

LE CLAIRE

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BERTEL THORVALDSEN

1770 - Copenhagen - 1844

Portrait Bust of a Young Woman with a Tiara

Sculpture carved from a block of white Carrara marble.

The preliminary plaster model [Fig. 1] is housed at the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, where a date of circa 1827-38 is given. Else Kai Sass dates the marble to the 1830s.

Height: 48.9 cm

PROVENANCE: Possibly commissioned from Thorvaldsen in Rome in 1833 by Comte A. de Sampayo, Paris (on behalf of his brother, Lord Osborne) – Acquired by Richard Bingham, 2nd Earl of Lucan (1764-1839) or a later family member – Thence by descent to Richard John Bingham, 7th Earl of Lucan (1934-74) – Bought from the above by an English private collector in the 1960s – Thence by inheritance to his son – By whom consigned to Christie, Manson & Woods, London and offered in the sale *Important European Sculpture and Works of Art*, 6 July 1999, lot 72¹ – Purchased at the above sale by a German private collector.

LITERATURE: Else Kai Sass, *Thorvaldsens Portraetbuster*, I-III, Copenhagen 1963-5, II, pp. 300-4; III, p. 109, XXIII – *Thorvaldsens Museum* (in English), Copenhagen 1961, p. 41, no. 305.

This carved herm bust in white Carrara marble depicting a young woman is very closely related to a plaster model of a *Bust of an Unknown Woman* now in the collection of the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen [Fig. 1].² On stylistic grounds the model can be dated to circa 1827-38.

In order to understand the relationship between the plaster model and the marble version it is essential to bear in mind Thorvaldsen's working methods in his Rome studio. Katharina Bott explains the genesis of the plaster models as follows: "It is probable that in most cases Thorvaldsen did the modelling himself (...). Thiele notes in his biography of Thorvaldsen that he primarily modelled from life.³ A few hours spent before the model sufficed him. But he certainly also worked from drawings, paintings and busts made by fellow sculptors, in addition to plaster masks".⁴ Peter Springer describes the further stages: "It was common practice to commission a marble after seeing the

¹ The auction catalogue states that the present portrait bust (lot 72) and a group of three marble busts of Lord Lucan's daughters (lot 70 of the same sale) share the same provenance. Richard Bingham, 2nd Earl of Lucan, was an important patron of Thorvaldsen. He probably commissioned the portrait busts of his three daughters directly from the artist. The plaster models of the three busts (executed in circa 1816-18) are held at the Thorvaldsen Museum [inv. A308, A311, A313]. The three marble versions (executed circa 1821-24) were acquired by the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 2011 [inv. 2011.101.1-3].

² Thorvaldsen Museum, online catalogue: <<https://kataloget.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/A305>>.

³ Just Mathias Thiele, *Leben und Werke des dänischen Bildhauers Bertel Thorvaldsen*, I-II, Leipzig 1832-34, I, p. 19.

⁴ Katharina Bott, 'Wechselbeziehungen zwischen Thorvaldsen und seinen deutschen Auftraggebern, in Künstlerleben in Rom', in *Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844) Der dänische Bildhauer und seine deutschen Freunde*, exhib. cat., Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg and Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum Schloß Gottorf, Schleswig 1992, p. 338.

preliminary plaster model in the studio; Caroline von Humboldt's remarks typify the reaction triggered by a viewing in the studio: 'I wish to own [it] ... in marble'.⁵

A visit to Thorvaldsen's vast studio on Piazza Barberini was a must for every art-loving traveller to Rome. "A form of permanent exhibition awaited the visitor, boasting a repertoire that changed in step with the different stages of production the works had reached – it encompassed preparatory designs, models, finished marble sculptures and pieces ready for shipment. The additional attraction of a studio visit was the spectacle of uninterrupted workshop activity, offering irrespective of visitors the opportunity to observe some forty assistants – and every so often perhaps even the master himself – moving busily about their tasks (...). Thorvaldsen's uniquely structured self-marketing strategy was a decisive factor in ensuring that the majority of orders were placed in the immediate presence of the works, under the direct impact of the plaster models and marble sculptures. After all, not only did strangers and inquisitive outsiders, fellow artists and distinguished collectors beat a path to his door, but also ruling monarchs and even the Pope."⁶

