

The River Nile, A Giovanni Volpato Masterwork

JAMES DAVID DRAPER

Henry R. Kravis Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

IN 1785, WITH THE BLESSING of Pope Pius VI (r. 1775–99), Giovanni Volpato (1735–1803) opened his well-known manufactory for the production of biscuit porcelain statuettes in Rome, in via Pudenziana near Santa Maria Maggiore.¹ The many-talented Volpato, a native of Bassano long established in Rome as a prolific printmaker, enterprising archaeologist, and sometime dealer in antiquities, probably did not abandon any of those pursuits, but it is clear from the number and quality of the surviving porcelains that his efforts in relation to them, the first of consequence to be made in Rome, were quite focused. His heirs ran the firm until 1818. Volpato had also established at Civita Castellana a line of domestic earthenware productions for the table “ad uso d’Inghilterra” (after the English manner), but their reputation never approached that of his biscuit porcelains.² The latter succeeded for various reasons, including their relative novelty, their accessible size, the attractiveness and delicacy of their creamy white ceramic body, and the elegance and accuracy with which they reproduced ancient sculptures in reduced form. Today they are also valued for their rarity.

Volpato gained from a political situation that caused the luxury products of Revolutionary France to be cut off from foreign visitors to the benefit of Italian manufactories. Contemporary taste was veering steadily toward the increasingly austere forms of Neoclassicism that were encountered and nurtured in Rome. He also showed an outstanding knack for making friends and establishing powerful contacts—Gustav III of Sweden (r. 1771–92) and Antonio Canova (1757–1822), for example. The king bought several ancient sculptures excavated by Volpato. Canova, who came from the same area of the Veneto as Volpato, was a protégé, and Volpato was instrumental in obtaining the commission for Canova’s first great tomb, that of Pope Clement XIV (r. 1769–74) in SS. Apostoli, in Rome. The sculptor almost married

Volpato’s daughter and eventually created his funerary monument in the porch of SS. Apostoli. Although most of Volpato’s biscuit statuettes reproduce antiquities, he included Canova’s early masterpiece *Theseus and the Minotaur* (Victoria and Albert Museum, London) among his copies.³

One of Volpato’s helpful acquaintances in the quintessentially international Roman setting was the Swiss-born portrait painter Angelica Kauffmann (1741–1807). In 1795, Kauffmann advised young Charles Heathcote Tatham (1772–1842) to send a list of Volpato’s works to the architect Henry Holland (1745–1806), then completing buildings for the Prince of Wales and the Earl Spencer. Tatham, a draftsman in Holland’s employ, was in Rome to assist the architect in forming a collection of ancient fragments for his London residence. Tatham also forwarded similar lists from bronze founders. Volpato’s porcelain reductions of antiquities are perhaps to be viewed as his response to those in bronze, which found their way to the mantelpieces and dining tables of several English homeowners eager for reflections of the classical world, whether as mementos of the Grand Tour or simply to embrace formally correct embodiments of ancient ideals.

The only surviving copy of Volpato’s printed price list, in the Victoria and Albert Museum Library, has been frequently cited but never, to my knowledge, reproduced (Figure 1).⁴ Its French text underscores the ecumenical nature of artistic life in the Eternal City at that date. Tatham’s note at the bottom reads: “Madame Angelica recommended me to enclose this Catalogue of the Articles made at a Manufactory here—they are of the whitest porcelain⁵ similar to the french—but very superior as to design workmanship and Art.—The mark + is a very beautiful Collection.” Tatham’s plus sign in ink denotes a set of statuettes of *Apollo and the Nine Muses*, after marbles in the Vatican Museums, priced together at 40 gold sequins. Down the list, by far the most expensive item, priced at 100 sequins (this also in pen, as if Volpato had difficulty at the last minute deciding what to charge), comes *Le Fluve* [sic]

