A detailed marble sculpture of Hercules wrestling the Nemean Lion. Hercules is shown in a powerful, muscular physique, leaning forward with his right arm extended, grasping the lion's mane. The lion's head is visible in the lower foreground, with its mouth open and teeth bared. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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A sculptor close to Cristofano Stati

Hercules and the Nemean Lion











A sculptor close
to Cristofano Stati
(Bracciano, 1556 – Rome, 1619)

Hercules and the Nemean Lion

first quarter of the 17th century
sculpture group in Carrara marble

120 x 60 x 35 cm.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: M.C. Fabbri, *Gherardini, Nasini e altri artisti in palazzo Del Chiaro a Firenze*, in “Nuovi studi”, III, 6, 1998, pp. 159-182, esp. p. 180 note 68 (attributed to the school of Foggini);

S. Bellesi, M. Visonà, *Giovacchino Fortini. Scultura, architettura, decorazione e committenza a Firenze al tempo degli ultimi Medici*, 2 vols., Florence 2008, I, pp. 128 fig. 11, 129, 132 note 56 (attributed by M. Visonà to Isidoro Franchi).

1. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.

This surprisingly dynamic sculpture comes from Palazzo Tolomei-Biffi (formerly Del Chiaro) in Florence and was initially attributed to the school of Giovan Battista Foggini (1652 – 1725), then to Isidoro Franchi (recorded 1683 – †1719), but as we shall see below, both these attributions must be rejected in favour of a date in the early 17th century (fig. 1).

The sculpture depicts a male figure struggling with a lion. The figure is likely to be Hercules, but may also be Samson. In the absence of any other iconographical evidence, and in view of the fact that it shows the moment in which the hero tears apart the beast’s mouth, it is impos-



2. 1st century AD with subsequent restorations.
Oxford, Ashmolean Museum.

3. II-III century AD with subsequent restorations.
Saint Petersburg, The Hermitage State Museum.

4. II century AD. Rome, Torlonia Collection.

sible to be any more definite than that. In any event, its collecting history (discussed below) suggests that in the 18th century it was identified as Hercules, and so that is what we shall call it from now on in this essay.

This iconographical ambiguity first developed in the context of the Italian Renaissance where, as has been discussed by others,¹ the depiction of the lion being slain not by strangling but by having its jaws torn apart is likely to have been inspired by the Old Testament story of Samson slaying a lion. Antonio del Pollaiuolo was probably the first to hint at this hybrid situation in his three canvases depicting the *Labours*

of Hercules painted for the Medici Palace in Via Larga c. 1460, now lost but described by Giorgio Vasari. According to Vasari, in the Medici painting, Hercules “setting his teeth and extending his arms, and grasping the Lion’s jaws with both his hands, is opening them and rending them asunder by main force, although the beast is tearing his arms grievously with its claws in self-defence”.² This description of Pollaiuolo’s lost painting, dwelling as it does on the lion’s jaw being broken and its claws scratching Hercules’s arms, accurately reflects the statue under discussion in this essay, thus it may well testify to an echo of that composition, given that, as we shall see, it was probably carved in Florence at a time when Pollaiuolo’s paintings were still visible (until at least the late 16th century).³ Yet it is also possible that Pollaiuolo may have based his own work on a Classical composition, considering that he was so strongly influenced by antiquarian

1 H. Economopoulos, *La forza e l’ingegno. Stefano Maderno e il mito di Ercole nella scultura tra Cinque e Seicento*, Rome 2020, p. 161.

2 G. Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori, nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, 6 vols., Florence 1966-1997, III [1971], p. 505.

3 For the Pollaiuolo cycle in Palazzo Medici, see A. Wright, *The Pollaiuolo Brothers. The Arts of Florence and Rome*, New Haven, London 2005, pp. 75-86.

5. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.





6. Isidoro Franchi, *Hercules Resting*, c. 1695-1698.

culture. In this connection, it is worth pointing out that a composition akin to this sculpture, with the lion standing and scratching Hercules's right arm, is found in a number of ancient Roman sculptures,⁴ an analogy that points to the sculptor's likely familiarity with such a prototype (figs. 2-4).

