

Adriaen de Vries

‘The Most Famous Modeller-Artist of All’

‘A sculptor has come from Florence, with whom we have negotiated for months and who is now working very contentedly... He is a Dutchman of thirty years old. ... Please God he shall meet our expectations.’ The sculptor spoken of with such great anticipation in this 1586 letter is Adriaen de Vries (1556-1626). At the time he had been in the service of Pompeo Leoni in Milan for just one week. Leoni ran one of the largest sculpture workshops in Europe. He had engaged De Vries to work on one of the most prestigious sculpture projects of the era: the high altar for the Escorial, King Philip II’s palace near Madrid. De Vries made three of the fifteen life-sized bronze statues that adorn the high altar. At that time he had already been in Italy for five years or so. In about 1580 we find him in Florence, where he gained his first experience of work in the service of Giambologna (Jean de Boulogne), who originated from what is now French Flanders and was a celebrated sculptor to the Medici. The work of Giambologna and Leoni played a decisive role in the successful career De Vries could look forward to.

Adriaen de Vries was born in The Hague, the son of a prosperous pharmacist. He must have left his native country for Italy sometime around 1575-1580. For an ambitious artist it was of great importance to spend time studying in the birthplace of the Renaissance: it considerably improved his career prospects and provided opportunities to join the service of a foreign ruler. In the sixteenth century, a conspicuously large number of artists from the Netherlands expressed this ambition; in Italy these ‘northern foreigners’ were for convenience’s sake called *fiamminghi* (Flemings), a collective name for everyone from the Low Countries. This nickname was also applied to De Vries, even though he signed his name proudly with the Latin appendage *Hagien-sis Batavus* (Hollander from The Hague).

De Vries’s great talent did not go unnoticed. Via Turin, where he obtained his first independent post



Adriaen de Vries, *Bacchus Discovering Ariadne on Naxos*, Prague, c. 1611, bronze © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

as court sculptor to Duke Carlo Emanuele I of Savoy, he ended up at the court of Emperor Rudolf II in Prague in 1589. The Prague court was the absolute cultural hotspot north of the Alps at that time and the eccentric emperor was the most important Maecenas of his day. Rudolf had brought many leading artists together there, often originating from the Netherlands, but he had so far lacked a first-rate sculptor at his court. De Vries immediately handed over his visiting card in the form of two finely-crafted monumental statues with which he entirely lived up to his reputation as a prominent sculptor of bronze. With his *Mercury Abducting Psyche* (1593), which is now in the Louvre in Paris, he demonstrated that he could make two figures ‘float in the air’ and offer a fine outline from every angle.

Apart from an interval of several years in Rome and Augsburg (1594-1601) - where he made two fountains which can still be seen there - Adriaen de

Vries spent the rest of his life in Prague. The fountains in Augsburg made a substantial contribution to his fame: they led the Danish King Christian IV to commission a fountain too, in 1613, for the forecourt of his Frederiksborg Castle. However, the bronze sculptures of this watery monument dedicated to Neptune, the god of the sea, were plundered by the Swedes as early as 1659. One of them, a *Triton* that originally spouted water from the edge of the basin, is now in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. After this intermezzo in Augsburg, De Vries returned to Prague. From then on he produced a lot of work for Rudolf's collections - partly to glo-



rify imperial power, partly as works of art in their own right: portraits and allegories, and also works of an erotic-mythological nature. The relief entitled *Bacchus Discovering Ariadne on Naxos*, which must have been made for the emperor in about 1611, is typical of this sensually stimulating 'Rudolfian' art. We see the athletic Bacchus dashing at full speed into the bedroom of the gracefully slumbering Ariadne under the watchful eye of a small Amor. It is not hard to guess what follows...

After the death of Rudolf II in 1612, Prague soon lost its status as the capital of European culture, but this did no harm to De Vries's career. On the contrary, the last ten years of his life saw the creation of some of his most radical works; they are characterised by an increasingly sketchy and virtuosic style of modelling and by extremely dynamic compositions. The best illustration of this is the 1626 *Bacchant* - De Vries's last work - recently acquired by the Rijksmuseum. This bronze is the masterly conclusion to a majestic oeuvre and confirms Adriaen de Vries's reputation as 'the most famous modeller-artist of all', as he was justifiably labelled in 1620.

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Translated by Gregory Ball

Adriaen de Vries, *Triton*, Prague, c. 1615-1618, bronze
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