

14-15.

## *Luigi Acquisti*

*Forlì 1747 – Bologna 1823*

### TWO FEMALE FIGURES

Terracotta, Giustizia-Fortezza 27 x 29 x 14 cm; Temperanza-Umiltà 27 x 24 x 16 cm

Inscriptions: Giustizia, Fortezza / Temperanza, Umil[tà]

These two remarkable terracotta figures, devoid of any attributes, are typical examples of early Neoclassical Bolognese sculpture. A sculptural counterpart to the last great flourishing of Bolognese painting with the brothers Ubaldo and Gaetano Gandolfi, the terracotta and stucco production of artists such as Giacomo Rossi, Carlo Prinetti, Petronio Tadolini and Luigi Acquisti is characterized by a style still indebted to that of the late Baroque, and thus to the glorious tradition of Giuseppe Maria Mazza, though interpreted in more delicate and graceful forms. In particular, the garments of these figures, arranged into solemn folds, are reminiscent of those of figures such as *Music* and *History* executed by Acquisti for the sacristy of San Michele dei Leprosetti in Bologna between approximately 1778 and 1779.<sup>1</sup>

We can now reconstruct the career of this important protagonist of Italian sculpture between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries with a degree of accuracy. Local sources, most notably Marcello Oretti, had already provided important information on the basis of which to outline his biography, and many scholars have worked on these data, from Eugenio Riccòmini up to the recent studies by Giorgio Galeazzi. All the studies on Acquisti have focused on his activities as a stucco artist: there is no doubt that especially during the long period spent in his home region, between Bologna and Romagna (up to 1791), he worked primarily on decorative programmes, both sacred and secular, executed in the stucco bas-relief technique. However, Oretti had already mentioned some works in terracotta by the artist, specifying that in 1778 he had placed eight figures ‘al naturale’ on the terrace of a building in Via Galliera.<sup>2</sup> Now lost, like the

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Riccòmini, *Vaghezza e furore: la scultura del Settecento in Emilia e Romagna*, Bologna 1977, pp. 141-142, no. 215; Giorgio Galeazzi, *Luigi Acquisti (Forlì 1747 – Bologna 1823) protagonista nella decorazione neoclassica – il periodo bolognese – (parte prima)* in “Strenna storica bolognese”, LVIII, 2008, pp. 277-281.

<sup>2</sup> Riccòmini, *op. cit.* 1977, p. 140; Giorgio Galeazzi, *Luigi Acquisti (Forlì 1747 – Bologna 1823) protagonista nella decorazione neoclassica – il periodo bolognese – (parte seconda)* in “Strenna storica bolognese”, LIX, 2009, p. 302.





Luigi Acquisti, *Justice*, Medicina, church of the Assunta.



Luigi Acquisti, *Peace*, Medicina, church of the Assunta.

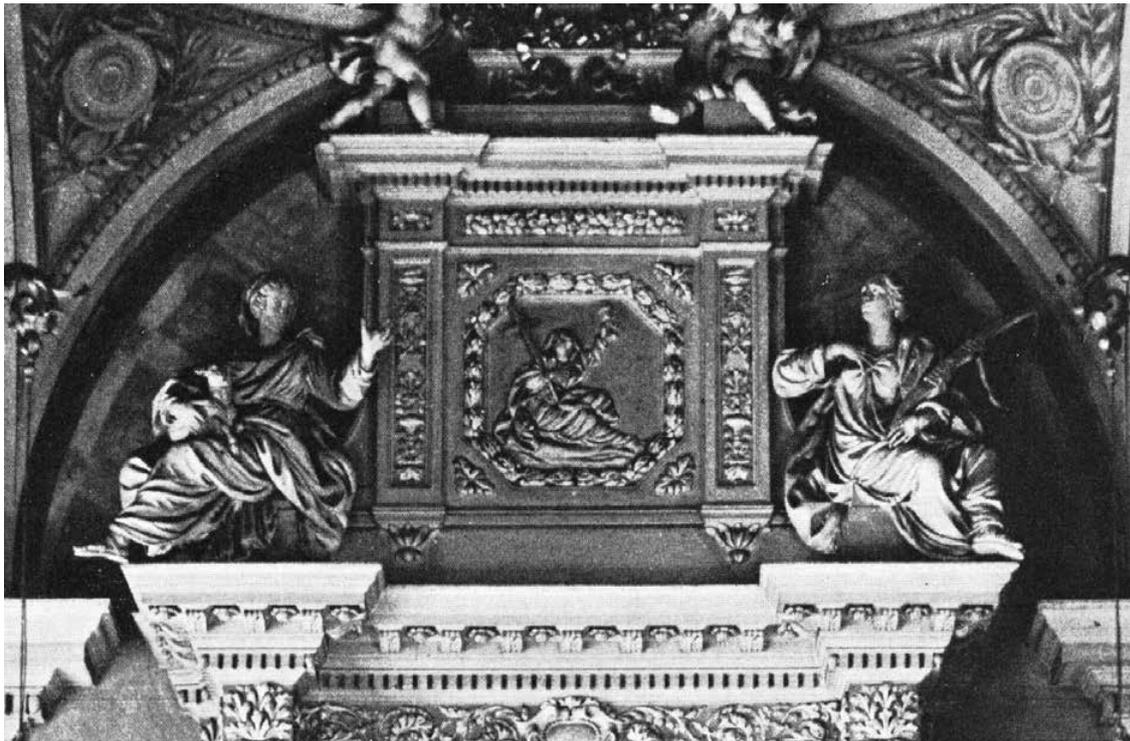
possible small models or studies made with a view to their execution, these figures probably stood in an upright position. The two terracotta works presented here, by contrast, seem more similar to the figures of Virtue reclining above tympana, also modelled in stucco by Giacomo Rossi for San Giuliano in Bologna (ca. 1780), for which we also have some terracotta studies.<sup>3</sup> It should be stressed that, at the present state of research, Bolognese 18<sup>th</sup>-century terracotta pieces identifiable as models or studies for works later executed in stucco are extremely rare: those presented here, alongside the aforementioned terracottas by Rossi (though the latter are far more summarily executed than Acquisti's remarkably well-finished figures), are the only known examples. In any case, Acquisti himself executed figures similar to those in San Giuliano in Bologna; suffice it to think of the *Docility* and *Humility* seated on top of the altar of the Oratory of Santa Maria dei Guarini, also in Bologna (1788), and of *Justice* and *Peace* on the altar of Death in the church of the Assunta in Medicina (1789-1790).<sup>4</sup> In both the stucco works and our terracottas we see an identical striving for a solemn and monumental tone, obtained through those ample and voluminous draperies so characteristic of the sculptor. The works in

