Two eighteenth-century sculpture acquisitions for the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

by MARJORIE TRUSTED

TWO IMPORTANT EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCULPTURES were recently purchased by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, both to be classified as British, although the earlier of the two is by an artist from the Netherlands, and the later one a work produced in Rome. The purpose of this article is to highlight these exceptional acquisitions, and to summarise the history of each sculpture.1

The earlier of the two, the Crouching Venus (Figs. 35 and 36), was produced in Carrara marble, and signed and dated 1702 by John Nost the Elder (active 1680s; died 1710).2 It was bought by the Museum in March 2012.3 It is an extraordinarily early instance in Britain of a monumental freestanding life-size sculpture of a mythological subject, carved in a classical style, some years before the Grand Tour became fashionable. The nude goddess half-kneels on an integral plain rectangular base, resting her left buttock on an overturned urn, her arms crossed in front of her breasts, her head turned to her right, and her hair partly coiled in a bun at the back of her head. She wears a bracelet on her upper left arm. The sculpture is signed on the front of the base: ‘I. Nost F. / 1702’.4 Unusually for a sculpture of this date, the original plinth, of Sicilian and Belgian black marble, has survived (Fig 35). It closely resembles a design by Nost of the 1690s for a plinth for the statue of William III, a drawing also in the V. & A.5 The corners at the back of the plinth were cut away at some point, probably so that it could be accommodated in a niche (see below). But the condition is generally good, since the piece seems never to have been displayed outside.6

Nost’s sculpture depends on the antique prototype of the Crouching Venus (or Crouching Aphrodite), a Hellenistic sculpture, perhaps dating from the 3rd century BC, of which several versions are known: in the Uffizi, Florence, in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme, Rome, and elsewhere.7 One version, however, dating from the 2nd century AD, in the Royal Collection, and now on long-term loan to the British Museum, may well have been the specific model on which Nost’s sculpture is based. The Royal Collection work was owned by the Gonzaga Dukes of Mantua, and had been acquired by Charles I after 1631. In 1682 it was presented to Charles II by Sir Peter Lely, who had bought it at the sale of Charles I’s goods, after the king’s execution in 1649. For this reason it is sometimes known as the Lely Venus.8 Nost is extremely likely to have known it, since he had numerous patrons at court, not least the monarchs themselves, William and Mary, by whom he was awarded commissions at Hampton Court.9

Nost’s interpretation of this classical prototype is not unique, although it is among the earliest. Other post-classical copies and variants of the Crouching Venus were made in France and Italy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, notably a variant by Antoine Coysevox (1640–1720) dating from 1686. Tommaso Solari made a garden sculpture of the Venus in 1762, during the period of deferral, the V. & A. raised the sum needed for its acquisition, partly using funds from the Hugh Phillips Bequest.

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3 Inv. nos A.5:1 and 2-2012. The sculpture came to the Museum as a result of an export deferral by the Culture Minister, Ed Vaizey, in November 2011, on the recommendation of the Reviewing Committee for the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, since it was deemed to be of outstanding interest for the study of British sculpture in the eighteenth century, the third of the three Waverley criteria. For this specific case, see the press release issued by Arts Council England and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 4th November 2011. During the deferral period, the V. & A. raised the sum needed for its acquisition, partly using funds from the Hugh Phillips Bequest.

1 The total height of the sculpture and plinth is 237 cm.; the height of the statue alone is 122 cm.
3 Some pock marks are visible on the surface of the marble figure, as is the natural veining of the stone. The fingers and thumb of the left hand are later replacements, and the right hand seems to have been broken and re-affixed. There are also some surface chips on the figure and on the plinth.
and bronze statuettes dating from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century were produced by Giacomo Zoffoli (active 1753–84), Giovanni Zoffoli (c.1745–1805), and Francesco Righetti (1749–1819).

Nost’s Crouching Venus was probably made for the statesman and lawyer Andrew Archer (1659–1741) for Umberslade Hall, Warwickshire. Archer was the brother of the gentleman architect Thomas Archer (c.1668–1743). Umberslade had been constructed c.1695–1700, and it is thought that the sculpture was intended to be placed in the entrance hall. It was apparently originally paired with a statue of Apollo, perhaps a version of the Apollo Belvedere, now lost. No documentation of the commission survives, and it is first recorded at Umberslade in 1815, when the house was described as being ‘long neglected’ and ‘entirely unfurnished and forsaken’.


