

Bertel Thorvaldsen's *Nessus Abducting Deianira*

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IN THE NEOCLASSICAL ERA foreign artists flocked to Rome to study antiquity. Many found the city's attractions and opportunities so irresistible that it became their permanent home. One of these visitors-turned-residents was Bertel Thorvaldsen. Born in Denmark in 1770, he celebrated his "Roman birthday" on March 8, the day in 1797 when he first arrived in the city and which he commemorated as the symbolic beginning of his career as a sculptor.¹ Until his return to his native land in 1838 and death in 1844, his practice was one of the most successful and productive in Rome. Rivalled only by the most famous Neoclassical artist of all, Antonio Canova, Thorvaldsen ran an efficient workshop that carved marble statues and reliefs for the aristocracy and the intellectual elite of Europe. Compared to Canova this northern rival's style tended to be more severe, his compositions simpler, and his expression restrained; contemporary critics noted the distinction between their Italian and Nordic strains of Neoclassicism.² After Canova's death in 1822, the Dane became the artistic capital's leading sculptor.

In 1820, the Nazarene painter Adolf Senff, fellow resident of the Casa Buti on the Via Sistina, portrayed Thorvaldsen on a loggia standing between two recent works, a model for the *Shepherd Boy* of 1817 and a relief *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, conceived in 1814/15 (Figure 1).³ The inclusion of a relief in the Senff portrait is appropriate, because it was the art form in which Thorvaldsen was considered preeminent. German critic Karl Grass acknowledged the relief carver's primacy with this statement in the *Morgenblatt*: "The frieze is executed in a truly Greek style, after the most beautiful period in art, that, as even his rivals agree, assures him the first place. The Italians call him the 'patriarch of the relief' and recognize that in this field his works are truly classic."⁴ The frieze Grass cites, *Alexander the Great's Entry into Babylon* (Figure 2), was a major commission by any standard. Thirty-two meters long, it was modeled in stucco in 1812 for the Palazzo del Quirinale in preparation for Napoleon's visit to

Rome.⁵ Not all contemporary critics agreed that it was purely classical. The art historian Karl Friedrich von Rumohr considered it "of Romantic fascination . . . without any antique reminiscence."⁶ More recently, the Thorvaldsen specialist Bjarne Jørnaes stated that its blend of classicism and Romanticism prefigured the sculptor's most Romantic phase, seen in the reliefs *Night* (Figure 13) and *Day*, modeled in 1815. The works are distinguished from the strictly classical style of earlier reliefs, like the *Heralds of Agamemnon Conduct Briseis to Achilles* (1803), in which carefully outlined figures move at a stately pace across the surface.⁷ Indeed, relief sculpture was the medium in which this



Figure 1. Adolf Senff (German, 1785–1863). *Portrait of Bertel Thorvaldsen*, 1820. Oil on canvas, 100 x 75 cm. Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg, Halle, I/184

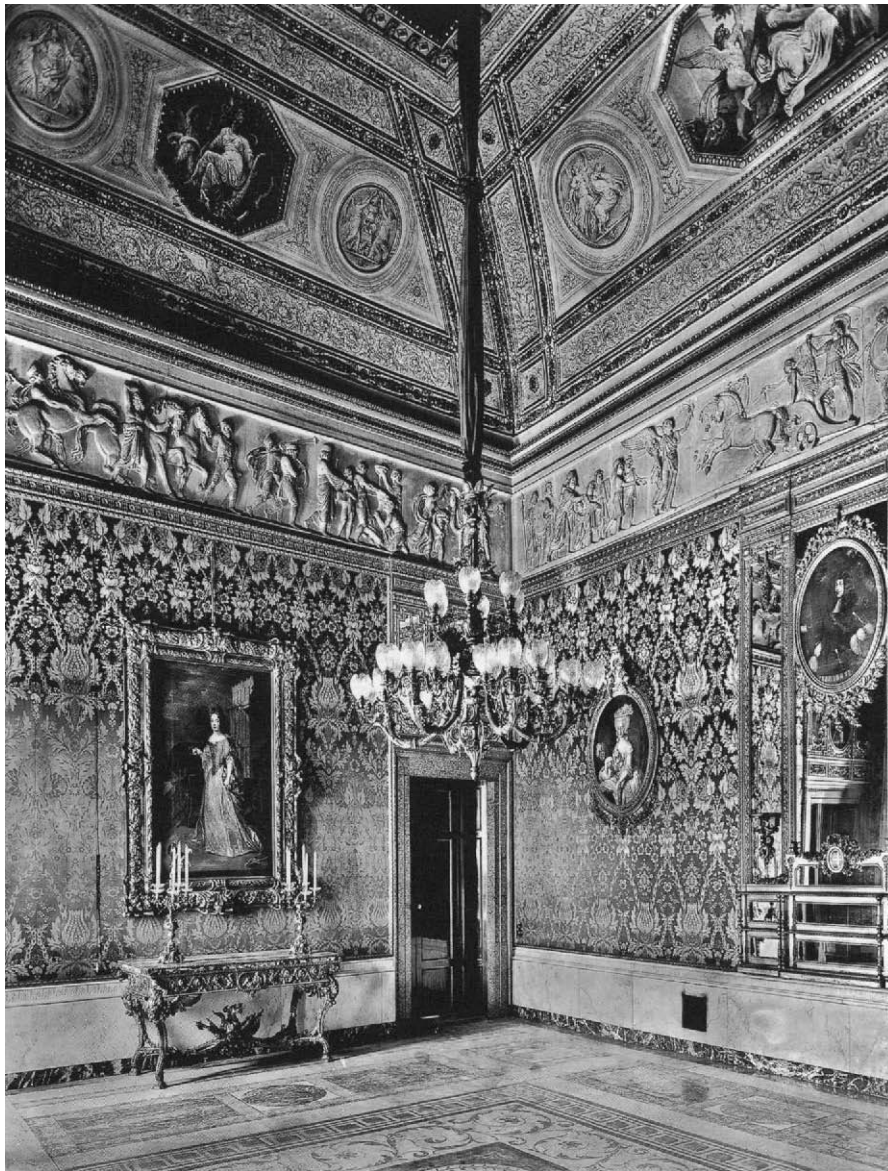


Figure 2. View of Salone d'Onore including a portion of *Alexander the Great's Entry into Babylon*, by Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1812. Palazzo del Quirinale, Rome (photo: © Alinari/Art Resource, NY)

prominent Neoclassicist appears to have exercised the greatest freedom in expressing emotion and movement.