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<sup>3</sup> Andrea Bacchi, *Alle origini del neoclassicismo a Bologna: Ubaldo Gandolfi, Carlo Prinetti e Giacomo Rossi in San Giuliano*, in *Arti a confronto. Studi in onore di Anna Maria Matteucci*, ed. by Deanna Lenzi, Bologna 2004, pp. 386-388, plates 293-296.

<sup>4</sup> Galezzi, *op. cit.* 2009, pp. 283-284 and 290-292.





Luigi Acquisti, *Docility and Humility*, Bologna, Oratory of Santa Maria dei Guarini.

Bologna, in particular, present close stylistic parallels with these terracottas that help to confirm their attribution to Acquisti. According to the inscriptions made in a contemporary hand on the models presented here, the subjects depicted in the Oratory of Santa Maria dei Guarini differ from those proposed by Acquisti. Significantly, however, each of the two inventions could be adapted to represent two different personifications, Temperance or Humility on the one hand, and Justice or Fortitude on the other. The attributes would be added only later, and even very different iconographic combinations were proposed. In short, there is no reason to reject the possibility that these terracottas were modelled precisely with a view to work on the altar of the Oratory in Bologna, and that, perhaps at the request of the patron, Acquisti later changed both the subject represented and the position of the figures, more comfortably reclining in these models, practically seated in the stucco works executed for the tympanum of the Oratory of Santa Maria dei Guarini.

Until he moved to Rome in 1792, Acquisti was engaged on numerous different worksites, doubtless forcing him to work at a rapid pace. Despite this, his pieces are always of extremely high quality and it is clear that already in the 1780s he sought to establish a dialogue on equal terms with contemporary painting, without ever falling into the facile style that the stucco technique itself sometimes encouraged. It is therefore likely that on several occasions during these years he created terracotta models before modelling his most important works in stucco. In this context, it is important to remember his feat at Santa Maria della Vita, where Acquisti executed a series of highly monumental *Sybils* and *Evangelists* in stucco, following a formula



that was entirely new for Bologna. The artist, already very proud, received a payment that was judged too excessive compared to the more usual plaster decorations, and his work, precisely because of its innovative character, was not well received, to the extent that the patron requested changes. Acquisti appealed to the Accademia in 1789, and only much later, in 1819, did he again intervene in the church on works he had already executed.<sup>5</sup>

An eloquent testimony to Acquisti's desire to completely throw off the role of mere decorator was his clash with the local Accademia in 1794. By this time he already had moved to Rome, and sent to Bologna a marble bas-relief for the Concorso Curlandese, now lost, on the theme of *Daedalus and Icarus*. When it was judged to be poor by the Committee, the sculptor demanded that the motivations leading up to this judgment be explained to him. Nor was this the end of the matter. He had three certificates sent to the commission, obtained in Rome and declaring the work to be of high quality: among the authors of these writings was the famous Angelica Kauffman. Acquisti's protests were to no avail, however, and the sculptor went so far as to resign from the Accademia.<sup>6</sup> In those years, in Rome, Luigi had begun to work with Canova and to sculpt in marble: he must now have felt that he was a well-rounded artist who could not tolerate a negative assessment from the environment, provincial compared to that of Rome, of Bologna. Acquisti's ambitions were soon satisfied: between 1803 and 1804 he had the honour of being chosen by Canova himself, as "lo migliore [statuario] che fosse in Roma e di lui [Canova] dipendente", to execute the statue of *St. Ignatius* intended to replace the silver one by Pierre Le Gros on the altar of the same name in the church of the Gesù in Rome, a masterpiece melted down by the French in 1798.<sup>7</sup> This was a genuine triumph: before him perhaps just one other Emilian sculptor, the great Alessandro Algardi in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, had started by training as a modeller in stucco and terracotta, and succeeded in creating a work of such enormous importance in Rome.

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<sup>5</sup> Riccòmini, *op. cit.* 1977, pp. 143-144, no. 218; Giorgio Galeazzi, *La grande cupola di Santa Maria della Vita*, in "Il Carrobbio", XXXIII, 2007, pp. 102-106.

<sup>6</sup> Galezzi, *op. cit.* 2008, pp. 261-263.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Galeazzi, *Lo scultore Luigi Acquisti: il periodo romano (1792-1806) e il periodo milanese (1807-1823)*, in "Strenna storica bolognese", LXII, 2012, pp. 195-197.