In Palazzo Del Chiaro, *Hercules and the Lion* was paired with a later *Hercules Resting* which can be attributed to Isidoro Franchi (figs. 5-7). As we shall see below, the two statues were positioned on the main staircase connecting the courtyard to the *piano nobile* in Palazzo Del Chiaro following Leon Battista Del Chiaro's marriage to Maria

Ugolini in May 1695, and it is highly likely to have been on that occasion that *Hercules and the Lion* was 'modernised' so that it could be paired with *Hercules Resting*. A separate piece of marble representing an anemone, clearly carved in the late 17th century, was added to it at the height of the beast's genitals, and the base was reworked at the front (fig. 5). The result of this latter reworking shows so strong an affinity in the use of the toothed-end gradine chisel with the base of *Hercules Resting* that one is tempted to argue that the 'modernisation' (with the addition of the anemone) must have been performed by the same sculptor (figs. 8-9).

⁴ The main exemplars in W. Felten, in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)*. V.1, Zurich, Munich 1990, pp. 16-34, esp. pp. 10 cats. 1723, 1725, II cat. 1730, 14 cat. 1747, 28 cats. 1935, 1936, 33 and related figs. in vol. V.2.

7. View of the main staircase connecting the courtyard to the *piano nobile* in Palazzo Del Chiaro with the sculptures still in their niches.





8. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*. In this image, the passage with the late 17th-century reworking (on the left), and the original portion (on the right).

The Palazzo Del Chiaro *Hercules* is a grandiose sculpture in Carrara marble, two-thirds life-size and carved from a single block. The mythological hero is portrayed in a bold and *virtuoso* pose designed to be viewed from all round, the view from the rear showing how, before perfecting it, the artist had studied masterpieces of Florentine Renaissance sculptur, in particular Bertoldo di Giovanni's *Battle* (c. 1480; Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello; figs. 10-11) from which Michelangelo also drew the inspiration for his now lost cartoon for the *Battle of Cascina* commissioned in 1504.⁵ The astonishing nature of the composition in question is revealed in the endless variety of views it offers, there being no perspective leaving the observer unsatisfied or failing to offer new information. Its strongest point is the diagonal connecting the head of the hero to that of the lion and which is itself connected to another diagonal ending at the hero's right foot. The human and the beast are engaged in an extremely tough



9. Isidoro Franchi, *Hercules Resting*, c. 1695-1698. The conduction of the base is analogous to the part reworked at the end of the 17 century for the uniformity in view of the positioning in the niches of the staircase.

struggle, and the moment the sculptor captures is the exact instant in which the lion succumbs to Hercules, grimacing as he tears the beast's mouth apart. One is struck by the naturalistic rendering of every detail and the sculptor's skill in imparting elasticity to his figures, a flexibility visible not only in their poses but also in such wonderful details as the hero's foot flexing on the hard rock as though it were real flesh in order to serve as a pivot and to bolster the strength of his action. The surfaces are also extraordinarily varied. The very smooth and waxy skin allowing us a glimpse of Hercules's meticulously studied anatomy (the right calf contracting, the left relaxing) contrasts with the many-sided rock and its sharp surfaces, just as the lion's body is differentiated and carved using a gradine chisel in order to convey the texture of its fur.

From a compositional standpoint, the strongest and most unequivocal comparison for the group is with Cristofano Stati's *Samson and the Lion*

5 For these similarities, see F. Caglioti, *Bertoldo's place between Donatello and Michelangelo*, in *Bertoldo di Giovanni. The renaissance of sculpture in Medici Florence*, exhibition catalogue (New York, The Frick Collection, 18 September 2019 – 12 January 2019), ed. A. Ng, A.J. Noelle, X.F. Salamón, New York, Lewes 2019, pp. 80-107, esp. pp. 103, 105 figs. 54-55.



now in the Art Institute of Chicago (signed and dated 1607);⁶ the grandiose group in Chicago could also be the object of the same iconograph-

ical ambiguity, were it not for the history of its commissioning and the sources making it very clear from the outset that in this instance we are

