



# LUIGI VALADIER

ALVAR GONZÁLEZ-PALACIOS

With an Introduction by Xavier F. Salomon

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# CONTENTS

Director's Foreword 8

Acknowledgments 10

Introduction 14

XAVIER F. SALOMON

I • THE VALADIER FAMILY 19

II • ANDREA VALADIER 41

III • SECULAR SILVER 57

IV • *DESERS* 123

V • COLORED STONES AND GILT METAL 207

VI • WORKS FOR THE MUSEO PROFANO 259

VII • OPUS SACRUM 291

VIII • BRONZES 355

IX • FURNISHINGS AND DECORATION 395

X • GIUSEPPE VALADIER AND THE END OF THE WORKSHOP 451

XI • MODELS FROM THE VALADIER *REGISTRO GENERALE* OF 1810 475

Chronology 512

Appendices 516

Bibliography 530

Index 538

Illustration Credits 544



# I

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## THE VALADIER FAMILY

“**W**hat a dreadful business. Mr. Luigi Valadier has thrown himself into the river,” wrote the sculptor Vincenzo Pacetti of his partner and friend; perhaps this cold, intelligent, and rather ruthless character was actually moved for once. For most eighteenth-century Roman artists, even the very successful ones, getting paid by patrons was as difficult as carving marble, painting a canvas, or casting a piece of silver. Some, like Pacetti, managed to become rich, but poor Valadier, who had multiple commissions and clients—even popes and sovereigns—was up to his eyeballs in debt. According to Costantino Bulgari, the great biographer of the Roman silversmiths, Valadier had become an associate of a certain Giuseppe Amici, who loaned him the enormous sum of ten thousand *scudi* on January 13, 1780, with a colossal interest rate of 24 percent. How could one live, or work, with such a burden?

Luigi Valadier’s father, Andrea (André in the original documents), was a Frenchman—from the Provençal village of Aramon—who for some reason moved to Rome in his youth. He was baptized in 1694 and must have been in Rome by 1720 because on December 8 of that year he was recorded among those who worked for Roman goldsmiths. His license to

practice on his own was granted in 1725, and as far as we know he never left the great city.

Born in Rome on February 26, 1726, Luigi was Andrea's first son and more French than Italian since he was also the grandson, on his mother's side, of a French tailor. He began to work with his father fairly early on; their names appear jointly in the payments, between 1744 and 1747, for casting railings for the baptistery of Lisbon Cathedral (see fig. 7\_1), a work executed in Rome after a commission from Jo  V of Portugal. During these years, Andrea Valadier was already a well-known goldsmith with important clients, among them, members of the highest nobility and papal dynasties, such as the Giustiniani, Sforza Cesarini, Borghese, and Colonna. Luigi soon became one of the most famous silversmiths in Europe, as well as an expert bronze caster like his father. His art (not his way of speaking Italian) always had a Gallic flavor, perhaps prompted by a trip to Paris, where, according to Bulgari, he went in 1754 to perfect his skills. There may be a connection here with the Germain, the great family of French goldsmiths. Thomas Germain had lived in Rome for some years, when the Jesuits were busily employing smelters, silversmiths, and jewelers to work on the altar of St. Ignatius in the church of the Ges . Luigi Valadier was born in the same year as Fran ois-Thomas Germain, the son of Thomas, who had been in Rome.

The Valadiers were also well acquainted with the great families of the Eternal City. Andrea had been employed by the Odescalchi, and Luigi worked for the family's subsequent generation. In the mid-1760s, Luigi produced the magnificent metal embellishments for the *gabinetto nobile* of Palazzo Chigi (see figs. 9\_8–9\_11), commissioned for the wedding of Maria Flaminia Odescalchi and Sigismondo Chigi. Years later, in 1795, Luigi's son Giuseppe created an entire silver dining service—unquestionably among the best of its kind in Italy—for Monsignor Antonio Maria Odescalchi, the younger brother of Flaminia Chigi. A similar, though smaller service was made for their sister, who married a Rospigliosi.