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CATALOGUE

Des Statues antiques, Groupes, et Dessert de Porcellaine en biscuit,
de la Fabrique Jean Volpato à Rome

STATUES

plus hautes d'un Pied de France	
Apollon du Museum Vaticanum	6
Paris dito	6
Melagre dito	6
Marius assis dito	6
Sylla assis dito	6
Centaure avec un Lievre en Main dito	9
Autre Centaure avec un Amour sur le Dos de la Villa Borghese	9
Gladiateur mourant étendu du Museum Capitolin	6
Agrippine dito	6
Idole Egyptien dito	6
Hercule de palais Farnese	6
Flore dito	6
Mars en repos de la Villa Ludovici	6
Faune dormant du palais Barberini	6
Autre Faune avec un Amour à Florence	6
Les memes plus bas d'un pied	
Apollon Cythere avec les neuf Muses du Museum Vaticanum	40
Memnosine dito	4
Ganimede dito	4
Famulus des Bains dito	4
Adonis dito	3
Venus avec une perle entre les mains du Museum Capitolin	4
Antinous dito	3
Mercurio dito	2
Uge Flore au Capitol	4
Gente du Museum Vaticanum	2
Deux Enfants avec des Oiseaux dans la Galerie Borghese	4
Apollon de medice à Florence	4
Faune avec les cliquettes dito	4
Autre Faune antique chez l'Auteur	4

GROUPES

De différents grandeurs

Un Char de triomphe avec Bacchus et Ariane tiré par des Tigres, avec deux Amours et son terrain	40
Le Fluve Nile avec les Enfants	100
Une Faune, et une Bacchante groupés	9
Satyre et des enfans qui jouent avec un bouc	8
Autre Groupe semblable	8
Deux Bacchantes qui dansent	8
Quatre Bacchantes plus petites	6
Quatre Enfants qui tiennent des Masques	4
Deux groupes des Enfants	4
Deux Vasaux qui soutiennent deux Chandeliers	12
Une Europe sur le Taureau	9
Tesé avec le minotaure	15
Les deux Statues Equestres du Quirinal avec l'Obélisque, et les deux Fontaines	25
Un Temple soutenu par huit Cantharides de l'hauteur d'un pied et demi	20

VASES ANTIQUES

Vase avec des masques à Londres	8
Autre Vase avec des Masques dito	8
Vase avec Ephigénie de Medius à Florence	12
Autre Vase avec des Bacchantes à la Villa Borghese	12
Vase avec des ornements au Museum Capitolin	8
Autre vase Semblable	8
Vase long avec des ornements	6

BUSTES DES PHILOSOPHES

De la proportion de la moitié d'une Tête naturelle

Platon dans le Museum Capitolin	3
Euripide dito	3
Epicure dito	2
Socrate dito	2
Apollonius Tiansus dito	2
Alexandre dito	3
Diogene dito	2
Flore dito	2
Achille dito	2
Biante du Museum Vaticanum	3
Pericles dito	2
Aristotele dito	2
Phodros dito	2
Apollonius dito	2
Deux Harpies des Bacchantes dito	6
Solon à Naples	2
Homere dito	2
Ajax à Florence	2
Zenon près le Chevalier de Azara	2
Isocrate dito	2
Alexandre dito	2
Euripide dito	2
Hieronymus	2
Pittacus dito	2
Pherecide dito	2
Theocrite dito	2
Socrate dito	2
Heraclite dit	2
Heraclite Massigete dit	2
Metodore dit	2
Apollonius Tiansus dit	2
Carneside dit	2
Aristotele dit	2
Demostene dit	2
Ciceron dit	2

L'Auteur a une collection plus petite des memes Bustes sur des

Hermes à un sequin chacun

Plusieurs Vases, et Tasses de belles formes à un sequin la piece	
Deux Chandeliers	6
Un Chandelier antique	2

L'Auteur fait toujours de nouveaux Groupes, et Statues pour orner les Tables, et les Cheminées à mesure qu'on lui presente l'occasion de les faire.

