

Antonio Canova, (1757-1822)

'Memorial to Admiral Angelo Emo', 1794

Key Facts:

Size: 285 x 233 cm

Medium: Marble

Patron: Zulian, Falier, Republic of Venice

Location: Museo Storico Navale, Venice

Scope of works: Leaders, Memorial, pre-1850

"The most important, and one of the most politicized, commissions Canova executed for the Serene Republic"¹



1. Subject

- Zulian and Falier were close friends of Admiral Angelo Emo, considered the last of Venice's great naval heroes in its struggles against the Turks. Emo had distinguished himself by his attacks on the pirates of Algeria and Tunisia.
- "He had invented a type of floating battery that could broadside the vessels of the Barbary pirates in shallow water, an invention that effectively ended the seizure of Venetian merchantmen on the seas and the piratical raids on coastal settlements."²
- A memorial to Venetian marine strength, as well as their last naval hero.

2. Form and Style

- "Government ordinances forbade the erection of a full-length, life-size representation of patricians, so Canova chose the **stele** format":
 - A format taken from Classical Greek funerary monuments
 - A stele is an upright stone monument with inscriptions, used as grave markers, for dedication, commemoration, and demarcation. They were usually rectangles carved in relief.
 - People were portrayed on the stele as highly idealized and with their name inscribed.
 - Men are pictured according to the specifics of their role and what labours they are associated with.
- Diagonals and echoing forms of Victories counterbalance the stolid verticality of Emo and the column.
- The bust, with its "eyes closed in death, [is] raised upon a column in the midst of the sea. Two Victories are in attendance: one – of consummate elegance – winged and

¹ Johns p.54

² Ibid.

hovering to crown him; the other kneeling at the foot of the stele, about to spell out the victorious name."³

- The kneeling figure before him seems to be on a floating battery, while Venetian ships are in the background behind the column.
- The battery is made of wood lashed together, has a cannon and bags of shot.
- A winged Fame/Victory crowns the hero in his moment of apotheosis."⁴
- "All the marks of Canova's sensuality in the handling of marble are present in the stele:
 - In the Victories, whose drapery folds around genitals and, while covering, enhances;
 - In the fingers that arch before they touch with relish, and precision;
 - In backs that are flexible – that of the girl curved as she bends toward her work of inscription, the boy's arched as he hovers to bestow the wreath.
 - Amid the scrolls of the wondrously worked waves, the female Victory kneels on... his invention of the floating battery.
 - The mid-ocean cenotaph is embellished with the jutting prows of ships bearing the lion of St Mark, the still-proud sign of the Republic."⁵
 - Mid-ocean position – protecting Venice, still. Canova shows waves crashing against the column
- Victories' bodies are idealised, showing similar proportions, similar drapery.
- Victories do not engage with the viewer but focus on memorialising Emo by crowning him and writing his inscription.
- Victories shown in profile while Emo is in a frontal pose.
- Emo's portrait is realistic yet classically idealised, representing him as a patrician statesman, his cloak with acorn buttons over the top of his armour, showing both his naval and political roles.

3. Materials and Techniques

- Shallow relief carving used for ribbons on crown, wings of flying Victory and some waves.
- Undercutting shows where arms and legs, for example, are separated from the block and add movement and drama to the scene and create space.
- The low relief of the ships suggests space; a sense of scale suggested by different sizes of ships, but no indication of them being in water or a horizon line above them.
- Fragile thin forms of wings and trumpet extend out of block, to the limits of the material's tensile strength.
- Rough chisels used to show waves at the base of the memorial.
- Finer chisels used for fine detail on battery, figures, drapery for example.
- Drilling evident in the hair of both Victories.
- Contrasts in textures of water, wood, sack, metal, skin, hair, feathers, stone.

³ Plant p.17

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

4. Political Interpretation

- "Emo was widely mourned when he died in 1792, and a wave of patriotic nostalgia ensued, driven by the increasingly uncertain political situation."⁶
- "The republic awarded Canova a pension to demonstrate to the world the 'unequivocal esteem and the protection accorded by this government to those among its subjects capable of winning universal recognition in the fine arts'".
 - "Or, more accurately, it would reflect glory on a government fortunate enough to have as a subject a cultural celebrity of the first rank."⁷
- He had little time to enjoy this – Venice lost its independence to Napoleon in May 1797. It then became an Austrian territory in October 1797. Neither Napoleon nor Emperor Francis II of Austria continued the pension.
- Before the French evacuated the city, Napoleon ordered Venice be thoroughly sacked. The looting appalled and infuriated the patriotic artist.
- "The only other work by Canova in the city, *Psyche*, had originally been made for Girolamo Zulian, who died before it could be delivered, so it was in the palazzo of its owner Count Giuseppe Mangilli.
- Accompanied by the Queen of Bavaria, Napoleon called there, and the queen was deeply impressed by *Psyche*. With typical impulsiveness Napoleon embarrassed the count by demanding to buy it, even though its owner had no wish to sell, especially since he did not want to see the statue leave Venice.
- Mangilli had to yield to persistent imperial pressure, consoling himself with a very high price... The artist must have been chagrined to learn that a work he had executed with great affection had been alienated from his homeland through the agency of Napoleon Bonaparte."
- Canova never forgot it or forgave Bonaparte.⁸

⁶ Johns, p.56-7. The Republic of Venice was on the verge of being taken by France, who would install a puppet government.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.