

Italian Art at Torquay Museum

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Earlier this year we reported on the new identification of our beautiful Carrara marble half-length bust of Elizabeth Williams Johnson, which is now attributed to Lorenzo Bartolini, portrait sculptor to the Bonapartes.

The find made us look more closely at the other sculptures in the entrance hall some of which are identified, one in particular is signed by the artist. This led us to the discovery of a remarkable coincidence.

Opposite Bartolini's half-length bust is another Carrara marble statue of Esmeralda a fictional character in Victor Hugo's 1831 novel *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (or *Notre Dame de Paris*). She is a French Roma girl who constantly attracts men with her seductive dances, and is often seen with her clever goat Djali.

This sculpture is by another Italian artist Pasquale Romanelli (1812 – 1887) who was the apprentice of Lorenzo Bartolini. The coincidence of these two sculptures (only a few feet apart) is purely accidental, but we have both the master and his apprentice together in our entrance hall.

Pasquale entered an apprenticeship in a studio producing alabaster sculptures, studying in his free time. Alabaster, or Castellina marble, is softer to carve than usual marble, thus often used by those in training. Aged only 15, he became an apprentice in the studio of Luigi Pampaloni, in Piazza San Marco, who trained him sculpting Carrara statuary marble. He was promoted to assisting the master in the carving of the statues of Renaissance masters, Arnolfo di Cambio and of Filippo Brunelleschi, these are now placed in the Piazza del Duomo in Florence.

Pasquale then was invited to work in the studio of Lorenzo Bartolini, professor of sculpture at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Firenze, he also attended his courses at the academy. He was Bartolini's most gifted student and some commissions were passed-on to him but he soon opened a studio of his own.

In 1850 the year that Bartolini died, Pasquale acquired his studio in Borgo San Frediano and was entrusted with completing several of Bartolini's great monuments that were unfinished at the time of his death. The first of which was to transform the plaster of *Fiducia in Dio* into a marble, this now resides in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.

Our Esmeralda was sculpted in 1863, at this time he opened an art gallery on the Lungarno Acciaiuoli where completed works could be sold directly to the public. Mrs Oswald Smith of Paignton gifted the sculpture to the Museum in 1947, but we don't know how she acquired it or how long it might have been in her possession.

It is an exception that a regional Museum like Torquay has the works of two great Florentine artists in our entrance hall. You don't need to travel all the way to Italy to see some amazing Italian art.