

# Giovanni NICOLINI

by Elena Marconi - Biographical Dictionary of Italians (2013)

He was born in Palermo on 14 April 1872 by Giuseppe, a decorator of a certain fame.

He received the first rudiments from Uncle Filippo, carver and author of numerous crucifixes and wooden Madonnas. Around 1890 he enrolled in the courses of the Industrial Artistic Museum of Palermo under the direction of Vincenzo Ragusa, who in 1892 wanted him with him as a collaborator in an educational exhibition organized by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce to reward the best essays of the students of the schools of the Kingdom.

At the end of the exhibition, in spite of the economic constraints, he decided not to return to Palermo but to remain in the capital. He was accepted in Giulio Monteverde's study, obtaining thanks to the involvement of this an annual pension which raised him at least partly from financial problems. Soon, however, he moved away from the workshop of the master to begin an independent journey, culminating in the realization of the *Little Lombard lookout*, inspired by the book *Heart* of Edmund de Amicis. The sculpture was greeted with enthusiasm by the Promoter of Palermo in 1893, arousing amazement at the maturity shown by Nicolini in reconciling the extremely natural rendering of the body with a strong pathetic emphasis, and was rewarded with a gold medal; translated into bronze, it was bought by the Minister of Education and today it is located in the English garden of Palermo.

Large compositions alternated smaller works such as *Margaritella*, exhibited in Turin in 1894 and purchased by Umberto I, who awarded it the gold medal, the *Portrait of the painter Sciuti* (purchased by the City of Palermo) and the *Menestrello*. After showing considerable introspective skills in the portrait field, with the busts of *Giacomo Leopardi*, of the *Colonel Giuseppe Galliano* (1898; Rome, via Lepanto), of the *Duke of Verdura* (private collection), he dedicated himself to a veritable subject in the background social, following the illustrious example of Vincenzo Vela: the *Sons of the zolfara* (Latina, Civic Gallery of modern art); the work is based on the effective contrast between two types of miners: one, from the broad front and the frowning look, expresses the conscience of his condition and the contempt for those who subject him to such slavery, the other, brutalized by work, has an empty expression, an index of the unconscious passivity in the face of the labors and sufferings that he is forced to undergo.

In 1900 Nicolini, who attended the free school of the nude, won the Roman pension with the bas-relief *Le Marie at the tomb*, where, according to the critics, he was able to blend the mystic tone, appropriate to the composition, with the realism of the forms. This event marked a turning point in his career, and from that moment a succession of awards and honors allowed him to obtain important public commissions. Among the commemorative monuments, the one dedicated to *Francesco Crispi*, inaugurated in 1901 (Palermo, church of S. Domenico), in which, depicting on the sides of the cippus the *Sicily* and the Michelangelo *Genius of the Revolution*, aimed to reconcile the architectural structure with the plastic decoration, and that to the economist *Francesco Ferrara* (ibidem), which still reflects the canons of nineteenth-century iconography in the personification of *politicoeconomy*, placed next to the austere figure of the scientist, in the act of holding the pen and the rudder.

During the years of the pensioner he applied formal research to the theme of the nude, in works strongly expressive of feelings or passions, often played on the contrast between feminine and masculine bodies mutually entwined: *Pleasure* in which above all the female figure with flowing hair and enveloping shapes revealed a strong liberty mark; il *Vinto*, inspired by Rodin's sculpture, of which Nicolini declared himself a fervent admirer; the *Awakening* (Rome, Istituto Superiore di Sanità), up to the *Meditation*, modeled at the end of the four-year period of studies, which became the property of the State. In 1906 at the Milan Fine Arts Exhibition he presented the bronze group *Falciati* (Rome, National Gallery of Modern Art), still focused on the theme of work, interpreted in terms of social denunciation and emotional participation towards the

vanquished, in this case embodied by the figure of the mower, collapsed under the blows of fatigue and the sun on the wheat he has just cut.