Despite the markedly classical, idealized quality of the young woman's features, the eyes with their delicately worked pupils suggest that the bust is a portrait, perhaps of a historical or contemporary figure. In the search for a similar depiction of a contemporary woman among Thorvaldsen's portrait busts the *Portrait of Karoline von Rehfues* immediately springs to mind [Fig. 3, plaster model; Fig. 4, version in marble]. The German writer Freiherr Philipp Josef von Rehfues commissioned a bust of his wife from Thorvaldsen in 1827. What the present bust and the *Portrait of Karoline von Rehfues* have in common is their herm form, one rarely chosen by Thorvaldsen for his female portraits. The depiction of the hair with its long wavy tresses is also similar, although Karoline von Rehfues has a floral head wreath and the young woman in the present bust wears a tiara. Karoline von Rehfues is clothed, while the woman depicted in the present bust is naked, which speaks for an ideal image.

Strong similarities are also found between the plaster *Bust of an Unknown Woman* [Fig. 1], the present marble bust after which it was carved, and the *Head of a Woman with a Tiara* [Fig. 2], a plaster model that Thorvaldsen made in 1837 in preparation for restoration work on the lost head of an antique bronze, a robed statue known as the *Spinnerin*, now in the Munich Glyptothek.⁷ All three display a classically inspired style of idealization in combination with tangible elements such as the shape of the tiara and the centre parting. The *Head of a Woman with a Tiara* [Fig. 2] and the two portrait busts of Karoline von Rehfues [Figs. 3 and 4] also provide a framework for the dating of the plaster model of the *Bust of an Unknown Woman* held in the Thorvaldsen Museum [Fig. 1], on which the present marble version is based.

Although scholars have so far failed to clarify the sitter's identity conclusively, a document published by Else Kai Sass in her book on Thorvaldsen's portrait busts contains a possible key to the bust's *raison d'être*.⁸ The document referred to is a letter to Thorvaldsen from a man named A. Sampayo, dated Paris, 15 December 1833. It reminds Thorvaldsen about his and Luigi Bienaimé's pledge to execute a bust and two further works for Sampayo and his brother. The letter reads: "I am charged by my brother to deliver the one hundred louis which he is owing for the *Amor* and to your pupil for the

⁵ Peter Springer, 'Thorvaldsen zwischen Markt und Museum', in *Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844) Der dänische Bildhauer und seine deutschen Freunde*, exhib. cat., Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg and Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum Schloß Gottorf, Schleswig 1992, p. 216.

⁶ Ibid., p. 213.

⁷ See Else Kai Sass, op. cit., II, p. 303-4. – The bronze version of the *Head of a Woman with a Tiara* is in the Glyptothek in Munich.

⁸ Published in Kai Sass, op. cit., p. 300.

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first bust (I have already given Mr. Bienaimé 20 l); to you we owe the rest, Sir, since you have had the magnanimity to create from it a chef d'œuvre, to have bestowed certain immortality on an obscure portrait.”

Else Kai Sass posits that the letter was penned by Comte de Sampayo, a man of Portuguese extraction who lived in Paris and attracted considerable public attention through his liaison with the feminist writer Hortense Allart (1801-79). Allart went on to describe her affair with Sampayo in a novel published in 1872 titled *Les Enchantements de Mme Prudence de Saman L'Esbats* (her nom de plume was Prudence de Saman L'Esbats). Sampayo's mother's name was Osborne. She was Irish and her second son went by the name of Lord Osborne. It is conceivable that the works mentioned in Sampayo's letter were destined for this same brother, Lord Osborne. It is also possible that the present bust came into the possession of the Earls of Lucan at a later date via Lord Osborne. The Earldom of Lucan is also in the peerage of Ireland.

The payments listed by Sampayo at the end of the letter are as follows: *100 Louis du au Mr. Le Chevalier Thorvaldsen* [100 louis owed to Mr. Le Chevalier Thorvaldsen], *35 Louis du à M. Bienaimé* [35 louis owed to M. Bienaimé] and *5 Louis pour frais d'emballage tt.* [5 louis for packaging costs in total].

