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FELICE PALMA

(Massa di Lunigiana 1583 – 1625)

*CHRIST BEFORE HIS
BAPTISM IN THE RIVER JORDAN*

Carrara marble

height 90.5 cm.;

base 21.2 x 22.5 cm.

Provenance

Müller collection, Strasbourg, from *circa* 1918 – 1952;
Brautigam collection, Strasbourg, from 1952 – 1970s;
Private collection, The Netherlands, from the 1970s until the present.

Literature

C. Casini, in C. Andrei, N. Ciarlo, F. Federici, C. Casini and S. Ragni (eds), *Felice Palma, Massa 1583–1625. L'Oro Bianco. Straordinari dimenticati*, vol. 8, Fosdinovo 2024, p. 51, reproduced pp. 148–54.

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This exceedingly rare sculpture by Felice Palma has only very recently become known to scholars, and as such represents a significant addition to the sculptor's small but prestigious *œuvre*. Apart from an initial period of training in Venice, Palma spent his entire career in his native Tuscany, but it is his combination of Venetian and Florentine styles, along with a profound spirituality, that makes his work so original and successful. Palma of course also looked to the Antique, the earlier sculptors of the Trecento in Pisa, as well as Andrea del Verrocchio (1435-88) in Florence, and was inevitably inspired by the great Giambologna (1529-1608), whose work bridged the transition from the High Renaissance to late Mannerism. This marble figure of Christ, on the point of receiving His Baptism in the River Jordan, dating to *circa* 1618, reflects this range of influences. It relates to a bronze statuette of Christ, which Palma created, along with a *Saint John the Baptist*, between 1618-21 for the holy water fonts either side of the main nave of Pisa Cathedral.

Palma, the son of Iacopo di Leonardo, a dealer in marble, was taught to sculpt bronze and marble in the workshop of the Paduan sculptor Tiziano Aspetti II (1557/59-1606) in Venice and Padua, probably from as early as 1599. Aspetti and Palma returned to Tuscany in 1604 and found favour with the Berzighelli family, leading figures in the trade and processing of Apuan marble, in Pisa (which was probably a more favourable environment than Florence, where Giambologna and his workshop dominated); indeed, upon Aspetti's sudden death in 1606, Cosimo Berzighelli commissioned Palma to sculpt his late master's funerary bust to surmount his tomb in the Convento del Carmine, Pisa. The Berzighelli family was related to the prominent Tuscan Usimbardi family, who in turn were closely linked with the Medici. Palma's early work in Pisa attracted the attention of Cosimo II de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, who had seen the figures of two angels (now untraced), which Palma had produced for the church of S. Nicola. From 1610 Palma became involved in commissions for Cristina of Lorraine and Maria Maddalena of Austria, the respective wives of Grand Dukes Ferdinand I and Cosimo II, and finally moved to Florence between 1613 and 1614.

While in Florence Palma completed for Cosimo II the colossal marble statue of *Jupiter Hurling a Thunderbolt* (1614; today on a plinth in the Villa Poggio Imperiale, Florence, but originally intended for the Isola di Venere in the Boboli Gardens; fig. 1), which takes Giambologna's *Hercules with a club* (Museo Nazionale, Bargello, Florence) as its model for the pose. This beautiful work, both muscular and graceful, led to Palma's election as consul of the Florentine Accademia del Disegno in 1623, having been introduced to the institution in 1614 by the famed sculptor Pietro Tacca (1577-1640),

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who described Palma as ‘a young sculptor of great merit.’¹ Palma was also employed in Florence by Lorenzo Usimbardi (1547-1636), brother-in-law of Camillo Berzighelli and a former grand-ducal secretary, sculpting for him a life-size bronze Crucifix, as well as marble portrait busts of several important family members, for the family chapel in the Basilica of Santa Trinita (1614-15). Thanks to these commissions and his connections with the Medici, Palma was also engaged by the powerful Guidi family of Volterra to execute marble busts for the family funerary chapel in the church of San Francesco, but his untimely death, just as his career was in its ascendancy, meant that these were left incomplete. Nevertheless, Palma’s legacy is found throughout Tuscany: in Massa, Florence, Pisa, Pietrasanta, Monsummano Terme, Colle Val d’Elsa and Volterra.

