

A patinated bronze portrait bust of Etienne Pierre Méjan (Montpellier 1766–1846 Munich), Comte de l'Émpire, Count of the Kingdom of Italy, Officer de la Legion d'Honneur, Commendatore dell'ordine della Corona di Ferro, Secretary of State under Eugene de Beauharnais.

**Attributed to Luigi Manfredini (Bologna 1771–1840 Milan)
After Giovanni Battista Comolli (Valenza 1775–1831 Milan)**

Milan, c.1808–09

The Manfredini Manufactory and the present bust

Luigi, Francesco and Antonio Manfredini founded the most important bronze manufactory in Italy under the Napoleonic Empire. They were in charge respectively of sculptures and medals, clocks, and bronze smith work. Their manufactory was housed in the former Church of Santa Maria alla Fontana. The manufactory's main patron was the Viceroy Eugene de Beauharnais, through the finances of the Ministry of the Interiors and with the direct encouragement of Napoleon himself, to the point that the manufactory took the name of 'Manifattura Nazionale dell'Eugenia'.¹

Luigi Manfredini trained as a sculptor in Bologna.² From 1801 he was director of the mint of the Cisalpine Republic and from 1805 the mint of the Kingdom of Italy. He produced some of the finest commemorative medals and several sculptures in bronze, with the technical support of his brother Antonio, an expert in the processes of casting, chiselling and gilding.³

Their most famous piece is perhaps the bust of Napoleon (fig.1) after the colossal sculpture of the Emperor as Mars by Antonio Canova (London, Apsley House). Around 1811 the Manfredini delivered a portrait bust also of the Viceroy of Italy Eugene de Beauharnais after a model by Giovan Battista Comolli, formerly in the *Medagliere* at Brera, and today in the Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Milan.⁴ A second casting of Beauharnais' bust is instead at Villa Melzi, Bellagio, which also houses a bronze bust portraying Francesco Melzi d'Eril, also by Luigi Manfredini.⁵ Another version still of Beauharnais' portrait by Manfredini, with the same base and cartouche in gilt bronze as the one in Bellagio, is instead in the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg (fig.4).

To these known and well-studied pieces, we can now add the present bust, cast in bronze, finely chiselled, and patinated. The sitter is to be identified with Etienne Méjan who, after the coronation of Napoleon as King of Italy in 1805, was appointed as counsellor and State Secretary to the Viceroy Beauharnais.

¹ B.Gallizia di Vergano, *La manifattura dell'Eugenia dei fratelli Manfredini*, in: *Gli splendori del bronzo*, Torino, 2002, pp.27–43.

² A. Imbellone, Manfredini, Luigi, in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Vol.68, 2007, p.750–54.

³ On the role of Francesco Manfredini next to his brother Luigi in the realisation of sculptural groups see: A. Imbellone, *Op.cit.*, p.751.

⁴ G. Kannès, Comolli, Giovanni Battista, in: *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Vol. 27, 1982, p.623; A. Oldani, P. Zatti (ed.), *Le collezioni della Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Milano*, Milan, 2017, p.252.

⁵ F. Mazzocca, A. Morandotti, E. Colle (eds.), *Milano neoclassica*, Milan, 2001, p.519.



Fig.1 (left) Luigi Manfredini, after Antonio Canova, Napoleon as Mars the pacemaker, c.1808 (Milano, Galleria d'arte moderna)

Fig.2 (centre left) Luigi Manfredini, after Giovan Battista Comolli, Eugenio di Beauharnais, 1808-09 (Milano, Galleria d'arte moderna).

Fig.3 (centre right) Luigi Manfredini, after Giovan Battista Comolli, Eugenio di Beauharnais (Bellagio, Villa Melzi).

Fig.4 (right) Luigi Manfredini, after Giovan Battista Comolli, Eugenio di Beauharnais (St Petersburg, Hermitage).

