

Canova Compendium

Unless otherwise stated, most of this text is adapted and abridged from:

Albert Boime, Art in an Age of Revolution 1750-1800, 1987 University of Chicago, pp138-145.

With additional information added from:

Christopher MS Johns, Antonio Canova and the Politics of Patronage in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe, 1998, University of California Press

Plant, M., Venice, Fragile City: 1797-1997, 2003, Yale University Press

1. Introduction

One of the youngest artists directly linked with the first generation of neo-classicists and who bridges the second is the Italian sculptor Antonio Canova. Canova arrived in Rome in 1779 as a twenty-one year old prodigy and four years later obtained the most important commission available to a sculptor in Rome, the Pope Clement XIV monument for the church of SS. Apostoli. By 1792, when his second papal monument was unveiled, Canova had acquired a European reputation such as no other Italian sculptor had enjoyed since the seventeenth century. His mercurial rise to fame occurred within a little more than a decade, but it seems less astonishing when we learn that he had the backing of abbé Filippo Farsetti, Giovanni Falier in Venice, and Gavin Hamilton and Girolamo Zulian in Rome.

2. Early Life and Patrons

Canova was born at Possagno in the province of Treviso, one of the Venetian mainland dominions. He descended from a long line of stonecutters, and he grew up under the tutelage of his grand-parents. While assisting his grandfather in refurbishing country residences, he came to the attention of their patrician client Giovanni Falier, a member of the old Venetian aristocracy. He took on the young Canova as his protégé and apprenticed him out to a local sculptor named Torretti, who had a studio in Venice. After his death, Canova studied at the Venetian Academy and also at Palazzo Farsetti, which contained an immense collection of casts and ancient masterpieces in Rome. Filippo Farsetti was the cousin of the future Clement XIII, and they (as well as their wider family members) gave Canova early commissions. Farsetti dealt in antiquities and could introduce Canova to Gavin Hamilton.

3. The Influence of Girolamo Zulian and Gavin Hamilton in Rome

On the basis of his early notable sculptures *Euridice and Orpheus* and *Daedalus and Icarus* Falier promoted Canova as a national genius, and put him in touch with Girolamo Zulian, Venice's ambassador to the Holy See (The Vatican). Like Falier, Zulian was anxious to demonstrate that Venetian culture was still capable of producing outstanding talent, and he seized the opportunity to bring the young sculptor to Rome. At this time Canova made a pilgrimage to Gavin Hamilton's studio, still the *doyen* of neo-classicism.

On seeing the plaster cast of *Daedalus and Icarus* in Rome, Hamilton responded enthusiastically to the group but advised Canova to temper his realism with the Greco-Roman ideal. Hamilton won Canova's confidence, becoming a close friend and trusted adviser. Hamilton made Zulian see the importance of giving effective assistance to Canova, and the latter promptly purchased a block of marble for the young sculptor without stipulating the choice of subject. Canova chose *Theseus and the Minotaur*.