

KISS OF VICTORY (1878-1881)
SIR ALFRED GILBERT (1854-1934) – 76.32 G357
Anna Bethune August OOM

Description and notes on Object

- **Roman Legionary fallen in Battle and kissed at moment of death by genius or spirit of Victory** – The wings of the angel curve around the fallen legionnaire as if to protect him. Is the youth dead or has he just fainted?

Note the **sensual relationship** between the female and the youth – kiss and enfolding wings.

(See Cupid and Psyche by Canova also for inspiration)

Commissioned by Somerset Beaumont (1835-1921) who became a great friend and patron of Sir Alfred Gilbert. Commission price 150 guineas, two earlier models made in Rome did not survive because they dried out and cracked – so he continuously redesigned.

Also thought to be **memorial to his brother Gordon** who died of consumption at the age of 21 a few months before the commission was obtained. Gordon was favoured by parents, and Alfred felt in shadow of his brother...

Statue returned into ownership of Gilbert who gave it to his father. (Beaumont sold it back to Gilbert who gave to his father who sold it to Boehm, then purchased in 1891 by Mr Smith of Park Lane, London.

Idea originated from a work by Gustave Dore – also known as Kiss of Victory but proper name is Gloire presented at Paris Salon in 1878– the title is what gave the inspiration not the work.

French heroic style was ubiquitous in France after the Prussian War of 1870-71 see Gloria Victis by Mercie.

Revitalization of symbol of Nike figure during the 1870's – (see call to arms by Rodin – though more in Michelangelo style) England at the time was more peaceful than France so this Heroic style was not as prevalent.

White marble – very smooth (parallel with Ganymede)

Amusing quote about Gilbert written by Walburga – Lady Paget, wife of British Ambassador in Rome ; she befriended him whilst she was in Rome (1879-80):

"I took a great interest in poor Gilbert, quite young and so full of genius with sketches of statues that reminded one of Michelangelo. He had a sick wife and three children and

the struggle was awful. It was a grief to me that I never had the means to help the poor artists otherwise than by praise or making them known.

One day I found Gilbert in despair over a group of his – Glory and Death (thought to be our Kiss of Victory).

He saw the faults without being able to remedy them. I sat down on a packing case amidst the cats and pigeons which rummaged about in the marble dust of the elementary studio and began my criticisms.

He at the same time, cutting off ruthlessly the parts indicated. After three hours we had a huge heap of clay by his side and his lovely group stood out in the graceful proportions it now has. “

Another quote by Gilbert himself :

“All sculptors and painters ought to beware of imitating the proportions of their own bodies unless they are quite normal “

Gilbert himself was short and extremely broad. He is thought to have used some of his characteristics in the body of the youth. He frequently would narcissistically project himself into his statues.

Statue was all by Gilbert’s hand except for one assistant who pointed the marble – Salvatore Bglione.

The Statue Perseus Arming is thought to be a reworking of the Kiss of Victory youth.

Piece was criticized for being imperfect and unfinished from behind and for the lumpen drapery.

- What is victorian about the piece?

Victorians favoured tragic somber subjects

-Small scale – meant for drawing room or perhaps entrance hall.

Idealized effect

Reflective and contemplative

Mood of regret and nostalgia

Sir Alfred Gilbert –

Born to two musician parents.

Grammar school is ALdenham (which had an interesting art program)– started formal art education at Heatherley Art School in London. Then Royal Academy 1872.

Studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts (1876) under Prof P.j Cavelier – then studied in Rome (1878) where he became familiar with sculpting in Marble but also revisited the technique of lost wax casting which he reintroduced in Britain. Studied and admired Donatello and Cellini.

So very classical training. Studied classic and neo –classical style (Flaxman and Stevens)

First major commissions :

Perseus arming and Icarus.

Style is very much that of idealized figures

But innovation was the development of relatively small symbolic intimate bronzes - ie not life size – more suited to interiors less public works. These works when reproduced were then further reduced.

Sir Alfred Gilbert reintroduced the lost wax technique for bronze which had been superseded by a brickdust plaster and sand method. Also most bronzes at the time were portraits of individuals either seated. On a horse, or in busts. Or recumbent on tombs as memorials – very conservative –Gilbert was therefore an innovator when he returned to symbolism. Seen as being a much more continental language – very French (Glory is a French heroic style) – Eroicism and exaggeration were also seen as his signature – (see Mourning Angel 1977) Unusual size of his works ;neither lifesize nor bibelot size.

Philosophy of Gilbert : Romantic – belief that a statue should touch the feelings of a viewer – not just the aesthetic sense alone.

Gilbert was also helped by sculptor J.E.Boehm who helped him obtain a commission from the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury - A statue for a fountain in Picadilly Circus, very well known nowadays as the Eros – symbolic representation of Charity- (fountain symbolized charity in providing drink for the Poor and Anteros represents the God of Selfless love as opposed to Eros.)

Also innovative use of materials – Eros is in ALuminium, seldom used in Sculpture at the time – much more difficult.

In 1884 when he presented his Icarus to the Royal Academy he was seen as the new talent of his generation and Leader of a movement known as New Sculpture– but critics accused him of having no sense of scale.

He was known to have difficulties finishing work and to rework, rework continuously and destroy work in process.

Gilbert further developed goldsmithing and jewelry skills – making himself into a modern day renaissance man. Also known for working in polychromy. (different colours in metals).

Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy – 1900 -1904
Famous for spiritual and symbolist themes for domestic spaces and architectural décor yet moving small bronzes away from Decorative arts – to sculpture proper.

However struggled financially – bankrupt in 1897

After 1904 self imposed exile to Belgium (Brugges) where he lived until 1926-
Quarrelled with Edward VII over advances for unfinished commissions.

Themes

War and peace
Conflict resolution
Symbolism in Art
Victorian period

Possible questions

What does this statue tell us about war? (glorification or realism?) Would contrast nicely with the Warrior and Shield by Henry Moore – one very idealized the other one stark realism of War....

How does this statue make you feel?

What is the relationship between the Nike figure and the youth?

How do we represent war?

What art objects do we place in a prominent space in our home?