Two of his relatives, both also called John Nost, worked as sculptors in Britain and Ireland during the eighteenth century, but John Nost the Elder is generally considered to be the most important member of the family. As the leading member of a dynasty of sculptors, he was a seminal influence on British sculpture of the eighteenth century, combining traditions derived from Netherlandish sculpture of the seventeenth century with classical forms ultimately stemming from Rome.

The Venus is a remarkable instance of Nost’s assured carving. The idealised beauty of the figure, as well as the graceful serpentine pose, while deriving, of course, from the classical template on which it is based, recall Giambologna’s work of a century before. Its scale and accomplishment give it a grandeur and presence which were truly exceptional at that date in Britain. As in its prototype, Venus is depicted ineffectually attempting to cover her nakedness, her gesture only succeeding in drawing attention to her sensual body. The goddess is thought to be bathing, or possibly adjusting her hair, and caught unawares. When the Hellenistic original was created in Greece, the female nude was relatively novel; previously only males were so depicted.

Nost’s sculpture suggests the sophisticated level of patronage of the wealthy gentry in Britain at the start of the eighteenth century, and tantalisingly evokes the way in which interiors of eighteenth-century country houses were adorned with sculpture. In its present setting at the V. & A., it can clearly be seen to form part of the tradition of British sculpture, a classicising successor to the seventeenth-century work of Nicholas Stone (1586/7–1647) and foreshadowing the slightly different classical interpretations of Henry Cheere (1703–81), John Cheere (1709–87) and Joseph Nollekens (1727–1823).

The second of the two sculpture acquisitions here under discussion dates from the end of the eighteenth century, and came to the Museum as the result of the munificent bequest of Count Vladimir Caruana and Ivan Booth.

The possibility to acquire a sculpture by the Neo-classical artist John Deare (1759–98) arose fortuitously when a relief by Deare was offered for purchase at about the same time that the executors of the Caruana Bequest approached the Museum. The V. & A. owns a number of drawings by this artist, but had lacked any sculpture by him.

The marble acquired, Julius Caesar invading Britain (Fig.38), is one of Deare’s most imposing works, carved towards the end of his short life. It is signed and dated: ‘I. DEARE . FACIEBAT’ . ROMÆ . 1796 at the bottom of the relief, the line of lettering following the flow of the carved marble waves (Fig.37). The form of the signature and date replicates Deare’s inscription on his earlier marble relief of Edward and Eleanor dated 1790 (private collection) and acquired by Sir Andrew Corbet Corbet in 1792.

The subject of the V. & A.’s relief is probably unique in sculpture. The literary source was a passage in Caesar’s Commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars, which records the Roman invasion of Britain in 53 BC. A Latin inscription on a separate marble slab under the figural relief quotes from this text; brass letters (three of which are now missing) are affixed to the polished, slightly veined, red marble block beneath the white Carrara marble relief (Fig.38). The inscription reads: ‘HOC [IN]VM AD PRIST[N]AM FOR TVNAM CAESARI DE[F]VIT’ (this thing was lacking to complete Caesar’s accustomed success). The line comes from a passage in Caesar’s account describing the Roman invasion of Britain: ‘...and the British knew nothing of the Roman invasion...’ (Commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars, Book I, Ch.3).


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18 Ridgway, op. cit. (note 7), p.231.
20 Sculptures by these two artists are on display nearby in the Dorothy and Michael Hinde Galleries; see Bilbey and Trusted, op. cit. (note 11), nos.15 and 16 (Stone); nos.129–46 (Nollekens). The terracotta for Andrew Archer’s monument by Henry Cheere mentioned at note 11 above is in the Ceramics galleries at the V. & A.
21 Known as the Caruana Bequest, the terms of this generous donation to the Museum stipulated that the money should be used to purchase one major work of art. Such an acquisition would effectively act as a permanent monument to the deceased donor.
22 For the drawings, see the V. & A.’s website: http://collections.vam.ac.uk/search?offset=0&limit=15&narrow=&extrasearch=&q=john+deare+drawings&commit=Search&quality=0&objectnamesearch=&placesearch=&after=&after-adbc=AD&before=&before-adbc=AD&namesearch=&msearch=&msearch=.
23 This is signed ‘I. DEARE. FACIEBAT ROMÆ 1790’; see C. Avery: ‘John Deare’s marble reliefs for Sir Andrew Corbet Corbet, Bt’, The British Art Journal 3/2 (2002), p.52, fig.3.
moment when the Roman troops, attempting to land their ships on British shores, were attacked by native soldiers, and were forced to fight in shallow waters, to their disadvantage. Despite the invaders’ ultimate victory, Caesar admitted that this was a setback. The sculpture depicts this vivid battle scene, showing the invading Roman soldiers being repelled by the Britons on the shores of the English Channel.

