The Tarnowska Perseus by Canova

The following pages reproduce the photographic display that accompanied the first public showing of the Tarnowska Perseus in the Great Hall, from September 5 to October 29, 1967, together with the original contract (right) between Canova and Countess Tarnowska.

The captions are by Olga Raggio, Associate Curator of Western European Arts.

The Legend of Perseus

Perseus, son of Jupiter and Danäe, was sent by Polydeuces, King of Seriphos, to cut off and bring home the head of the Gorgon Medusa. The king secretly hoped he would perish in the attempt, but to help Perseus in his venture, Pluto provided him with a helmet of invisibility, Mercury gave him sandals and wings, and Vulcan a sword with a diamond hook. The young hero is shown here at the very moment when, radiant with joy, he triumphantly lifts up the severed head of Medusa.

Translation of the contract between Antonio Canova and Valeria Tarnowska, Rogers Fund, 67.169

I, Antonio Canova, sculptor, undertake to give to Countess Tarnowska a statue of Carrara marble carved by me, representing the triumphant Perseus holding the head of Medusa, also of marble, and his sword, in all similar to the other one now in the Vatican Museum, for the price agreed upon of three thousand sequins, real value, or their equivalent in silver; I will be satisfied to be paid in full in three installments, of a thousand sequins each: the first one on April 24, 1806, the second in April 1807, and the third in April 1808; and delivering my statue simply in my studio into the hands of the Banker, or whomever the Countess shall please to delegate in her stead: since I do not intend to be held responsible for anything that might happen after the moment of my delivery. In order, however, that the present contract be confirmed, about fifteen days shall elapse; after which time, if Marquis Torlonia will accept my order to pay the aforementioned sum of three thousand sequins, within the aforesaid terms, the present contract will be understood to be wholly valid.

Rome, April 14, 1804
(Signed) Antonio Canova
Valeria Countess Tarnowska
née Stroynowska

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The Tarnowska Perseus, by Antonio Canova
(1757-1822)
Height 7 feet 6 inches. Fletcher Fund, 67.110

The Metropolitan’s Perseus was made by Canova for the Polish countess Valeria Tarnowska, who wished to have a replica by the master’s hand of his immensely popular Perseus in the Vatican. The contract for the Tarnowska Perseus was signed by Canova on April 14, 1804. The sculptor must have completed the figure by 1808. It was shipped to Poland shortly thereafter. The Tarnowska Perseus remained in the family of the counts Tarnowski-Stroinowski until 1850, when it was sold to Baron Carl von Schwarz of Vienna. From 1941 to 1967 it was on loan from the heirs of Baron von Schwarz to the city of Salzburg, where it was exhibited in the Schloss Mirabell.

The Vatican Perseus, by Antonio Canova
Height 8 feet 1 inch.
Vatican Museum, Rome. Photo: Anderson

In May 1801, Canova finished this sculpture in his studio in Rome. Although the figure had been promised to a Milanese collector, so great was the admiration aroused in Rome by Canova’s work that the sculpture was not granted an export permit by the Roman authorities. Instead, it was acquired by Pope Pius VII, who had it placed in the sculpture court of the Belvedere, in the Vatican Museum—an unprecedented honor for the work of a modern sculptor.
Canova was a reflective and painstaking artist, forever in search of a perfect balance between "an exact and beautiful imitation of nature," and "the fine taste and ideal beauty of the Ancients." Sometimes—as in the case of the Vatican and of the Tarnowska Perseus—he returned to the same subject to produce what actually is not a simple replica, but a perfected version. In his autograph works, changes in the smallest detail represent a further stage of improvement. A list of autograph works dictated by Canova himself in 1816 includes the Tarnowska Perseus, described as: "Another Perseus, replica of the first one with some small changes, sent to Poland to Countess Tarnowska." The details shown here illustrate the small, but significant, changes made by the sculptor.
A comparison between the two draperies shows a more pronounced swing in that of the Tarnowska Perseus (opposite, left) and also a greater softness of modeling. These variations would seem to be the result of Canova’s ever renewed studies of draperies from the live model.

A comparison of the left sides of the Vatican and of the Tarnowska Perseus shows how, in the second version, Canova was able to do away with the marble support between the arm and the hip. In smoothing the line of the groin and the modeling of the nearby muscles he achieved a more subtly flowing contour, and a slimmer and softer figure (above, left).
The Apollo Belvedere

After a Greek original attributed to Leochares. Roman, 1st century A.D. Vatican Museum, Rome. Photo: Anderson

Canova is said to have been inspired by this celebrated sculpture for the composition of his Perseus. A comparison of the Apollo and the Perseus seems, however, to bring out the differences almost as much as the similarities between the two figures. Canova’s own definition of the creative method the sculptor should follow was: “Study nature, consult the works of the great masters of antiquity, and, after careful comparisons, arrive at your own original style.”
Canova’s Creative Method

Canova always started with numerous drawings after the living model. He then studied his composition by making wax and clay sketches, and when these were thought to be satisfactory, he made a large clay model. This was normally the full size of the final marble. Once the model was finished, it was cast in plaster. The plaster model was used for pointing off the marble block, a task that was left to the studio assistants.

Once the marble was so prepared, the working up of the modeling and the finishing of the surface was carried on by Canova himself. The sculptor attached the greatest importance to these last stages and spared himself no effort in achieving the perfection he required. At the end, he often finished his work by candlelight, to be able to refine every surface transition ever so softly and so smoothly.

The first preparatory sketches of Canova, in 1799, were for a figure of Mars. In the process of work the sculptor decided to change his subject into that of a Perseus—a legendary figure who could better express the combination of heroic force and youthful grace that fascinated him as a theme.

A small plaster sketch of the Mars (opposite) is still preserved in the Canova Museum at Possagno, near Venice. It has lost its head, but it is interesting to observe the contrast between its modeling—drier and closer to the antique—and the soft, painterly effect to be observed in the Vatican and Tarnowska marbles. As can be seen in the model, the handsome sweep of the drapery that so beautifully underlines the motion of the body was from the start conceived as a support for the figure; yet the direction of the folds over the arm was radically changed in the marbles to suggest the swift, triumphant motion of Perseus, the airborne hero.

The head of Medusa is traditionally represented as a “beauty tinged with horror,” her snaky locks surrounding the face that changed into stone whoever cast a glance upon it. A terracotta study for this head (right, below), by Canova, is preserved in the museum at Possagno.