Two Candelabra by Luigi Valadier from Palazzo Borghese

ALVAR GONZÁLEZ-PALACIOS

In 1763, upon the death of his father, Don Camillo, Prince Marcantonio Borghese (1730–1800) inherited one of the grandest of all Roman estates, and with it what were by all means the city's largest artistic collections. These holdings had their origins in the time of Paul V (r. 1605–21), the family pope, and that most genial of connoisseurs, Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1576–1633). For his part, Don Marcantonio, whose personality is as yet little known, in part because that is the way he wanted it to be, as Ennio Quirino Visconti relates specifically in the prologue to his Monumenti gabini della Villa Pinciana (Rome, 1797), deserves to be considered the greatest collector-patron of Neoclassical Rome and, in the context of his own family, second only to Cardinal Scipione. To carry out his enlightened activities, he turned to some of the most accomplished scholars, artists, and artisans then at work in Rome. Chief among them was the said Visconti, renowned archaeologist, ideal disciple of the famous Winckelmann, and a man of immense erudition and capacity for work. His voice was heard not only when it was a question of acquiring new marbles for the collection or restoring those already existing, but in 1796 it fell to him to publish all that the prince had done toward remodernizing his famous residence-museum on the Pincian Hill, the Villa Borghese. Visconti's Sculture del palazzo della Villa Borghese detta Pinciana constitutes a truly fine, sound catalogue of the house's contents and remains a work of extreme interest and utility.¹

For this and other of his undertakings, Don Marcantonio relied on an architect of exceptional talent, Antonio Asprucci (1723–1808), who worked for the prince throughout his career. Dating back to the time of Don Camillo, Asprucci was engaged in restorations in the Borghese Chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore (1759–60). The hero of the present essay, Luigi Valadier (1726–1785), was already present on that occasion. The two artists, bound by ties of staunch friendship, received innumerable commissions from the prince, a man close to them in age. Asprucci would be the builder of the rooms of Villa Borghese, which count among the highest achievements in European architecture and interior decoration. He also constructed a seaside house at Pratica, as well as other tempietti and pleasure sites in the gardens on the Pincio. Luigi Valadier became the silversmith of this illustrious household (as his father, Andrea, who died in 1757, had been before him), furnishing it with such extraordinarily prestigious works as a silver-gilt service, in its day considered one of the marvels of Rome and for which many drawings and a few original pieces survive.² He also supplied no small amount of furnishings, acting as bronze founder and head of the city's most important workshop, in which stonemasons and engravers, draftsmen, and possibly cabinetmakers worked side by side with bronze specialists and silversmiths.

The Borghese objects that concern us here come from the family's magnificent palace in the Campo Marzio in Rome for which, in the early 1770s, Don Marcantonio commissioned from Antonio Asprucci the redecorating of the ground floor.³ The prince and his architect used the services of an impressive number of artists and craftsmen—the same ones who would thenceforth be active in the rather more demanding endeavors for the villa on the Pincio. Between 1773 and 1774 Luigi Valadier furnished a significant body of work, which included the restoration and completion of many small antique bronzes; the gilt embellishment of several tables of varicolored marbles and mosaic; the provision of bronze embellishments for three fountains situated within the palace; and the making of two chandeliers.⁴ To this list can be added a herm-figure of a lapidario a rosa with a superb bronze head of Bacchus and the total restoration of a famous table of jasper borne by bronze caryatids after models by Alessandro Algardi, dating from 1633–37. For this sumptu-
ous piece (together with the Metropolitan Museum’s sixteenth-century Farnese Table, one of the most extraordinary furnishings then to be seen in Rome), Luigi Valadier refashioned the border and supports, supplied stretchers and garlands, altered the position of the caryatids’ limbs, and executed a partial gilding and an entire repatination. The herm-figure and table were destined, as we have reported elsewhere, for the ground-floor gallery of Palazzo Borghese, where the family’s picture collection was shown systematically in several rooms beneath ceilings appropriately decorated by Roman painters active at the time of Pius VI. The table, which we shall call the Algardi Table, was then in the Galleria’s third chamber; after having been lost sight of during the nineteenth century, it is now in a private
collection. The herm-figure, first located in the Camera dell’Ermafrodito (named for one of the two Borghese versions of the ancient marble Hermaphrodite), remained there until 1831, when it was moved to Villa Borghese, which was refurnished after the family sold its most famous antiquities to the Louvre in 1807.

