



**GAETANO GANDOLFI (Bologna 1734 - Bologna 1802)**

## **The Birth of Venus**

oil on canvas

58 x 66 7/8 in. (147.3 x 169.7 cm.)

This magnificent canvas, a masterpiece of compositional choreography, was first unveiled to the public in Donatella Biagi Maino's 2002 exhibition in Cento, Gaetano e Ubaldo Gandolfi: opere scelte. Though previously known to scholars only through black-and-white photographs, *The Birth of Venus* has for decades been recorded as a magnificent example of Gaetano's mature work, and its elaborate, beautifully orchestrated composition hailed as a defining achievement of the dramatic and emotionally complex images for which the brilliant draftsman has become renowned. Its pendant, *Diana and Callisto*, was rediscovered in 2009 and sold to a private collector in New York.

The ex-Christie's canvas illustrates the tragic story of the chaste and vengeful goddess of the hunt, Diana, as she discovers the illicit affair between Callisto, one of her most devoted companions, and the god Jupiter, and banishes the nymph to exile upon discovering her swollen, pregnant belly. The present work, therefore, acts as a somewhat more buoyant counterpart, as *The Birth of Venus* is a subject which proclaims the triumph of love. The 'Venus Anadyomene', or 'Venus Rising from the Sea' is one of the most iconic representations of the goddess, said to have originated in a much-admired painting by the Greek artist Apelles that is described in Pliny's *Natural History*. According to the Greek poet Hesiod, Venus was born as a fully grown woman who emerged from the sea, which perpetually renewed her virginity, and was borne to shore on a scallop shell. In the present composition, Gandolfi has envisioned the famous antique subject in an exuberant rococo environment: chubby putti tumble over themselves with excitement; twisting, serpentine sea monsters emerge from the white-capped waves; and the contorted muscular bodies of exultant river gods, who lift the goddess high overhead and trumpet her arrival before the viewer, drift in and out of the evening light that bathes the scene, giving the composition great vitality of movement and depth. At upper left, a blindfolded Cupid – whose mask serves as a reminder that, as Shakespeare wrote, "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind," (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) – grasps the goddess' arm, his bow and heart-inflaming arrows at the ready. Behind him, drifting towards the scene on a cloud, are the Three Graces – Aglaia, Euphrosyne and Thalia, the three daughters of Zeus and the sea nymph Euronyme, who served as the handmaidens of Venus. Respectively, they also represent the three phases of love: Beauty, Desire, and Fulfillment.

Although the present canvas was only rediscovered in the 21st century, its appreciation in scholarship had begun decades before with the 1977 reemergence on the London art market of two exquisite, highly finished oil sketches which are clearly preparatory to the present work and its pendant. Carlo Volpe first published the sketches in 1979, and recognized the association between them and the

paintings described by Gaetano's son, Mauro Gandolfi (1764-1834), in a letter to his friend in Bologna, Luigi Sedazzi. The letter, dated 21 December 1819, implores Mauro's correspondent to track down and purchase two red chalk drawings by his father Gaetano, which are identified by their subject matter: '...fare ogni diligente ricerca, se esistono tuttora e presso di chi si trovino, due disegni di mio Padre all'apis rosso e gesso, rappresentanti l'uno il bagno di Diana, l'altro la nascita di Venere e Amore posti in una conchiglia sostenuta da vari Tritoni, con sul davanti degli amoretti che scherzano coi delphini. Servirono cotesti disegni a de quadri che dipinse per un Moscovita'. ('...make every diligent inquiry as to whether there still exist, and with whom they might be found, two drawings by my father in red and white chalk, one depicting the bath of Diana, the other the birth of Venus and Cupid situated on a shell held up by various Tritons, with little cupids frolicking with dolphins. They had served as models for two paintings that he made for a Moscovite.') There can be no question that this remarkable letter refers to the preparations for the present work and its companion, both 'made for a Moscovite'. It is also notable that, in his description, Mauro gives a much more detailed and complete account of the Birth of Venus composition, which must have held some particular significance or interest for him.

In 1993, one of the compositional drawings for which Mauro Gandolfi had been searching was discovered in a Paris collection. While clearly preparatory to the present work, the artist reinvented several elements of the composition in his final design, including the position of Venus' body at center, which moves from a more modest pose in the red chalk drawing to a bolder, more triumphant orientation in the finished canvas. The compositional study for Diana and Callisto remains lost, but two elegant charcoal studies for several of the figures survive (Foundation Ratjen, Vaduz, Lichtenstein; and National Gallery of Art, Washington).