The relief *Nessus Abducting Deianira* (Figures 3, 4), recently acquired by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is certainly one of Thorvaldsen's most dramatic and erotically charged works.⁸ This well-known myth was frequently depicted in the Renaissance, exemplified by Giambologna's bronze of the subject (1571), and in the Baroque—Guido Reni's famous painting in the Louvre (1617–21)—but less often in the sober age of Neoclassicism.⁹ Joseph Chinard's terracotta stands as a brilliant exception (Figure 5).¹⁰ In the scene, the centaur Nessus, who has agreed to carry Hercules' wife across the river Euenus, betrays this trust and tries to abduct her. In Thorvaldsen's version, the centaur clutches Deianira's right breast and left hand, as he rears back and twists to plant a kiss on

her cheek. Deianira slides along the centaur's flank, struggling to avoid the centaur's lips and waving to attract her husband's attention. Some paintings of the scene (such as Reni's) depict Hercules shooting the arrow that will slay Nessus, whereas ancient versions often include a river god to specify the location (a tradition that Chinard follows in his terracotta). Thorvaldsen eschews such narrative details: the background is severely plain, and only a row of waves cresting above the plinth indicates the locale. In the absence of landscape or narrative detail the sculptor focuses on the struggle of the two protagonists.

The sculptor's skill in relief carving is evident in the suggested plasticity of the bodies and the clarity of their silhouettes. Bulging chest muscles express the centaur's torsion, while the subtle diminution of his legs conveys a sense of depth. Carved in high relief,



Figure 3. Bertel Thorvaldsen (Danish, 1770–1844). *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, modeled 1814/15, carved 1821–23 or 1826. Marble, 120 x 125 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts Fund, 2004 (2004.174). See also front cover

Deianira's arm appears to protrude into space against the shallow relief of the lion's skin tied around the centaur's neck. The sharply defined pleats of her gown distinguish her from the centaur's naked flesh, while their flowing lines vividly convey a sense of motion. Scrupulously attentive to the details of ancient art, the sculptor even includes a dress weight, dangling above her right calf, that tugs the material taut. The scene's action is reinforced by other details: the lion's skin flaps like a flag in the wind and the horsetail streams behind the centaur. The figures' limbs radiate outward like the spokes of a wheel. The compact figural group recalls the concentratedly centered design of the ancient cameos and coins that Thorvaldsen collected; much of this relief's power stems from the sculptor's monumental approach to the reductive simplicity of these ancient glyptic works.¹¹ One of the sculptor's

most famous statues from this period, *Ganymede and the Eagle* (1817), also owes its composition to an ancient cameo in his collection, further indicating how his study of such glyptic sources informed both his subjects and technical style.¹²

Typical of Thorvaldsen's working methods, he first fashioned his composition for *Nessus Abducting Deianira* in clay and preserved it in plaster.¹³ Precise as to form and dimensions, the plaster served as a template for the marble versions he and his assistants would carve. According to letters written by Danish painter Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783–1853), a resident of Rome from 1813 to 1816, the sculptor completed the model in 1814 or 1815.¹⁴ The studio daybooks record marble versions of a "centaur" carved in 1821–23 and a "marble centaur bassorilievo" in 1826.¹⁵ Along with most of his models, the original



Figure 4. Detail of relief in Figure 3



Figure 5. Joseph Chinard (French, 1756–1813). *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, ca. 1791–92. Terracotta, 41.8 x 38.5 x 15.2 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, H 797 (photo: © Studio Basset)

plaster (Figure 6) is today in the Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen. Of three known marbles only one was made for a specific commission, that for Paolo Marulli, now at the Metropolitan Museum.¹⁶ The two others were evidently carved speculatively or for the sculptor's own use but remained unsold and ended up in Copenhagen (Figure 7). (One of these was auctioned in 1849 and is now in the Jaegerspris Castle.)¹⁷

As one would expect, there are slight variations between plaster and marbles. Some of the textures are rough and impressionistic in the plaster; the waves become increasingly regular and smooth in the marble versions and the horsetail flows more elegantly in curves that echo Deianira's pleats. Some details that are implied in the model—or perhaps were lost in translation from clay to plaster—are more fully realized in the marble: the fringe of hair above the hooves, for example. Other details have been changed

or added: the callosity (called a chestnut) on the left foreleg does not appear in the plaster but does on the New York version and even more prominently on the Copenhagen marble. The tip of the penis is rounded in the plaster, pointed in the marble. The skeletal definition of the right foreleg is more pronounced in the marble than in the plaster, and tucks of flesh appear at the leg joint that do not in the plaster. Despite these few differences the marble's fidelity to the plaster model is remarkable. The carving clarified or sharpened motifs where necessary and embellished only the smallest of details. Overall, the New York and Copenhagen marbles are close in character. Given the volume of his studio's output, however, one has come naturally to expect a given amount of workshop assistance partially or wholly in many of Thorvaldsen's works. It is likely that assistants blocked out the commissioned New York work and that Thorvaldsen finished it himself.



Figure 6. Bertel Thorvaldsen. *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, modeled 1814/15. Plaster, 102 x 123 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, A481 (photo: © Thorvaldsens Museum)

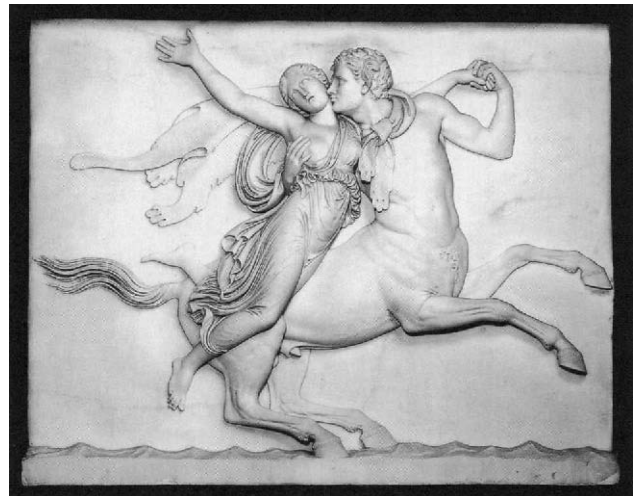


Figure 7. Bertel Thorvaldsen. *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, modeled 1814/15. Marble, 103.5 x 127.5 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, A480 (photo: © Thorvaldsens Museum)

