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VINCENZO GEMITO
1852-1929

YOUNG NEPTUNE OR NETTUNO GIOVINETTO
c.1911

Bronze; signed Gemito and stamped with the Gemito Fabrication seal and foundry stamp
34.2 cm high

PROVENANCE

The artist's collection;
And by descent to his daughter, Giuseppina Gemito;
By whom sold in around 1939;
Private collection Italy;
With Robert Bowan, London;
Consigned to Sotheby's London for private sale in June 1999;
Where acquired by Sheldon and Irma Gilgore, Naples, Florida;
And by descent.

EXHIBITED

Milan, Castello Sforzesco, *Catalogo dellamostra di sculture e disegni di Vincenzo Gemito*,
April 1938, pl.V (illustrated)

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

C.Siviero, *Gemito*, Naples, 1953, p.89
K.McArthur and K.Ganz, *Vincenzo Gemito (1852 - 1929). Drawing and Sculpture in Naples & Rome*, exh. cat. Kate Ganz Gallery, 2000, p. 44. cat. 19;
P.Fogelman et al., *Italian and Spanish Sculpture. Catalogue of the J. Paul Getty Museum Collection*, Los Angeles, 2002, pp.338-343, no.43

The two great influences on the art of Vincenzo Gemito were classical sculpture and the street life of his native city, Naples. Gemito's genius lay in his ability to fuse these influences and create works of a startling originality. The present statuette of the *Young Neptune* is a supreme example of his sculpture.

As a newborn baby Gemito was left on the steps of a Neapolitan foundling hospital. He was adopted by a poor artisan and his early years were very much like those of the street urchins he famously portrayed. He was apprenticed to a painter at the age of nine and quickly developed a precocious artistic talent. By the age of 16 he was exhibiting at the prestigious Promotice di Napoli and his work was acquired by the city of Naples. Gemito travelled little, but he did visit Paris and exhibited his *Neapolitan Fisherboy* at the Salon of 1878.

Although Gemito had a formal artistic education - he enrolled at the Naples Academy of Fine Arts at the age of 12 - he was largely self-taught. His primary source of inspiration was the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples. He steeped himself in the museum's pre-eminent collection of classical sculpture and archaeological finds from Pompeii and Herculaneum. These revered works were copied, re-worked and re-imagined by the sculptor, who infused them with an impudent vitality drawn from contemporary life.

Gemito was obsessed by the facture of sculpture, paying close attention to the modelling, casting and chasing of his works. Inspired by the Renaissance master Benvenuto Cellini he set up his own foundry on the Via Mergellina. After a meteoric rise and an intense period of artistic activity Gemito had a mental crisis in the late 1880s and was committed to an asylum. He escaped and became a recluse living in a single room for a period of 20 years. During this time he produced not one sculptural work, confining himself solely to drawing. The sculptor emerged from this isolation in around 1909 with a new direction. The soft modelling of the early period was replaced by a strong sense of line and detail. He took up the art of silver and



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goldsmithing – the principles of which applied equally to working in bronze – and *Nettuno Giovinetto* was one of the first masterpieces to be completed.

Carlo Siviero (*loc.cit.*) described the *Nettuno* in 1953 as ‘Leaping from the waves, in the frenzy of the sea wind, quivering within the folds of a cloak which stretches out like a wing...’ and called it ‘the ultimate sculptural creation’ of Gemito’s art. The movement captured in the spiralling form certainly seems to defy the limitations of a static art. The modelling is characterised by a certain agitation, which enlivens the figure. The highly refined cold work in the bronze lends the group a magical quality and the finesse and complexity of the detail can only be compared to another masterwork, the silver and gilt *Medusa* in the J.P.Getty Museum, Los Angeles. The *Nettuno* recalls the Neapolitan boys of Gemito’s first period, such as the *Acquaiole*, but transcends their insolent realism. The artist no longer shocks, but enchants.

This precious masterpiece, cast and chased by the artist himself, was kept in Vincenzo Gemito’s own collection until his death in 1929, later bequeathed to his daughter, Giuseppina. A handwritten letter by Giuseppina that formerly accompanied this bronze (fig.1) states that the work was a genuine one by her father¹. A closely related drawing of nearly the same subject (fig.2) resides in a private collection and is dated twice 1907 and 1909 showing that Gemito had the composition in mind at the end of the first decade of the 20th century. This dating is further corroborated by a letter from Gemito to Giuseppina dating from November 1911 where the artist states that a silver-gilt version of the *Nettuno* was nearing completion (see Sotheby’s, London, 15 December 2015, lot 116; fig.3). Additional casts in wax², bronze and silver are known though the present version and that sold at Sotheby’s in 2015 are by far among the finest casts.

¹Io sottoscritta Giusepp(ina)? Gemito dichiaro che la statuetta rappresentante il Nettuno, è bronzo autentico di mio padre Vincenzo Gemito con firma, Giuseppina Gemito 20/3/1939

²The original wax for the model is in the collection of the Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome.

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Gemma Gemito
Gemma Gemito che
la statuetta rappresenta
il Nestore, è lavoro autentico
del mio padre Vincenzo
Gemito con firma
Giuseppina Gemito.
Cristo 30/3/39

Fig.1 Handwritten letter by Giuseppina Gemito stating that the present bronze is an original work by her father



Fig.2 Vincenzo Gemito, *Study for a Fisher boy*, 1907-9
Pencil and charcoal on board, private collection



Fig.3 Vincenzo Gemito, *Young Neptune (or Nettuno Giovanetto)*, c.1911
Silver-gilt, private collection