Christina Ferando

Exhibiting Antonio Canova

Display and the Transformation of Sculptural Theory

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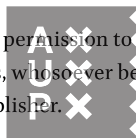

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Introduction: Canova on Display

Abstract: The introduction, "Canova on Display," examines Canova's dedication to the art of display and his innovative exhibition strategies. Beholders' responses to these displays are firmly situated both in the Italian context that engendered him and in the international community that celebrated his work. The discourse generated by viewers in response to exhibitions of his works impacted the way works of arts were perceived, fueling reconsiderations of the sculptural medium and its place in cultural patrimony.

Keywords: sculpture installations, pedestals, lighting, grand tour, reception theory, art criticism

This is not a book about the making of art. Nor is it concerned with tracing the history of display or locating the origins of aesthetic theories. It is, rather, a consideration of the dynamic relationship between viewers and works of art. By using the work of Antonio Canova (1757–1822) as a linchpin, I explore the way viewing conditions, political turbulence, and familiarity with artistic concepts shaped beholders' interpretations and judgments of objects. This, in turn, formed their understanding of themselves as beholders and critics. More importantly, however, their discussions shaped the legacy of important sculptural theories, helping usher in their modern definitions and creating the lenses through which we experience and interpret works of art. Beholders' variable attitudes towards Canova's work demarcate a transitional moment in the history of art and the establishment of modern attitudes not just towards sculpture, but towards cultural patrimony in general.

Canova's career spanned the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a period when the European continent was experiencing considerable turmoil due to revolutionary forces in France and the subsequent establishment—and collapse—of the French empire. Despite the political upheaval within the Italian states and their occupation by foreign sovereigns, Canova was hailed as the greatest artist of the period (Fig. 0.1). His neoclassical creations exemplified the ideals of the ancients and merged a classical aesthetic with a Romantic sensibility, attracting admirers from across the globe. Moreover, upon the sculptures' completion, Canova and his patrons took care to celebrate the masterful conception and carving of his works in the meticulous orchestration of their display. His sculptures were venerated with dramatic and noteworthy exhibitions that attracted hundreds, if not thousands, of visitors. By enshrining his marble figures alongside plaster casts of ancient works, bathing them in candlelight, staining and waxing their surfaces, and even setting them in motion on rotating bases, Canova engaged viewers intellectually, physically, and emotionally. He delighted their senses even as

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Fig. 0.1: Thomas Lawrence, *Portrait of the Italian Sculptor Antonio Canova* (1757–1822). Oil on canvas, 91 × 71 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

he challenged them to rethink inherited views about the nature of sculpture.

By the twentieth century, however, Canova's neoclassical perfection was invoked only as a foil to modern art, and his dismissal as the "erotic Frigidaire" sounded the death knell to his reputation and the precipitous decline of neoclassicism.[1] To blame, in part, is the fact that the modern experience of viewing neoclassical sculpture is vastly different than that of the early nineteenth century. Canova's sculptures do not fare well against the modernist aesthetic of the "white cube." Gone are the walls with carefully chosen palettes that both cast a warm glow on the white marble and allowed it to stand out against them. Gone, too, are the hidden alcoves and enclosed viewing spaces that lent Canova's works such mystery. Isolated against bright white walls, it is no surprise more contemporary critics found Canova's works cold and lifeless.

Yet during his lifetime, and, indeed, for many years after his death, Canova's perfect marmoreal forms inspired passion and vitriol. They provoked debates on a wide range of topics—the nature of sculptural production, the definition of originality, the construction of normative white femininity, the centrality of cultural patrimony and many more. I argue that modern conceptions of sculpture were shaped through the animated response to his work, which was activated by dramatic displays. Although now descriptors of Canova's work—white, European, gendered, idealized—seem out of touch in a world that privileges very different definitions of sculpture and which has radically different cultural and geopolitical concerns, my research reaffirms the continued relevance of the artist and his work.

By examining a wealth of primary sources in English, French, Italian, and German, I put forth a way of thinking about the display conditions which so enlivened Canova's works and the multifaceted way viewers engaged with them. The display of Canova's works encouraged viewers to critically examine, inspect, and contemplate his sculptures. Beholders vociferously debated issues that remain central to the study of art history today. What is the nature of artistic production? How does one write eloquently about a work of art? How best should a work be exhibited? How does sculpture shape and reflect cultural norms? Who owns, or should own, a work of art? Can sculpture be a modern art? By considering Canova's work in depth, I am

1 Mario Praz, "Canova, or the Erotic Frigidaire," *ARTNews* LVI (Nov. 1957): 24–27.

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able to approach these evolving and resonant questions from the vantage point of one of their earliest and most lasting (if until now not always acknowledged) originators. Canova may not have been original in the way we think of—his neoclassical works are sometimes too redolent of the past—but he was highly original in orchestrating the display and presentation of his work. In this way, he affords us new understanding of the immersive experience of contemporary art and the way it commands the beholder's attention and their physical and psychological engagement.

Beholders were encouraged to take the art of looking at sculpture seriously, and so they did. Their examination of Canova's works and their wide-ranging and often fierce discussions in letters, travel diaries, newspapers, and journals reveal the key role Canova's work played in defining and transforming aesthetic theories about sculpture in the early nineteenth century, which continue to have an impact well into the present day. Recent art historical literature has tended to position Canova in relation to northern sculptors such as Bertel Thorvaldsen or situate him in the broader context of European art, often as a complement to the French neoclassical painter Jacques-Louis David. My book redresses these narratives, firmly situating Canova both in the Italian context that engendered him and in the international community that celebrated his work. By emphasizing a transcultural and international approach, I paint a more complex picture of Canova's importance in artistic, political, and public circles. Beholders' changing attitudes towards his work demarcate a transitional moment in the history of art that fueled reconsiderations of the sculptural medium and its place in cultural patrimony. These lively debates not only placed Canova's work at the heart of modern ideas about the production, reception, and aesthetics of sculpture, but they reaffirmed the power of public dialogue to shape art theory and the canon itself.

***

Canova's popularity can be gauged by the number of commissions he received from a host of international patrons from Europe and as far afield as the United States. Unlike other artistic luminaries from the period—most notably Jacques-Louis David—he successfully negotiated the turbulent political climate of the time, remaining in the good graces of the Papacy, Napoleon and the Bonapartes, the Austrian Hapsburgs, and the subsequent Restoration regime, from the 1790s until his death in 1822. Moreover, many of these artistic commissions translated into important cultural posts. As the Inspector General of the Fine Arts of the Papal States, he modified key installations in the Vatican Museums, such as those of the Museo Pio-Clementino and Galleria Chiaramonti, and set policies regarding cultural patrimony.[2] In addition to these cultural roles, Canova also took on political responsibilities—even if he did so hesitantly. After Napoleon's deposition, the allied European forces descended on Paris to demand the return of their looted works of art. It was Canova whom the Pope sent on this diplomatic mission on behalf of the Papal States, and while in Paris, Canova intervened and bore witness to repatriations not only for the Papal States, but also the Venetian Republic and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

This cultural and political cachet merely augmented the reputation he had already

2 For Canova's impact on the cultural patrimony of Italy, see Giancarlo Cunial, "Canova e la tutela degli oggetti d'arte," in *Antonio Canova: Scultura, dipinti e incisioni dal Museo e dalla Gipsoteca di Possagno presentati ad Assisi*, ed. Mario Guderzo (Crocetto del Montello, Treviso: Terra Ferma, 2013), 55–73.

