

PRESS RELEASE

from

THE FRICK COLLECTION

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CANOVA'S GEORGE WASHINGTON

EXHIBITION ADDRESSES CANOVA'S ONLY WORK FOR UNITED STATES

May 23 through September 23, 2018



Antonio Canova, *Modello for George Washington* (detail), 1818, plaster, Gypsotheca e Museo Antonio Canova, Possagno, Italy; photo Fabio Zonta, Fondazione Canova onlus, Possagno

In 1816, the General Assembly of North Carolina commissioned a full-length statue of George Washington to stand in the rotunda of the State Capitol, in Raleigh. Thomas Jefferson, believing that no American sculptor was up to the task, recommended Antonio Canova (1757– 1822), then one of Europe's most celebrated artists. The first and only work Canova created for the United States, the statue depicted the nation's first president in ancient Roman garb—*all'antica* armor—per Jefferson's urging, drafting his farewell address to the states. It was unveiled to great acclaim in 1821. Tragically, a decade later, a fire swept through the State Capitol, reducing the statue to a few charred fragments. On May 23, The Frick Collection presents *Canova's George Washington*, an exhibition that examines the history of the artist's lost masterpiece. The show brings together for the first time all of the objects connected to the creation of the sculpture— including a remarkable life-sized *modello* that has never before left Italy—and tells the extraordinary transatlantic story of this monumental work.

The life-size *modello*, above, provides the closest idea of what the destroyed marble would have looked like. It is shown in the Frick's Oval Room—alone—to replicate the effect it would have had in the rotunda of North Carolina's State Capitol. The adjoining East Gallery features the few surviving elements that reveal the artist's creative process for this project: two drawings from the Museo Civico in Bassano del Grappa and five three-dimensional sketches from the Gypsotheca e Museo Antonio Canova and the Museo di Roma. The faux marble pedestals in the exhibition

replicate a design devised by Canova himself and are identical to those used to display his plaster *modelli* at Possagno. Also on view are preparatory objects and comparative materials that shed light on the commission, including works by Jean-Antoine Houdon, Gilbert Stuart, Giuseppe Ceracchi, and the spectacular portrait of Canova by Thomas Lawrence (see paragraph below), which was begun in London in 1815 and completed in Rome in 1819, while the sculptor was at work on *George Washington*. The exhibition is organized by Xavier F. Salomon, The Frick Collection’s Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator, in collaboration with Mario Guderzo, Director of the Gypsotheca e Museo Antonio Canova, the Venice International Foundation, and Friends of Venice Italy Inc. Following its presentation at the Frick, the exhibition will be shown in Possagno, Italy, at the Gypsotheca e Museo Antonio Canova, in the fall of 2018.



Antonio Canova Study for George Washington, 1817, graphite on paper, Bassano del Grappa, Museo Civico, Su gentile concessione MBA Musei Biblioteca Archivio di Bassano del Grappa

CHOOSING CANOVA



Thomas Lawrence, *Antonio Canova*, 1815–19, oil on canvas, Gypsotheca e Museo Antonio Canova, Possagno, Italy; photo credit: Fondazione Canova onlus, Possagno

Writing in 1755, the German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the father of modern archaeology and the author of the first substantial history of Greek and Roman art, made a penetrating observation about ancient sculpture: “The general and principal distinction of the Greek masterworks is their noble simplicity and quiet grandeur, both in gesture and expression. As the bottom of the sea lies peaceful beneath a foaming surface, a great soul lies serenely beneath the strife of passions in Greek figures.” Two years later, on November 1, 1757, a boy was born in the small town of Possagno, on the Venetian mainland, in Italy. The grandson of a stonecutter, Antonio Canova grew to become the incarnation of the ancient sculptors, who would make Winckelmann’s notions about art reality again. Aged twenty-three, at the end of 1780, Canova moved to Rome, where he remained based for the rest of his life.

In his studio, near the Via del Corso, he produced marbles that were admired for their “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.” Over a career of more than forty years, he sculpted ambitious mythological groups and large papal monuments, and portrayed many of the “great souls” of the age. His patrons and sitters were the most powerful men and women in Europe, with a remarkable geographical breadth. He worked in Rome for Pope Pius VI, the papal court, and the aristocracy (Prince Camillo Borghese, for example), but also produced masterpieces in Paris for Napoleon and his family, in London for the Prince Regent and the Duke of Devonshire, and in Vienna for Albrecht of Saxony, Duke of Teschen. A number of his works were created for patrons as far away as Izabela Czartoryska in Poland and Empress Catherine the Great in Russia.