6 For this work, see I. Wardropper, *Cristoforo Stati's Samson and the Lion. Florentine style and spanish patronage*, in "Apollo", CL, 451, 1999, pp. 30-37; C. Avery, *Studies in Italian sculpture*, London 2001, pp. 315-338 essay XV entitled *Cristoforo Stati of Bracciano and Giambologna: 'figure nude con sì bell'arte condotte (Baglione) - New discoveries*; S. Walker Schort, *The Duke of Lerma's Palace in Madrid. A reconstruction of the original setting for Cristoforo Stati's Samson and the Lion*, in "Apollo", CLIV, 474, 2001, pp. 11-21; M.M. Estella, *Adiciones y rectificaciones a noticias sobre esculturas italianas en España*, in "Archivo español de arte", LXXXI, 321, 2008, pp. 17-30, esp. pp. 23-24; F. Loffredo, *La vasca del Sansone del Giambologna e il Tritone di Battista Lorenzi in un'inedita storia di duplicati (con una nota sul Miseno di Stoldo per la villa dei Corsi)*, in "Saggi e memorie di storia dell'arte", 36, 2012 (though in fact 2013), pp. 57-114, esp. pp. 69, 74-75; K. Helmstutler Di Dio, *Sculpted diplomacy: state gifts of sculpture from Italy to Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, in *L'arte del dono. Scambi artistici e diplomazia tra Italia e Spagna, 1550-1650*, conference proceedings (Rome, Bibliotheca Hertziana, 14-15 January 2008), ed. M. von Bernstorff, S. Kubersky-Piredda, Cinisello Balsamo 2013, pp. 51-65, esp. p. 59; C. Pizzorusso, *Profitti e perdite di Battista Lorenzi e Cristofano Stati*, in "Studi di scultura. Età moderna e contemporanea", 2, 2020, pp. 18-25, esp. p. 17. Further bibliography: <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/146875/samson-and-the-lion>. My gratitude to Rebecca Long (Art Institute of Chicago) for her assistance in unearthing photographic material relating to the work.



10. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.



11. Bertoldo di Giovanni, *Battle*, c. 1480.. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.



12. and 14. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean*

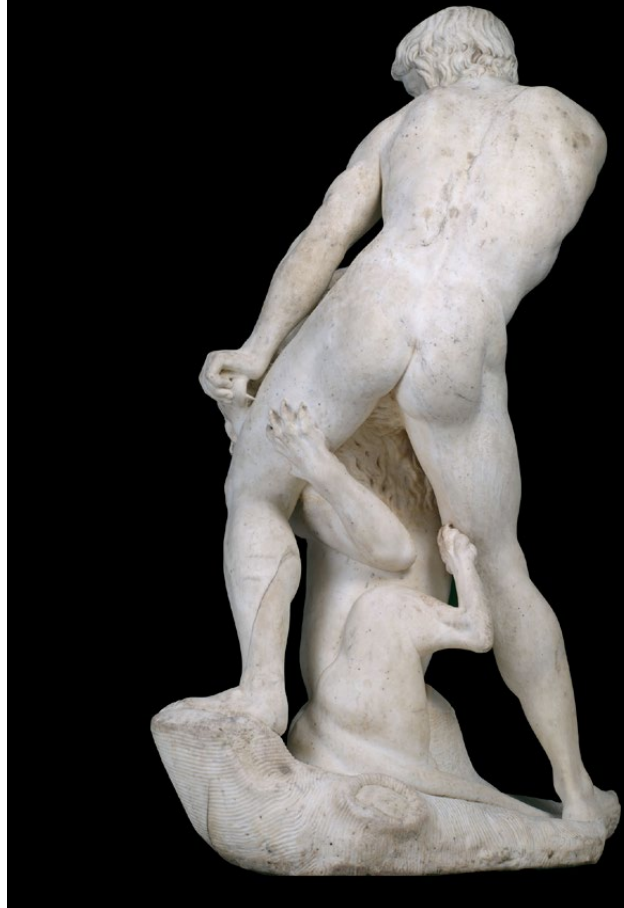


13. and 15. Cristofano Stati, *Samson and the Lion*. Chicago, Art Institute.

