereafter, Canova returned for several months to supervise the construction and remunerate the workers. During his 1822 visit he suffered an attack of severe abdominal pain, but recovered enough to travel to Naples. While there, however, his malady returned. Unable to eat or drink, and breathing with great difficulty, he became bedridden. Two Venetian physicians and numerous friends attended to him, but in vain; he died in the early morning of October 13. The *Gazzetta di Venezia* mourned him the following day:

*Il cuore angelico di Canova palpità per l'ultima volta, e la di lui mente divina si chiuse per sempre a' suoi sublimi conceptimenti.*¹⁷

An autopsy was performed, and the cause of death was discovered to be a deformation of the rib cage and sternum

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that prevented him from swallowing. The condition must have existed for some time, but Canova never complained of it. The injury likely resulted from years of the artist pressing his chest against the chisel as he worked.

Canova's remains are interred at the church he built in Possagno, still referred to today as the *Tempio Canoviano* (Canovian Temple). Much of his fortune went toward the construction; the rest was left to the academies to found scholarships for students and relief funds for poor artists. 

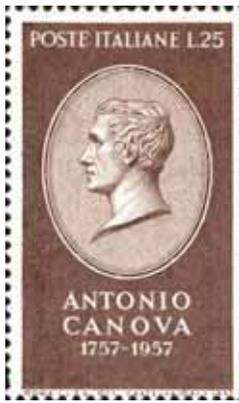


Fig. 16: This £25 Italian stamp of 1957 (Scott #722) shows Pietro Fontana's engraving of a Canova self-portrait.

¹ George Gordon (Lord Byron), "On Canova's Bust of Helen" (1816).

² Although Canova also worked as a painter, only his sculptures have been reproduced on stamps. A miniature sheet released in 2004, purportedly by Somalia, is not included here because the 2007 Scott Catalogue does not list it and the Universal Postal Union considers it to be an illegal issue. Readers knowing of any Canova stamps not covered here are asked to contact the author.

³ Milizia to the Count of Vicenza, 21 April 1787. Quoted in J.S. Memes, *Memoirs of Antonio Canova with a Critical Analysis of His Works* (Edinburgh: 1825), p. 326.

⁴ Quoted in Fred Licht, *Canova* (NY: Abbeville Press, 1983), p. 181.

⁵ Licht, p. 175.

⁶ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of Ancient Art* (1764).

⁷ Only models survive today; the statue itself was lost in an 1831 fire.

⁸ Gustave Flaubert, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1910), Vol. 9, p. 44; quoted in Licht, p. 164. Flaubert's passion is reminiscent of another writer, the German poet Heinrich Heine, who wrote that he dreamt of holding Canova's *Venus Italica* in his arms (in *Pictures of Travel*, 1856).

⁹ A post previously held by Johann Winckelmann, Giambattista Visconti, and Raphael.

¹⁰ Licht, p. 101.

¹¹ Quoted in Christopher M. S. Johns, "Portrait Mythology: Antonio Canova's Portraits of the Bonapartes." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 115-129.

¹² Quoted in Roberta J.M. Olson, "Representations of Pope Pius VII: The First Risorgimento Hero." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (March 1986), pp. 77-93.

¹³ In a Roman context, the couch was associated more often with dining, reading, or writing than sleeping.

¹⁴ Licht, p. 141

¹⁵ Now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

¹⁶ Licht, p. 82

¹⁷ "The angelic heart of Canova beat for the last time, and his heavenly mind is forever closed to its sublime conceptions." Quoted in Memes, p. 510.

In addition to the works cited in the endnotes, the following were consulted in the preparation of this article:

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