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established as a sculptor. Canova was known for his perfectionism. His carving and the special attention he paid to the surface of the marble created the illusion that the stone had been transubstantiated into "real flesh."[3] The softness achieved by Canova's chisel was heightened by the application of wax and grind water to the marble, which filled in the interstices and unevenness of the stone and created a lush, reflective surface. At times Canova even tinted the cheeks and lips of his female sculptures with rouge. While these techniques were sometimes controversial, they also secured his reputation as the modern Pygmalion and encouraged the brisk market for his work. For those admirers who could not afford a marble sculpture, his work was available via reproductions which ranged from high-end marble copies and luxury engraved gems to (comparatively) inexpensive prints and plaster casts. Travelers could also see many of his sculptures in his studio in Rome, which acted as a showcase of sorts, with large clay models, plaster casts, and marbles in the process of being carved all on display.

Canova's studio was by no means the only place viewers could encounter his works. Original sculptures were on display throughout Europe, in private collections, churches, academies, gardens, public squares, state-sponsored exhibitions, and newly founded public museums. These diverse locations make it difficult to speak of a dominant mode for the presentation of works of art in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Yet while there is no single resource on the history of display, scholarship by Malcolm Baker, Jeffrey Collins, Gail Feigenbaum, Andrew McClellan, Carole Paul, and others makes use of contemporary details culled from a variety of sources to showcase the period's diverse exhibition strategies.[4] Sculpture in particular lent itself to a variety of possible installations. The durability of marble and bronze meant works could be displayed outside, while the medium's three-dimensionality allowed artists and patrons to play with lighting, pedestal heights and types, and viewing angles. Eighteenth-century installations were a far cry from modernism's white wall.

Canova, like other artists of the period, became versed in these possibilities because of his own experience of viewing art. His well-documented "grand tour" in 1779–1780, in which he viewed objects in the academies, museums, and private collections of all the great Italian centers, influenced his own near-obsession with the exhibition conditions of his sculptures. His patrons quickly picked up on the importance display held for him. While commission and installation details are not always available, in many cases correspondence with his clients

3 Cited in Antonio Canova and Antoine-Chrysosthôme Quatremère de Quincy, *Il carteggio Canova-Quatremère de Quincy, 1785–1822*, ed. Giuseppe Pavanello and Francesco Paolo Luiso (Ponzano, Italy: Vianello, 2005), 175. The phrase "*vera carne*" was used by Canova when admiring the Parthenon marbles and has been used subsequently to describe his own capacity to carve marble. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

4 For some examples, see Malcolm Baker, *Figured in Marble: The Making and Viewing of Eighteenth-Century Sculpture* (London: V&A Publications, 2000); Jeffrey Laird Collins, *Papacy and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Rome: Pius VI and the Arts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Gail Feigenbaum and Francesco Freddolini, eds., *Display of Art in the Roman Palace, 1550–1750* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2014); Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Carole Paul, *The Borghese Collections and the Display of Art in the Age of the Grand Tour* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008); and the essays in Carole Paul, ed., *The First Modern Museums of Art: The Birth of an Institution in 18th- and Early-19th-Century Europe* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012).

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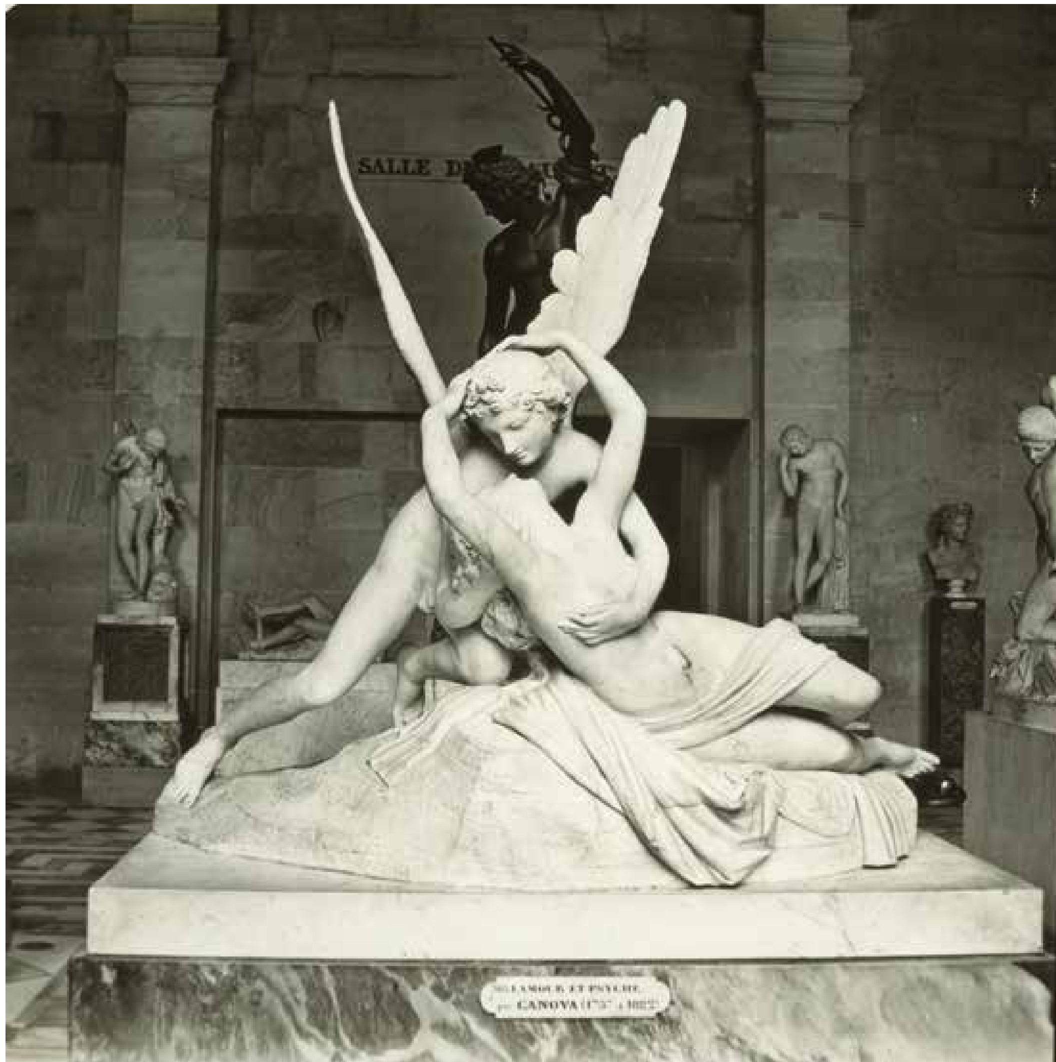

