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Early Italian and European Works of Art



PAOLO GIAN SIRACUSA

ART AND SCIENCE IN A REDISCOVERED WAXWORK BY
GAETANO GIULIO ZUMBO

GAETANO GIULIO ZUMBO

(Siracusa 1656 - Paris 1701)

Anatomical bust with worms

1699-1700

Polychrome waxwork
in a black-lacquered
wooden case with
gold leaf
cm 62 × 68.5 × 27



THE DISQUIETING BEAUTY OF THE ART OF WAX MODELLING

After more than three hundred years a sculpture has emerged from the dust of time whose technical, formal and stylistic elements identify it as waxwork of the end of the seventeenth century by Gaetano Giulio Zumbo (or Zummo). The discovery is of remarkable historical and artistic importance as it adds another piece to the puzzle of the career of one of the most brilliant artists of the Baroque era.

The disgust, mixed with fear and revulsion the viewer felt when confronted with such hideous seventeenth century sculptures in wax, wood, terracotta and marble, has often compromised the preservation of documents that would have assured certainty of attribution of works of art of this unusual genre. One well known example is *The "French Disease"* of the Florentine collection of Prince Corsini (Fig. 1), described by Giuseppe Carobbi in the early twentieth century as follows: "... it is beautiful, on a large-scale, kept within a great glass display case; it is perhaps the most important of the waxworks by Zumbo, but the subject matter is itself quite horribly revolting and disgusting in its all too realistic representation." The waxwork was probably a gift from Cosimo III de' Medici to Prince Filippo Corsini and was kept permanently hidden and locked away.

The disturbing appearance of the *Anatomical bust with worms* was assuredly the main cause for the loss of documentary records on the work, as well as explaining why it was absent from public memory. The rediscovery of this waxwork by Zumbo is, therefore, a matter of real importance, both for the rarity of the subject and because of its excellent state of preservation. Equally important are the formal and stylistic aspects that identify it, more than any documentation could, as an undisputed work of the Sicilian artist.

Zumbo's *Teatrini della Morte*, little theatres of death, and many other similar depictions of the time had the purpose of exorcising death, sickness and pain. In an age in which cholera and syphilis, plague and tuberculosis reaped huge quantities of deaths, people chose to surround themselves with apotropaic images. The thought in the seventeenth century was that the portrait of death could in some way distance death itself. By placing evil in full visibility, there was a sense that they could exercise some control over its terrible effects.

The last sculptural period of Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, which precedes his appointment to the post of official anatomist of the French king Louis XIV, had commercial as well as scientific implications. Proof of this can be seen in the conflict with the French anatomist Guillaume Desnoues (Chief of Surgery at the Hospital of Genoa and Professor of Anatomy and Surgery) with whom he worked for a while on the production of wax anatomical models. Far from the commissions under the patronage of the Medici (with whom he remained until 1695), between Bologna and Genoa (1695-1699) he found a way of executing anatomical works with such skill that they earned him fame and fortune. The chronicles of the time list among his works a small figure of a woman who died in childbirth, a life-size figure of a woman in labour, a Nativity scene and a Deposition. These are but a few of the subjects, which included a very large number of depictions, tableaux, heads and anatomical busts (Fig. 2). Zumbo had a special fondness for figuratively addressing the human body in decay, with decomposing flesh, rotting bodies and subsequent infestation by rodents and parasites. Since the very first tableaux created in Naples, filled with visual memories he acquired in Sicily after his many excursions into the crypts of cemeteries of confraternities and monasteries, his obsessive passion for ghastly representations of the human body was already apparent. The formal mannerist aesthetics learned from waxworks of monks and cloistered

orders were turned by his hand into figures of torment, figurative devastation and into putrefying ossuaries, with repugnant worms and maggots and stacks of bodies being devoured by rats disembowelling the still warm and succulent flesh. At the height of his dispute with the Desnoues, he spent some time in France (1699-1700) bringing with him some works for demonstration purposes. In Marseilles he met the Intendant General of the French goals for whom he produced an anatomical head. The *Anatomical bust with worms* by Gaetano Giulio Zumbo can be dated to this time. It is clearly the depiction of a young man who died a traumatic death, bearing as he does large and obvious wounds from beatings and cuts. A goal bird, it would seem, a young person subjected to daily hard labour while serving his sentence. The large gash in the neck, which serves as a brilliant lesson in anatomical analysis, is surely a wound caused by a rope or chain. Who knows how many such individuals Zumbo had the chance to see and sculpt during his short stay in Marseille. It was an exercise of extraordinary importance in technical and creative terms for the artist, and soon afterwards he was able to exhibit one of his anatomical heads at the Académie Royale des Sciences in Paris (May 25, 1701).