The genesis of this accomplished design can be followed through an engraving after the antique and a series of pen, ink, and pencil sketches. Remaining in Thorvaldsen's preserved library is a bound volume of engravings after ancient reliefs restored by the eighteenth-century Roman Bartolomeo Cavaceppi: *Raccolta d'antiche statue, busti, bassirilievi ed altre sculture restaurate da B. Cavaceppi*, published in Rome in 1772.¹⁸ One of the engravings (Figure 8) reproduces a relief then thought to represent Nessus abducting

Deianira, titled "Bassorilievo in Inghilterra." Dyveke Helsted first noted this as a source for Thorvaldsen's relief. The sculptor could not have seen the original (Figure 9), as it was purchased in Rome in 1768 by Charles Townley and taken back to England (now in the British Museum, London); his starting point was a graphic one. While Thorvaldsen was aware that the relief had been restored, he would not have known which parts were original and which parts Cavaceppi completed.¹⁹



Figure 8. Bartolomeo Cavaceppi (Italian, 1716?–1799). "Bassorilievo in Inghilterra," in *Raccolta d'antiche statue, busti, bassirilievi ed altre sculture restaurate da B. Cavaceppi* (Rome, 1772), p. 29. Engraving.



Figure 9. *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, Roman, late Hadrianic–early Antonine (ca. 117–138 A.D.). Marble, h. 56.5 cm. The British Museum, London, GR 1805.7–3.122 (photo: The British Museum)

There are sufficient points of comparison between the Cavaceppi engraving and the Thorvaldsen marble to suggest that the Dane had the engraving in mind when devising his composition: the lion's skin tied like a scarf around the centaur's neck with its rear paws and tail flapping behind; the horsetail curling out horizontally; Deianira's robe revealing one breast, clinging to her torso, and fluttering behind. Just as interesting are the differences: Thorvaldsen eliminated riverbank and tree, reversed the direction of the figures, and fundamentally altered the action between centaur and woman. In the ancient relief and the engraving, Nessus clasps her to his chest as she faces forward, rigid as a ship figurehead; their heads angle away from one another. Thorvaldsen shifts Deianira back so that Nessus' twisted body is now directed toward her; Deianira's arms are still raised to gesture to Hercules, but she tilts her head to avoid Nessus.

Four drawings in the Thorvaldsens Museum bear witness to the artist's struggle to resolve the composition. One of the most vivid works from his pen is an ink sketch showing Nessus heading to the left (in the direction of the Cavaceppi engraving), yet the tangle of lines betrays his indecision whether to position Deianira's legs to the front or to the rear (Figure 10).²⁰ A pencil drawing (C1073) retains the centaur's direction to the left but the sculptor places the pair in a landscape with a tree to upper left and Hercules shooting his bow from across the river on the far right. A fragmentary drawing (C157) outlines the final poses, though they were still reversed and still framed by mountains and trees. The most detailed study finalizes the elements of the composition by changing the direction, except for the centaur's head, which is not pressed against Deianira's (Figure 11). Reintroducing this motif from the first sketch completes the design. Although it is impossible to secure the chronological order of the drawings, clearly the process of design focused on the tight relationship of the protagonists' poses. Elimination of landscape elements seems inevitable in Thorvaldsen's characteristically reductive relief style. While there are, rarely, landscapes among his reliefs, such as in the *Rape of the Nymphs* (1833),²¹ these tend to be less successful than those with purely flat backgrounds. The only descriptive detail he retains—the waves of the river—cleverly turns the low plinth that is typically a base for his figures into a minimal setting. Finally, by reversing the composition from the direction of the ancient one, the sculptor reinforces the confrontation of the two figures, as Nessus contorts into Deianira's body and against our natural inclination to read the scene from left to right.

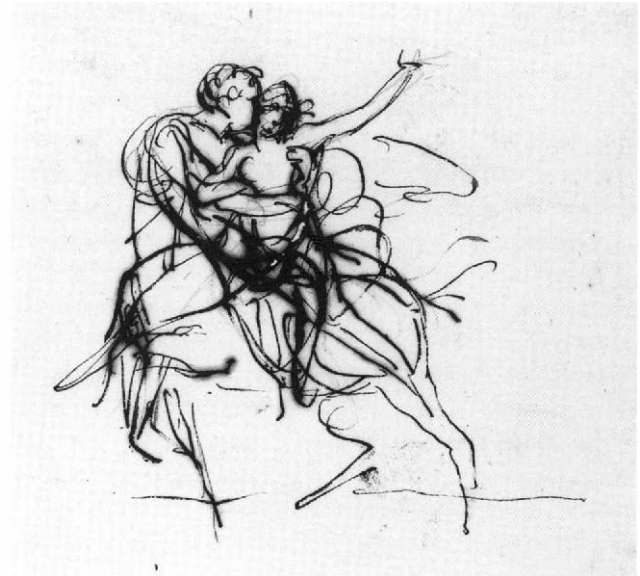


Figure 10. Bertel Thorvaldsen. *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, ca. 1814. Pen and ink, 19.2 x 20.6 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, C155 (photo: © Thorvaldsens Museum)

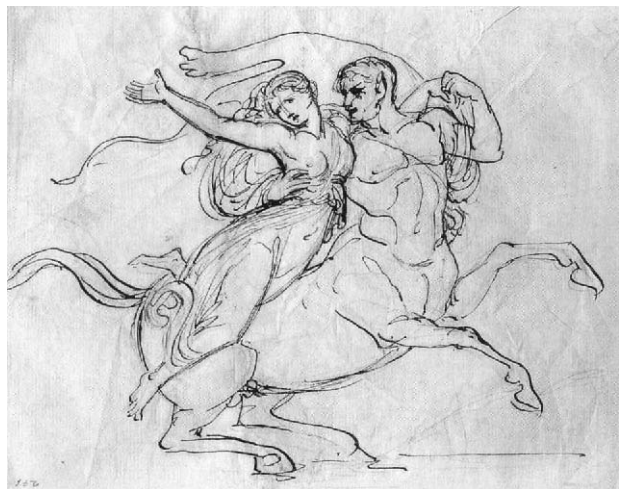


Figure 11. Bertel Thorvaldsen. *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, ca. 1814. Pen, 18.5 x 23.3 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, A6, 156 (photo: © Thorvaldsens Museum)