Fig. 0.2: L. & F., One-half of stereograph showing Canova's *Cupid and Psyche* in the Musée du Louvre, 1856–1890. Notice the handle on the base of the sculpture which enables it to turn. Glass, paper, and sealed edge, 8.4 × 17.1 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

signals not just Canova's interest, but his fixation on the placement of his works. His patrons, in turn, were eager to assure him that his sculptures were well situated and set off to their best advantage. The very nature of the medium, its long production time, the challenges and difficulties of installation meant that Canova was involved—even if indirectly—in the placement of most of the large-scale works completed during his lifetime. Therefore, while the installations that Canova and his patrons subsequently employed were not created ex-novo but were rooted in long-standing display conventions, particularly those of ancient sculptures, the degree to which Canova intervened and influenced them was unparalleled.

Countless works, for instance, were placed on pedestals with built in turntables. While there

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Fig. 0.3: Anonymous, Canova's *Creugas*, *Triumphant Perseus*, and *Damoxenes* in situ in the Vatican Museums, 1890–1910. Part of photo album of a journey through Southern Europe and the Middle East. Gelatin silver print, 19 × 24.6 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

were precedents for this in both antiquity and the early modern era, these were rare rather than regular occurrences. In contrast, most of Canova's works, except the religious sculptures, were placed on rotating bases.[5] Small busts, for instance, had handles in their bases that could be used to rotate the work, but large works such as his *Cupid and Psyche* turned easily as well (Fig. 0.2). Sculptures that were conceived as a pair only rotated one hundred and eighty degrees, to maintain the logic of their relationship to one another.[6] These included the famous boxers, *Damoxenos* and *Creugas*, and *Hector* and *Ajax* (Fig. 0.3). In addition, works not placed on rotating pedestals were sometimes surrounded by mirrors. These display techniques showcased Canova's capacity to think in three dimensions. Since he also periodically worked with a trestle that allowed him to rotate both clay and marble works easily in front of him, Canova's insistence that viewers see his sculptures from all points of view was an extension of his own working process and his own experience with the materiality of marble.

Not satisfied with ensuring viewers' appreciation of all the angles of his work, Canova also

5 See Kristina Herrmann Fiore, "Sulle virtù dinamiche di statue e colossi del Canova," in *Sculture romane del Settecento, II: La professione dello scultore*, ed. Elisa Debenedetti (Rome: Bonsignori, 2002), 269–294.

6 Ibid., 277.

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Fig. 0.4: Benjamin Zix, *The Emperor Napoleon and Empress Marie-Louise Visiting the Laocoön Room in the Louvre by Torchlight*, ca. 1804–1811. Pen and ink, 26 × 29 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

insisted on controlling the lighting in which his sculptures were displayed. Viewing sculptures in torchlight, for instance, surged in popularity at the end of the eighteenth century because it was believed that the ancients themselves enjoyed looking at sculpture in this manner.[7] Attending the Vatican (and subsequently the Louvre) at night to see the *Laocoön* and the *Apollo Belvedere* was a popular pastime, and Canova likewise urged visitors to admire his works out of the undiluted light of day (Fig. 0.4). In other instances, Canova ensured that his sculptures were well lit from above, creating apertures in the ceiling above his works. In 1803, he even ordered the niches in the octagonal courtyard of the Museo Pio-Clementino bricked up to control the lighting of *Triumphant Perseus* and *The Boxers* and to isolate the beholder from the surrounding sculptures.[8]

In addition to techniques that guided the viewer's interaction with the sculpture, Canova was equally preoccupied with the larger

7 Oskar Bätschmann, *The Artist in the Modern World: The Conflict between Market and Self-Expression* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 21–22.

8 Paolo Liverani, "La nascita del Museo Pio-Clementino e la politica canoviana dei Musei Vaticani," in *Canova direttore di musei. I settimana di studi canoviani*, ed. Manlio Pastore Stocchi (Bassano del Grappa: Istituto di ricerca per gli studi su Canova e il neoclassicismo, 2004), 97–98.

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Fig. 0.5: Antonio Canova, *Psyche*, 1793–1794. Marble, 150 × 50 × 60 cm; pedestal 80 × 60 cm. Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany. © Kunsthalle Bremen – Lars Lohrisch – ARTOTHEK

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environment. Early in his career Canova applauded the intended placement of *Psyche* in Girolamo Zulian's home (Fig. 0.5). Although Zulian died before obtaining the work, Canova felt that the room Zulian and the architect Giannantonio Selva had designed seemed "perfectly suited" for the sculpture. But Canova's praise did not mean he did not have advice for the architect. On the contrary, he had detailed suggestions for improvement and recommended Selva add a "simple frieze with a chiaroscuro festoon, with a few butterflies, with a simple coffered ceiling and greenish or yellowish walls […], or to paint or tint with stucco some of the coffered panels of the vault. You know a thousand times better than me," he continued with false modesty, "but I would think all in chiaroscuro."[9]

In fact, Canova encouraged collectors to display his sculptures in architectural frames. These were meant to flatter the work, control the lighting, invite contemplation, and encourage—or limit—movement around the sculpture. Numerous works were exhibited in settings constructed or modified specifically for them. Nicolaus II Esterházy commissioned a temple in the park of Esterházy palace, shown here in a painting by Alfred Christoph Dies, that ultimately showcased the seated statue of Princess Leopoldine after its completion in 1822[10] (Fig. 0.6). The Duke of Bedford famously ensconced *The Three Graces* in a chapel-like space at Woburn Abbey, and *Hercules and Lychas* reigned in a similar apsidal alcove in

9 Cited in Ranieri Varese, "La *Psiche* seconda: 'Ed ha un occulto magistero'," *Studi veneziani, N.S.* 45 (2003): 309.

10 Géza Galavics, "'Porträts' eines fürstlichen Gartens: Der Esterházysche Schloßpark in Eisenstadt," in *"Der Natur und Kunst gewidmet": Der Esterházysche Schloßpark in Eisenstadt*, ed. Franz Prost (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 126.

Fig. 0.6: Albert Christoph Dies, *The Temple of Leopoldine with Lake*, 1807. Oil on canvas, 168 × 217 cm. Private collection, Eisenstadt Castle, Eisenstadt, Austria. Esterházy Privatstiftung, Schloss Eisenstadt, Gemäldesammlung, B 95

the home of the Duke of Torlonia in Rome[11] (Figs. 0.7 and 0.8).