D. 1497-98
17

Madame Appliquea recommended me to enclase this Catalogue of the articles made at a manufactory here - they are of the finest porcelain similar to the french - but very superior as to design workmanship and etc. - The mark * is a very beautiful Collection.

Figure 1. Giovanni Volpato's price list sent to Henry Holland in 1795. Victoria and Albert Museum Library, London (photo: Victoria and Albert Picture Library)

Nile avec les Enfans. The reference is to the ancient marble sculpture of a river god, the *Nile*, in the Vatican. Volpato's group recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum is apparently the unique surviving biscuit reduction (Figures 2, 3). Given the biscuit group's exceptional size (for porcelain) and the fiendish detail lavished on it, this representation of the *Nile* may even be the only one that his manufactory managed to produce. Despite the signature in block letters on top of the right rear, G. VOLPATO ROMA (Figure 4), with which the group, like roughly half the production, is stamped, it is probable that Vol-

pato did not model the work himself but hired modelers and finishers in much the same way that the bronze founders did. It was not always easy to find help; in 1786, his "primo uomo" was jailed for theft,⁶ but that must have been only a minor setback. Close supervision on his part or that of a foreman or both is implied by the uniformly high quality of the manufactory's overall output; even in that context, Volpato's *Nile* stands out spectacularly.⁷

The marble river god in the Vatican is a colossus more than ten feet wide (Figure 5).⁸ Ever since its discovery during the early sixteenth century in excavations



Figure 2. Giovanni Volpato, after the antique, *The River Nile*, ca. 1785–95. Hard-paste biscuit porcelain, H. 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (29 cm), W. 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (57 cm), D. 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (28.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Isak and Rose Weinman Foundation Inc. Gift, 2001 (2001.456)