Both Andrea and Luigi Valadier worked for the Borghese family. Prince Camillo, married to Agnese Colonna, died in 1763. Their son

Marcantonio, the fourth of that name, was the richest man in Rome, as well as the most ostentatious. He was also Luigi Valadier's principal and perhaps most generous client, or at least—as reflected in the dozens of accounts settled by the Borghese—the one who made him suffer the least over securing payment. Both men seem to have lost their minds over money, albeit fifteen years apart. Prince Marcantonio's fortune was ruined by the Treaty of Tolentino, the 1797 peace settlement between revolutionary France and the Papal States. A true death blow for Rome, the treaty saw the signing of the documents that sealed the fate of the ancien régime. Pius VI, who had knighted Valadier, was shown the door of his own realm after paying fifteen million *scudi*, contributed in part by the Roman princes, Marcantonio among them. After the turn of the century, the pope returned to Rome in a coffin: in 1800, the church had been forced to elect his successor in Venice, and the history of Rome was never to follow the same rhythm again. Prince Marcantonio lost his title, and his financial ruin was compounded by the disappointment caused by his two “Jacobin” sons. By the end of the ordeal, he “no longer had his head screwed on.”

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An understanding of the artistic relations in eighteenth-century Rome must take into account the family relationships among members of the oligarchy that had governed the city for several centuries. A careful look at the drawings for silver made for these individuals sheds light on Roman rules and social alliances. Luigi Valadier never fully distanced himself from the lure of French taste, but his nature was not solely shaped by this. The second magnet for his soul was antiquity or classicism, but this was balanced by a delicate gracefulness, one more inclined to whimsy and less to norms. Rococo art cast its spell on him when he went to Paris in 1754. He spent the next five years in his father's workshop, close to San Luigi dei Francesi. Sometime in 1762, a transformative year for Luigi, he left the

shop to his younger brother Giovanni (their father, Andrea, had died in 1759), his son and successor Giuseppe was born, and he moved with his family to a larger shop on what is now Via del Babuino, on the corner of Via Alibert. The drawings he made about this time are among his best. One of these sheets is almost a little rebus (see fig. 3\_9), one I believe we have resolved. It shows an object as exquisite as it is useless, once referred to in Rome as a *digiuné*, a term roughly transliterated from the French *déjeuner*. This is an *alzata* (salver) made to support a chocolate or coffee service, and its decorative motifs consist mainly of small oak branches with a dragon nesting among them, symbolizing the Chigi oak and the Boncompagni dragon. The genealogy of the two families informs us of the marriage of Laura Chigi and Ignazio Boncompagni Ludovisi in 1726.

Valadier's new proximity to Piazza di Spagna, which he mentions with satisfaction every time he speaks of his workshop, yielded immediate results. The Order of the Knights of Malta had its headquarters nearby, and the area was a hub for wealthy foreigners. Luigi received one of his most important commissions at that time: three magnificent bronzes ordered by the second Earl of Northumberland for Syon House, near London (see figs. 8\_4–8\_6). Still in admirable condition, these statues illustrate Valadier's extraordinary skill. The first bronze was completed in 1765. In 1763, James Adam had written from Rome to England to ask if two marbles made by Filippo Della Valle for Syon ought to be shipped. Della Valle, a talented sculptor, was also Valadier's father-in-law and something of a second father to him, and James, brother of Robert Adam, was at that time supervising Syon.<sup>1</sup> Della Valle may have in some way influenced the style of Valadier's altar for the cathedral in Monreale, Sicily (see fig. 7\_15); he died precisely when Valadier exhibited part of that important work to the public, in 1768.

Della Valle had several daughters: the sisters of Valadier's wife also married artists—Cristoforo Unterperger, a painter from the Swiss canton of Ticino, and the Spanish sculptor Juan Adán—and they make occasional appearances in Luigi's career. The exchange of ideas and the mutually



beneficial relationships were certainly helpful in prompting the election of Valadier to the Congregazione dei Virtuosi al Pantheon in 1765, a rare honor for a goldsmith. These years saw his graceful transformation from the Baroque to what is referred to in Rome as the *barocchetto*—an untranslatable term that refers to a specific form of the city’s great artistic tradition, with French and sometimes German Rococo influences. Valadier’s altar for Monreale is a good example of the style, while the gold tabernacle of Seville (see fig. 7\_37) is more precious, not only materially but in its taste, which is something of an homage to the Spanish penchant for Flemish art. The imposing silver lamps (see figs. 7\_11–7\_13) for Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain are among the most Rococo silver items produced in Rome.