In Vienna, Canova's involvement in the placement of his works is evident from correspondence between the artist and the architect Pietro Nobile, who designed a large temple in the Volksgarten to hold *Theseus and the Centaur* (Figs. 0.9 and 0.10). Not only did Canova recommend Nobile for the job, but he also weighed in with opinions on the architecture, suggesting, for instance, that the temple be modeled on the Temple of Hephaestus, in Athens, then known as the Theseion and believed to have housed the remains of Theseus himself.[12] The same architect had also designed a temple to house the *Monument to Maria Christina of Austria* in 1803, for which a series of drawings show his

11 See Marco Pupillo, "Appunti sulla sistemazione dell'***Ercole e Lica*** di Antonio Canova," *Bollettino dei musei comunali: Associazione Amici dei Musei di Roma* N.S. XXVI (2012): 113–132.

12 Monica Pacorig, "Canova e il tempio di Teseo," *Arte documento* 7 (1993): 239–242.

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Fig. 0.7: Antonio Canova, *Three Graces*, 1814–1817, in situ at the Duke of Bedford's Woburn Abbey. From the Woburn Abbey Collection

Fig. 0.8: Pietro Vitali, "The Gallery of *Hercules and Lychas* in the Palazzo Torlonia," frontispiece of P. Vitali, *Marmi scolpiti esistenti nel palazzo di S.E. il Sig. Gio. Torlonia*. Rome: Presso Vitali, [182–?], vol. 2. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (85-B24588)

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Fig. 0.9: Carl Schmidt, *Theseus Temple by Pietro von Nobile in the Volksgarten*, *Vienna*, *Perspective*, 1820. Graphite, black pen, watercolor, 51.8 × 73.1 cm. The Albertina Museum, Vienna

Fig. 0.10: Carl Schmidt, *Theseus Temple by Pietro von Nobile in the Volksgarten, Vienna, Cross-Section*, 1820. Graphite, black pen, pink wash, 71.5 × 52 cm. The Albertina Museum, Vienna

unrealized plans[13] (Figs. 0.11 and 0.12). Nobile intended the temple to be freestanding, with Doric columns and a domed roof, and accessed from the front, limiting viewers' perspectives of the monument. Although Prince Albert of Saxony, Duke of Teschen, ultimately was pleased with the placement of the monument in the Augustinian Church in Vienna, he "perhaps did regret" his decision not to place the work in a *tempietto*.[14] As Canova himself wrote unenthusiastically, "the church certainly could not have an extremely favorable light, even if it wasn't extremely bad, either."[15]

At other times, Canova used careful juxtapositions to draw attention to his works' aesthetic qualities. Before entering the collection of the Museo Pio-Clementino, for instance, *Triumphant Perseus* was exhibited in Canova's studio near a plaster cast of the *Apollo Belvedere*, its model. Likewise, casts of other ancient masterpieces were exhibited both as inspiration and foil to Canova's own sculptures. A model of *Hercules and Lychas* was displayed next to a cast of its prototype, the *Farnese Hercules*. Even the fragments of classical works Canova collected and placed on the outer walls of his studio were organized to show "typological groupings.[16] (Fig. 0.13). In Canova's museological installations, such as his plan for the Braccio Nuovo of the Museo Chiaramonti in the Vatican, objects were also grouped together and installed in

13 Angelika Gause-Reinhold, *Das Christinen-Denkmal von Antonio Canova und der Wandel in der Todesauffassung um 1800* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1990), 42–45.
14 Cited in Varese, "La *Psiche* seconda," 330.
15 Cited in Ricciotti Bratti, *Antonio Canova nella sua vita artistica privata* (Venice: R. Deputazione, 1917), 375.
16 Maria Elisa Micheli, "*Iudicium et Ordo*: Antonio Canova and Antiquity," in *The Rediscovery of Antiquity: The Role of the Artist*, ed. Jane Fejfer, Tobias Fischer-Hansen, and Annette Rathje (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2003), 277.

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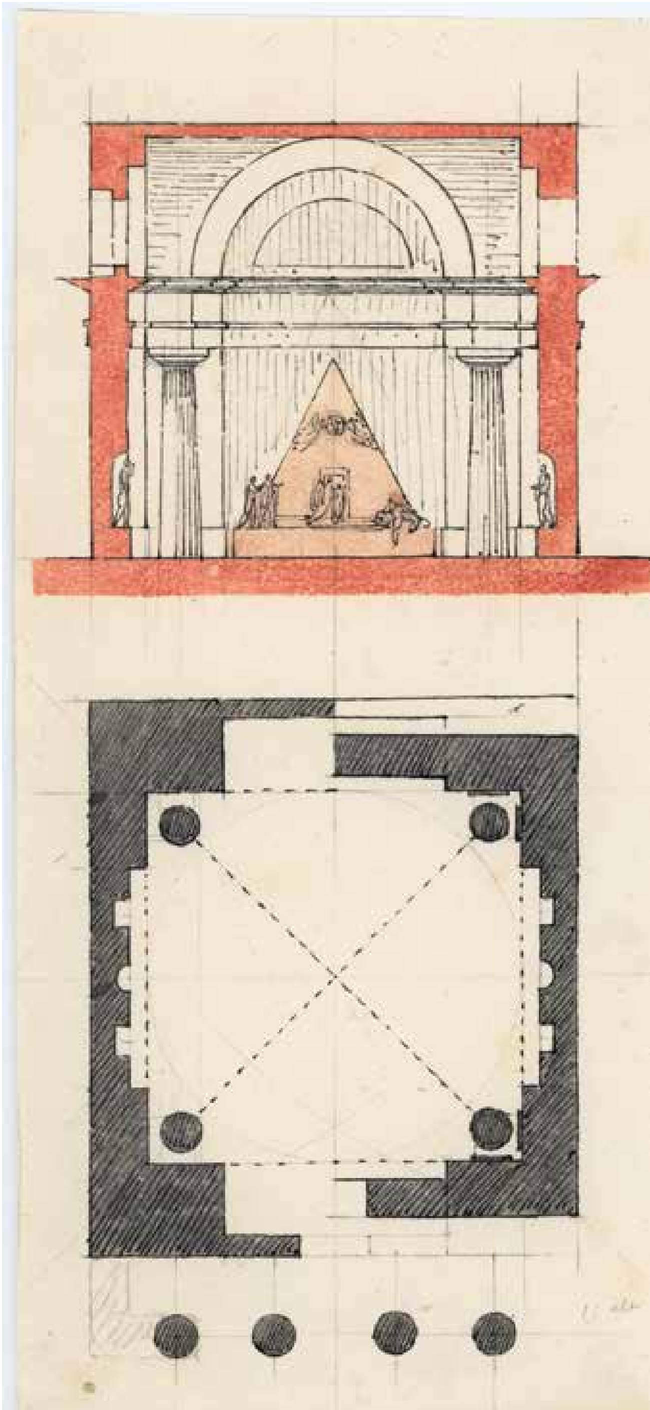