Finally, it should be noted that this composition of two struggling figures recalls the Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs metope reliefs from the Parthenon (ca. 447–443 B.C.). Although Thorvaldsen never saw the originals, in 1815 Antonio Canova did see those marbles that Lord Elgin transported to London and offered to the British government (now in the British Museum). Thorvaldsen may well have known the compositions through reproductions and, inspired by Canova's enthusiasm for the Greek originals, reflected their form in *Nessus Abducting Deianira*.²²

If his starting point for the composition was a much restored antique relief that he had never seen, there is no question that Thorvaldsen extensively studied antique originals in Rome. He acquired for his own considerable collection, now in the Thorvaldsens Museum, statuettes, heads, and fragments that were less attractive to aristocratic collectors, who generally sought large-scale statues for their grand interiors.²³ The sculptor may have used some of these antiquities as models for parts of the relief. Nessus' head, for instance, with flowing locks of hair, smooth-shaven except for incised sideburns, is, apart from the pointed ear, completely different from the curly haired, bearded centaur in Cavaceppi's version. As Jørgen Hartmann first observed, Thorvaldsen may have turned to two ancient Roman herms of young satyrs that he owned.²⁴ One of these first-century A.D. satyr heads in particular (Figure 12) bears the spray of hair at the top of the forehead, long nose, and fleshy lips similar to those of Nessus. There are many similar heads in Rome and it is not known when Thorvaldsen acquired these particular antiquities, but they remind us how closely the sculptor studied ancient sculpture. Deianira's regular



Figure 12. *Herm of a Young Satyr*, Roman, probably 1st century A.D. Marble, h. 35, width at base 23 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, H1414 (photo: © Thorvaldsens Museum)

features, betraying little emotion despite her ordeal, follow such well-known models as the fifth-century Niobid sculptures, which by Thorvaldsen's time had moved from Rome to Florence, but were known through numerous copies.²⁵

Thorvaldsen could also draw on images of male and female centaurs that became fashionable in the late eighteenth century through the reproduction of ancient frescoes in Pompeii and Herculaneum. The publication of *Le antichità di Ercolano Esposte* (Naples, 1757–92) provided models for compositions by sculptors and painters, and even for ceramists in porcelain.²⁶ Given that the renewed vogue for centaurs was inspired by models from Herculaneum, it is not surprising that the commission for Thorvaldsen's daring composition came from a resident of nearby Naples. Thorvaldsen visited this southern capital on several occasions, first in 1797, again in 1804, 1818, 1828, and probably on one subsequent trip.²⁷ His first Neapolitan commission, a colossal marble statue of Ferdinand of Aragon for the church of San Francesco di Paola, came to naught. Though this statue was unrealized, the project put him in contact with the presiding officer of the committee to decorate the church, Marcello Marulli, duke of Ascoli, as documented in a letter of March 21, 1818.²⁸ The Marulli were a significant family in Naples, active in politics and society as well as art collecting. The eldest brother, Trojano, a courtier of Ferdinand IV and captain of cavalry, was fond of paintings. An inventory of sixty-seven paintings, published two years after his death in 1823, documents his taste for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Neapolitan and Flemish works.²⁹

In contrast to the eldest brother, Paolo Marulli was interested in contemporary art. In 1816 Paolo lived with his nephew Sebastiano, who had married into the family of the Marchese Francesco Berio. Several years later Paolo and his wife, Anna Carlotta Senford, owned their own palazzo at 73 Riviera di Chiaia.³⁰ Documents reveal that Marulli decorated a room in this palazzo with three reliefs by Thorvaldsen and a bust by Canova. The marble reliefs—*Nessus Abducting Deianira*, *Night* (see another version in Figure 13), and *Day* (private collection, Rome)—were set into the walls, while Canova's *Herm of a Vestal Virgin* (Figure 14) was placed on a granite column designed by Canova's half-brother Giovanni Battista Sartori.³¹ Paolo Marulli had first approached Canova in 1816 in the hope of obtaining a full-length marble statue. A letter from Berio alerted the sculptor that Marulli had often seen Canova's *Adonis and Venus* (1795, now in Villa La Grange, Geneva) in Berio's house and wished to obtain a Canova statue for himself.³² Marulli also attempted to contact Canova through the agency of



Figure 13. Bertel Thorvaldsen. *Night*, 1815. Marble, diam. 72 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, 367 (photo: © Thorvaldsens Museum)

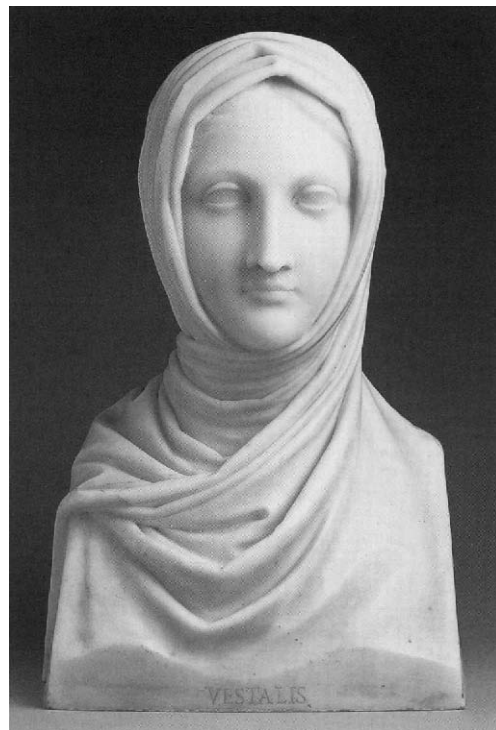


Figure 14. Antonio Canova (Italian, 1757–1822). *Herm of a Vestal Virgin*, 1821–22. Marble, 49.8 x 31.9 x 24.1 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 85.5A353 (photo: J. Paul Getty Museum)

Giuseppe Capacelaturo, ex-bishop of Taranto, in 1817.³³ Although it is unknown why Canova never provided the desired full-length statue, Marulli agreed to accept the herm of a Vestal in a letter of December 28, 1821, and may have received this one by January 18, 1822. In that year Marulli also negotiated with Canova to commission a sepulchral monument to Berio, unfinished when the sculptor died some months later.³⁴