In 1774, during the same campaign of work for Palazzo Borghese, Valadier stated that he had executed a pair of small tables with twelve-cornered tops of porphyry (Figure 1); he had provided them with delicate gilt-bronze edges of the most painstaking facture and with masks reminiscent of the Seasons in the same material. These images, for the sake of sheer refinement, were based on eight different models and not four, as might be expected.

Figure 1. Luigi Valadier (1726–1785). Table, 1774. Porphyry, marble, and gilt-bronze. Rome, Villa Borghese (photo: Villa Borghese)
In their rigid frontality they seem to refer to prototypes in ancient painting, then held in great esteem in the wake of discoveries at Pompeii and Herculanum. The two small tables were intended for the Galleria’s sixth room, called the Galleriola dei Cesari because it boasted sixteen niches that held as many busts, the porphyry heads of emperors set into togas of varicolored marbles that had been in the palace for over a century; there they remained until 1831, when they were transferred to Villa Borghese.5

Luigi Valadier's bill listing these works also includes the making of two porphyry candelabra:

Conto di due Candelabri di metallo dorato e Porfido, fatti p S. E. il Sig.re Principe D. Marc’Ant.6 Borghese 1774 a 6 Sette:e p aver fatto due Candelabri di porfido tutti guarniti con dell'ornati e figure di metallo dorato rappresentanti le tré figure che sono ad ogn’uno de detti candelabri La Venere delle belle chiappe, L’Amazone et una Musa, sopra de padelline de med. candelabri nascono quattro gran fiori, che cadono giù in forma di cornucopio, et uno altro nel mezzo p uso di porvi le candele, con un zoccolo sotto ottangolato parimenti di metallo dorato, quali importano fra Porfido con la sua lavorazione, modelli fatti à posta delle figure, e bracci sud.i; metalli, fattura e doratura———54506

These too were destined for the Galleriola dei Cesari, whose dominant element, it is readily understood, was porphyry. In an inventory of 1812, compiled on the occasion of the lease of the prem-
Figure 3. Detail of candelabrum 1994.14.1 (at left in Figure 2), showing Callipygian Venus figure

Figure 4. Detail of candelabrum 1994.14.1, showing Amazon figure

Figure 5. Detail of candelabrum 1994.14.1, showing Muse figure

Figure 6. Luigi Valadier. Cast of Amazon figure now in Vatican Museum, 1780. Bronze. Paris, Musée du Louvre (photo: R.M.N.)
ises to Charles IV, the former king of Spain, then resident in Rome, they are cited as follows:

ali due lati della Galleria due tavole ottagonali [sic] di porfido con cornice intagliata di metallo dorato poste sopra un Piedestallo composto di vari Marmi con alcune guarnizioni di metallo dorato. Esistono sopra dette Tavole due Candelabri di porfido con guarnizioni di metallo dorato a 5 lumi.7

From that date, 1812, there is no further notice of the two candelabra until 1993, when they were identified by the author on the Paris art market and subsequently bought by the Metropolitan Museum (Figure 2).8

As the document specifies, each candelabrum consists of a majestic porphyry shaft that rises from a high circular socle and then swells into a baluster crowned by a tazza shape. For this aspect of the work Valadier must have sought a stonecutter’s participation. There were more than a few of these in the service of the prince, but it is possible that the artisan selected was Lorenzo Cardelli. I say this because Cardelli collaborated with Valadier on a mantelpiece of statuary marble and porphyry made for Palazzo Borghese one year later, in 1775. In any case, Cardelli was certainly equipped to work porphyry, an art that was not within the range of all lapidaries of that day.9 For the candelabra, Luigi Valadier arranged each stone construction on a tall, octagonal gilt-bronze socle, disposing on the plinth a collar of leaves and beading and affixing to it festoons suspending bucrania. Around the central baluster are three exquisitely modeled female figures, which are reductions of ancient statues. Each one has a raised arm and together they give the illusion of supporting the crowning tazza, which in turn bears lions’ heads suspending rings and three theatrical masks from which leafy clusters emerge; these last terminate in the five sockets for the candles.