Fig. 0.11: Pietro Nobile, *Plan for a Temple for the Maria Christina Monument, Vienna* (unrealized), 1803. 25.5 × 11.5 cm. Su concessione della Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio del Friuli Venezia Giulia, Ministero della Cultura, Fondo Pietro Nobile, vol. 42, no. 10

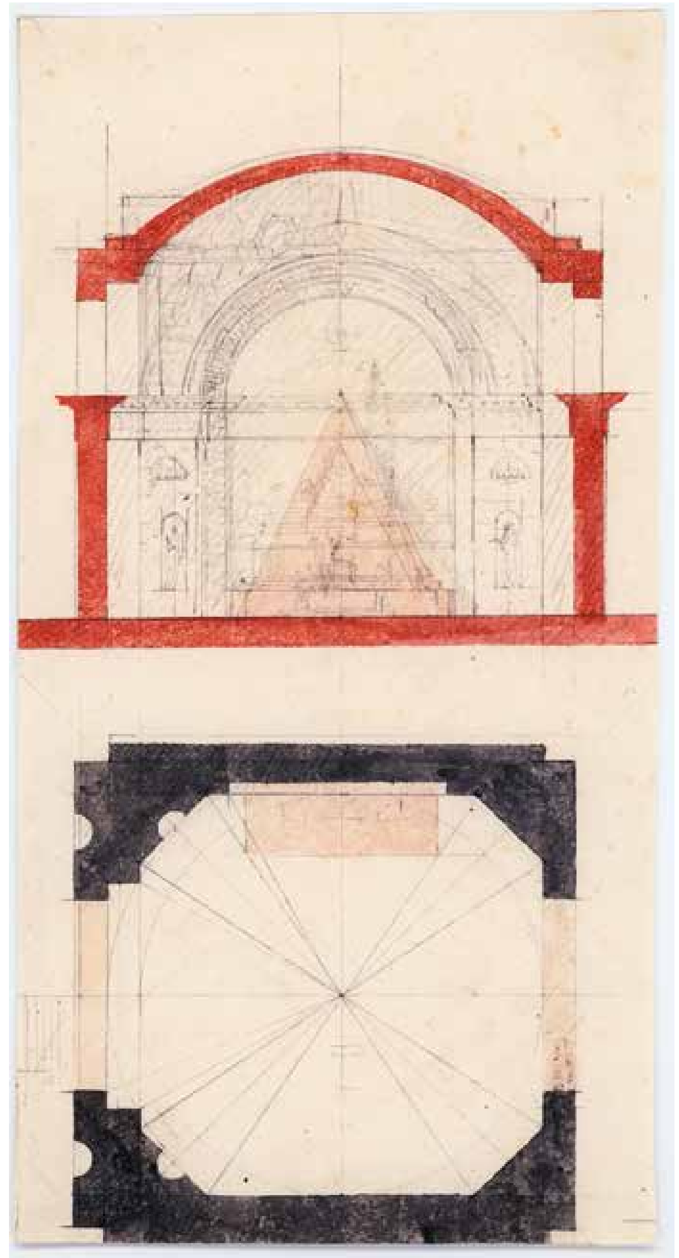

Fig. 0.12: Pietro Nobile, *Plan for a Temple for the Maria Christina Monument, Vienna* (unrealized), 1803. 27.5 × 14.5 cm. Su concessione della Soprintendenza Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio del Friuli Venezia Giulia, Ministero della Cultura, Fondo Pietro Nobile, vol. 42, no. 11

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Fig. 0.13: "Canova's Studio," *L'Album, giornale letterario e di belle arti*. Rome: Tipografia delle belle arti, 1835, vol. 2, no. 37 (Saturday, November 21, 1835): 296. Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (85-S84)

order to invite comparisons between them.[17] It was thus through the display of his work that Canova best expressed his engagement with the sculptural medium and that he and his patrons stage-managed the viewer's experience.

The sensitivity and, at times, anxiety Canova revealed concerning the display of his work has broad implications not only for our understanding of his attitude towards his sculptures and their beholders but also about larger questions of artistic intent and an audience's capacity to generate a work's meaning. Canova had his beholders in mind throughout the creative process: in the formulation of his works, in his exploration of sculpture's three-dimensionality, in the carving of their surfaces, and in their dramatic display. The central position the beholder held for Canova not only reflects their importance but also the embodied nature of viewing art in the nineteenth century. These are questions that evolved over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and can also teach us about our engagement with art in this contemporary moment.

Canova's relationship with his beholders has been of great interest recently to art historians and in recent exhibitions, where his works have been displayed on rotating pedestals, with mirrors, and with subdued lighting that mimics torchlight.[18] Alex Potts has analyzed some of

17 Maria Antonietta de Angelis, "Il 'braccio nuovo' del Museo Chiaramonti: Un prototipo di museo tra passato e futuro," *Bollettino—Monumenti musei e gallerie pontificie* 14 (1994): 194–196 and 205–207.

18 As, for instance, in the 2019–2020 exhibition in Milan, *Canova: Eterna bellezza*. See Giuseppe Pavanello, ed., *Canova: Eterna bellezza* (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019).

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these display techniques—particularly the pose and position of Canova's sculptures as well as their tinted surfaces—with respect to the aesthetic experience of the viewer.[19] For Potts, Canova's flowing sculptural forms work in tandem with these exhibition techniques to force the beholder to circle the work, thus seeing it bit by bit at close range, ultimately undoing the "wholeness" of classical sculpture. This, he argues, points the way forward to modern viewing practices promoted by Rodin and Minimalism. Satish Padiyar likewise draws attention to the process of viewing Canova's sculptures by emphasizing the sculptural surface and its lustrous "skin." For him, the modernity of Canova's works is this "envelope" which becomes the site of subjectivity, transcendence, and collective identity in the postrevolutionary period.[20]

Padiyar's analysis depends on Immanuel Kant's aesthetic philosophy, as does David Bindman's recent book on the sculptor.[21] Bindman positions Canova in relation to the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen by examining their work in light of neo-Kantian criticism, particularly that of the German author Carl Ludwig Fernow. Focusing on issues of gender, color, and race, Bindman suggests that not only were Canova's apologists, such as Leopoldo Cicognara and Quatremère de Quincy, also affected by Kant's philosophies of the autonomous work of art, but that Canova himself also may have altered his sculptural practice in response to (negative) criticism he received—ultimately indirectly responding to Kant's aesthetic philosophy.