The comparison between the present, recently rediscovered bust and the well-known one portraying Eugene today in Milan present several similarities. Upon close inspection, the two pieces present several consistencies: the rendering of eyes and hears, the modelling of hair, sideburns and, above all, lips. Taking into account the necessary differences identifying the two individuals, in all these details it is possible to clearly recognise the hand of one master who provided the wax models for both castings.

If we consider the bust of Beauharnais at Bellagio, instead, we will notice the similarity between the cartouche on the base is extremely close to the one of the present piece (figs.3-4). Far from being a minor decorative element, this detail confirms that the two objects come from the same workshop: the Manifattura Nazionale dell'Eugenia.

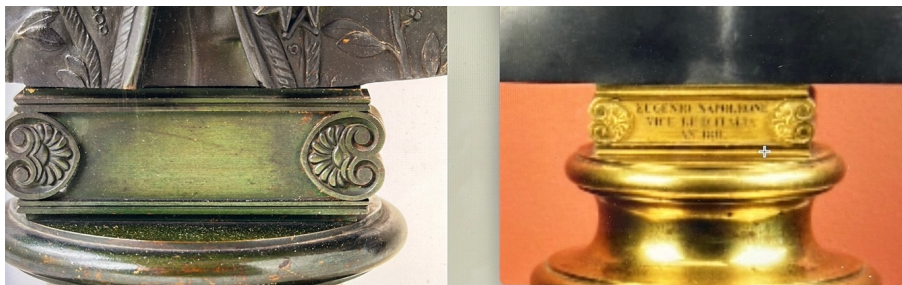


Fig.4 Luigi Manfredini, comparison of the cartouche on the base of the busts of Méjan (left) and Eugene de Beauharnais in the Villa Melzi/Hermitage versions (right).

Méjan's bust, however, is characterised by the careful chiselling, which makes it a unique piece, superior even to the busts portraying Beauharnais. Such a refined use of the chisel is most evident in the rendering of the curls, in the long sideburns, in the lace cravat on the collar, in the embroideries of the coat, and in the medals on the chest. It is the quality of the finish that distinguishes the finest production of the Eugenia manufactory towards 1805–10.⁶

The model of Giovanni Battista Comolli

As for the authorship of the model used for the casting of Méjan's bust. Although Luigi Manfredini trained as a sculptor at the Accademia Clementina in Bologna, and several of his early works are known in Ravenna,⁷ it is well documented that as a director of the mint in Milan, Manfredini worked almost always after models provided by the finest artists of the period. Long and well documented is the collaboration with Giuseppe Bossi and Andrea Appiani, with the latter being responsible for the design of one of the most beautiful medals coined by Manfredini: the one commemorating the marriage between Napoleon and Maria Luisa, of 1810. The model for Eugene's bust, as mentioned before, is by Giovanni Battista Comolli. The famous pieces of the Manfredini's production after the Napoleonic period are equally after designs by accredited artists: the *Sestiga* (or chariot) of the Arco della Pace in Milan, of 1827, is after a model by Abbondio Sangiorgio, whilst the monument of Andrea Appiani, of 1826, is after a model by Bertel Thorvaldsen.



Even for the present bust, it is possible to suggest the authorship of Comolli, who must have known Appiani's portrait. It is important to notice that Comolli's fame among his contemporaries was tied not only on to his monuments, but also to his ability as a portraitist.

In his early years, as a political refugee in Grenoble in 1800, he made some portrait busts for the library in that city.⁸ In 1802, in Turin, Comolli became professor and director of the Sculpture school of the Accademia Nazionale presenting 'deux teste en hermes' of the first consul Napoleon and of the General Jourdan.⁹ His ability as a portraitist was commented on by his contemporary, as the Count Baudi di Vesme, who wrote, 'Egli scolpì vari busti, belli per l'artificio del lavoro e per la rassomiglianza.'¹⁰ In 1804 he was commissioned a bust of the poet Giovanni Battista Casti by Eugene

⁶ See for example the large *Pendola delle Sabine* (Milan, Palazzo Reale).

⁷ A. Imbellone, *Op.cit.*, p.750.

