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ADOLFO WILDT
1868 – 1931

SANTA LUCIA
c.1927

Candoglia marble; inscribed and signed to the truncation of the proper right shoulder 'S. LVCIA/ A. WILDT'; repaired breaks to the top of section of the background
55 cm high

PROVENANCE

Aldo Bona collection, Milan before 1950;

Quadreria dell' 800, Milan;

From whom acquired by The Irma and Sheldon Gilgore collection, Naples, Florida in 2005; and by descent.

EXHIBITED

Esposizione Internazionale di Arte Sacra MCM-MCML, Rome, 1950

LITERATURE

Esposizione Internazionale di Arte Sacra MCM-MCML, Rome, 1950, p.268, pl.239

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

A. Wildt, *L'Arte del Marmo*, Milan, 1921

Darmstadt, Mathildenhöhe, *Adolfo Wildt: Ein Italienischer Bildhauer des Symbolismus*, 25 Mar.-17 Jun. 1990

Brescia, Palazzo Martinengo, *Adolfo Wildt e i suoi allievi: Fontana, Melotti, Brogginì e gli altri*, 23 Jan.-25 Apr. 2000

Forlì, Palazzo Albertini, *Wildt A Forlì: La scultura dell'anima*, 30 Apr.-25 Jun. 2000

Paris and Milan, Musée de l'Orangerie, and Galleria d'Arte Moderna, *Adolfo Wildt (1868-1931): Le dernier symboliste*, 15 Apr. – 13 Jul. 2015 and 30 Oct. 2015–30 Jan. 2016

Adolfo Wildt is one of the true geniuses - and, indeed, progenitors - of Italian modern art and yet, despite his importance to Italian art history, his work is almost entirely unknown outside of the country of his birth.

His complex, esoteric and highly distinctive works are a lyrical synthesis of Greek, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque art, seen through the lens of Viennese Symbolism and German Expressionism. His protagonists are almost always either anguished martyrs whose greatness coincides with tragedy; or victors who, despite their heroic status, contained a quiet melancholy that placed them, along with the 'vanquished', in the same melancholic quagmire.

In this vein, the powerful, over life-sized head of *Santa Lucia*, offered here on the international market for the first time, is a perfect embodiment of Wildt's masterful play with subject-matter, and of his great skill at carving and finishing marble. With this stylised, abstracted and powerful image of the paleo-Christian saint - who had her eyes gouged out - Wildt displays his interest in classical and expressionist art, while also directly referencing Gian Lorenzo Bernini's baroque masterpiece the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (fig.1), completed in 1652 and installed in the Coronaro family chapel, in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Works by Wildt very rarely come on to the international market, so the re-emergence of a large and iconic work as the *Santa Lucia* is particularly exceptional. This rarity factor is explained by the fact that Wildt was not a prolific sculptor and that his sculpting techniques were time consuming and technically challenging, however, the greatest reason is that - despite some international acclaim in his lifetime - his collecting sphere and critical acclaim remained almost exclusively Italian. However, his life and works have been more recently studied by French, German as well as Italian scholars - including Dr Paola Mola who also confirmed the present work's authorship in 2005 and 2008. And while almost every exhibition dedicated to his work has been in Italy, his prominence on the international stage has begun to grow thanks in part to the Musée de l'Orangerie's pivotal 2015 exhibition *Adolfo Wildt. Le Dernier Symboliste*.



Adolfo Wildt was born in Milan in 1868 and was initially drawn to art from the age of nine, developing a particular interest in the field of sculpture. He studied in the city's Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera where he trained in classical sculpting techniques, while also seeking inspiration from emerging avant-garde movements of the time, such as the Viennese Secession and the German Expressionist movement.

His earliest works frequently depicted stylised, truncated figures clearly referencing the fragmentary nature of Greek and Roman sculpture, while others demonstrated his interest in Antonio Canova's elegance and purity of line, such as his 1892 marble *Vedova* (fig.2).

