

Vincenzo Camuccini, *A Roman Triumphal Entry, Possibly of Marcus Claudius Marcellus*
1771 - Rome - 1844

oil on canvas

19 ½ by 24 ½ inches (49.6 by 62.2 cm)

signed and dated at the lower left: 'V. Camuccini ft. 1816'

provenance: Sale Vercelli, Italy, Casa d'Aste, Meeting Art, A. p. A., November 7, 2015, no. 383.

note: In his still definitive article on the eighteenth-century Roman, Neo-Classical painter Vincenzo Camuccini, Ulrich Hiesinger wrote, "Camuccini's talents as a painter and his official positions in the papal government made him, after Canova, the most sought after and influential artist in Rome during the early decades of the nineteenth century... Contemporaries considered him one of the few living artists worthy of comparison with the great figures of Italy's artistic past."¹ Born in Rome, Camuccini was trained by his older brother, Pietro, a part-time painter, as well as restorer and dealer, and the painter Domenico Corvi, but it was through observation and study of the Renaissance masters in the Vatican, especially Raphael and Michelangelo, that the artist perfected his superb drawing technique. Although he painted some religious subjects and portraits, the bulk of Camuccini's works were devoted to scenes of Greco-Roman history.

Elected to the Academy of St. Luke in 1802, Camuccini then became its head in 1805 through suspension of the minimum age requirements. He served until 1810 and then was a professor of painting until, on Canova's death in 1822, he once again assumed the presidency until 1827. His long association with the papacy began in 1803 when Pius VII appointed him Director of the Vatican Mosaic Studios. Then in 1809, he was named Superintendent of the Vatican Picture Galleries, and from 1814 until the year before his death he served in his most important capacity as Inspector of Public Paintings for Rome and the Papal States.

Following Napoleon's annexation of the Papal States in 1810, Camuccini travelled to Paris, and received commissions (unfulfilled) from the Emperor and also met the leading French Neo-Classical painters David, Gros, and Gerard. However, he soon returned to Rome and continued his prolific career, fulfilling commissions from both Italian patrons and many foreigners visiting on the Grand Tour. As Hiesinger noted "these contemporary visitors came eventually to regard Camuccini himself as a local landmark, while for many Romans he became the very symbol of continuing national pride in the arts."² Camuccini also formed a major collection of Old Master paintings, including a notable *Madonna* by Raphael. In 1833 when excavations at the Pantheon uncovered the tomb of Raphael, it was Camuccini who was asked to record the findings.

Camuccini first achieved fame with two great historical compositions produced over several years – *The Death of Julius Caesar* and *The Death of Verginia*. They were commissioned by an English patron in 1793 but only completed by 1818, by which time the original patron had died, and the enormous works were acquired by Ferdinand I for his court in Naples. For these scenes of ancient history, Camuccini already began his life-long practice of studying antique models and aided by archaeologists perfected the details of costume and architecture. As Hiesinger noted, "Together the *Caesar* and *Verginia* set a pattern for the meticulously executed expansive historical compositions that were to become Camuccini's stock-in-trade." And he further observed that the success of Camuccini's works was due to its rejection of the older Baroque traditions in favor of a "deliberate and painstaking formality, suggesting an aspiration to the absolute in their clarity and precision."³ The austere modernism of this Neo-Classical approach, inspired in part by the writings of

Winkelman and the examples of Mengs and Canova, is evident in the many evocations of Roman history that Camuccini derived from the reading of ancient texts.