The portrait bust in question must have been made after a model – perhaps a drawing or a painting – since Sampayo offers Thorvaldsen his thanks “for bestowing immortality on an insignificant portrait.” The master is rewarded for his powers of invention, which find expression in the plaster model he has made. It was clear to the client that the execution and completion of the marble he had ordered lay in the hands of Luigi Bienaimé. He was Thorvaldsen's workshop manager and one of the studio's best stone carvers.⁹

Regrettably, Sampayo's letter does not disclose the identity of the sitter. Else Kai Sass has suggested that the bust portrait may represent his Irish mother. He mentions a *premier buste* which leads Sass to conclude that two copies were to be completed in marble, one for each brother. Margrethe Floryan writes that she would be reluctant to confirm this thesis. She sees the bust not as a portrait of a mother but as a portrait of a young woman, a daughter or a lover whose name still escapes identification.

We are grateful to Margrethe Floryan, Senior Curator at the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, for her research findings. We offer her our sincere thanks for her invaluable assistance and advice.

⁹ Harald C. Tesan, 'Vom hässlichen Entlein zum umworbenen Schwan: Ein dänischer Künstlerunternehmer in Rom', in *Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844) Der dänische Bildhauer und seine deutschen Freunde*, exhib. cat., Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg and Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum Schloß Gottorf, Schleswig 1992, p. 234: “To meet the persistent demands of Crown Prince Ludwig who insisted that the orders he had placed be executed ‘by the Master's own hand’ Thorvaldsen commissioned the best stone carvers for this specific purpose. For example, he entrusted Luigi Bienaimé with the execution of the marble *Bust of Marianna Florenzi*.”

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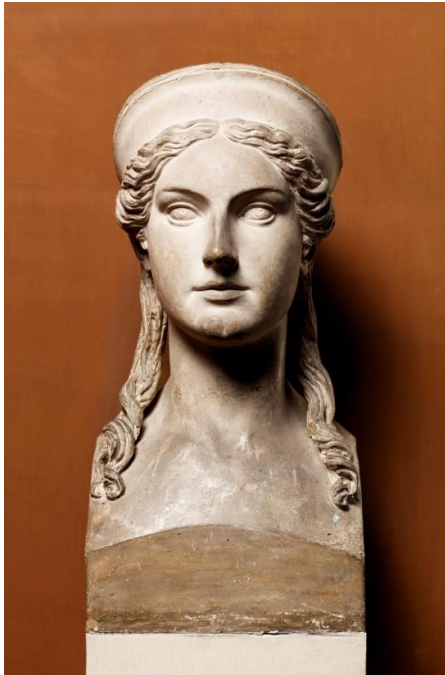


Fig. 1: *Bust of an Unknown Woman*, circa 1827-38
Plaster. Height: 48.6 cm
Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen [A305]



Fig. 2: *Head of a Woman with a Tiara*, 1837
Plaster. Height: 37.5 cm
Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen [A723]



Fig. 3: *Portrait of Karoline von Rehfues*, 1827
Plaster. Height: 53.2 cm
Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen [A245]

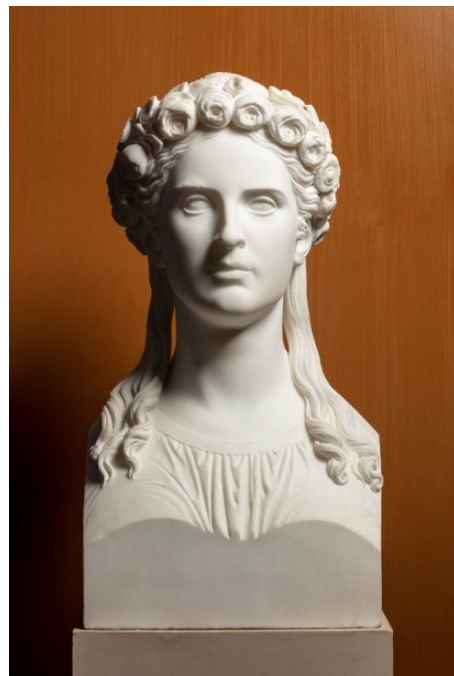


Fig. 4: *Portrait of Karoline von Rehfues*, 1827
Marble. Height: 54.7 cm
Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen [A861]