In 1894 he met the wealthy Prussian landowner, Franz Rose, who became a close friend and patron and who guaranteed him a significant salary in exchange for the first version of every work he made. With these works Rose embellished his home in Döhlau with symbolist sculptures and copies of works by past masters.

Wildt's productive output from the early 1900s, however, began to reveal a darker and more technical approach: almost always human figures – and particularly heads – with severe expressions; the focus, therefore, being on the tragedy of the human condition, conveyed by an intricate handling of texture and surface:

A work of art is not for the eyes, it is for the soul... sculpting means, precisely, injecting spirit into matter... (Adolfo Wildt, quoted in *op.cit.*, 2000, p.11)

Despite his growing fame, and - thanks to Rose's support - frequent awards at various German exhibitions, these years were marked by profound unhappiness and creative dissatisfaction, which he came out of in 1909 upon the creation his self-portrait: *Maschera del dolore: Autoritratto* (fig.3). Combining expressionistic deformations and truncations, a hollowed-out mask anchored to a decorative background slab, and a richly polished surface, this work became the archetype for everything that followed. As Pontiggia observed (*ibid.*), for Wildt, the process of creating sculpture was not merely an aesthetic exercise, but an ethical one, which had as its aim not the pleasure of beauty, but the provision of a metaphysical truth.

Franz Rose died in 1915 and Wildt was forced, therefore, to establish local cultural relationships in Milan - where he resided - and to open himself up to Italian critics. By 1917 he began exhibiting his latest works and garnered largely positive praise, sales, as well as new commissions from eager collectors like Giuseppe Chierichetti who purchased a version of the *Maria dà luce ai pargoli Cristiano* (fig.4) and went on to commission the war memorials of Appiano Gentile and Valduggia, the portrait of his deceased daughter, Mariuccia, and the family mausoleum in the Cimitero monumentale di Milano.

In contrast to the preceding years, the 1920s presented a period of prosperity for Wildt: he opened up the Scuola del Marmo in Milan, which offered him the chance to train a new generation of artists, such as Lucio Fontana, Fausto Melotti and his own son, Francesco; he published his treatise on sculpting: *L'Arte del Marmo* in 1921; his champion at the time, Margherita Sarfatti (whom he portrayed in 1930), included him in the steering committee of the First Exhibition of the Italian *Novecento* in 1926; and he participated in numerous international exhibitions, while always remaining stylistically distant from the rhetoric and classicism of the Fascist regime.¹

Highpoints from this period include derivations on the theme of the family, as attested by *La concezione* and *La Famiglia* (respectively: fig.5, 1921, private collection, Milan; and fig.6, 1922, dismantled, and with elements in three private collections in Italy), and his portraits of

¹ It is important to note that Wildt was an artist that, like every one of his contemporaries, was operating under the rule of Benito Mussolini's National Fascist Party (1922-1943). And while Wildt may not have been ideologically aligned to it he did produce official images of Mussolini, as his three extant busts demonstrate. We can only speculate as to the artist's true feelings on this matter, but we cannot exclude the possibility that he may have felt trapped by the fear of career regression and a sense of obligation to his greatest champion, Margherita Sarfatti: she was a journalist, art critic, patron, collector, and prominent propaganda adviser of the Party. She was Benito Mussolini's biographer as well as one of his mistresses. Sarfatti had equally strong relationships with the likes of Medardo Rosso, Mario Sironi, Arturo Martini and Umberto Boccioni.

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the painter, critic and art dealer *Vittore Grubicy de Dragon* (1921-2); the conductor *Arturo Toscanini* (1923); and *Pope Pius XI* (1926).

With the former works one can see that Wildt supplanted the 'vanquished' that featured so prominently in the preceding years and replaced them with, for example, visions of Catholic piety and family togetherness: praying mothers, singing fathers, almost Christ-like effigies of newborn children. Likewise, with his portraits, Wildt created a pantheon of personalities with super-human stature: omniscient, omnipotent, austere and imposing. Combined, these works demonstrated a uniquely Wildtian sculptural idiom that simultaneously also paid tribute to past masters and art historical periods that he revered.