However obliquely engaged Canova himself may have been with Kant's ideas—for as Padiyar puts it, "Canova is not a reader of Kant"—there is no escaping the influence Kant had on the history of aesthetics and the history of art at the end of the eighteenth century.[22] This has most recently been analyzed with great success by Caroline van Eck in a larger study on the changing attitudes towards the reception of sculpture in the late eighteenth century.[23] Prior to 1750, sculptures were often treated as animated beings that could evoke an extreme range of emotions, from love to hatred, in viewers. By the late eighteenth century, propelled by the rise of aesthetic philosophy including the dissemination of Kant's ideas of disinterested judgment, this type of reaction was increasingly considered inappropriate. The formation of ideal "rational, enlightened and autonomous" subjects promoted an aesthetic experience based on the formal properties of the work of art, free from "practical use" and "monetary value," from idolatry and fetishism, and from "all feelings of love, hate, fear or desire."[24] Moreover in conjunction with the concomitant rise of the art museum, responses to works of art were policed, creating new models for the appreciation of art which had an enormous impact on the history of modernism. As van Eck points out, however, this transition was hardly a clear cut one and "pre-modern" engagement with the art object continued—and continues—to linger.

19 Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), esp. "Surface Values: Canova," 38–60.

20 Satish Padiyar, *Chains: David, Canova, and the Fall of the Public Hero in Postrevolutionary France* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 6.

21 David Bindman, *Warm Flesh, Cold Marble: Canova, Thorvaldsen and Their Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

22 Padiyar, *Chains*, 136. Canova did own two editions, in German, of Kant's *Critic of Pure Reason*. See Giuseppe Pavanello, *La biblioteca di Antonio Canova* (Verona: Cierre, 2007), 68, nos. 1254–1255.

23 Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence: From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

24 Ibid., 132.

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Indeed, Sarah Betzer has recently suggested that the heightened attention on Kant's theories of disinterestedness was in part a response to "a new alertness of the 'subjective self'" and an "affective" aesthetic response that was particularly stimulated by sculpture.[25]

This was a transitional moment in the history of art when models of looking and possibilities for the aesthetic experience were in flux. Everything about Canova's works—his alternatively sensual and violent subjects, his surface values, the display conditions of his works—all reiterate his complicated relationship to the Kantian legacy. The interaction Canova's viewers had with his sculptures showcases the limits of Kant's model of aesthetic judgment free of desire; there is inevitable tension between idealized theory and its application in a politically and socially charged world. Moreover, Canova's works—and particularly the display of them—undermined Kant's requirement of disinterestedness. It is true that Canova's display techniques often elicited aesthetic judgment on his sculptures. They required viewers to critically assess his works by testing different skills. The installations were meant to educate viewers' vision and their judgment in numerous ways. The sculptor wanted viewers to admire his careful conception of subjects, to understand his selection of iconographic details, and to appreciate his talent as a carver. At the same time, however, the singular and dedicated manner in which beholders paid heed to his works—turning them on pedestals, approaching them closely, admiring them in torchlight, stroking their marble surfaces—encouraged a physical encounter with the work of art that superseded formal admiration. Beholders could not help but be conscious of their own physical, carnal nature, and this, in combination with the political undercurrents brought out by the exhibitions, denied any possibility of detachment on their behalf.

What is common to both Kant and Canova, then, and what dominates the period around 1800, is the emphasis on the part of artists and philosophers alike on the role of the beholder.[26] Broad cultural transformations in the eighteenth century contributed to a shift in viewing conditions for works of art. The new circulation of visitors throughout Europe, as the Grand Tour reached its peak, the abundance of archaeological excavations that supplied hundreds, if not thousands, of new works for sale, and the movement of works of art themselves as part of the art market and military conquest meant that viewers from far beyond the Italian peninsula could see objects directly on a scale as never before. Physical encounters with objects—especially large sculptures—which had once been limited to a rarified audience, or which were experienced via reproductions as plaster casts and prints, were increasingly part of the common experience of works of art. Louis Simond, a Frenchman who traveled through Italy in 1817–1818, said it best: "In this travelling age, all the world has seen the Belvedere Apollo and the Belvedere Apollo has seen all the world."[27]

25 Sarah Betzer, *Animating the Antique: Sculptural Encounter in the Age of Aesthetic Theory* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 16.

26 Mark Cheetham points out that one of the criticisms against Kant by his contemporaries was that he thought of art from the point of view of the spectator and not the creator. Mark A. Cheetham, *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

27 See Louis Simond, *A Tour in Italy and Sicily* (London: Printed for Longman, Reese, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1828), 219. Simond's journal was first published in French. This citation is from the English translation. I refer to both versions throughout the book because the differences between them are enlightening.

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Of course, viewers encountered original works of art before the eighteenth century; this relationship between object and beholder has always been integral to the experience of works of art, and artists and writers, philosophers and critics, have always been conscious of their audience. But the period around 1800 is unique because the wide array of spaces in which viewing art took place coincided with and encouraged an exponential growth in the audience. Concrete figures are scarce, but even a quick look at the rising number of visitors to art exhibitions and museums over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gives a sense of the increasing number of individuals interested in the fine arts. Those of the large urban centers of London and Paris are better known—and more easily explicable by the population growth in those cities themselves. By the 1820s, the congested conditions of the Royal Academy, the National Gallery in London, the Parisian Salon, and the Louvre were regularly lampooned by caricaturists. But such numbers were not limited to northern European capitals. Scholars working on the Capitoline and Pio-Clementino suggest that the museums were "well attended" in the early nineteenth century, and the strict guidelines laid out for custodians regarding proper visitor behavior hint at crowds that needed to be policed.[28]

By all accounts, visitors flocked to Canova's sculptures in droves. European and American travel diaries and both public and private journals teem with references to his sculptures. A stop at Canova's studio in Rome, for instance, was practically de rigueur. While other sculptors' studios in Rome were also open to the public, many of these artists primarily sold newly restored antiquities, copies after ancient sculptures, and plaster casts; they did not have the same allure as an artist making original, modern works in marble. Enticed by the "contemporary art world," as it then was, the individuals who saw Canova's work were varied, and included men and women, Italians and foreigners, artists, connoisseurs, critics, statesmen, educated members of the middle and upper classes, and even members of the working class.

Canova understood the important role these visitors had in his success. He carefully cultivated public interest in his work. He had, to quote the travel writer and novelist Charlotte Eaton, "the avarice of fame, not of money."[29] Although his financial gain was directly linked to his success, Canova did seem genuinely concerned with the critical reaction to his sculptures. Upon unveiling his *Venus Italica* in the Galleria degli Uffizi of Florence, for instance, he noted that he received the poetry written in his honor with some skepticism; it was the "incorruptible judgment of the public" that he trusted the most.[30]

More and more viewers understood the power that they had in shaping critical responses to works of art. In the introduction to his letters on his travels around the Continent, Henry Milton, a British War Office clerk sent to Paris to describe the Louvre for the British public, wrote:

> Works of art may be viewed with reference to the means by which they are produced, or to

28 Many thanks to Carole Paul for sharing her reflections on the attendance of the museums in Rome. For more on policing museum crowds, see Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, ed. Reesa Breenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996), 81–111.