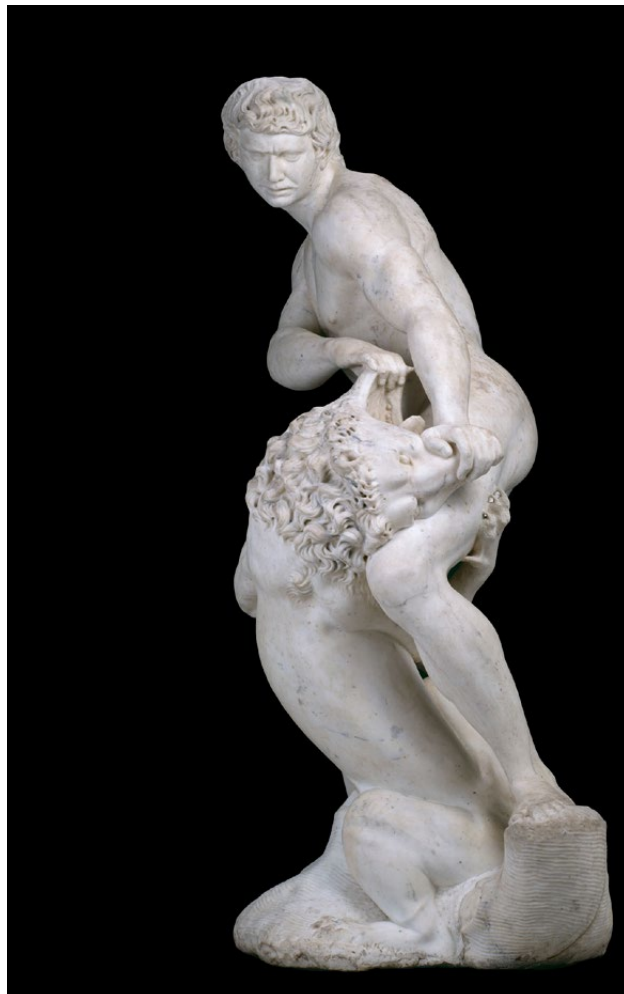




16. and 18. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean*



17. and 19. Cristofano Stati, *Samson and the Lion*. Chicago, Art Institute.







looking at the biblical rather than the mythological hero. The sinuous composition of our *Hercules* and of the Chicago *Samson* is virtually identical, and the figure's anatomy, muscular and tonic yet not heroic and on the short side in terms of its proportions, is remarkably similar (figs. 12-19).



20. After Giambologna, *Hercules and the Lion*, 1581 (the model). Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello.

23. Giovanni Caccini, *Hercules and the Centaur*. Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

21. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.

22. Cristofano Stati, *Samson and the Lion*, 1605-1607. Chicago, Art Institute.



Hercules and Samson tear open the lion's mouth with the same movement of their arms and legs, and even the animal's posture is practically identical, the sole difference being that in the work under discussion here the beast adopts a more combative pose, with its left paw on the figure's right arm in an effort to loosen the grip of his hands on its mouth – a solution derived from the Classical prototype, as we have seen. Stati carved the Chicago *Samson* between 1605 and 1607 for the Duke of Lerna's garden in Madrid, as a companion piece to Giambologna's *Samson and the Philistine* (1560-2), which was despatched to Spain in 1601 (now in the V&A in London). The connection with this work by Giambologna is far from coincidental and in the course of Stati's career in Flor-

ence, corresponding to his formative and mature years (1583 – 1607), there were several points of similarity between the two sculptors.⁷ From that viewpoint, both the composition of the Chicago *Samson* (fig. 22) and that of our group (fig. 21) are closely linked to Giambologna's model of *Hercules and the Lion*, which Stati would have been able to admire in its autograph silver version (1581; known from later replicas; fig. 20) which was in the Uffizi when Stati was practising as a restorer there in 1583–4⁸, yet by comparison with Gi-

ambologna's group, Stati exacerbates the counterpoise with the hero's left foot pressing on the rock. It is also worth pointing out that Giovanni Caccini, with whom Stati is recorded as working in his restoration of the Classical sculptures in the Uffizi Gallery, also experimented, when restoring *Hercules and the Centaur* c. 1595⁹ (figs. 23, 26), with a strongly twisting dynamic pose which drew its inspiration from Giambologna and which must have influenced Stati's *Samson* (and thus, by extension, also his *Hercules and the Lion* [figs. 24–25]).

7 For Stati, his career in Florence and the similarities with Giambologna, see C. Avery, *Studies...* op. cit. (note 6), pp. 315–338; V. Saladino, "E intanto imparano quella bella maniera": gusto e fantasia nel restauro dei marmi antichi per il giardino di Boboli (1587–1670), in *I granduchi di Toscana e l'antico. Acquisti, restauri, allestimenti*, Florence 2008, pp. 1–129, esp. pp. 5, 18 note 148, 27; D. Pegazzano, *Stati, Cristoforo*, in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, 94, Rome 2019, pp. 57–60 (with previous bibliography).

24. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.

25. Cristofano Stati, *Samson and the Lion*, 1605–1607. Chicago, Art Institute.

26. Giovanni Caccini, *Hercules and the Centaur*. Florence, Uffizi Gallery.



8 D. Pegazzano, in *Magnificenza alla corte dei Medici. Arte a Firenze alla fine del Cinquecento*, exhibition catalogue (Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Museo degli Argenti, 24 September 1997 – 6 January 1998), ed. M. Sframeli, Milan 1997, p. 234 cat. 186; H. Economopoulos, *La forza e l'ingegno...* op. cit. (note 1), p. 163; C. Avery, *Studies...* op. cit. (note 6), p. 319; M.G. Vaccari, *Di e da Giambologna: la collezione del Bargello*, in *Giambologna, gli dei, gli eroi. Genesi e fortuna di uno stile europeo nella scultura*, exhibition catalogue (Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, 2 March – 15 June 2006), ed. B. Paolozzi Strozzi, D. Zikos, Florence 2006, pp. 348–361, esp. p. 360 cat. 28.

9 A. Grünwald, *Über einige unechte Werke Michaelangelos*, in "Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst", 1, 1910, pp. 11–70, esp. pp. 17–18; G.A. Mansuelli, *Galleria degli Uffizi. Le sculture. Parte I*, Rome 1958, pp. 152–153 cat. 123, figs. 126a–c (*Hercules*); V. Saladino, *Sculture antiche per la reggia di Pitti*, in *Magnificenza...* op. cit. (note 8), p. 310.







27. and 29. Cristofano Stati, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1605. Bracciano, Museo Civico.



28. and 30. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.



Another of Stati's works, a group depicting *Venus and Adonis* in Bracciano (Museo Civico, c. 1605),¹⁰ the sculptor's birthplace, reveals similar features. In addition to the rather soft anatomy, it is primarily in the bold pose that we find similarities: Hercules seen from behind is very similar to the body of Adonis with his heavily curved backbone forming a comma and his tight buttocks sitting fairly low by comparison with his long back (figs. 27-30).

Stati's temperament as a sculptor is still

have seen, the *Hercules* under discussion here shows no other affinity with Stati's style, particularly in the definition of the figure's features and the handling of his hair. The pathos displayed by Hercules is very different from the sculptor's typical faces, which invariably have a classicising feel to them, a natural inclination for Stati in view of the passion for Classical antiquity that he showed from his earliest youth (figs. 31-34).¹¹ Hercules' hair consists of short curls folding in on themselves with flattened volumes, when Stati's treatment of hair



31. Cristofano Stati, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1605. Bracciano, Museo Civico.

32. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.

33. Cristofano Stati, *Orpheus*, 1600-1601. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

34. Cristofano Stati, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1605. Bracciano, Museo Civico.

somewhat difficult to get into focus. He was a multifaceted artist who changed his style and his register more than once in the course of his career, but quite apart from that, his work is distinguished in the panorama of Italian sculpture at the turn of the 16th century by its spasmodic search for movement, as though frozen in the marble, and of carefully devised spiralling poses consisting of exasperated twists and turns.

But having said all of this, we need to accept the fact that, aside from the close similarities we

was invariably characterised by long parallel locks running down the head (figs. 35-42). Also, Stati's manner of carving rocks and tree trunks never varied in the course of his career, the gradine chisel running around the surfaces to produce deep parallel grooves, whereas the rock in the *Hercules and the Lion* is far more sophisticated, its tiny gradine chisel marks bearing a remarkable similarity to those used to simulate the lion's fur (figs. 43-47). For all these reasons, I feel that the sculpture cannot be directly attributed to Stati in person.

¹⁰ V. Martinelli, *Cristoforo Stati e il gruppo di «Venere e Adone»*, in "Rivista d'arte", XXXII, III s., 7, 1957 (though in fact 1959), pp. 233-242.; C. Avery, *Studies...* op. cit. (note 6), p. 321.

¹¹ According to G. Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti, dal pontificato di Gregorio XIII del 1572 in fino a' tempi di papa Urbano ottavo nel 1642*, Rome 1647, p. 162 Stati, "on arriving in Rome, devoted his time to seeking out antiquities and pieces of ancient statues to send them (it was said) to Florence".