⁸ J. Roman, *Histoire et description du Musée Bibliothèque de Grenoble*, Paris, 1892, p.192.

⁹ A. Baudi di Vesme, *Schede Vesme*, Turin, 1963, Vol. I, p.349.

¹⁰ 'He sculpted various busts, beautiful for their making and the likeness', A. Baudi di Vesme, *Op.cit.*, p.348.

de Beauharnais. In 1806 Francesco Melzi d'Eril commissioned a portrait bust of Vittorio Alfieri. In his later years, after the fall of the Napoleonic empire, Comolli specialised in portrait busts: he executed the funerary herm of Vincenzo Monti (Milan, Ambrosiana); in 1822, on the occasion of the yearly exhibition of the Fine Art Academy of Brera, he presented a herm portraying Alessandro Volta, and in 1824 five more busts. In 1825 he sculpted the bust of Emperor Ferdinand I.¹¹ He was active also in Lucca, Tuscany, where he sculpted the busts of Elisa, Eugenio de Beauharnais, and the colossal head of Napoleon after Canova mentioned before. In short, Comolli was a favourite portraitist not only of Eugene de Beauharnais' circle, but also of the Italian aristocracy in the Napoleonic period.

Despite the lack of direct documents, there are several elements that allow us to attribute the model for Manfredini's bust of Méjan to Giovanni Battista Comolli. Comolli was close to Beauharnais and it was certainly Beauharnais who commissioned the present bust, a precious gift intended for the educated, intelligent and ambitious Méjan.

As for the dating, the most plausible hypothesis is to locate the realisation of the piece in the years 1808–09, when Manfredini realised also the bust of Beauharnais after a model by Comolli.¹²

Our bronze bust, or probably Comolli's wax model (now lost), served as the model for a marble bust depicting Méjan signed, 'Joseph Chinard à Lyon', now in an important private collection.

Dott. Giuseppe Beretti
Milan, February 2024

Etienne Mejan

Etienne Mejan was born in Montpellier in 1766. He moved to Paris in the 1780s to exercise as a lawyer. He was an attentive observer of the political turmoil of those years, and started operating as a political journalist: in July 1789 he founded the newspaper *Bulletin de l'Assemblée* together with Hugues-Bernard Maret (1763–1839). Méjan's writings soon made an impression on Mirabeau (Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, 1749–91), who in the same year (1789) invited the young man to collaborate to his newspaper, *Le Courier de Provence*. Despite his closeness to the monarchists (most notably Mirabeau), Méjan earned the trust and respect of Napoleon in virtue of his intelligence and ingenuity in navigating treacherous political situations. After Napoleon's coup d'état in 1800, Méjan was made Minister of the Prefecture.

When Eugene de Beauharnais was appointed Viceroy of Italy in 1805, at the age of only 24, Napoleon put Méjan on his step-son's side. In the newly-created Kingdom of Italy, Méjan operated as State Counsellor to the King, i.e. Napoleon, and as Secretary of the Orders, today's equivalent of Prime Minister, to the Viceroy

¹¹ A.Imbellone, *Op.cit.*, p.625.

¹² A.Imbellone, *Op.cit.*, p.623.

Beauharnais. Given his services to both the French Empire and the Kingdom of Italy, he was appointed with noble titles of both crowns: Comte de l'Émpire and Conte del Regno d'Italia. Equally he was honoured with titles of Knighthood orders of both crowns: Officer of the Legion of Honour for France, and Knight of the order of the Iron Crown for Italy. The medals of both orders sit prominently on the chest of the present bust, and allow us to identify the sitter with certainty.

His likeness was recorded also in a beautiful portrait by Andrea Appiani, dated May 1806, and today in the collections of the Birmingham Museum (fig.5). In Appiani's portrait, Méjan is shown in the act of writing a letter to his friend Nicolas Frochot. On the table, covered with a green cloth, we can find two finely-bound volumes: the *Oeuvres* of his friend and mentor Mirabeau and those of Nicolo Macchiavelli. On the sitter's back, in a niche, we can see a bust of Eugene de Beauharnais. On Mèjan's chest we can clearly distinguish the medals of the Legion of Honour and of the Order of the Iron Crown.