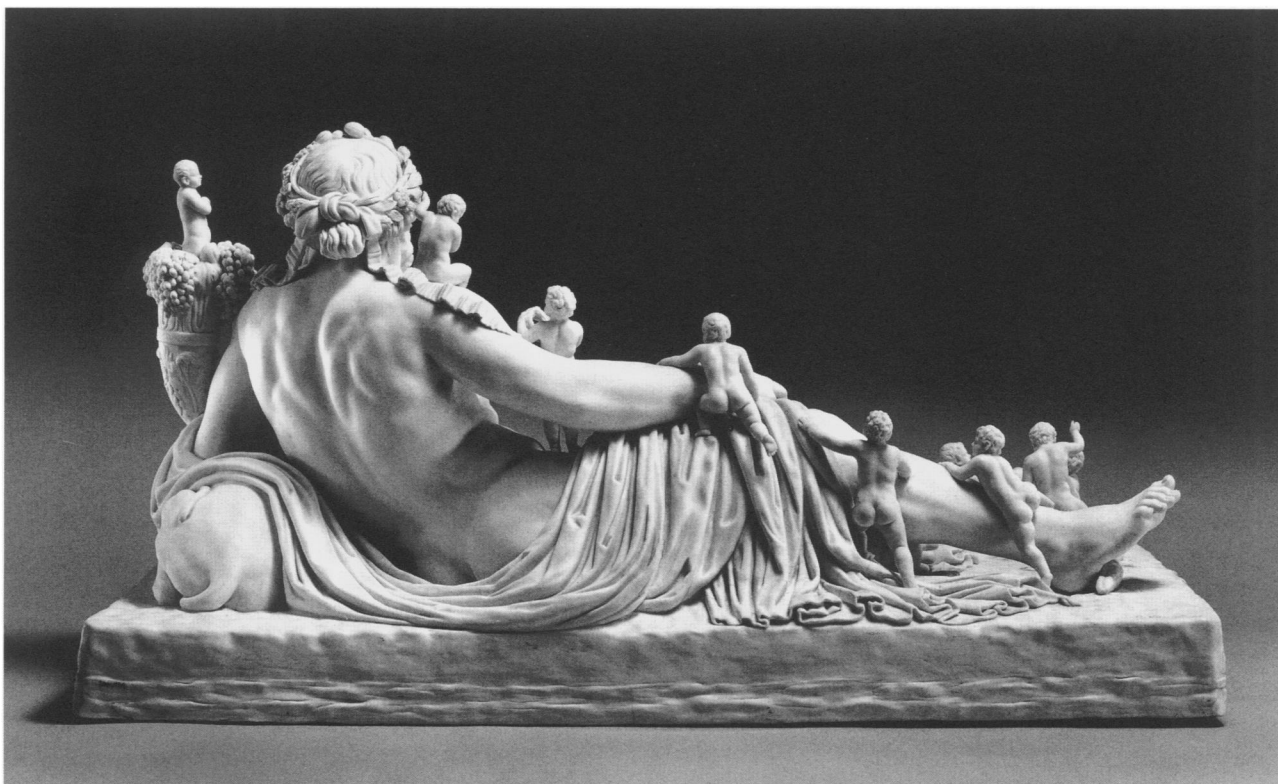


Figure 3. Back of the porcelain in Figure 2



Figure 4. Stamped signature on Figure 2: G. VOLPATO ROMA

of the shrine to Isis and Serapis, near Santa Maria sopra Minerva, and its placement in the Vatican Belvedere, the *Nile* was viewed as one of the most curious relics of the ancient world. In Volpato's day, it was in the Sala degli Animali, which he often traversed on his way to make drawings for engravings after Raphael;

today it is in the Braccio Nuovo. In Volpato's time the marble was also more highly esteemed than it is now; later scholars have tended to be somewhat dismissive of a work generally considered a Roman copy of a lost Alexandrian original. The Vatican *Nile* originated during one of those waves of Egyptomania that periodically washed over ancient Rome. In the Iseum it had a nearer Roman context, having been paired with the marble *Tiber* of equally impressive size. They were together until 1803, when both were dragged to Paris by terms of the Treaty of Tolentino; the *Nile* returned home, but the *Tiber* remains in the Louvre.⁹

The meaning of the *Nile*, a mammoth nude reposing against a sphinx and cornucopia amid babies who swarm and play with an alligator and a mongoose, is known from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (36.58). In his discussion of the stones of Egypt, Pliny mentions not the Vatican marble but an example carved of the dark gray composite stone graywacke, which he called "basanites."

The Egyptians, too, have discovered in Ethiopia the stone known as "basanites," which in color and hardness resembles iron, whence the name that has been



Figure 5. *The River Nile*, Roman copy of a Hellenistic statue, probably Alexandrian in origin. Marble, L. 10 ft. 2 in. (3.1 m). Musei Vaticani, Rome (photo: Archivio fotografico delle Gallerie e Musei Vaticani)

given to it. A larger block of it has never been known than the one forming the group which has been dedicated by the Emperor Vespasian Augustus in the Temple of Peace. It represents the river Nilus with sixteen children sporting around it, symbolical of the sixteen cubits, the extreme height to which, in the most favorable seasons, that river should rise.¹⁰

The annual rising of the waters by an ideal sixteen cubits was deemed essential to the maintenance of abundant life in Lower Egypt. Our group is thus an allegory of fecundity and was understood as such by the Roman sculptor or sculptors who provided complementary imagery for the *Tiber*. The *Nile* typology was apparently widespread. The babies who personify the cubits have a Greek name, *pecheis*, derived from the term for measurement of the forearm's length from wrist to elbow.¹¹ The marble infants are of roughly that height. In any case, their role and number were perfectly grasped when the group was restored for Pope Clement XIV by Gaspare Sibilla (d. 1782) earlier in the eighteenth century. As an archaeologist, Volpato evidently followed restorations closely. His biscuit line also included the Vatican *Centaurs*, which Sibilla had mended quite freely in 1782.¹²

