

Giosuè Bernardino Meli

Italian sculptor
(1816-1893)

He was born in Luzzana, a small hilly village in the Val Cavallina in the province of Bergamo, the son of Giovanni Antonio Meli (1777-1838), a landowner, and Lucia Mocchi. He was the eighth of eleven children. It was perhaps Francesco Bellini, parish priest and teacher of the town, who understood the artistic potential of the young Meli. Giosuè's penchant for sculpture took shape very early on: at the age of 16 he carved a dead Christ out of wood now preserved in the parish of Luzzana. Between 1836 and 1840, the young artist attended the Carrara Academy in Bergamo. In 1838 he lost his father, on whose tomb he made a tombstone in Carrara marble depicting a grieving female figure of Canova's taste. The large bas-relief carved in Luzzana in the rock and called "*Il Gigante*" dates back to that period. After years of oblivion the work has been restored and enhanced.

In 1840, thanks to the patronage of some prominent figures of the Bergamo society of the time such as the noblewoman Lucia Prezzati, Count Leonino Secco Suardo and perhaps Cardinal Angelo Maj, Giosuè Meli moved to Rome. In the city of Pope Pius IX he frequented Giovanni Maria Benzoni, a well-known sculptor of Bergamo origin. Meli perfected his sculpture studies following in the footsteps of Thorvaldsen and Tenerani, in search of an expressive language between Neoclassicism and Romanticism. In the years that followed, Giosuè Meli opened a studio with a house in Piazza Lancellotti and married his countryman Agostina Cremonesi.

In 1861 he presented to the public a semi-colossal statue in Carrara marble which portrayed a mother with her little son during the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. This work sanctioned the definitive affirmation of Meli in the Capitoline artistic panorama. The "*Pompeian Mother*" was purchased by Lord Mitchell Henry, a wealthy financier and member of the British Parliament, who set up the main hall in his palace in Kensington, London to house the Meli opera. Due to the financial distress of Lord Henry, in 1900 the work went up for auction and is now lost. In Rome Giosuè Meli sculpted a *Bound Christ* (1874) which can be admired at the Scala Santa, the monument of *Santa Francesca Romana* (1869) is preserved in the church of Santa Maria al Foro.

The marble work *Innocence and Fidelity* (1854) is exhibited at the State Russian Museum in a room of the Stroganov Palace in St. Petersburg. The sculpture was purchased by Tsarina Alessandra, wife of Tsar Nicholas I. Passionate art collector, the empress visited Meli's studio during one of her trips to Europe and bought her work.

Giosuè Meli, although living in Rome, often returned to Bergamo at the request of the numerous local clients but above all to stay in the native village of Luzzana.

Meli died in Rome on February 22, 1893, and was buried in the Roman cemetery of Verano.

The figure of Giosuè Meli, after years of oblivion, thanks to the work of his biographers (Don Felice Bellini and Carlo Pinessi) re-emerges from the past, outlining the profile of a great nineteenth century. Over fifty sculptural works are currently registered in Italy and abroad. Some works are kept in his hometown, at the Luzzana Contemporary Art Museum - Donation Meli. In a special room there are some sculptures, including 'The four putti' recovered in Boston (USA), a bust portraying the daughter of Lucia Prezzati, her benefactress and the tombstone that the young Giosuè Meli had carved in memory of the father Giovanni, who died when he was in his early twenties. In recent years, the museum has dedicated a book - full of numerous photographs - to the sculptor from Luzzana, signed by Carlo Pinessi. Numerous short informative videos are available online, illustrating the main works of Giosuè Meli, made by Bruno Ghislandi.

Translated from:

https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giosu%C3%A8_Meli