29 Charlotte A. Eaton, *Rome, in the Nineteenth Century; Containing a Complete Account of the Ruins of the Ancient City, the Remains of the Middle Ages, and the Monuments of Modern Times*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1820), vol. 2, 368.

30 Canova and Quatremère de Quincy, *Il Carteggio Canova-Quatremère de Quincy*, 153.

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> the effect resulting from those means. It is the exclusive privilege of the artist to speak on the former subject; but on the latter, those who do not possess practical skill may be competent to judge. The labours of the sculptor, the painter, and the architect, would fail of success if they were only addressed to the artist. They are given to the world; and hence all will assume to themselves a right to judge and discuss their merits: nor can any production be considered as successful, which gains only the applause of those who view it with reference to the difficulty of its execution, and the accuracy of its parts.[31]

For Milton, works were not meant to be evaluated only by their technical accuracy—their production values, so to speak. Specialized knowledge about the making of art might be restricted to artists, but once the work was "given to the world" anyone could weigh in with an opinion, and that opinion need not be limited to technique. Since everyone had the "right to judge," debates about the success and failure of works of art were no longer limited to artists and connoisseurs but were part of a much broader public dialogue. Although the general composition of the audience (European and American, primarily middle- to upper-class, white, and literate) meant this was not fully a democratic or egalitarian endeavor, it nonetheless meant art criticism was no longer circumscribed to a narrow circle of authors. Discourse—communal discourse—significantly impacted the way works of arts were perceived. The expansion of the number and types of individuals who could shape popular opinion on a wide variety of artistic issues created a broad shift in power dynamics over the course of the nineteenth century; beholders had more and more authority.

Importantly, it was a conversation that was occurring in print. These beholders, who felt that their responses and reactions to works of art were as valid as those who once had specialized knowledge, felt equally empowered to publish their opinions. In a period that also saw the expansion of the press, this sometimes took the form of journal articles and essays. At other times, writers took advantage of the epistolary form commonly used by Grand Tourists and published details about their voyages, as had Henry Milton. While travel journals have a long history and have their own idiosyncrasies of form and content, by the early nineteenth century, the sheer number of publications, at least, had grown exponentially.[32] This was accompanied by a shift in content. While seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors had sometimes done little more than list the works of art they saw or had fallen back on the excuse that a work was either "indescribable" or so well-known not to merit additional commentary, early-nineteenth-century authors were much more voluble. The profusion of literary reviews meant that criticism of their ideas, sometimes accompanied by large citations of the original text, were disseminated widely and at times even translated into foreign languages. Authors might also refer to, agree with, or contradict earlier authors in their own publications, creating a ripple effect which expanded the number of people engaged in the conversation. Everyone really was a critic.

It is the literature produced by this new culture of criticism that forms a core focus of this study. The belabored and lengthy process of working in

31 Henry Milton, *Letters on the Fine Arts, Written from Paris, in the Year 1815* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown), v–vi.

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32 For common tropes in travel writing, see Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography, 1600–1830* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).

marble stymied even the most cultured viewers who did not necessarily understand the nuances of the technical process. Liberated from the need to discuss those processes and free to comment instead on a work's "effect," as Milton put it, opened a whole range of interpretations of Canova's works. Christopher Johns has written eloquently about how the form of Canova's works themselves was open to multiple allegorical and political readings—a fluidity which largely accounted for his ability to remain in favor throughout a variety of political regimes.[33] I argue that it was not just the form of Canova's sculptures that encouraged these multiple readings. Exhibition conditions were also key to their shifting meanings. The display of Canova's sculptures acted as a catalyst for discourse across a broad range of subjects. Exhibitions of his works inspired discussions of topics as diverse as audience experience, originality and artistic production, the association between the sculptural surface, flesh, and anatomy, the relationship between painting and sculpture, and the role of public museums—all of which remain central to the production and experience of art today.

I resurrect these debates here. To understand the breadth and significance of responses to Canova's work, I engage with reception theory, which focuses not only on the historical context of the work's first reception, but also its changing context.[34] This "historical unfolding" promotes an evolutionary approach to reception that recognizes the significance of a work at a particular moment and within the broader scope of the history of the field, in this case, the history of art.[35] But reception theory does not deny the authorial presence; instead, it views production and reception as a dialectical process.[36] By allowing the primary sources to speak for themselves, I emphasize not only Canova's motivations, but also the changes in attitude towards his sculptures that emerge in the fifty years following their production. This changing discourse not only affects our understanding of Canova's reputation, but also the history of sculpture itself.

Over the course of my research, I have been struck by the coherent responses triggered by individual works at key moments in Canova's career. That unity, in which commentators returned repeatedly to one or two issues, was often prompted by the sculpture's display. By bringing together visual evidence with numerous textual citations, I trace five key exhibitions of Canova's work in five major European centers: Naples, Rome, Florence, Venice, and Paris, spanning the period from 1780 to 1850. One of the great challenges of the book has been dealing with the period's political and social fragmentation. Eighteenth-century Italy was not a unified nation-state. The peninsula was divided into many independent political entities which had different cultural habits, artistic traditions, and even linguistic dialects. Then in 1796, the invasions of the French set off a series of occupations, regime changes, conflicts, and border disputes that kept Italy and all of Europe in unrest for twenty years. Each of the exhibitions I examine not only plays a central role in determining the aesthetic response to Canova's work but also reflects the political vagaries of the period; Canova's works were

33 See Christopher M. S. Johns, *Antonio Canova and the Politics of Patronage in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
34 Wolfgang Kemp, "The Work of Art and Its Beholder: The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception," in *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Mark A. Cheetham, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180–196.

35 Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 32.
36 Ibid., 15.

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easily co-opted into political narratives and discussions about cultural patrimony.

I have focused on four Italian cities because Italy was the center of origin for many aspects of Canova's stagings. It was in Italy, with its profusion of ancient sculpture and Renaissance masterpieces, where viewers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries contemplated, discussed, and engaged with sculpture on an unprecedented scale. It was also the center for artistic instruction in Europe, and no other place attracted so many young, enthusiastic, and talented artists who hoped to absorb the lessons of the ancients while also making a name for themselves. Sculpture and artistic theories about sculpture—its creation, its relationship to painting, its expressive capacity—had a long and preeminent history on the peninsula. Viewers of Canova's work situated the sculptor not only in relation to artists from antiquity, such as Phidias and Praxiteles, but, more importantly, Michelangelo, Bernini, and even the painter Titian.

Despite recent scholarship which has positioned Canova as a foil to Thorvaldsen and Northern artistic traditions, I stress the importance Italian conventions had in shaping the reception of his work.[37] The ability of Canova's work to elicit such debate secured his position within an elevated genealogy of sculptors and artists, creating a distinguished artistic legacy for the sculptor at a moment when the Italian peninsula was in a state of artistic and political decline. Moreover, it showcases the way Italian art theory entered the hands of the public. Theoretical conversations about sculpture—once part of a more restricted dialogue between artists and critics—entered a broader public discussion about art.