The bravery of the local populace overcoming, if only temporarily, an invading colonial force must have appealed to the man who commissioned the piece, John Penn (1760–1834). Penn was an author, Member of Parliament, Justice of the Peace, and became the governor of Portland Castle, Dorset. He was the grandson of the eponymous founder of the American state of Pennsylvania, William Penn (1644–1718). This land was lost to the Penn family after the American Revolution of 1776. Thus John Penn was familiar with the political, and even emotional, repercussions of a colonial force occupying, and being expelled from, foreign lands, from the point of view of an Englishman whose family had once been colonial inhabitants in the New World. Paradoxically, at the same time, having lived in America from 1782 to 1789, he may also have sympathised with the cause of American independence, and felt an empathy with his transatlantic fellows for throwing off the yoke of the British Empire. Penn had considered settling permanently in America, with his transatlantic fellows for throw off the yoke of the British Empire. Penn conceived the subject of the relief. Grignon’s phrasing likewise indicates that Deare was making two pieces: the Julius Caesar and a chimneypiece, which served as a complementary pendant to the relief.

Penn clearly befriended the artist, who was more or less his contemporary. Deare wrote to his brother on 13th July 1791: ‘Mr. Penn […] took me to Naples in his own carriage, to see an eruption of Mount Vesuvius, and the antiquities in and about Naples, which are so wonderful, that I dare not attempt any description of them. I have 470l. worth of work to do for him’. The sum of £470 evidently refers to payment for the relief, the chimneypiece and Penn’s portrait bust. In another letter from the sculptor Christopher Hewetson (c.1737–98) to Cumberland of 4th May 1792, Hewetson noted that ‘Fagan [the painter Robert Fagan (1745–1816)] assures me that Mr Deare’s share of this American prize [sic] amounted to at least £100 sterling’. This compares with the fee of £50 or £60 for Deare’s smaller Marine Venus of 1787, noted above, and £100 for his relief of Edward and Eleanor of 1786, considerably simpler in composition than the
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Julius Caesar relief. Deare wrote to Cumberland on 1st March 1794: ‘in a very [missing word, probably ‘short’] time I shall send a chimney-piece to Mr Penn of Stoke near Windsor’. This may refer to both the chimney-piece and the relief. Their exact date of arrival in London remains uncertain. A letter from Grignon could imply that they had been shipped over by early 1796; he wrote to Cumberland on 20th January of that year: ‘I suppose you sometimes see Mr Penn as I think you are neighbours [. . .] Deare sent your little centaurs in a case of Mr Penn – you have no doubt received it’. However, since the sculpture is dated 1796, this may be a reference to an unrelated transaction.

The present marble has had a history of being moved and removed. As Fusco, Fogelman and Stock stated in their article, Deare’s relief was originally an overmantel, placed above the chimney-piece which, as proposed above, Deare almost certainly carved at the same time. The chimney-piece could be said to have acted as a visual pedestal to the relief, while the Latin inscription below the figurative carving served as its lapidary epigraph. The relief and chimney-piece were probably initially housed in London from about 1796, after they had been shipped from Rome, until some time after 1804, when the building work at Stoke Park was complete. They were possibly installed at Penn’s town house, known as The Portico, at 10 New Street, Spring Gardens, Westminster, or perhaps stored in packing cases. In the early nineteenth century they were installed in the Great Dining Room (or ‘Banqueting Room’, later the Presidents Bar, and now once again the dining room) at Stoke Park. In a watercolour from a set dating from 1830 illustrating the interiors at Stoke Park, a rectangle represents the Deare relief (Fig.39), shown verbally, rather than visually, over the chimney-piece. The space where the relief would have been set is inscribed: ‘Julius Caesar’s check invading Britain; his confession in his Commentaries “This only was wanting to continue the ancient good fortune by Caesar”’. In the lower left of the