North Carolina’s budget for the statue of George Washington was unrestricted, and therefore the best possible sculptor was sought. A committee of state senators interviewed eminent figures in the artistic world—architects, collectors, and experts—to determine who should be hired. Without much debate, it was decided that the best advice had been provided by another president, Thomas Jefferson, living in fine isolation at his Italianate residence at Monticello. For Jefferson, the only sculptor suitable was Antonio Canova, and the only material in which the statue should be produced was Carrara marble. Jefferson had never met Canova, but he knew him by reputation, which had reached beyond Europe, all the way to Virginia. Jefferson went so far as to recommend an intermediary for the commission: Thomas Appleton, the American Consul in the Tuscan harbor city of Livorno.

Over the next five years, between 1816 and 1821, more than one hundred letters document the vicissitudes of the sculpture’s creation. Many of these are published in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, charting the decisions made in Raleigh and Rome, passing through Livorno. Appleton, in the end, acted not only as intermediary, but was directly involved in momentous decisions, especially regarding details of the iconography of the statue and about the transportation of the finished marble from Italy to America. Canova began working on the sculpture in the summer of 1817. As was his custom, he produced a number of drawings and three-dimensional sketches, both in plaster and terracotta, in preparation for a life-size plaster *modello* of his subject, before tackling the marble block.



Antonio Canova, *Primo Pensiero for George Washington*, 1817, terracotta, Museo di Roma, Roma © Roma - Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali - Museo di Roma; Photo: Mauro Magliani

GEORGE WASHINGTON AS SUBJECT



Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington*, 1795, oil on canvas, The Frick Collection, New York Photo: Michael Bodycomb

Canova faced two primary challenges. The first was that he did not know what Washington looked like, as the former president had died sixteen years before. The second was determining the costume in which Washington should be shown, whether contemporary or ancient. Again, the solutions were provided by Jefferson, in dialogue with Appleton. Several options were offered for the model to use for Washington’s portrait, including paintings by Gilbert Stuart and sculptures by Jean-Antoine Houdon, but it was decided that Canova should use a bust by the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Ceracchi, which was



Giuseppe Ceracchi, *George Washington*, ca. 1792, marble, on loan from the Carolina Art Association/Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, South Carolina Image courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association

made from life in 1791–92, when Washington was sixty years old. This bust of the president was considered by Jefferson to be “the best effigy of him ever executed.” Conveniently, Appleton owned a plaster model of the bust, which he sent to Canova’s studio in Rome. As for the costume, ancient garb was favored by all parties, as the classical style was popular at the time. Canova agreed with Jefferson when the former president wrote in 1816: “I am sure the

artist, and every person of taste in Europe would be for the Roman, the effect of which is undoubtedly of a different order. our boots & regimentals have a very puny effect.”

For a European public, accustomed to the absolute power of emperors, popes, and kings, the idea of a general or a head of state peacefully retiring to private life and passing his title to another individual was almost inconceivable. The painter John Trumbull, writing in 1784 about Washington’s resignation from the army, wrote: “Tis a Conduct so novel, so inconceivable to People, who, far from giving up powers they possess, are willing to convulse the Empire to acquire more.” Washington was therefore likened to the ancient republican hero Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, who, in 458 B.C., having won a civil war as a Roman dictator, stepped down and returned to his countryside dwelling, resuming his life as a farmer. Canova showed Washington drafting his farewell address to the nation. The paper he writes upon reads (in Italian): “George Washington /To the People of the United States/1796/Friends and Citizens.” This address was seen as one of the defining moments in his life and career.

By the summer of 1820, Canova’s *George Washington* was completed and ready to be shipped to North Carolina. It left Italy in March 1821, traveling from Canova’s studio down the Tiber on a barge, before reaching the Mediterranean Sea, where it was transferred to an American warship, which safely delivered it across the Atlantic Ocean. It reached Raleigh in December of that year, where it was unveiled with great fanfare on Christmas Eve, displayed majestically in the rotunda, at the heart of the State Capitol. A contemporary newspaper praised the monument, comparing it to ancient masterpieces: “Even the celebrated Statues of the Apollo of Belvidere [sic] and the Venus of Medici have their blemishes, but the Statue of Washington, like Washington himself, is without a stain or spot.”



Antonio Canova, *Fragment of George Washington (base and signature)*, 1818–20, marble, The North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, N.C. Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History

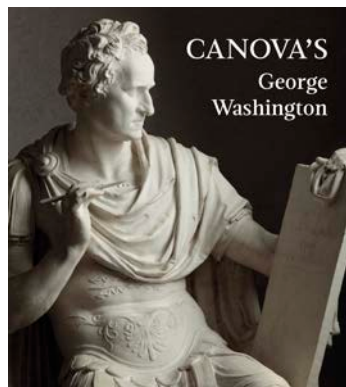
Canova’s American masterpiece, however, was on view for less than a decade. In the early morning of June 21, 1831, a devastating fire destroyed the State Capitol. The calamity saw the complete destruction of the building, the dome of which collapsed above the marble statue. A later account reported: “during the fire the doors were opened and people saw the statue, snowy white at first, seated on the base some six feet high. Presently the statue reddened in the glaring flames and then with a crash of the falling dome came to almost total ruin.” Plans to restore the statue never materialized, and the charred fragments of Canova’s marble are now preserved in four different locations in Raleigh, where they are usually kept in storage. Had it survived, Canova’s *George Washington* would have been one of the most important artistic treasures from the early history of the United States. The exhibition includes the fragment (shown above), which includes the artist’s signature.