Other correspondence from the Marulli family helps to clarify their relationship to Thorvaldsen, though these missives do not resolve the chronology of the works of art discussed. A letter from Marcello Marulli to Thorvaldsen (December 12, 1821) indicates that Paolo had already acquired Thorvaldsen's relief of *Night* for 250 scudi, and proposed to buy three more bas-reliefs for 600 scudi.³⁵ As noted earlier, Thorvaldsen's studio daybooks indicate a "centaur" being carved in 1821–23 and a "marble centaur basso-rilievo" in 1826, both probably versions of *Nessus Abducting Deianira*.³⁶ However, the dates when Marulli's version was carved and when it arrived in Naples remain unclear. Three letters of 1825 from the painter Vincenzo Camuccini to Paolo Marulli allude to Paolo's impatience to receive two reliefs from Thorvaldsen and explain that the delay is due to the

sculptor's wish that they be carved as well as possible (a common excuse for a busy artist, though there may be an element of truth in the statement, too).³⁷ Camuccini was well positioned to mediate in this matter: he and Thorvaldsen were sufficiently close to have proposed, though not completed, the exchange of portraits in 1810; in addition, Paolo owned Camuccini's painting of the *Dying Magdalen* (before 1824; location unknown).³⁸

It is not established when *Nessus Abducting Deianira* arrived in Naples, whether in the first transaction of 1821–22 or the second of 1825–26. Notably, Paolo actively commissioned art from Canova in 1821–22. In addition, the presence of a version of *Nessus Abducting Deianira* in Senff's 1820 portrait (Figure 1) suggests that the sculptor was engaged with this relief that he had first conceived five or six years earlier. Jørnaes observes that the subject was somewhat risqué for the standards of the era and that this could explain why it took several years to find a client willing to pay for a marble.³⁹ Still, Marulli could have commissioned it as early as 1820, Thorvaldsen only finishing it several years later. Thus it is likely the one listed in the daybooks in 1821–23, but the possibility remains that it is the one finished in 1826.



Figure 15. Guglielmo Bechi (Italian, 1791–1852). Detail of ceiling decoration of female centaur. Fresco. Palazzo di San Teodoro, Naples

In any event, Marulli was planning the display of sculpture in his palazzo about the earlier of these dates. His letter to Canova of January 25, 1822, discusses the five-foot-high granite pedestal that was being carved for the *Herm of a Vestal Virgin*.⁴⁰ This letter has been interpreted to indicate that the bust was nearly ready for its definitive placement in the Via Chiaia palazzo.⁴¹ In an adjacent room, Paolo Marulli's collection of paintings was displayed, including works by or attributed to Canaletto, Guercino, David Teniers, Gerhard ter Borch, and Leonardo da Vinci. All of these works were still in the palazzo in the years 1843–47, but by 1863 were dispersed.⁴²

Paolo Marulli's embedded Neoclassical reliefs in his gallery walls held consistent with Neapolitan interior decoration of the first decades of the nineteenth century. The grandest examples that this majordomo of the king would have known were at the Royal Palace at Caserta. Although in 1804 the architect Carlo Vanvitelli had planned to include six overdoor bas-reliefs of episodes of the life of Alexander the Great, the new political regime revised the project, limiting it to episodes from the life of Giocchino Murat. These were carved in marble by Claudio Monte, Domenico Masucci, and others.⁴³ (They were destroyed after the Bourbon restoration and replaced in 1846–47, but were well known in Naples in Marulli's time.) Another room at Caserta, the Sala di Marte, was decorated between 1807 and 1812 with stucco panels of scenes of Mars and Venus.⁴⁴ The decorations that Marulli commissioned were more modest in scale and thematic coordination than the royal ones. Yet the Caserta examples must have been foremost in his

mind when he planned the decor for his salon. Down the street from Marulli's residence the artist Guglielmo Bechi frescoed a ceiling of the Palazzo di San Teodoro with centaurs, echoing ancient paintings that were familiar from publications (Figure 15).⁴⁵ The classically inspired decoration of a centaur, or in this case, a female centaur, carrying a nymph, was thus fashionable in Neapolitan palazzo decoration in the decade that Marulli installed the Thorvaldsen reliefs.

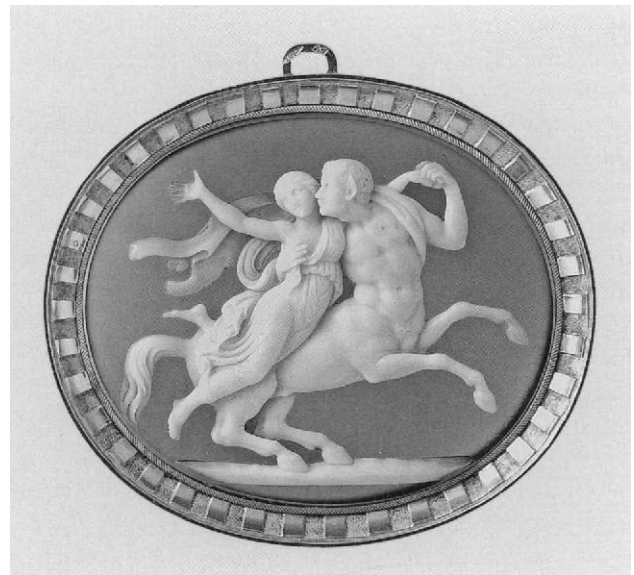


Figure 16. Giuseppe Girometti (Italian, 1780–1851). *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, ca. 1815–25. Sardonyx, mounted in gold as a pendant, 3.5 x 4.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Assunta Sommella Peluso, Ada Peluso, and Romano I. Peluso Gift, in memory of Ignazio Peluso, 2004 (2004.164)

Although the sole commissioned version of *Nessus Abducting Deianira* was sent to Naples, its image disseminated nonetheless through reproductions spread from Rome and, ultimately, Copenhagen. In the nineteenth century Thorvaldsen's fame encouraged the use of his compositions in many media. Engraved reproductions of Thorvaldsen's most notable works began to appear in the second decade of the century. Ferdinando Mori's *Le statue e li bassirilievi inventati e scolpiti in Marmo* published thirty-two works in 1811; a later edition included *Nessus Abducting Deianira* among an additional forty-seven works completed by 1817.⁴⁶ In 1826 twenty-five etchings of Thorvaldsen's works were published, including the Venetian print-maker Marchetti's reproduction of *Nessus*.⁴⁷ Later compilations of prints in 1828, 1831, and 1836 also included the *Nessus Abducting Deianira*.⁴⁸