About 1905 is the *bust of Ophelia* ( Düsseldorf, Gallery of modern art ), in which the Shakespearean theme is faced with modern sibility, expressed by the face characterized by "the depths of the lost eyes and the trembling lips of unconscious sobs" (Scarpa , 1927, p.48). The following year he executed the bronze titled *Chimera del Polo* , "which sphines on icy rock" (ibid.).

In 1906 he participated in the Milanese competition for the *Giuseppe Verdi Monument* , but he did not win, although his sketch was considered the most original (ibid., P.58), because he detached himself from the traditional cliché of the monumental statuary with the figure of the character in *rendigote*, to evoke rather the plastic synthesis of the genius: in the center of the composition, in fact, a giant hermaid over the actual allegory, focused on the myth of Orpheus, intent on playing with the lyre the melody produced by the seven notes, having next to a tamed lion.

In 1907, the result of the winners in the national sculpture contest of the *Vittorio Emanuele Monument* by Giuseppe Sacconi, he created one of the statues of the Italian regions placed on the crowning , *Calabria* , mighty caryatids, perfectly suited for the purity of the lines and shapes , to the classical style of the monument. Also in the following *Monument to Carlo Porta* he remained faithful to a noble language, based on the evocation of the poet's personality through an allegorical representation. However he was able to renew the traditional vocabulary of neoclassical ancestry, abolishing the usual attributes of personifications to arrive at a skinny and synthetic symbolism. In 1911 he created the marble group *Political triumph* for the Vittorio Emanuele II bridge on the Tiber.

Alongside these monumental exploits, he devoted himself to works of mythological-pastoral inspiration, in keeping with D'Annunzio's aesthetic taste, such as the series of *Satyrs, Nymphs* and *Bacchantes* depicted in contorted and lascivious poses ( *Ebbro* , *Provando* , *Vecchio fauno* ) or the *Fontana Gaia* , located in 1929 in the garden of the Villa Borghese lake in Rome. *Pomona* bronze also belongs to this trend, exhibited in 1924 at the Venice Biennale (Florence, Palazzo Pitti Modern Art Gallery).

In contact with the most illustrious figures of the century, I count among his friends as well as D'Annunzio and Rodin, also Ugo Ojetti, Luigi Pirandello, Beppe Ciardi, Ivan Mestrovich and Antonio Mancini, of whom he made a bronze bust (1920) remained owned by the artist, while the portrait that Mancini gave to Nicolini was donated by him to the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome.

The most fruitful period of activity coincided with the production of works for Latin America, starting with the *Monument to Joaquim Nabuco* , erected in Pernambuco to celebrate the apostle of the liberation of slaves in Brazil. In Havana, in Cuba, the equestrian statue of General *Alessandro Rodrigo* and *z* (1924) was commissioned, and the monuments to *Jos are Miguel Góó me* (1925) and *Carlos Aguierre* (1926).

Back in Europe, he alternated his vocation for a heroic art, celebrating the illustrious figures of his time, to works of a more intimate and personal inspiration, like *My children. Roberto, Marcello, Giovanni* (Palermo, Gallery of modern art), and *My daughter Anna* (Rome, Gallery of modern art) . After the *Brutus* , exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1922, he executed the bronze statue *Vedetta goliardica* , emblem of Fascist youth, which was presented at the II Quadrennial in Rome and purchased by the State and then placed in 1935 in the University City.

The last two decades saw him very busy in religious art: he realized, among other things, the *Via Crucis* for the church of S. Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome (1933) , the colossal group of *S. Eufrosia Pellettier* (1940) for the Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican and, in the year 1950, the *Piet à* , exhibited at the International Exhibition of Sacred Art and purchased by the Ministry of Education. Among the last works there was a bronze bas-relief depicting the *Science* , made in 1950 and placed in the anti-hall of the Higher Institute of Health in Rome.

He was also a discreet painter, dedicated, in moments of pause from the activity of sculptor and during his trips abroad, to landscape painting .

Married from 1900 with Marceline Colignon, born in Antwerp, had six children: Marcello, Roberto, born in 1907 and became a famous architect, Giovanni Jr, who followed his father's footsteps dedicating himself to sculpture, and finally Ortensia, Anna and Dora.

He died in Rome in 1956.

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