The mysterious 'Moscovite' patron described in Mauro's letter remains enigmatic, but Donatella Biagi Maino has ingeniously proposed his identification with Prince Nikolai Borisovich Yusupov (1751-1831, one of the biggest landowners in Russia and the sole heir to an immense fortune, as well as the preeminent collector of European art in his country at the end of the 18th century. Much of Yusupov's collection is now divided between the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, and the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, for which he served as director. Yusupov was a Senator, Minister of State Properties, and Director of the Imperial Theaters, and served under Catherine the Great, Paul I, and Alexander I as a private councilor and diplomat. Well-disposed to the emerging neoclassical taste in French and Italian painting after his Grand Tour (1774-1777), which included a visit to Versailles where he met King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, Yusupov acquired pictures by Greuze, Vernet, Vigée Lebrun, Boilly and Hubert Robert. He also commissioned a great Cupid and Psyche from Antonio Canova and a grand painting of Sappho, Phaon and Cupid from Jacques-Louis David (both now Hermitage, St. Petersburg). In the mid-1780s, Yusupov served as Minister of State to the King of Sardinia, a diplomatic post based in Turin, during which time he acquired numerous works by artists such as Angelika Kauffman, Anton von Maron, and Pompeo Batoni, to name a few.

Although he is not documented as having traveled to Bologna, in 1787 Yusupov was elected an Honorary member of the city's Accademia Clementina, the august body where Gaetano Gandolfi had studied art and was still a revered member, making likely some sort of contact between the two men. Indeed, in his 1805 record of the Yusupov collection (St. Petersburg am Ende seines ersten Jahrhunderts, II), Heinrich Christoph von Reimers describes, along with works by artists from Raphael to Rembrandt, a long gallery featuring works by Titian, Francesco Furino, and Gandolfi (p. 374: 'Aus dem Saal tritt man in eine lange Gallerie, wo sich ausser drei Gemälden von Tiziano, Gandolfi und Furino'). A century later, in 1901, an inventory of the Yusupov collection records a "Répos de Diane" and a "Naissance et triomphe de Vénus" by Boucher (Galerie des peintres de S.A. Le Prince Youssoupoff à Saint-Pétersbourg, p. 5). Photo archives in the Documentation of the Louvre, discovered in the 1980s by Pierre Rosenberg, reveal that both the present work and its pendant were once considered to be by the French history painter Louis Jean François Lagrenée. After they were separated, the present Triumph of Venus bore an attribution to Boucher, which it retained while in the private collection of which it is currently a part (D. Biagi Maino, 2001, loc. cit.). These tantalizing clues make the hypothesis about the Yusupov provenance for both Diana and Callisto and The Triumph of Venus – even if their correct attribution was misplaced over the course of a century – ever more convincing.

A dating for these grand canvases in the late 1780s, in accordance with the period during which Gandolfi and Yusupov may have come into contact with one another, also corresponds with Biagi

Maino's observation that the animus for the present work and its pendant seems to have been filtered through the artist's observation of the canvases of Sebastiano Ricci. In particular, Ricci's series of imposing, large-scale decorations painted for Lord Burlington (c. 1712-1716) showing Diana and her Nymphs and The Triumph of Galatea – which would certainly have been studied by Gaetano on his visit to Burlington House during a trip to London in 1787 – appear to be a direct source of inspiration. The solidity of form, surface polish, and gravity of emotion of both the present work and its pendant also exemplify Gaetano's painting during this period, while the bright coloring, academic proficiency, and suave execution all accord with the taste for neoclassical pictures in the 1780s.

### **Provenance:**

Commissioned by and unidentified collector, Moscow, possibly Prince Nicolay Borisovich Yusupov (1750-1831), Archangelskoe (near Moscow), Russia, after 1787.  
Private collection, Kromar, Lithuania, early 20th century, as Louis Jean François Lagrenée, according to photographs in the archives of the Documentation du Louvre;  
Private collection, Brussels, by 2002;  
Private European collector

### **Exhibitions**

Cento, Ferrara, Auditorium di San Lorenzo, Gaetano e Ubaldo Gandolfi: opere scelte, 13 April-16 June 2002, no. 32, catalogue by D. Biagi Maino.

### **Literature:**

- D. Biagi Maino, 'La pittura Emilia Romagna nella secondo metà del Settecento', S. Barozzi et. al., eds., *La pittura in Italia: Il Settecento*, Milan, 1990, II, p. 728.
- M. Cazort, *Bella Pittura: The Art of the Gandolfi*, exhibition catalogue, Ottawa, 1993, pp. 65, under no. 42.
- D. Biagi Maino, *Gaetano Gandolfi*, Turin, 1995, p. 376, no. 121.
- D. Biagi Maino, 'Gandolfi, Gaetano' in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani.... LII*, Rome, 1999.
- D. Biagi Maino, 'Prolegomeni al classicismo accademico tra Bologna e Roma', E. Borsellino and V. Casale, eds., *"il tempio del vero gusto": La pittura del Settecento romano e la sua diffusione a Venezia e a Napoli*, Florence, 2001, p. 202, no. 1.
- D. Biagi Maino, ed., *Gaetano e Ubaldo Gandolfi: Opere scelte*, exhibition catalogue, Cento, 2002, pp. 37, 96, no. 32.
- D. Biagi Maino, 'Gaetano Gandolfi', D. Benati, ed., *Il fascino dell'arte emiliana: dipinti e disegni dal XVI al XIX secolo*, exhibition catalogue, Bologna, 2008, pp. 116-118, under nos. 28 and 29.

### **Artist description:**