The anatomical portrait is of a pale and sickly young man whose face has been wounded by cutting weapons, his head viciously beaten, his neck torn by a deadly grip. Was this perhaps a sailor, condemned to the galleys? Such a reading may be suggested by the broadly painted strokes that offer no background detail, like a red-grey sky approaching dusk, in the dramatic shades of a death that has already been enacted. The anatomical details are typical of Zumbo in their rendition and in the techniques used. The details of the teeth, of the eyes and of the open wounds are sculpted in his signature manner. As for the worms and the clumps of voracious maggots attached to the flesh, these are typical of the works of Zumbo, such as *The Plague*, *The Triumph of Time* and the terrible consequences of *The "French Disease"* (Fig. 1).

Gaetano Giulio Zumbo created this sculpture using a jet of coloured and filtered wax that was applied directly into the cavities of the negatives of the previously shaped forms. The artist executed the moulds with very fine plaster that was able to reproduce even the smallest detail in the original moulded clay. The colours of the wax are in themselves scientifically descriptive of the various stages of the depiction we see. The grey and purple swellings, as well as the disturbing layers of red in the cuts and the other wounds should be noted in this respect. As in all of Zumbo's waxworks, the colouration of the various parts of the sculpture is a result of meticulous medical examination.

The focus on anatomical realism in Sicily, before this famous wax modeller began his career, centred around two Franciscan monks, Fra' Umile and Fra' Innocenzo da Petralia, forerunners of those who studied the cadavers in the vaults of the monastery. The realism of the two friars was seen particularly in the woodcarvings of numerous crucifixes from which Zumbo must surely have drawn inspiration.

In the works of the seventeenth century, there is no shortage of symbolism and hidden meanings that can be associated with the religious culture of the time and the sphere of magic. Superstitions and apotropaic elements frequently intertwined with the fears that characterised an unfortunate age battered by wars, plague and the ferocity of the Inquisition. In Sicily and Naples in particular, death and the physical consequences of infection were even depicted on the city walls. The frescoes by the best Neapolitan artists around the city gates after the terrible plague of 1656 (which reaped 240.000 of the 400.000 souls that had lived there), were intended to exorcise evil and stave off misfortune, by representing the great tragedy and all of its



symbolisms. The symbols, to summarise greatly, were replete with the most chilling of meanings but were at the same time expressions of salvation and rebirth, and not only of the body.

The anatomical torso we see here is typical, crawling as it is with worms and parasites, reproduced in the starkest realism. The rat, for example, is one of a group of negative symbols. It stands above all for anguish, disgust and degradation. The cockroach fulfils a similar role, its very colour signifying darkness, depression and death. The meaning of the moth is, on the other hand, that of metamorphosis, it points towards the light of the resurrection. From egg to caterpillar and then from pupa to butterfly, the transition is from a creature crawling on the ground to one free to take flight in the air. The message is that of the gospels, to be reborn the seed must first die (*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit”*, the Gospel of John). The bones seen in the gash in the neck are also a positive vision in that the parts of the skeleton also represent the resurrection and rebirth, no longer as flesh but as spirit. The orbits of the eyes are turned upwards as if beseeching a world above that is different, one without suffering, a world of final safety and of health.

Gaetano Giulio Zumbo thus intended with the *Anatomical bust with worms* to represent both good and evil, darkness and light, the putrefaction of the decaying flesh and the Christian dream of resurrection.

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Credits:

All images of the *Anatomical bust with worms* by Gaetano Giulio Zumbo

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Fig. 1 - Gaetano Giulio Zumbo,
The "French Disease", circa 1691-1694
 Museo di Storia Naturale dell'Università degli Studi di Firenze,
 Sezione di Zoologia "La Specola", Firenze, Italia



Fig. 2 - Gaetano Giulio Zumbo,
Anatomy of a male head, circa 1695
 Museo di Storia Naturale dell'Università degli Studi di
 Firenze, Sezione di Zoologia "La Specola", Firenze, Italia

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