Cameos were a medium particularly well suited to revealing the nuances of marble relief and were highly prized as reproductions of large-scale sculpture during this period. As Count Hawks Le Grice points out in his *Walks through the Studii of the Sculptors at Rome* of 1841: "Although Impronte [impressions] are miniature copies . . . they exhibit all the fidelity and beauty of the originals, and convey to the eye a better idea of sculptured works of art than the most finished engravings. . . ."⁴⁹ By the 1810s and 1820s leading practitioners of the form, such as Tommaso Saulini and Giuseppe Girometti, began to extend the traditional role of cameos, reproducing antiquities, to that of copying the works of the most famous contemporary sculptors, notably Canova and Thorvaldsen.⁵⁰ The Dane's many reliefs lent themselves particularly well to this form of reproduction. Furthermore, small carvings were often commissioned by wealthy collectors as copies of favorite works of art in their possession. Marchese Giovanni Battista Sommariva, for example, commissioned Girometti and Luigi Pichler to make cameos after statues by Canova in his collection and Clemente Pestrini to carve in four sections Sommariva's version of Thorvaldsen's extensive frieze *Alexander the Great's Entry into Babylon* displayed in his villa (later called the Villa Carlotta) at Tremezzo on Lake Como.

Cameos of famous compositions by Thorvaldsen were made not only for the owners of the marbles but also for a wider audience; these sculptures' renown and artistic success made them attractive subjects for small lapidary works destined for many an admirer of contemporary art. Girometti's sardonyx *Priam Supplicating Achilles for the Body of Hector*, about 1815–25, in the Museum's collection, was inspired by a relief that Thorvaldsen carved for the duke of Bedford in 1815, but the cameo was not made for the duke.⁵¹

Recently, the Museum acquired a cameo by Girometti after *Nessus Abducting Deianira* (Figure 16).⁵² Faithful to the original in most respects, Girometti altered some details: the lion's skin is not tied around Nessus' neck, but simply drapes over his shoulder, and the centaur's tail does not flow straight behind but curls down to conform to the oval border. The ease with which Thorvaldsen's large marble translates to a small sardonyx demonstrates the concentrated simplicity of the design and the essentially circular rhythm of the figural group. It also reminds us that the sculptor studied ancient cameos for his relief compositions and techniques, thus facilitating transformation back into modern glyptics.

Large numbers of intaglios after widely known sculptures were later cut, and these could be cast in



Figure 17. After shell cameos by Tommaso Saulini (active 1850–1860). Impressions of cameos after statuary by Antonio Canova and Bertel Thorvaldsen. Gypsum. Museo di Roma, Rome. Reproductions of Thorvaldsen's *Nessus Abducting Deianira* (lower left), *Day* (upper left), and *Night* (upper right) (photo: after *Thorvaldsen: L'ambiente, l'influsso, il mito* [Rome, 1991], p. 94)



Figure 18. T. Stein after Bertel Thorvaldsen. *Chiron and Achilles*, modeled 1837, carved 1888–90. Marble, 101.5 x 123.5 cm. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, 488A (photo: © Thorvaldsens Museum)

plaster as inexpensive souvenirs of Rome. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the dealer Francesco Carnesecchi sold gypsum casts of intaglios and cameos after Canova and Thorvaldsen.⁵³ The Museum has a bound collection with examples copying Thorvaldsen's works mounted on one side, and those after Canova's on the other.⁵⁴ A gypsum copy of *Nessus Abducting Deianira* after a conch shell cameo by Tommaso Saulini exists, more exactly reproducing Thorvaldsen's composition than does Girometti's sardonyx.⁵⁵ Mounted in a shallow box in a Roman collection (Figure 17) are plaster examples of the *Nessus Abducting Deianira* (lower left), *Day* (upper left), and *Night* (upper right), together with Canova's statues, such as the *Magdalen* (center), in addition to other compositions, suggesting in miniature the decorative scheme Paolo Marulli arranged in his Neapolitan residence. By the 1840s less expensive and more easily carved conch shell displaced hardstone as the most popular material for cameos. Images of Thorvaldsen's *Night* were in such demand that examples of the many produced can be found in the Museum, notably as the centerpiece of a necklace for a shell cameo parure made in Naples in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵⁶ By this point the composition had become so widespread as to be a virtual icon of the decorative arts.

In 1837 Thorvaldsen himself returned to the *Nessus Abducting Deianira* by creating a pendant to it. *Chiron*

and *Achilles* (Figure 18) has dimensions similar to the earlier relief and recalls its composition, here with a human atop a centaur.⁵⁷ This relief depicts the wise Chiron mentoring his ward, the young Achilles, in deliberate contrast to the lusty Nessus betraying his charge, Deianira. The later relief's placid figures reveal just how dramatic the earlier one was in Thorvaldsen's oeuvre. *Chiron and Achilles* is decorous by comparison; the more restrained figures have slender, nonmuscular torsos. Concerned with symmetry, the sculptor aimed to complement his earlier work. In the absence of a clear mate to *Nessus Abducting Deianira* until later in the sculptor's career, the collector of small glyptic copies was forced to select another erotically charged relief, *Cupid and Psyche* (1838, plaster cast in the Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen) to complete the careful pairing in the box's left and right columns (Figure 17). Juxtaposition of the centaur relief pendants points up the singular nature of the earlier relief, when first conceived some twenty-three years earlier.

The Thorvaldsens Museum reflects the sculptor's final thoughts on *Nessus Abducting Deianira*. By giving his original master plaster casts and many marbles, as well as his personal collections of antiquities and paintings, to his native city, the sculptor had the opportunity to direct the way in which his art would be perceived in the future. Although he died before the museum's completion in 1848, he was alive for two

years during its construction and was involved with plans for the display of his art. The marble relief of *Nessus Abducting Deianira* is shown there in a small gallery, embedded in the wall eight feet from the floor. (The Metropolitan Museum's relief is currently displayed at the same height in the Carroll and Milton Petrie European Sculpture Court.) A high window lights the relief from the right; *Chiron and Achilles* faces it from the opposite side. Little in the Spartan simplicity of the galleries distracts from the art, and each room invites contemplation of just a few works. It seems likely that Paolo Marulli's Neapolitan residence framed Thorvaldsen's work in a richer, more palatial context. In the Thorvaldsens Museum, however, *Nessus Abducting Deianira* is seen as the artist wished, in

an architecturally restrained context and within the continuum of his work. One of his most dramatic statements, the relief is nonetheless a part of his sustained vision of the ideals of the ancient world, a vision broadcast through his own prolific art, as well as through printed and small lapidary copies, and, finally, preserved in his museum and now this one.

