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Venice, early 17th century

Vulcan and Venus Marina

After models by Girolamo Campagna (1549–1625) and Tiziano Aspetti (1559–1606)

Bronze, golden-brown patina; the head of
Vulcan's hammer missing

16 ½ in. (41.9 cm.) high



Provenance

King Leopold III of Belgium (1901-1983); until sold,
Sotheby's, London, 7 April 1976, lot 96 as Tiziano Aspetti;
where purchased by the father of the current owners.

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During the period referred to as the 'High Renaissance', Venice was a leading centre for sculptural production and had a wealth of talented sculptors working in and around the city, such as: Alessandro Vittoria (1525–1608), Girolamo Campagna (1549–1625) and Tiziano Aspetti (1559–1606). The present models of *Vulcan* and *Venus Marina* appear to have been inspired by Campagna and Aspetti's carved figures of *Venus Marina* and a 'Giant', respectively, at the Marciana library, Venice (figs. 1 & 2). In 1921, Leo Planiscig fully attributed two slight variations of the present models to Aspetti and included them in his seminal work on Venetian renaissance sculpture *Venezianische Bildbauer der Renaissance* (figs. 3 & 4).¹

Tiziano Aspetti was one of the most important sculptors of the Italian 'High Renaissance'. As a result of his talents, he lived and worked at the Palazzo Grimani, Venice and his fame was such that George III acquired a portrait of the artist by Leandro Bassano, executed circa 1592, which resides in the Royal Collection (fig.5).

Standing elegantly in a stance of exaggerated contrapposto and swinging his hammer², *Vulcan*, the husband of *Venus*, was the Greek and Roman god of fire and the blacksmith who forged the weapons of many gods and heroes in ancient mythology. *Venus Marina* was the Roman goddess of love and fertility and identified with the Greek Aphrodite. Her similarly contrapposto pose offers somewhat of a mirror image and counterpart to the male figure of *Vulcan* here. She attempts to cover one of her breasts in modesty and stands with one foot on the head of a dolphin, while holding up its tail with her other hand. The attribute of this aquatic creature references her birth from the sea, as well as the city of Venice's lagoon location, nautical prowess, and naval power. Venice is known as 'the city of Venus', while *Vulcan* is significant to both the city and the wider Veneto region as they were well-known for their bronze foundries (particularly the towns of Padua, Brescia and Verona). Therefore, this pairing of *Vulcan* and *Venus Marina* neatly represent the concept of the triumph of Vulcan's forge in Venus' city³: a celebration of the mastery of bronze manufacture by the sculptors and founders of the city of Venice during the late 16th century.

It is possible that at some point these statuettes surmounted 'firedogs', or 'andirons', which were typically located in the hearth of Italian palazzi. These objects were therefore quite prominently displayed in the

¹ Planiscig, 1921: figs. 616 and 644

² Although here missing its hammer head.

³ V. Avery, *Vulcan's Forge in Venus' City: The Story of Bronze in Venice, 1350 – 1650*, New York, 2011

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decorative scheme of a Renaissance court or grand interior. As such, the lower sections of these andirons sometimes displayed the cartouche of the noble family they belonged to. There is also a pair of andirons at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that bear the same models of *Vulcan & Venus Marina*, as our statuettes (fig.6).

However, the combination of the crisp facture of this bronze and its golden-brown patina is unusual in Venetian bronzes, which are often characterised by a loose modelling style and a rough, darkly patinated surface. The thick, dark surface of most Venetian bronzes is due to protective coating, consisting of a drying oil like walnut or linseed, sometimes cooked down with pine pitch, and a pigment based on carbon such as soot. The present statuettes have an almost translucent, lacquer-like varnish more typical of Florentine bronzes from the Giambologna school of the late 16th century. It is therefore likely that these, rather more superior statuettes were made as independent, free-standing sculptures, as opposed to the more darkly patinated and 'summary' productions one usually sees surmounting firedogs or andirons. These waxy, lively bronze casts are finely finished with areas of meticulous chasing, chiselling, filing, and punching to its surface. Such 'cold work', undertaken after casting, cooling, and removal from their moulds, would have required a great deal of time and skill, so were no doubt executed at considerable expense.

Selected bibliography

- D. Allen, *Italian Renaissance and Baroque Bronzes in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2022, n.75, 76 & 80
- L. Planiscig, *Venezianische Bildhauer der Renaissance*, Vienna, 1921
- V. Avery, *Vulcan's Forge in Venus' City: The Story of Bronze in Venice, 1350 – 1650*, New York, 2011
- P. Motture, 'The Production of Firedogs in Renaissance Venice', in P. Motture (ed), *Large Bronzes in the Renaissance*, New Haven and London, 2003, pp.277 - 307

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Fig.1) Girolamo Campagna (1549 – 1625), *Venus Marina*, 1588–90, Istrian stone, Libreria Marciana, Venice

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Fig,2) Tiziano Aspetti (1559–1606), *Giant*, 1590 – 1591, marble, Libreria Marciana, Venice

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Fig.3) Tiziano Aspetti, *Vulcan*, bronze, Vienna, last recorded in the collection of Dr. Strauss.

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Fig.4) Tiziano Aspetti, *Venus Marina*, bronze, last recorded in the Read collection, London.

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Fig.5) Leandro Bassano (1557-1622), *Portrait of Tiziano Aspetti holding a Statuette*, c.1592-3, oil on canvas, 88 x 67.2 cm. Royal Collection, Buckingham Palace, London (inv. no. RCIN 405988)

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Fig.6) *Pair of Andirons with Figures of Venus Marina and Vulcan*, Venice, possibly early 17th century, bronze,
Venus andiron: 113 cm; Vulcan andiron: 111.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. no.
14.40.694, .695)