Before the restoration of the *Nile* many of the babies were missing partially or altogether, as older drawings show, but finally all were completed—whether refashioned or reinvented. Their complaisant charms echo classical literature. Certain lines from Philostratus the Elder must have rung in the restorer's head. In his chapter on *pecheis*, which his translator renders as "cubit-dwarfs" (10.5), Philostratus, influenced by painting, writes:

About the Nile are sporting children no taller than their name implies; and the Nile delights in them for many reasons, but particularly because they herald his coming in great floods for the Egyptians. At any rate they draw near and come to him seemingly out of the water, infants dainty and smiling. . . . Some sit on his shoulders, some cling to his curling locks, some are asleep on his arms, and some romp on his breast. And he yields them flowers, some from his lap and some from his arms, that they may weave them into crowns and, sacred and fragrant themselves, may have a bed of flowers to sleep upon. And the children climb up one on another with sistra in their hands, instruments the sound of which is familiar to that river. Crocodiles, however, and hippopotami, which some artists associate with the Nile, are now lying aloof in its deep eddies so as not to frighten the children. But that the river is the Nile is indicated, my boy, by symbols of

agriculture and navigation, and for the following reason: at its flood the Nile makes Egypt open to boats; then when it has been drunk up by the fields, it gives the people a fertile land to till; and in Ethiopia, where it takes its rise, a divinity is set over it as its steward, and he it is who sends forth its waters at the right seasons. . . . Toward him the river is looking as it prays that its infants may be many.¹³

Volpato, like Sibilla, presents us with putti wielding wheat instead of blossoms, but many particulars, the tone, and even the rhythmic sense are much the same in the group as in the text.

The *pecheis* or *cubitini*, if we may be permitted to imagine an Italian so referring to these putti, imposed the greatest challenge to copying, as the modeler had to reduce them in height to about three inches. Although small in relation to the marble, the copy is very sizable in terms of porcelain. The copyist, while clearly rising to the task of faithfully diminishing to tiny fractions such details as the strands of the river god's beard and the grapes of the cornucopia, decided on one decisive overall change. One of the marble's most endearing features is its base. The front is carved with wavy lines to suggest the Nile's water, but on the back and sides are friezes in low relief inhabited by ibises and creatures of the deep including crocodiles and hippopotami; there are also Pygmies rowing boats.¹⁴ The modeler chose to delete these lively scenes, no doubt fearing that they could not be reproduced successfully on the sharply curtailed scale of the porcelain. His solution was to furnish the base and its sides with a fictive sheet of wet drapery, providing a softer foil for the group. This provision, more in accord with Neoclassical decorum than slithery hippopotami and crocodiles, anticipates by a couple of decades Canova's draping of the bed on which his famous *Pauline Borghese* (Galleria Borghese, Rome) reclines.

It is hardly a wonder if, as we suspect, Volpato's expensive *Nile* was repeated little or not at all; the amount of labor involved may be indicated by the absence from his price list of a biscuit *Tiber* pendant. The rest of his porcelain oeuvre divulges treasures, certainly—for instance, a perfectly recapitulated *Dying Gaul*,¹⁵ or a *surtout de table* exhibiting every finesse,¹⁶ or even a double-herm bust that looks strikingly original¹⁷—but no group of this size and complexity. With it Volpato tested his manufactory to the limit and served up one of the most eye-catching confections among all those that perpetuate memories of the Grand Tour.