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NOTES

1. Jane Fejfer and Torben Melander, *Thorvaldsen's Ancient Sculptures: A Catalogue of the Ancient Sculptures in the Collection of Bertel Thorvaldsen, Thorvaldsens Museum* (Copenhagen, 2003), p. 9. See also the entry on Bertel Thorvaldsen by Bjarne Jørnaes in *Grove Dictionary of Art*, ed. Jane Turner (New York, 1996), vol. 30, pp. 763–66, for recent bibliography.
2. Jørnaes, in *Grove Dictionary of Art*, vol. 30, p. 764, writes the following regarding *Jason with the Golden Fleece* (1803): "Executed in a severe style reminiscent of the work of Pheidias, it marked his independence from the more refined hellenizing works of Canova, and contemporary critics made much of this distinction between the Nordic and the Italian." For example, Christian Molbeck, in *Rejsigjennemmen af Tyskland, Frankrig og Italien* (Copenhagen, 1822), vol. 3, p. 205ff., comparing Canova's and Thorvaldsen's reliefs, avers that the latter's "come directly from those antiques at the Vatican." Julius Lange, *Sørgel og Thorvaldsen: Studier i den nordiske Klassicismes; Fremstilling af Mennesket* (Copenhagen, 1886), p. 111, notes the Danish character of Thorvaldsen's mature works: "... a marked procession, bold, decided, is extraneous to their languid essence, and it reveals in this a foreign feeling he brought with him from his own country." Quoted in Eva Henschen, "Radici nordische dell'arte di Thorvaldsen," in *Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1770–1844: Scultore danese a Roma*, exh. cat., Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome (Rome, 1989), p. 41.
3. See *Künstlerleben in Rom, Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844): Der dänische Bildhauer und seine deutschen Freunde*, exh. cat., Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, and Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum, Schleswig (Nuremberg, 1991), p. 514, no. 4.8.
4. Karl Grass, in *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände*, no. 254 (October 22, 1812), p. 1016. See Bjarne Jørnaes, "Il patriarca del bassorilievo": Uno sguardo al Thorvaldsen dei rilievi," in *Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1770–1844: Scultore danese a Roma*, p. 46.
5. See Bjarne Jørnaes, "Thorvaldsen's 'Triumph of Alexander' in the Palazzo del Quirinale," in *Thorvaldsen: L'ambiente, l'influsso, il mito*, ed. Patrick Kragelund and Mogens Nykjaer (Rome, 1991), pp. 35–42. See also Fernando Mazzocca, "Thorvaldsen e i committenti lombardi," in *Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1770–1844: Scultore danese a Roma*, pp. 120–28.
6. Cited by Jürgen Wittstock, *Geschichte der deutschen und skandinavischen Thorvaldsen-Rezeption bis zur Janresmitte 1819* (Hamburg, 1975), pp. 230–371.
7. Jørnaes, "Il patriarca del bassorilievo," p. 46, fig. 1.
8. See Ian Wardropper, in "Recent Acquisitions: A Selection, 2003–2004," *MMA B*, n.s., 62, no. 2 (Fall 2004), p. 26.
9. Anthony Radcliffe and Charles Avery, in *Giambologna, 1529–1608: Sculptor to the Medici*, exh. cat., Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh (London, 1978), pp. 111–16.
10. See Guilhem Scherf, in *Playing with Fire: European Terracotta Models, 1740–1840*, exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (New York, 2003), pp. 165–67, no. 72.
11. The influence of Thorvaldsen's collection of ancient scarabs and gems on his own work is discussed in *Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1770–1844: Scultore danese a Roma*, pp. 297–303, nos. 165–86.
12. Anthony M. Clark, "Thorvaldsen and His *Ganymede and the Eagle*," *Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin* 55 (1966), p. 76. See also *Bertel Thorvaldsen—Skulpturen, Modelle, Bozzetti, Handzeichnungen: Gemälde aus Thorvaldsens Sammlungen*, exh. cat., Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne (Cologne, 1977), p. 182, no. 52; and Jørgen Birkedal Hartmann and Klaus Parlasca, *Antike Motive bei Thorvaldsen: Studien zur Antikenrezeption des Klassizismus* (Tübingen, 1979), pp. 133–34.
13. See Dyke Helsted, "Thorvaldsens Arbeitsmethode," in *Bertel Thorvaldsen: Untersuchungen zu seinem Werk und zur Kunst seiner Zeit*, exh. cat., Museen der Stadt Köln (Cologne, 1977), pp. 7–38.
14. A letter from Eckersberg, dated August 5, 1815, calls the relief of *Nessus and Deianira* contemporary with *Priam and Achilles* and *Night and Day*. See Henrik Bramsen and Hannemarie Ragn Jensen, "Eckersbergs Dagbog: Eckersbergs Brevkon-