This sculpture of Christ relates to one of the two bronze statuettes that were commissioned for the holy water stoups either side of the main nave of Pisa Cathedral, which had only reopened for worship a few months before Palma had returned to the city as a young man, in October 1603, following its restoration after a disastrous fire in October 1595. From 1616 to 1634 the *Operaio della Primaziale* of the cathedral was one Curzio Cevoli, who embarked on a series of artistic commissions to recover and renew the sculptural and pictorial contents of the building. In 1618 he engaged ‘Felice Palma scultore in Firenze’ to provide bronzes of *Saint John the Baptist* and *Christ* in the centre of the two new holy water fonts, which were sculpted out of red Campiglia marble by Bastiano Bitozzi, between 1616-17; the statuettes were placed on two simple marble bases made by Francesco Cioli, which are inscribed with the date 1621, and mention Grand Duke Cosimo II, Archbishop Giuliano de’ Medici, and Ceuli himself (figs 2 and 3). The work was estimated at 450 *scudi* and was supported by Grand Duchess Cristina of Lorraine and the Grand Ducal secretary, Lorenzo Usimbardi. Records show that Palma was paid on 19 April 1622, after the work had been completed the previous year.²

Christ appears in the act of receiving the sacrament, with his arms crossed over his chest, holding up the drapery that covers half of his body, while the Baptist is captured mid-motion as he advances with a cup of water in his right hand, and the cross in his left hand. The figures reflect the way Palma integrated a range of influences in his work – although the figures do not contain the more exaggerated torsion of Giambologna’s late Mannerist works, nor are they distinctly classical – they are naturalistically modelled, with an emphasis on the musculature defined by the poses in which they are captured, in line with the sensibilities of the nascent Baroque. Claudio Casini hypothesises that the present sculpture, formed from Carrara marble,

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may have preceded the bronze statuettes.³ The figure appears a little stockier than the bronze *Christ*, and does not include a halo, though it does incorporate the broken trunk of a palm tree, which acts both as a support for the figure, and also perhaps as an allusion to the identity of the sculptor.

In this marble version, Palma is able to render the Redeemer's complexion, His curly locks of hair, and the deceptively light folds of the drapery with both levity and deep expression, perhaps even more than in the bronze. Palma appears to have reused the model for Christ, with His evenly parted hair either side of a rather elongated face, from the *Crucifix* that he made in 1617 for the Usimbardi chapel in Santa Trinita (fig. 4), mentioned above. Though relatively modest in scale, this sculpture of refined composure nevertheless conveys not only Palma's profound technical skill but his deep religious sensibility, clues to which may also be found in the will he drew up a few days before his death on 13 August 1625, including an allowance for alms and specifications for his burial, which reflect the strength of his own faith.⁴ Palma's will is also instructive in demonstrating the way in which the sculptor executed several versions of the same subject in different materials, including models in wax, terracotta, plaster and papier-mâché, some of which he bequeathed to fellow artists and friends.⁵ Another example of an alternative sculpture in marble is the *Saint John the Baptist*, recorded in an English private collection, which is in a different pose from the Pisan bronze, but of a similar size.⁶

The artistic merit of the celebrated bronzes in Pisa Cathedral is attested to by the two electrotype copies of the figures, made by Messrs Giovanni Franchi & Son, London, in *circa* 1866, today in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, where they were in the past mistaken as replicas of works by Giambologna (fig. 5).⁷

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Fig. 1 Felice Palma, *Jupiter Hurling a Thunderbolt*, 1614. Villa Poggio Imperiale, Florence