Yet this attachment to the past was at odds with changing ideas about the role of art, its production, and its reception. Attitudes towards Canova's work in the seventy-year span I examine reflect not only his slow decline from the greatest artist of the period to the cold sculptor of neoclassicism, but also the fading hegemony of Italy itself. While Canova initially seemed to offer the promise of cultural rehabilitation, in the end, that promise went unfulfilled. In a shift that had begun a century earlier, the peninsula was no longer the center of artistic production or intellectual discourse; that distinction now belonged to Paris. Indeed, it was in Paris where the understanding of Canova's work as affective and expressive established a modern, forward-looking path for sculpture.[38]

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The book is arranged chronologically and regionally, beginning in late-eighteenth-century Italy and ending in Paris in 1850. Chapter one, "Imagining Sculptural Practice," centers on the 1795 exhibition of Canova's *Venus and Adonis* in Naples. Naples has generally received short shrift in English scholarship, but as the third largest city in Europe at the time, a major archaeological center, and thriving community of artists and literati, it too played an important role in the reception of Canova's work. *Venus and Adonis* was displayed in a *tempietto* in the garden of Francesco Maria Berio, Marchese di Salza, and the group launched a citywide

37 In addition to Potts and Bindman, see Stefano Grandesso and Fernando Mazzocca, eds., *Canova Thorvaldsen: La nascita della scultura moderna* (Milan: Skira, 2019).

38 I have omitted London because the British had their own strong tradition of sculpture, and there are numerous scholars ably examining Canova's work and his British patrons. Since, however, so many of the journals and diaries I examine were written by British travelers, we do get a sense of changing attitudes towards Canova and the impact that Italian art theory had on British artists, critics, and the public.

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debate regarding modes of artistic production and the best means of communicating those artistic possibilities to an audience. Using Canova's statue as a jumping off point, writers imagined Canova's working process in detail, from its conceptual origins ("*invenzione*" or "invention") to the final carving of the piece ("*esecuzione*," or "execution"). Anchoring the sculptural process on these two poles not only simplified the real labor that went into sculptural production, but it also established two opposing means by which to describe and communicate the sculptor's labor to a broader audience. Which of these two descriptions was the most effective, however, subsequently became the subject of heated debate, as writers argued not only about the way Canova himself approached the act of sculpting, but, more importantly, about the relationship between art and writing.

Unlike Naples, Rome was the uncontested center of artistic training in the eighteenth century. Artists vied to establish their reputation in relation to the city's ancient and Renaissance works. Chapter two, "Reevaluating Ancients and Moderns," focuses on Canova's attempt to cement his legacy through the display of his *Triumphant Perseus* in relation to the *Apollo Belvedere*. Although this comparison was meant to highlight Canova's innovative "imitation" of antiquity, Canova soon lost control over the way his work was perceived by beholders. The changing political circumstances of the period, the different locations in which this comparison took place, and the fact that the *Apollo* was present only as a plaster cast for much of the period when the original sculpture was in Paris not only resulted in shifting opinions about *Perseus* but also contributed to a change in attitude towards imitation in artistic practice. Once considered a fundamental and generative part of the creative process, imitation took on increasingly negative connotations as mere copying.

Chapter three, "Anatomizing the Female Nude," continues to explore the themes of imitation and cultural patrimony by focusing on Canova's 1812 *Venus Italica*, which was celebrated as the replacement for the *Venus de'Medici* after the latter was sent to Paris. For the four years that Canova's *Venus Italica* was installed in the Tribuna in the Uffizi, she reaffirmed the sculptor's status as the greatest artist of the age and became a symbol of national pride for occupied Florence. After the *Venus de'Medici* returned to Florence, however, the *Venus Italica* was moved to the Palazzo Pitti. There, displayed in a "boudoir" surrounded by mirrors, visitors focused on the softness ("*morbidezza*") of her flesh. Although softness was valued in the seventeenth century by admirers of Bernini's seductive sculptures, the concomitant discourse of desire and seduction was mitigated by Canova's viewers; they transformed their captivation with the *Venus Italica*'s sensual flesh into anatomical inquiry. The predilection for "scientific" examination not only reflected the period's conservative social mores but reveals how sculpture was implicated in the construction of racial and gender hierarchies.

Sculpture's capacity to imitate flesh remained a central concern in the 1817 exhibition of Canova's *Polinnia* in the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice, which is the focus of chapter four, "Challenging the Supremacy of Painting." There, Leopoldo Cicognara, one of the most prominent theoreticians and critics of the period, exploited his position as the director of the Accademia to enforce what might be called a new curatorial focus. In the newly opened public painting gallery, he exhibited Canova's *Polinnia* with recently restored Venetian Old Master paintings, including Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin*. In the confrontation between these two Venetian masters, who both excelled at the depiction of flesh, Cicognara constructed a clear, understandable narrative for a diverse

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audience that merged politics and aesthetics. He literally enacted the *paragone*, or competition between painting and sculpture, to reaffirm the Veneto's artistic authority in a moment of political decline.

Finally, chapter five, "Defining Modern Sculpture," shifts to Paris, signaling the moment when Italy became peripheral in sculptural theory and practice. It was there, in the French capital, where Canova's *Penitent Magdalene* launched a discussion about "expression" and the emotional resonance of art. Exhibited first in the 1808 Salon and subsequently in an intimate space in the townhouse of Giambattista Sommariva, *Magdalene*'s emotional despair encouraged visitors to reflect on their own sentiments as they gazed upon her. This self-reflection on the part of beholders had numerous consequences. It reinforced notions of individuality and the self and established Canova's *Magdalene* as a particularly French and modern work. Equally important, it also forged a direct link between emotional resonance and aesthetic value. This interpretation, I argue, ultimately had the greatest impact on the history of sculpture. In Paris, the focus on expression established a universal model by which sculpture could be appreciated, one that did not rely on sculptural theory, however central to public discourse that theory had become, but rather relied upon more accessible conceptions of empathy and lived human experience.

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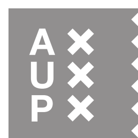
Canova's works held a keystone position in the larger art world of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Canova and his patrons' display techniques called attention to the highly dramatized nature of his sculptural process and demanded the active participation of his beholders; moreover, these displays kept him at the center of debates in aesthetic theory, politics, and cultural patrimony. By reflecting on the political, social, and formal significance of Canova's work, by showcasing their connoisseurship skills and familiarity with aesthetic theory, by publishing their reflections and bringing other authors into the conversation, beholders' engagement with Canova's sculptures revealed the collaborative, communal nature of looking at art in the early nineteenth century. Discussion about sculpture entered a broad public dialogue and set the stage for contemporary attitudes towards the medium and the experience of viewing art in general. In this pivotal moment in history and in the history of art, reactions to Canova and his work make evident his position as a fulcrum between the early modern and modern period.



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