Wildt died in Milan - the city of his birth - in 1931 from influenza and while the obituaries of the time celebrated him, his name faded into obscurity over the subsequent decades. His resurrection only began in the 1980s thanks to the studies of scholars like Dr Paola Mola who reasoned that his absence from Italian art history was down to the fact that he simply didn't conform to the stylistic norms of the time.

SANTA LUCIA

According to apocryphal texts, Santa Lucia (d.304AD) came from a wealthy Sicilian family in Syracuse, however, she spurned marriage and worldly goods and vowed to remain a virgin in the tradition of another local female martyr: Santa Agatha. Consequently, when an angry suitor reported her to the city's Roman authorities, she was sentenced to be removed to a brothel and forced into prostitution. According to legend, divine intervention thwarted this order, and she was thus condemned to death by fire, which, miraculously, she proved to be impervious to. She was finally martyred by having a sword plunged into her throat.

Absent from early narratives and traditions is the story of her being tortured by eye-gouging: according to accounts, before she died, she foretold the punishment of Paschasius and the speedy end of the persecution of Christians, adding that Diocletian would reign no more, and that Maximian would meet his end. This so angered Paschasius that he ordered the guards to remove her eyes. Another version told how Lucia removed her own eyes to discourage a persistent suitor who admired them. Either way, when her body was prepared for burial in the family mausoleum it was discovered that her eyes had been miraculously restored. Hence why Santa Lucia is considered the patron saint of those with eye illnesses.

The high relief under discussion here is Wildt's only tribute to Gian Lorenzo Bernini's genius - though, in part, it also referenced the *Laocoön* group in the Musei Vaticani, Rome (fig.7). Depicted with her head thrown back and, as noted above, in a seemingly 'ecstatic' gesture that mirrors Bernini's saint's (fig.1), the sculptor plays with the conflation of ecstasy and pain, sensuality and death, the sacred and the profane.

It is a work that Wildt used to exemplify his debt to Baroque art, which was at the time also undergoing an important re-evaluation in Italy, though not - as Mola stated as regards Wildt - for its naturalism and classicism, but for its illusionism and visual excess (Forlì, *op.cit.*, 2000, p.73). Precisely, with this work, Wildt sought to convey contradictory - yet equally extreme - sensations using Baroque art as a vehicle heading towards theatricality and mysticism: the deeply and roughly gouged-out eyes; the stylised and exaggerated facial features; the over life-sized head; and the highly polished surfaces all contributed towards dramatic and complex interplays of light and shadow that - in the 17th and 20th centuries alike - would have precipitated a profound (and even religious) experience among its onlookers.

Furthermore, the complexity of Wildt's compositional debt to Bernini as well as his own philosophical pursuits in the creation of the *Santa Lucia* are matched in equal parts by the technical challenges he undertook in sculpting this very piece. Carved in Candoglia marble, it was significantly harder and riskier to carve than Carrara marble, however, it was a risk worth taking in order to create the highly polished, luminous and seemingly transparent surfaces he wanted. In his *L'Arte del Marmo* Wildt cautioned the novice sculptor of the challenges in working with such a material:

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This marble is as fascinating in its tone of flowers and flesh as it is hard to work due to the hardness of the grain. ... I hope that the choice of using this unique and extremely rare material was not simply a whimsical desire, rather it should stimulate a close affinity between the particular origin of this marble and the nature of the work of art you wish to create: an affinity which should be graceful and strong at the same time ... Bear in mind that for each stroke on the Carrara marble you will need five on the Candoglia.

(*op.cit.*, pp.100-104, 108, 110-112).