35. Cristofano Stati, *Samson and the Lion*, 1605-1607. Chicago, Art Institute.

36. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.

37. Cristofano Stati, *Friendship*, 1605. Paris, Louvre Museum.

38. Cristofano Stati, *Orpheus*, 1600-1601. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

39. Cristofano Stati, *Ganymede*, 1605-1608. Florence, Boboli Garden.

41. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stati, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.

40. Cristofano Stati, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1605. Bracciano, Museo Civico.

42. Cristofano Stati, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1605. Bracciano, Museo Civico.

Nevertheless, it is beyond question that, as things stand today, the Chicago *Samson* is without doubt our most effective yardstick for setting the *Hercules* in its proper context and that it is likely to have served as the model for the sculptor who carved it.

The most likely working hypothesis that we are in a position to formulate today, therefore, is either that the artist who carved *Hercules and the Lion* saw Stati's *Samson* in Florence between 1605 and 1607, or that he had available to him a model of

the work, which Stati may have brought with him to Rome (where he remained until his death in 1609) after leaving Florence c. 1607.

Research conducted hitherto has failed to produce any further evidence and none of the sculptors known to have been working in Florence or Rome in the first quarter of the 17th century appears to fit the bill as the artist responsible for *Hercules and the Lion*. The only person who in some ways may fit the picture, at least in the search for figures of *Hercules* engaged in performing his *La-*





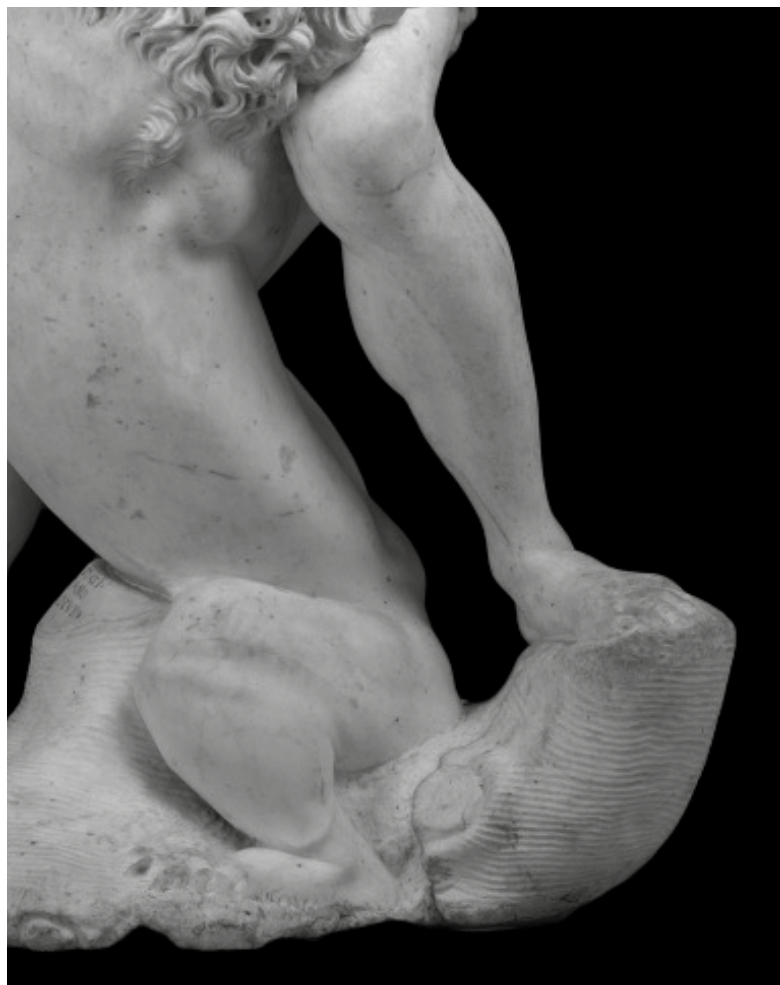
43. Cristofano Stati, *Friendship*, 1605. Paris, Louvre Museum.