This relatively early work it is clearly a scene of triumph with the heroic victor in a grand helmet standing in a chariot drawn by several rambunctious horses. A crowd by his side and behind him carry in the trophies of his victory. The background setting of pyramidal structures suggests that the scene is not set in Rome. Distinctive and providing a possible clue to the identity of the subject are the two elephants in the background who are ridden by several nearly naked men. Elephants had been part of triumphal processions since ancient times (fig. 1), but of course the most famous ancient hero to make use of elephants was the Carthaginian Hannibal, and when sold in 2015, this painting was in fact identified as *The Triumph of Hannibal*.⁴ But Hannibal was an African and the victorious figure here is obviously a Roman and dressed in the manner Camuccini usually employed for his Roman figures (fig. 2). The greatest of Roman leaders to be depicted in a triumphal scene with elephants was Julius Caesar in the well-known series of paintings by Andrea Mantegna at Hampton Court, which were widely circulated in woodcuts (fig. 3). They in turn served to inspire *A Roman Triumph* also with elephants by Rubens (fig. 4). Another triumph with elephants, however, was also staged by Caesar's rival, Pompey. On his return to Rome in 61 B. C., following his victories in Sicily and Africa, Pompey demanded a triumphal entry, and seeking to outdo his rivals had his chariot pulled by an elephant to represent his African conquests. His use of the exotic beast, however, was not successful as this elephant was too large to fit through the city gate. The triumph of Pompey with several elephants was depicted in an elaborate drawing by the eighteenth-century French artist Gabriel de Saint-Aubin (fig. 5).⁵

Yet another Roman consul who had engaged in warfare with Hannibal and his elephants and made a triumphal entry with the beasts was Marcus Claudius Marcellus (ca. 268 -208 B. C.). Two drawings⁶ of a Roman triumph by Camuccini (figs. 6 and 7), quite similar to the present oil sketch, have been identified as representing this heroic figure. In these works the composition moves from left to right; the elephants and their riders are in the background, and the setting more clearly seems to represent the classical structures of ancient Rome. When it was exhibited in 1978, the version from the Camuccini family collection (fig. 7) was identified as the celebratory triumph of Marcellus over the Gauls,⁷ but in fact it and our oil sketch more likely represent his later triumph celebrating his defeat of the forces of Hannibal in the 2nd Punic War of 261 B. C. On this occasion, according to the Roman historian Livy, "eight elephants were led in procession to signalize Marcellus' victory over the Carthaginians."⁸ If this is indeed the subject then the number of elephants was reduced by Camuccini for the sake of compositional clarity. Camuccini was a most conscientious artist who produced many preliminary drawings and *bozzetti* to perfect his compositions, their lighting and modeling, so it is indeed likely that having first designed a left to right format in the two drawings, he then shifted in this brilliant oil sketch to a right to left format.

While the two careful preliminary drawings reveal what Anthony Clark characterized as Camuccini's "vigorous force of organization,"⁹ this oil sketch is remarkable for its immediacy, spontaneity, and luminous brilliance. As Roberta Olson has observed, "Camuccini's historical canvases reflect a fine chromatic sensibility derived from the eighteenth century masters,"¹⁰ and that is certainly true in this case, especially in the figure of the hero in his golden armor and pink cape dramatically set against a cloud of smoke (fig. 8).

¹ Ulrich Hiesinger, "The Paintings of Vincenzo Camuccini, 1771-1844," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 60, no. 2, June 1978, p. 297.

² *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 301 and 303.

⁴ Vercelli, Casa d'Aste, Meeting Art, November 7, 2015, no. 383.

⁵ See *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 63, no. 2, Fall 2005, p. 25.

⁶ Signed drawing sold Christie's, London, November 26, 1973, no. 141; and unsigned drawing exhibited in *Vincenzo Camuccini: Bozzetti e Disegni dallo Studio dell'Artista*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, 1978, pp. 74-75, no. 158.

⁷ See *Camuccini*, Rome, 1978, p. 74.

⁸ Titus Livius, *The History of Rome*, vol. 4, book 26, chapter 21.

⁹ Anthony Clark in *The Age of Canova: An Exhibition of the Neo-Classical*, RISD, Providence, 1957, p. 3.

¹⁰ See Roberta Olson in *Italian 19th Century Drawings & Watercolors An Album*, Shepherd Gallery, New York, 1976, under cat. no. 185.