Thus, carved during a period of relative prosperity in his career - and just four years before his death - the present relief is a technical marvel that exhibits none of the internal anguish clearly visible in Wildt's earlier works, and it seems that through intentionally blurring the meaning of the subject matter and iconography he was also engaging in an intellectual pursuit: the beautiful rendering of Santa Lucia/ Teresa's facial features and her serene, yet also 'ecstatic,' expression betray none of agony she might have felt. And what are the parted lips supposed to convey? Moans, song, screams? Even the oversized and roughly cut out eye sockets - the only clue as to Lucia's agonising ordeals - are rendered with such beauty as to take on an almost lyrical quality.

The *Santa Lucia* remains one of the most evocative and engaging works from the end of Wildt's career and with it he achieved a complex juxtaposition of opposing - yet equivalent - forces: love for antiquity and the baroque; ecstasy and agony; divinity and humanity; austerity and serenity; darkness and light. And what better choice for his protagonist than the martyr saint, Lucia, whose very name (from the Latin *Lux*) means: light?

ALDO BONA

Adolfo Wildt is known to have carved three versions of the *Santa Lucia*: one in the Musei Civici, Forlì (fig.8), the present one, and another sold at Sotheby's, London 16 December 2015, lot 134 and this is today in the Museo Civico Giovanni Fattori, Livorno (fig.9)². The Forlì version was the first to have been created and was presented by Wildt to his friend and patron, Raniero Paulucci de'Calboli in December 1926, for whom Wildt had already carved a marble bust of *San Francesco* earlier in the same year.

Little is known about the early history of the present relief, but when Mola first studied it in 2005 she stated that it was in the collection of Aldo Bona by 1950, and that it was also shown at the Esposizione Internazionale di Arte Sacra MCM-MCML, Rome in that year.

Interestingly, Bona was known to have owned another work by Wildt, *L'Orecchio*, which was originally bought in 1919 by Giuseppe Chierichetti from the Galleria Pesaro, and which was subsequently sold to Bona at some point thereafter (Paris and Milan, *op.cit.*, 2015, p.132). Sadly, nothing is known about the circumstances that led Chierichetti to sell the work.

Bona was an Italian inventor and manufacturer based in Milan, renowned for producing mechanical calculators in the mid-20th century. His company, Aldo Bona Milano, crafted devices such as the "Alfa Junior" calculator, a non-printing mechanical calculator from the 1940s. These calculators were notable for their robust construction and functionality, reflecting the technological advancements of the era.

² The Livorno *Santa Lucia* has an interesting history: it is the largest work by Wildt to ever come on to the international market and the one that sold for the highest amount (£485,000, roughly 650,000 Euros) - though it is important to note that this the highest auction record and that other works have sold privately for more. Furthermore, it was the subject of an ownership dispute after the Sotheby's sale that, despite it having been legally exported out of Italy, resulted in it needing to return to Italy while the ownership was established. For an in-depth discussion of this dispute see: <https://www.finestresullarte.info/en/news-focus/adolfo-wildt-s-saint-lucia-the-forgotten-masterpiece-arrives-at-livorno-s-fattori-museum>



Fig.1
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Ecstasy of Saint Theresa, completed 1652 (detail)
Marble, Coronaro family chapel, Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome



Fig.2
Adolfo Wildt, *Verdova*, 1892
Candoglia marble,
private collection, Munich

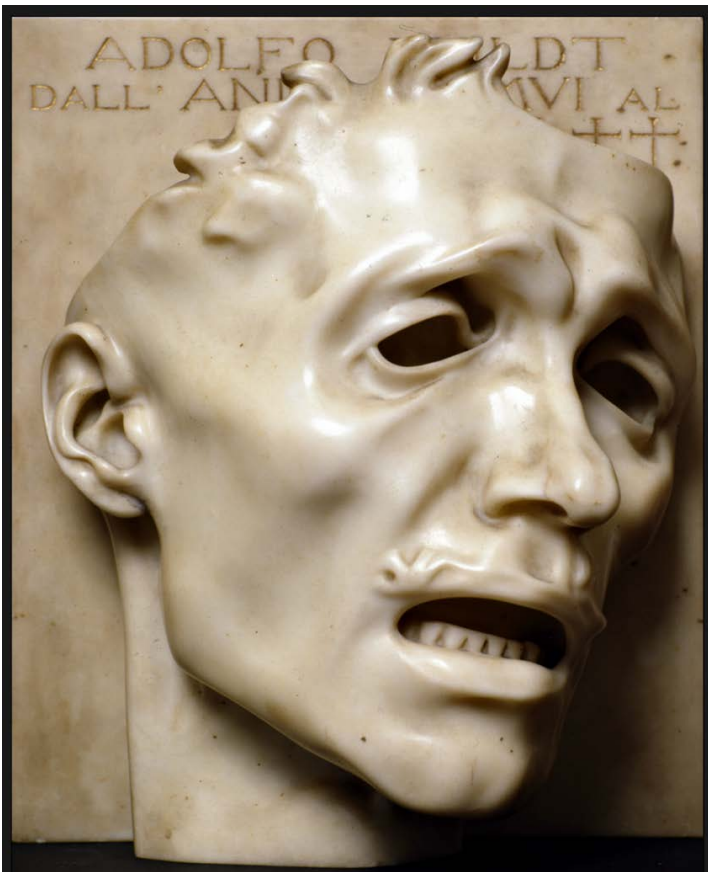


Fig.3
Adolfo Wildt, *Maschera del dolore: Autoritratto*, 1909
Marble, private collection, Milan



Fig.4
Adolfo Wildt,
*Maria dà luce ai pargoli
Cristiano*, 1918
Plaster, private collection,
Milan

Fig.5
Adolfo Wildt,
La Concezione, 1921
Marble, private collection,
Milan



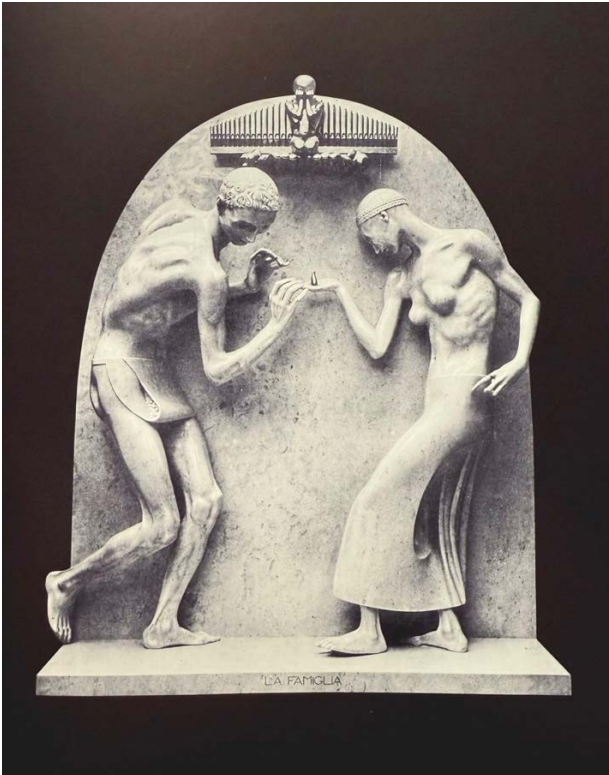


Fig.6
Adolfo Wildt, *La Famiglia*, 1922
Marble, dismantled
with elements
in three private
collections in Italy

Fig.7
Agesander of
Rhodes, Polydorus of
Rhodes, Athenodoros
of Rhodes, *Laocoön*,
1st century BC - 1st
century AD after a
bronze original cast
in circa 150BC
Marble, Museo Pio-
Clementino dei Musei
Vaticani, Vatican City





Fig.8
Adolfo Wildt, *Santa Lucia*, 1926
Candoglia marble, Musei Civici, Forlì



Fig.9
Adolfo Wildt, *Santa Lucia*, c.1927
Candoglia marble, Museo Civico
Giovanni Fattori, Livorno