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In 1908 Stoke Park and its estate became a golf course. In 1928, it was bought by a property developer, Sir Noel Mobbs (1878–1959), who put it up for sale in 1957, while continuing to reside at Stoke Manor. The golf course and Stoke Park were then purchased by Eton Rural District Council, now South Bucks District Council. Just before the sale, Deare’s relief was moved once more, without the later surround and chimneypiece, this time from Stoke Park to Sir Noel’s home, Stoke Manor, and installed in isolation, in a recess high up on the end wall of the great hall, about three metres from the floor, and a similar distance below a first-floor gallery running along one side of the hall. This meant that it was difficult to see, and the inscription with the sculptor’s signature and date was illegible and hence forgotten. Other than its publication in a privately printed book of 1930, in an article by Alastair Laing of 1983, and in the 2000 article, it was virtually unknown and unseen. In 2011 it was rediscovered anew, and bought by Daniel Katz Ltd., London, who sold it to the V. & A.

The composition of the relief is both complex and compelling. Clearly Deare, perhaps guided by Penn, was closely following the text of Caesar’s Gallic Wars. In the centre, the helmeted figure of Caesar stands commandingly on a flat-bottomed landing craft, armed with a shield and spear, his cloak billowing behind him in the wind. Behind him one of his soldiers, carved in low relief, aims an arrow at the Britons coming in to attack from the right. One of these, a long-haired figure, wearing only a loincloth, strides forth, his mouth open, no doubt shouting a battle cry, having leapt from his scythed chariot, the wheel of which is armed with a knife blade. Three other bare-chested Britons fight in the water, while two more can be seen charging in from behind. In the shallows a dead centurion, the eagle-headed Roman soldier is likewise chipped. For the published references, see McDermott, op. cit. (note 43); and Fusco, Fogelman and Stock, op. cit. (note 25). The artist Edward Armitage (1817–96) submitted a design for


40 The watercolours are in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. I am most grateful to John Brushe and Jon Bolter for bringing them to my attention.


44 For a list of the owners, see McDermott, op. cit. (note 25), p.41.

45 Ibid., plate opposite p.38, and p.39. See also Laing, op. cit. (note 43), p.187, fig.4. This is also the photograph used in Fusco, Fogelman and Stock, op. cit. (note 25), p.118, fig.32.

46 Laing, op. cit. (note 43), p.187; see also McDermott, op. cit. (note 25), p.39. The history of the building is recorded in the unpublished report of a meeting of the South Bucks District Council Planning Committee, 31st August 2011. Internal Specialist Advice by the Conservation and Design Officer, John Brushe. pp.3–4. A copy of the report is held at the council offices, Denham, Uxbridge. A resin replica of the relief has now been installed in the recess at Stoke Manor, fulfilling a condition set by the planning authority when permission to remove the sculpture was requested.

47 For this reason, the relief was misdated to 1793–94 in Fusco, Fogelman and Stock, op. cit. (note 25), p.101, understandably using the evidence of contemporary references, the authors being unaware of the date 1796 inscribed on the marble.

48 Inv. nos.A.101 and 2–2011. The measurements are as follows: h. of relief: 87.5 cm.; w. of relief: 164 cm.; d. of relief: 17 cm.; h. of inscription: 12.8 cm.; w. of inscription: 169 cm.; d. of inscription: 5.8 cm. There are some minor losses: the left arm of the Briton in the water on the right is missing, and his lance partly replaced; the sword held in the right hand of another Briton is missing; the blade of the sword held by Julius Caesar is a replacement; the tip of an arrow piercing the torso of the Briton in the water near the chariot is missing; the chariot is chipped, and the shield held by one of the Romans is likewise chipped. For the published references, see McDermott, op. cit. (note 25); Laing, op. cit. (note 43); and Fusco, Fogelman and Stock, op. cit. (note 25). The artist Edward Armitage (1817–96) submitted a design for
one of the murals for the new Houses of Parliament c.1843, of the same subject. This visually parallels the Deare, and must surely have been inspired by the earlier marble. Armitage’s drawing (never to be translated into sculpture) is now in the Palace of Westminster archives, London; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Caesar_invasion.png.

52 For the reference to the heroic eagle-bearer, see Caesar, op. cit. (note 24), Book IV, chapter 25.

53 For the Draco fable in Gaul, who were said to have come from Britain, see ibid., Book VI, chapters 13 and 14.

54 J. Penn: The Battle of Edington; or, British Liberty. A tragedy, London 1796. An earlier edition was published in 1792. For the bust see note 25 above.


