

POMPEO CALVI
(Milan 1806 - 1884)

The Interior of Canova's Workshop in Rome

Oil on canvas, 119.5 x 97.2 cm.
Signed bottom left: "P. Calvi"
c. 1880

This painting, which has recently attracted scholars' attention (cf. C. Ferando, *Maid servant as Muse: The dramatic reinvention of Antonio Canova*, in «Journal of Art Historiography», n. 3, December 2010, pp. 11-14, reproduced as fig. 11; E. Camboni, *Canova bibliofilo: dono di un'opera "proibita" per la Biblioteca dell'Accademia di San Luca* in «Annale delle Arti e degli Archivi; Pittura, Scultura, Architettura» Accademia di San Luca, I, 2015, reproduced on p. 18) is one of the rare depictions of the interior of Canova's workshop in Rome. Even rarer are a number of surviving depictions of the artist's workshop made while he was still alive: Chiarottini's famous watercolour now in the Museo Civico in Udine and two paintings in a private collection, one by Domenico Conti in which the artist is portrayed against a backdrop with *Psyche*, and another in which he is shown with the group of *Cupid and Psyche Embracing*. These works are thus emblematic of the artist in a pleasing genre that enjoyed immense success (including commercial success) with patrons. The statue of *Hebe*, on the other hand, appears in a painting by Letterio Subbia, an artist from Messina who visited Canova's workshop in Rome, while the *Venus Italica* can be seen behind the figure of the sculptor in a celebrated portrait by Fabre now in the Musée Fabre in Montpellier.

The painting under discussion here, on the other hand, is one of the rare depictions and recreations of the artist's workshop after his death, which include such evocative images as that of Van Brée in which we see the *Graces*, or the group of *Cupid and Psyche*, painted by Lorenzo Valles, in which *Paolina* is present in the flesh as she sits for Canova to carve her portrait (Christie's auction, London, 8 July 2009, lot 227), while the *Magdalen*, again based on a model from life, appears in Achille Beltrami's reconstruction of the workshop. In the picture under discussion here we are looking at an ideal recreation of Canova's workshop in which the images have the appearance of an anthology of the great sculptor's masterpieces. From left to right, we see the group of *Youth and Old Age* from the *Monument to Maria Christina of Austria* in

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Vienna; scale models, on a shelf behind the artist, of his *Hercules and Lichas*; the Forlì *Hebe*; the Vatican *Perseus Triumphant*; and the *Venus Italica*; while behind a curtain we can make out colossal statues of a heroic nature such as *Mars the Peacemaker* and one of the two *Boxers*. Two bas-reliefs, *Feeding the Hungry* and the *Death of Socrates*, hang on the walls of the workshop. The artist, for his part, is portrayed in working clothes, his legs clad in tight-fitting hose just as Hayez had portrayed him in his celebrated literary image of the sculptor's workshop (F. Hayez, *Le mie memorie*, Milan 1890). The presence of a female model, on the other hand, is incongruous because Canova never used any female models in his workshop, while the presence behind the artist of a figure with crossed legs who appears to be a visiting tourist, possibly one those collectors who read Canova passages from classical literature while he worked (given the open book in his lap), is altogether more plausible. A small ladder, a stool and a half-used candle complete the workshop's furnishings, reminding us that Canova also worked at night, the better to handle his marble by the artificial light of a candle. Those who visited his workshop were thus accustomed to admiring his masterpieces precisely in that atmospheric light.

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