The French patron Jacques-Laure Le Tonnelier, Bailli de Breteuil, ambassador of the Order of Malta in Rome and a man of great taste, lived near Valadier and had a decided influence on him. Breteuil commissioned from Valadier two grand *desers* (dining-table centerpieces). He sold the first one to Catherine II of Russia in 1777. The second he took with him to Paris; when he died in 1785, it passed through his sale to the future king of Spain. It is not known who conceived the idea for Breteuil’s two *desers* and other similarly luxurious designs in miniature that made Valadier famous throughout Europe. Valadier’s son Giuseppe was probably later involved, and the Roman architect Giuseppe Barberi may have been partly responsible. There is one drawing for the *plateau* (base) of a *deser*, with an inscription stating that it was executed in 1769 for the ambassador of Malta. The inscription may reflect the truth, but the sheet is unsigned and seems more like a *ricordo* (a drawing made as a record after a completed work) than a preparatory drawing; it belongs to a copious collection of drawings usually believed to be by Barberi.<sup>2</sup> Valadier’s centerpieces are neither Baroque nor Rococo but rather neoclassical or better still Piranesian, expressing a decidedly archaeological interest and careful attention to the proportions of the Roman monuments they represent. Yet everything is destined for use on a grand gentleman’s table, where a

scholarly lecture becomes a brilliant display of good manners—something that recalls Count Algarotti's little book *Il newtonianismo per le dame, ovvero dialoghi sopra la luce, i colori* (translated in 1739 as *Sir Isaac Newton's Philosophy Explain'd for the Use of the Ladies: In six dialogues on light and colours*).

\*

Valadier's obsession with perfection of detail, marvelously modeled in relief when made of bronze and gilded as many as three successive times (as specified in certain workshop documents), is reflected in his cameos mounted for Pius VI. In the cameo of Augustus (see fig. 6\_25), for example, he replaced inappropriate stone used in an earlier modern restoration with a minuscule fragment of the original agate (taken from a point invisible to the beholder) and carried out a sort of transplant. Valadier's studio seems to have operated along the lines established by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), both in the admiration for the magnificence of antiquity and in the attitude toward the restoration of excavated objects. Piranesi believed that in restoration the border between ancient and modern should not be apparent or, to use Valadier's words, that a restored piece should look as if it had never been mended. Antiquity, in a word, is perfect; it cannot be improved upon and at most can only be emulated.

For the papal cameos, Valadier provided frames and embellishments (composed of ancient fragments) with a florid and sometimes affected flair, almost like that of a jeweler. This penchant led to a neo-Alexandrine preciousness distinct from French taste and from that of Pierre Gouthière, Valadier's counterpart in Paris. Valadier's idiom is more virile and classical, whereas Gouthière's is sweeter and more feminine. While masterful, it goes beyond the delicate in its excess of ornamentation. This inclination places Valadier closer to Piranesi, the great visionary who created a new image of Rome, composing some objects by using parts of others. In a splendid letter from Gavin Hamilton to Charles Townley, a number of

references are made to Piranesi's great interest in the grand remnants of antiquity and of how he had secured for himself some beautiful fragments at Hadrian's Villa that he then used to conceive new ancient works. Thus the *cerveau noir de Piranèse*, as Victor Hugo defined it, generated pieces such as the candelabrum made for his own tomb (now in the Louvre) and the Warwick Vase, which Piranesi did not wish to finish without having first sold it. Its restoration, or rather its total remaking, cost more than any other original ancient piece he owned.