56 For Donatello’s marble relief, see J. Pope-Hennessy: Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Victoria and Albert Museum, I, London 1964, pp.70-73; for the bronze pulpit relief see idem: Donatello, New York 1953, p.310, fig.310.

57 This relief is now in the V. & A., inv. no.A.5-1984; Bilbey and Trusted, op. cit. (note 11), no.69.


59 For the Judgment of Jupiter, see Fusco, Fogelman and Stock, op. cit. (note 25), pp.99-102, and p.107, fig.5. See also http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record&id=40804&type=101.

60 For works by Flaxman in the V. & A., see Bilbey and Trusted, op. cit. (note 11), pp.76-83. Canova’s Thetis and the Minotaur, inv. no.A.5-1962, is displayed nearby in the gallery. For the Canova, see H. Honour et al.: exh. cat. The Age of Neo-Classicism, London (Royal Academy of Arts and Victoria and Albert Museum) 1972, no.307 (entry by H. Honour).

The theme of threatened invasion may have been inspired by fears of French attacks on Britain, which were only too apparent in the 1790s, and which became yet more real during the Napoleonic era, when Penn installed Deare’s relief in his Great Dining Room at Stoke Park. Caesar might even have been viewed as a prototype of Napoleon, menacing Britain’s sovereignty. Despite his American roots and affection for America, Penn was a fervent British patriot, and a great admirer of William Pitt the Younger, to whom he dedicated his play The Battle of Edington [sic]; or, British Liberty in 1796. The play recounted the ninth-century battle of Edington, when Arthur, the Great revolted an attempted invasion of Britain by the Danes. The frontispiece of the third edition of the play of 1832 was an engraving of Deare’s bust of Penn.61 Deare’s relief could therefore be understood as an epitome of Britain’s heroic defence of its shores, dramatising through sculpture an historical scene with all its resonance for current events.

The literary and historical inspiration for this work was complemented by a rich variety of visual sources. The authors of the 2000 article have drawn attention to some of these: the figure of Caesar is inspired by Alexander and Bucephalus, one of the Dioscuri on the Quirinal Hill in Rome.12 The Briton leaping from his chariot is derived from the Borghese Gladiator,53 and also recalls the figure of Bacchus in Titian’s Bacchus and Ariadne, which Deare might have seen in Rome. The virtuoso use of low relief for the battle may have been inspired by the skirmishes depicted on Trajan’s Column in Rome.54 In addition, the mourning Druids in low relief in the background recall the bas relief figures of Donatello, seen in his schiacciate marble reliefs, such as the Ascension with Christ giving the keys to St Peter at the V. & A., or the bronze figures executed in the backgrounds of the reliefs on his pulpits in the church of S. Lorenzo, Florence.55 The low relief marble of Thetis and her nymphs rising from the sea to console Achilles for the loss of Patroclus of 1777–78 by Deare’s older contemporary Thomas Banks (1735–1805), now also in the V. & A., provides another striking parallel, and may well have been known to Deare before it left Rome.57 Perhaps Banks’s Caractacus before Claudius for Stowe of 1773/74–77 similarly inspired Deare, since it too depicts a subject from Roman history, this time derived from Tacitus, showing Britons heroically confronting imperial invaders.58 Such a blend of classical, Renaissance and contemporary sources was typical of the sculptor’s practice.

Apart from this eclectic range of sources, the virtuoso carving and mastery of composition are vividly evident. The marble is exploited to yield extraordinary subtlety and potency in both high and low relief. The composition is reminiscent of a painted narrative, and conversely the thrusting figures emerge from the surface of the carved stone in an arresting and dramatic way. The natural cloudy discolouration of the stone at the top right has been used to suggest a cloudy sky. This, one of Deare’s last works, indicates only too clearly his exceptional talent, and also shows that he was at least the equal of both Banks and John Flaxman (1755–1826), his almost exact contemporary. It forms an interesting parallel with another major work by Deare, his large Judgment of Jupiter of the late 1780s, now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.60 Both are ambitious and virtuoso renderings in marble of classical subjects, drawing on a wide repertory of sources. In its present position at the V. & A., it is certainly of the Neo-classical master Antonio Canova.60

Chronology of the Bacchanals and the evolution of one of them, London 1969.

11 For the reference to the heroic eagle-bearer, see Caesar, op. cit. (note 24), Book IV, chapter 25.