NOTES

1. For Volpato's ceramics, see especially Hugh Honour, "Statuettes after the Antique: Volpato's Porcelain Factory," *Apollo* 85 (May 1967), pp. 371–73; Eros Biavati, "Giovanni Volpato di Bassano (1732–1803) incisore, produttore di porcellane, terraglie uso Inghilterra e maioliche a Roma," *Faenza* 63 (1977), pp. 132–40; Elisa Tittoni Monti, "Volpato a Roma," in *Piranesi e la cultura antiquaria: Gli antecedenti e il contesto. Atti del Convegno 14–17 Novembre 1979* (Rome, 1983), pp. 405–19; idem, "La fabbrica di biscuit di Giovanni Volpato," in Giorgio Marini, ed., *Giovanni Volpato 1735–1803*, exh. cat., Museo Civico, Bassano del Grappa (Bassano del Grappa, 1988), pp. 34–39; and Daniela Di Castro, "Il principe Chigi, Visconti e Volpato fra il centrotavola di Palazzo Pallavicino ed altri oggetti d'arte," *Gazzetta antiquaria* n.s., 28 (1996), pp. 42–51. I am profoundly indebted to Dr. Di Castro for sharing her research on the *River Nile*.
2. See Biavati, "Giovanni Volpato di Bassano," passim. Volpato printed four price lists for these wares beginning in 1796.
3. Olimpia Theodoli, "Un appunto su Antonio Canova e Giovanni Volpato," *Antologia di Belle Arti* 23–24 (1984), pp. 116–18.
4. Victoria and Albert Museum Library, London, D.1479.17–1898, first cited in Honour, "Statuettes after the Antique."
5. The whiteness claimed is overstated. The clay, dug at Tolfra, is off-white and slightly buttery to grayish in effect.
6. Biavati, "Giovanni Volpato di Bassano," p. 135.
7. A few words on facture and condition: the left end of the base rises a few degrees above horizontal. Warping of the sort was virtually to be expected in firing a piece of this size. The same is true of the numerous kiln cracks. Subsequent repairs, none carried out by the Metropolitan Museum and mainly comprising replacements of babies' fingers, are remarkably few.
8. See Walther Amelung, *Die Skulpturen des Vatikanischen Museums* (Berlin, 1903), vol. 1, pp. 124–34, no. 109; Wolfgang Helbig, *Führer durch die öffentlichen Sammlungen klassischer Alterthümer in Rom*, 4th ed., rev. (Tübingen, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 338–39, no. 440; Hans Henrik Brummer, *The Statue Court in the Vatican Belvedere* (Stockholm, 1970), pp. 191–204; Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500–1900* (New Haven and London, 1981), pp. 272–73, no. 65; and Phyllis Pray Bober and Ruth Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources* (London, 1986), pp. 103–4, no. 67.
9. Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, pp. 31–11, no. 79.
10. *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley (London, 1857), vol. 6, p. 328.
11. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. with new suppl. (Oxford, 1996), p. 1402.
12. Biscuit examples in the Museo Correr, Venice, and the Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome. Tittoni, "Volpato a Roma," p. 410, and Tittoni, "La fabbrica di biscuit," pp. 38–39. For Sibilla's career as a restorer, see Carlo Pietrangeli, *Scavi e scoperte di antichità sotto il pontificato di Pio VI* (Rome, 1958), passim.
13. Philostratus, *Imagines*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks (London and New York, 1931), p. 19.
14. The friezes seem not to be widely illustrated. In most old engravings they are transposed from the back and sides to two zones in front. Thus Salomon Reinach, *Répertoire de la statuaire grecque et romaine* (Paris, 1897), vol. 1, pl. 748, 5.
15. Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome. It appears on Volpato's list (Figure 1) as "Gladiateur mourant étendu du Museum Capitolinum." *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century*, exh. cat., Philadelphia Museum of Art and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Philadelphia, 2000), p. 208, no. 100.
16. Palazzo Pallavicini, Rome. Di Castro, "Il principe Chigi," passim.
17. The recent Anton Raphael Mengs exhibition in Padua presented Volpato's biscuit double-herm bust of Mengs and the Spanish diplomat Azura (Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; bequest of Federico Zeri). *Mengs: La scoperta del Neoclassico*, exh. cat. Palazzo Zabarella, Padua (Venice, 2001), pp. 118–19, no. 11.