THE GYPOSTHECA E MUSEO ANTONIO CANOVA

The Gypsotheca e Museo Antonio Canova in Possagno is the most important museum for Canova's work. Carrying out Canova's wishes after his death, his half-brother, Giovanni Battista Sartori, established a museum in the town of his birth, transforming the house where he was born into a museum. The artist's personal belongings and all the plaster *modelli* of his sculptures were transported from the studio in Rome to Possagno, where they have been available to the public ever since. "Gypsotheca," deriving from the Greek "gypsos" for "plaster," identifies the museum as the repository of Canova's plasters. The building to display these works was designed in 1836 by the architect Francesco Lazzari and expanded in 1957 by Carlo Scarpa, next to the house where Canova was born. Half of the objects in the exhibition are lent by the Gypsotheca for the first time.

While working on *George Washington*, Canova had assistants and his half-brother read aloud to him from a history of the American Revolution by the Italian historian Carlo Botta. He later admiringly described Washington as "the genius who has performed such sublime deeds, for the safety and liberty of his country." It is fitting that the story of this lost masterpiece should be told in detail in America, to celebrate the transatlantic links—artistic and cultural—between the United States and Italy. The sculpture was described at the time of its unveiling as "the boast and pride of North America." Its loss is a deep wound to the early heritage of the United States, but, for three months at the Frick this summer, the sculpture and its astonishing story will be brought back to life.

PUBLICATION



Accompanying the exhibition is a beautifully illustrated catalogue that examines the fascinating history of the Canova's lost American masterpiece. The publication will include correspondence relating to the commission—some of the letters to or from Thomas Jefferson—as well as essays by Salomon, Guderzo, and Guido Beltramini, Director of the Palladio Museum in Vicenza, Italy. The catalogue is a major addition to the current body of knowledge on the work of Antonio Canova, as well as on the classical revivalist sculpture of the early nineteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic. The book is available in the Museum Shop or can be ordered through the Frick's Web site (frick.org) or by phone at 212.547.6848. Hardcover (172 pages; \$45, member price \$40.50).

The exhibition is organized by Xavier F. Salomon, Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator, The Frick Collection. Principal funding is provided by an anonymous gift in memory of Melvin R. Seiden and by Ambassador and Mrs. W. L. Lyons Brown. Additional support is generously provided by Mrs. Daniel Cowin in honor of Ian Wardropper; Dr. and Mrs. James S. Reibel; Luciano and Giancarla Berti; the families of George and Michael Eberstadt in memory of Vera and Walter Eberstadt; Fiduciary Trust Company International; the Foundation for Italian Art & Culture (FIAC); Carlo

Orsi, Trinity Fine Art; Mr. and Mrs. Stanley DeForest Scott; Barbara G. Fleischman; Carla Bossi-Comelli and Marco Pecori; Michael L. Cioffi; and Barbara Dau. The accompanying catalogue is underwritten by Fabrizio Moretti.

CANOVA IN NEW YORK

In conjunction with the Frick's exhibition, two related shows will be presented in New York City this spring. *Canova e la Danza* (Canova and Dance), at the Italian Cultural Institute, features sixteen newly restored tempera paintings dating from 1799 to 1806, which have never before been seen in the United States. A show at the Consulate General of Italy in New York features the work of photographer Fabio Zonta, who documented Canova's sculptures at the Gypsotheca e Museo Antonio Canova in Possagno. Both exhibitions will be on view May 23 through June 28, 2018.

INTERACT

Social:    /FrickCollection

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BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: 212.288.0700

Web site: www.frick.org

Building project: www.frickfuture.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

App: frick.org/app

Museum address: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue

Hours: Open six days a week: 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day

Admission: \$22; senior citizens \$17; students \$12; Pay-what-you-wish hours on Wednesdays from 2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. **PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS:** Children under ten are not admitted to the museum

First Fridays: Museum admission and gallery programs are free from 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. on the first Friday evening of the month (except January and September)

Subway: #6 local to 68th Street station; #Q to 72nd Street station; Bus: M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: Included in the price of museum admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Shop: The shop is open the same days as the museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Museum Visits: Please call 212.288.0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is available online

Library address: 10 East 71st Street, near Fifth Avenue

Hours: www.frick.org/visit/library/hours

Admission: Open to the public free of charge

#325, April 26, 2018 - For further press information, please contact Alexis Light, Senior Manager of Media Relations & Marketing; Phone: 212.547.0710; E-mail: mediarelations@frick.org