Fig.5 Andrea Appiani, Etienne Pierre Méjan, 1806 (Birmingham Museum).

Méjan can be credited with the creation of the bureaucratic structure of the modern state in Italy. It was him who had to navigate the complex political situation of the new Kingdom, managing the pressures of the local aristocracy on the one hand, and of foreign powers, most notably Austria, on the other. He managed finances, appointed governors and prefects, fought against the claims – still feudal in nature –

of the Italian aristocracy, mediated the directives coming from France with the specificities of the Italian locale. He fulfilled his duties with great efficiency, but his diligence and toughness did not make him a loved character. We could compare him to Bernardo Tanucci (1689–1783, Prime Minister of Naples, 1755–76), the statist responsible for the creation and modernisation of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies a generation earlier.

Like Tanucci, in fact, Méjan was extremely cultivated. He was a refined bibliophile and he amassed a large library including rare incunabula from the 15th and 16th century. A prove of his enlightenment, he opened his library to public consultation. He also had a collection of old master paintings, including a panel then attributed to Andrea Mantegna, and today in the collections of the National Gallery of Art at Washington, DC (figs.6–7). He was a patron of the arts and sat on the committee of Academies and learned societies, such as the Consiglio dei Dotti del Regno d'Italia.



Fig.6 Ercole de' Roberti (1455–96), *The wife of Hasdrubal and her children*, tempera on poplar, c. 1490–93 (Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art).

Fig.7 Gaetano Zancon (1771–1816), after Ercole de' Roberti, previously attributed to Andrea Mantegna, *Mermero, Ferete ed Ancella fuggenti*, etching, 1812 (London, The British Museum), plate V of Zancon's *Galleria inedita raccolta da' privati gabinetti milanesi* (Milan, Francesco Fusi & C, 1812). In Zancon's volume, the plate is prefaced by the inscription 'esistente nel gabinetto del Sig. Stefano Méjan, Conte dell'Impero Francese e del Regno d'Italia, consigliere di Stato di S.M.I.R., Segretario degli ordini di S.A.I. il Principe Viceré, Ufficiale della Legion d'Onore, Cavaliere del Real ordine

della Corona di Ferro, e membro del Collegio Elettorale del Consiglio dei Dotti del Regno d'Italia' (in the cabinet of M. Stefano [Etienne] Méjan, Comte of the French Empire and of the Kingdom of Italy, State Counsellor to His Imperial and Royal Majesty [Napoleon], Secretary of the Orders of His Imperial Highness the Prince Viceroy [Beauharnais], Officer of the Legion of Honour, Knight of the Royal order of the Iron Crown, and member of the electoral committee of the Counsel of Learned men of the Kingdom of Italy).

After Napoleon's fall and the dissolution of the Kingdom of Italy, in 1816 he relocated to Munich to follow Beauharnais, who had become Duke of Leuchtenber after his marriage with Princess Augusta of Bavaria. He was tutor to Beauharnais's children and later Chamberlain to the King of Bavaria. He pursued bibliographic research until the 1850s, when he published *Verzeichniss von Incunabeln, Aldinen, Etiennes, Elzeviren und andern werthvollen Werken [...] aus der Königlichen und der Mejan'schen Bibliothek* (List of Incunables, Aldines, Etiennes, Elzevirs and other valuable works [...] from the Royal and Mejan's Libraries, Berlin, W. Hertz, 1851).

A portrait print from Méjan's late years allow us to identify with certainty the sitter of our bust (fig.8). Even if they date some thirty years apart, in both the bust and the print we can recognise the same piercing eyes, the button nose, and the thin lips.



Fig.8 Ignaz Fertig (1809–58), *Portrait of Comte Étienne Méjan*, lithograph, 1836 (Munich, Deutsches Museum, Archiv).

Dott. Domenico Pino
Naples, February 2024