Luigi Valadier's relationship with money was complex. On September 15, 1785, the little-known chronicler Francesco Fortunati speaks of the financial problems that plagued him and made him lose his wits. Even the Roman periodical *Diario Ordinario* mentions the subject, reporting how Valadier "went and threw himself into the Tiber *stricken by madness*" (si andiede a gettare nel Tevere preso da mania).<sup>3</sup> Fortunati records how *monsù* Luigi (*monsù* is the Italianate term for *monsieur*)—who owned a silversmith's shop in Piazza di Spagna, where he employed between seventy and eighty well-paid young men—had a few days earlier sold an important work to the French ambassador in Naples for twelve thousand *scudi*, to be cashed within a short period of time. But an "unfortunate coincidence" occurred: when he arrived in Naples, the ambassador had an apoplectic fit and died on the spot. The envoy was also a Professed Knight of Malta, and the order took possession of his goods. As soon as Valadier learned the news, "he became frenzied, saying he could not in any way go on living, being forced to close his shop and dismiss so many capable young men." The great goldsmith walked along the Tiber toward the Marmorata, removed his hat, which he placed on the riverbank with a stone on it, threw himself into the river, and promptly drowned. Perhaps behind this story of sudden folly was a need to justify suicide with madness.<sup>4</sup> However, Fortunati seems to have been confused: none of those on the list of French ambassadors around the year 1785 was a Knight of Malta, nor did any of them die of apoplexy. What Fortunati recorded, quite plausibly, was a disordered mix of urban gossip. The



Fig. 9\_19. Detail of fig. 9\_18

### The Dodecagonal Tables

The same lengthy invoice describes two “small twelve-cornered porphyry tables” for which bronze decoration had been made, composed of a small molding band with a ribbon running around it, perfectly perforated and accompanied by other minute embellishments, including leaves at each corner.<sup>35</sup> Valadier explains how before gilding the border braids it was necessary to test their setting on the porphyry surfaces in the marble-carver’s workshop, a difficult intervention that involved two men working for five days (in this case, the part involving stone was not Valadier’s task). Each of the curious supports was decorated with four gilt-metal heads representing the Seasons, for which wax and plaster molds had been prepared, and the casting, chasing, and gilding executed. The masks of the Seasons followed a different model for each table, making a total of eight. The work cost 163 *scudi*, with the expense for marble parts and wood finishes added later.

These sumptuous pieces are now in the Galleria Borghese (in the room then called the Galleria and known today as the Sala degli Imperatori) (figs. 9\_20–9\_25).<sup>36</sup> A pedestal composed of four equal elements and supported by a base made of several registers, in *nero* and *giallo antico*, is adorned with gilded wood consoles, each bearing masks representing the Seasons, which can be compared stylistically to those on the slightly later lamps at Wardour Castle. Gilded wood is also employed for the overlapping discs and the spindle and bead enclosing the black and white Aquitaine marble inlays, framed in *portasanta*. With such precious furnishings, it is surprising that many of the embellishments are made of gilded wood rather than gilt bronze. It is difficult to explain this combination through cost alone, since Prince Borghese’s inclination was for extravagance; there may have been a technical reason.

Whereas Valadier’s eight heads have an element of neoclassical stillness, the architectural flow of their supports, richly veneered in colored marbles, has an exuberance that conveys a Baroque idiom. The peculiar twelve-sided contour of the porphyry tops reveals a complex concept that is likely



Figs. 9\_20 and 9\_21.  
Luigi Valadier, *Tables  
with Dodecagonal  
Porphyry Top*, 1773.  
*Giallo antico,  
portasanta, bianco e  
nero antico*, gilt wood,  
gilt bronze, and  
porphyry, each  
36<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 55<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 34<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.  
(93 × 140 × 88 cm).  
Galleria Borghese,  
Rome





Fig. 9\_22. Luigi Valadier, *Winter Mask from the Gilt-Bronze Masks of the Seasons* (detail of fig. 9\_20)



Fig. 9\_23. Luigi Valadier, *Spring Mask from the Gilt-Bronze Masks of the Seasons* (detail of fig. 9\_21)



Fig. 9\_24. Luigi Valadier, *Summer Mask from the Gilt-Bronze Masks of the Seasons* (detail of fig. 9\_21)



Fig. 9\_25. Luigi Valadier, *Fall Mask from the Gilt-Bronze Masks of the Seasons* (detail of fig. 9\_21)