Valadier’s bill lays some stress on the sculptural models for his bronzes. Those chosen for the three figures are not all that common. The first (Figure 3) is taken from a marble then at the Farnesina and now in the Museo Nazionale in Naples: a Venus of the Callipygian type, known with reason in eighteenth-century Rome as the Venere della belle chiappe (Venus of the Beautiful Buttocks).10 This prototype, parenthetically, was copied several times by bronze artists, such as Francesco Righetti. The second figure (Figure 4), with a quiver at her side, is taken from an original known as an Amazon, first in the Mattei collection and now in the Vatican Mu-

seum.11 In 1780 Valadier made a cast of this famous marble for the comte d’Orsay; it is now in the Louvre (Figure 6). The third (Figure 5), which Valadier calls a Muse, is after a Diana the huntress in the act of fastening her mantle (the gesture remains unclear here, since Valadier altered the position of the right arm the better to align the figure alongside the porphyry cup). The best-known statue of this type was then in Rome, in Palazzo Verospi, but another version of greater merit happened to be discovered at Gabi, one of Prince Borghese’s estates, some twenty years afterward, about 1792. It then passed into the collections at Villa Borghese on the Pincio before being sold in 1807 to the Louvre, where it remains.12

It may be noted that each figure has at her feet an object that alludes in some fashion to her spirit. The Callipygian Venus steps upon a shell, a usual attribute and one that suggests an erotic undertone. The Amazon stands on a shield of buckler form, a reference to her bellicose character. The Muse, or rather Diana, has pipes indicative of her idyllic preoccupations.

In 1774 the design of the candelabra was truly in the vanguard of Neoclassical taste. Their elegant dignity is genuinely Neoclassical and demonstrates how, at its best, Rome did not lag stylistically behind London or Paris. Objects of this caliber evince not only a rare level of craftsmanship and a perfect sense of compositional balance, but also a feeling for classical antiquity that was beginning to penetrate so deeply that it became part of everyday existence, albeit at the highest social level. The role played by Luigi Valadier within this context remains to be defined. However exceptional an artisan he was, we suspect that Antonio Asprucci and the scholars who frequented Prince Borghese’s court should probably be credited with the ideas that went into the conception of these extraordinary furnishings.

NOTES

1. Alvar González-Palacios, Il gusto dei principi (Milan, 1995) pp. 212–300, with an extensive bibliography on this subject.


6. Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Archivio Borghese, f. 5298 (no. 3169). This document, omitted in my previous article because the objects were then on the market, is part of the same archival papers published by me.

7. Lucia de Lachenal, “La collezione di sculture antiche della famiglia Borghese e il palazzo in Campo Marzio,” Xenia 4 (1982) p. 104. It should be noted that the tables are usually said to be octagonal, even in recent publications (Faldi, Galleria Borghese, p. 24), so rare is a dodecagonal slab.

8. The candelabra have been illustrated by James David Draper in “Recent Acquisitions: A Selection, 1993–1994.” MMAB 52, 2 (1994) p. 38, and by González-Palacios in Luigi Valadier au Louvre, p. 91. In the palace of Pavlov (St. Petersburg) exists a second version of our candelabra, which may have been ordered or presented to the czarevitch Paul and his wife, Maria Feodorovna, during their visit to Rome in 1782; the candelabra are reproduced in A. Kuchov, Pavlov: Palace and Park (Leningrad, 1975) p. 229.

9. For more on Cardelli, see González-Palacios, Il gusto dei principi; the porphyry chimneypiece is fig. 487. Also see Faldi, Galleria Borghese, pp. 47–48. Other craftsmen, such as Paolo Santi and Benedetto Maciucchi, who both worked for the prince, were also capable of carving porphyry, but do not seem to have been active in this field before 1778.