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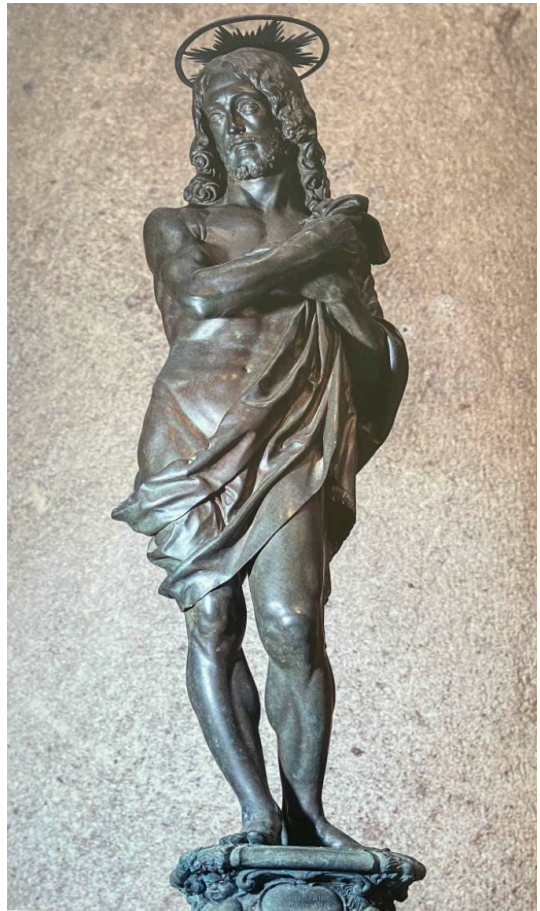
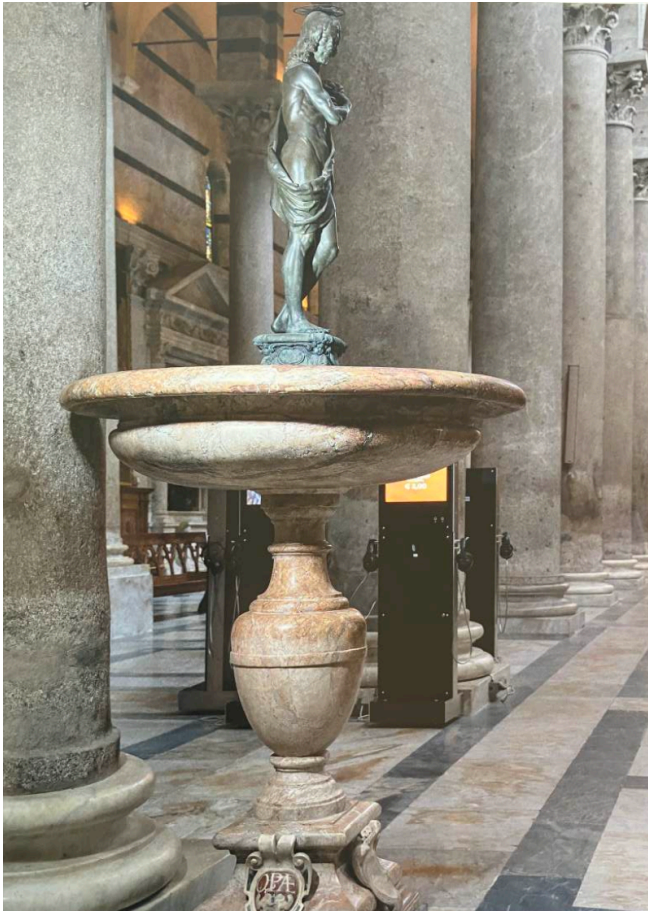


Fig. 2 Felice Palma, *Christ before His Baptism in the River Jordan*, 1618-21. Cathedral of Pisa

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Fig. 3 Felice Palma, *Saint John the Baptist*, 1618-21. Cathedral of Pisa

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Fig. 4 Felice Palma, *Crucifix*, 1617. Basilica of Santa Trinità, Florence.

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Fig. 5 Felice Palma, *Saint John the Baptist and Christ*, sculpted 1618-21, cast circa 1866.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

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Footnotes

¹ L. Migliaccio, F. Paliaga, 'Nuovi Studi su Felice Palma e note sull'attività Toscana di Tiziano Aspetti', in *Paragone*, vol. XLI, nos 479/481, 1990, p. 26.

² L. Tanfani Centofanti, *Notizie di artisti tratte dai documenti pisani*, Pisa 1897, pp. 196-97.

³ C. Casini, in Casini 2024, p. 51.

⁴ C. Andrei, in Casini 2024, p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ A. Parronchi, 'Felice Palma. Nascita del Barocco nella scultura toscana', in *Festschrift Luitpold Dussler. 28 Studien zur Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte*, Munich 1972, pp. 275-98.

⁷ Electrotype copper, both 105.5 x 29.5 cm., both inscribed: *FEL.PARMA SCVL*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. nos REPRO.1866-20 and REPRO.1866-21.