44. Cristofano Stati, *Orpheus*, 1600-1601. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.



45. Cristofano Stati, *Venus and Adonis*, c. 1605. Bracciano, Museo Civico.



46. Cristofano Stati, *Samson and the Lion*, 1605-1607. Chicago, Art Institute.



47. Sculptor close to Cristofano Stai, *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*.



bours, is Stefano Maderno (c. 1571 – 1636),¹² but a detailed stylistic analysis tends to rule him out. If, on the other hand, we turn our thoughts to those who may have had access to the model – my gratitude to Claudio Pizzorusso for his kind suggestion –, then the group may conceivably have been carved by Cristofano Stati's son Francesco, a shadowy figure of a sculptor who appears to have devoted more time to dealing in art and to gambling, and who died young (1592 – c.1627/8).¹³ He is known as a collector and a forger of inscriptions, and the only sculpture on which he appears to have worked is a relief made by his father depicting *Pope Paul V Receiving the Envoys of the Kings of Persia and the Congo* (1613–15)¹⁴ in the Pauline Chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore, a work that bears absolutely no relation to the *Hercules*, thus making such a hypothesis difficult to explore as things stand today.

Collecting history¹⁵

The earliest definite reference to the Palazzo Del Chiaro *Hercules and the Lion* is dated 26 January 1730, when it is mentioned in an expertise produced in the course of a trial in which the Tolomei were defending their right of first refusal on the palazzo against the creditors of the late Camillo del Chiaro, its last owner and a descendant of the family that gave it its present shape in the late 17th century.¹⁶ Shortly before May 1695, the palazzo had undergone major architectural and decorative renovation to mark the marriage of Leon Battista del Chiara with Maria Ugolini, a member of the old Florentine aristocracy. The wedding unquestionably deserved such pomp because it marked the peak of the rise up the so-

cial ladder for the del Chiaro family, who owed their recent (1649) status to the foundation of a successful silk-weaving firm that later extended its activities to include gold-beating and leather-working. In the context of this marital renovation project, between January and May 1694 two niches were opened, with “slabs as bases”, in the wall of the landing at the top of the main staircase connecting the courtyard to the *piano nobile*.¹⁷ Our *Hercules* adorned one of those niches for over two centuries. If we consider that the family's fortune dated to after the statue was carved and the random nature of its final position, we may deduce that it was purchased c. 1694–5. Of the many receipts in what remains of the Del Chiaro Archive, only one, despite being rather generic, appears to match such a purchase: on 18 April 1695 a certain Domenico Baldesi, a vintner by trade, issued Pier Francesco del Chiaro a receipt for 50 ducats for four marble statues which, in turn, had been sold to him by a certain Giovanni Querci.¹⁸ Baldesi was doubtless a middleman in the deal, but more than that we do not know. Giovanni Querci may have been one of those early antique dealers who attended auctions held by the Magistrate of Pupils, a grand ducal body charged with caring for under-age orphans and widows. The absence of documentation regarding such sales before the year 1700 precludes all further research in that connection. Thus between omissions and things left unsaid, we shall have to make do with this one certainty, namely that the statue of *Hercules and the Lion* stood in that niche from the turn of the 17th century until its removal in fairly recent years.

Lorenzo Principi

12 H. Economopoulos, *La forza e l'ingegno...* op. cit. (note 1), *passim*.

13 For Francesco, see A. Capoferro, *Francesco Stati scultore, antiquario e falsario*, in *Epigrafia 2006. Atti della XIV^e Rencontre sur l'épigraphie in onore di Silvio Panciera, con altri contributi di colleghi, allievi e collaboratori*, ed. M.L. Caldelli, G.L. Gregori, S. Orlandi, Rome 2008, pp. 1383–1406; D. Pegazzano, *Stati...* op. cit. (note 7), pp. 57, 60.

14 O. Ferrari, S. Papaldo, *Le sculture del Seicento a Roma*, Rome 1999, pp. 252, 253 fig.

15 This is a summary of the results of archive research conducted by D. Gambino (13 June 2022) which can be consulted on request.

16 Archivio di Stato di Firenze (henceforth ASF), Biffi Tolomei, 130, ins. I, cc. 44r–45v.

17 ASF, *Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo*, 1676 (ex P.XXX.68), Ricevute Del Chiaro, 1694–1700, cc.nn.

18 *Ibidem*.



Via Santo Spirito, 26/A - Milan
P. +39 02 76 31 89 07
www.walterpadovani.com

w.p.