- cepter, 1813–1816,” *Meddelelser fra Thorvaldsens Museum*, 1973, p. 88.
15. Archives, Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, Daybooks, 1819–23, p. 261, and 1823–28, pp. 8, 134.
 16. Sold at Finarte Semenzato, Venice, May 4, 2003, no. 621, with provenance from the collection of Sebastiano Marulli, duke of Ascoli, together with a letter from Alberta del Balzo di Capriano, daughter of Duke Traiano Marulli, which records the presence of the work in the family collection. Acquired through the dealer Alain Moatti in Paris. This work was listed in the *Istituzione di maggiorasco a favore di Sebastiano Marulli* in the notarial archives of Naples, notary G. Martinez, 1843, as one of his possessions allocated as a bequest to his nephew Sebastiano, and if he should be heirless, to the then-titled Real Museo Borbonico. The transfer to the Museo never took place. See Paola Fardella, *Antonio Canova a Napoli: Tra collezionismo e mercato* (Naples, 2002), pp. 132–34.
 17. Dyveke Helsted, ed., *Thorvaldsen's Museum*, trans. Ingeborg Nixon (Copenhagen, 1961; repr., 1972), p. 52, no. 480, and p. 57, no. 481.
 18. Dyveke Helsted, *Thorvaldsen: Drawings and Bozzetti*, exh. cat., Heim Gallery, London (London, 1973), p. 28, no. 38, notes Cavaceppi's relief as a possible source.
 19. Mark Jones, ed., *Fake? The Art of Deception*, exh. cat., The British Museum, London (London, 1990), p. 140, no. 143, with bibliography.
 20. Widely published, this drawing is illustrated in Dyveke Helsted, ed., *Thorvaldsens Museum: Katalog* (Copenhagen, 1975), fig. 56.
 21. Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen, inv. no. A484. See Jørnaes, “Il patriarca del bassorilievo,” p. 47, fig. 4.
 22. See Jacob Rothenberg, “*Descensus Ad Terram*: The Acquisition and Reception of the Elgin Marbles” (New York, 1977).
 23. Fejfer and Melander, *Thorvaldsen's Ancient Sculptures*, p. 18, discusses the nature of Thorvaldsen's collection as typical of an artist rather than of an aristocratic connoisseur.
 24. Ibid., pp. 46–49, nos. H1413, H1414. For a discussion of Thorvaldsen's classical sources for *Nessus Abducting Deianira*, see Hartmann and Parlasca, *Antike Motive*, pp. 157–59.
 25. See Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500–1900* (New Haven, 1981), pp. 274–79.
 26. See *Il Neoclassicismo in Italia da Tiepolo a Canova*, exh. cat., Palazzo Reale, Milan (Milan, 2002), p. 489, nos. IX.23–IX.25.
 27. Elena di Majo and Stefano Susinno, “Thorvaldsen a Roma e in Italia: Criteri di una mostra e qualche spunto di ricerca,” in *Thorvaldsen: L'ambiente, l'influsso, il mito*, p. 15.
 28. *Civiltà dell'Ottocento: Le arti a Napoli dai Borbone ai Savoia*, exh. cat., Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, and Palazzo Reale, Caserta (Naples, 1997), vol. 1, p. 99.
 29. Don Fastidio, “La quadreria di casa Marulli a Napoli nel 1825,” *Napoli nobilissima: Rivista di topografia ed arte napoletana* 8 (1898), pp. 182–83.
 30. Fardella, *Antonio Canova a Napoli*, p. 121.
 31. Peggy Fogelman and Peter Fusco, with Marietta Cambareri, *Italian and Spanish Sculpture: Catalogue of the J. Paul Getty Museum Collection* (Los Angeles, 2002), pp. 314–21.
 32. Fardella, *Antonio Canova a Napoli*, p. 120.
 33. Fogelman and Fusco, *Italian and Spanish Sculpture*, p. 314.
 34. Fardella, *Antonio Canova a Napoli*, pp. 119–39.
 35. Archives, Thorvaldsens Museum, file titled “Marcelli: Saur. Butera. Ascoli.” The letter is dated Naples, December 12, 1821.
 36. See note 15, above.
 37. The originals of Camuccini's letters are in the Archivio Camuccini. See Isabella Ceccopieri, ed., *L'Archivio Camuccini: Inventario* (Rome, 1990), pp. 7, 10. Copies are in the Archives, Thorvaldsens Museum, 13a, 53/203.
 38. Ulrich Hiesinger, “The Paintings of Vincenzo Camuccini, 1771–1844,” *Art Bulletin* 60 (June 1978), pp. 307, 315. Camuccini's portrait of Thorvaldsen is in a private collection, Rome, and the plaster bust of Camuccini is in the Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen.
 39. Jørnaes, “Il patriarca del bassorilievo,” p. 46.
 40. Paolo Marulli to Antonio Canova, Naples, January 25, 1822, Museo Biblioteca Archivio, Bassano del Grappa, cvii 4-10, n. 1279. Discussed by Fardella, *Antonio Canova a Napoli*, p. 132.
 41. Fardella, *Antonio Canova a Napoli*, p. 132.
 42. Ibid., p. 134, n. 42. *Night and Day* passed into the Genoese collection of Massimo Ettlinger at the end of the nineteenth century and by descent to a private Roman collection. See Di Majo and Susinno, “Thorvaldsen a Roma e in Italia,” p. 16 and n. 18.
 43. *Civiltà dell'Ottocento*, vol. 1, p. 33.
 44. Chiara Garzya, *Interni Neoclassici a Napoli* (Naples, 1978), pp. 72–73.
 45. Ibid., p. 97.
 46. Maria Vittoria Marini Clarelli, “L'opera di Thorvaldsen nell'editoria romana dell'Ottocento,” in *Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1770–1844: Scultore danese a Roma*, p. 309.
 47. Ibid., p. 310.
 48. *L'Anacreonte di Thorvaldsen [sic] in XXIV bassorilievi, descritti dal Cav. Angelo Maria Ricci* (Rieti: Salvatore Tinchì, 1828); *Intera collezione di tutte le opere inventate e scolpite dal Cav. Alberto Thorvaldsen; incisa a contorni con illustrazioni del chiarissimo Abate Misserini, dedicata a sua eccellenza Rodolfo, conte di Lutsov* (Rome: Pietro Aureli, 1831), pl. 55; *Anacreonte novissimo del commendatore Alberto Thorvaldsen [sic] in XXXI. bassorilievi anacreontici, tradotti dal Cavaliere Angelo Maria Ricci* (Rome: Giacomo Antonelli, 1836), pl. 27.
 49. Hawks Le Grice, *Walks through the Studii of the Sculptors at Rome* (Rome, 1841), p. 269.
 50. See Lucia Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli, “Le opere di Thorvaldsen nella glittica romana dell'Ottocento,” in *Thorvaldsen: L'ambiente, l'influsso, il mito*, pp. 91–92.
 51. Ibid., p. 95. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Milton Weil Collection, 1940 (40.20.40).
 52. See Lucia Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli, in *Maestà di Roma da Napoleone all'Unità d'Italia*, exh. cat., Scuderie del Quirinale, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, and Villa Medici, Rome (Rome, 2003), p. 528, no. XI.1.40.
 53. Stefanelli, “Thorvaldsen nella glittica romana,” pp. 92–93.
 54. Francesco Carnesecchi (Italian, active ca. 1822–44). *Impressions of Intaglios after the Statuary of Canova and Thorvaldsen*. Gypsum paper and leather box: 25.2 x 17.2 x 5.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Joseph D. Ryle, 1992 (1992.405.1–.35).
 55. See Stefanelli, “Thorvaldsen nella glittica romana,” p. 95.
 56. Parure (necklace, two bracelets, earrings, pin). Italian (Naples), mid-nineteenth century. Shell mounted in gold. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Mrs. John D. Jones, 1899 (99.33.1–6).
 57. Helsted, *Thorvaldsens Museum*, 1975, p. 169, no. A798. This relief was carved in 1888–90 after the original plaster, also at the museum (inv. no. A488), 101.5 x 72.3 cm.