

**A very rare Real Fabbrica Ferdinanda white biscuit porcelain group of Laocoon and his sons modelled by Filippo Tagliolini after the antique, on a naturalistic rockwork base, the Laocöon seated on a large rock, his sons by his side, Naples, circa 1785.**

Height: 20,47 in (52 cm)

Wight: in. (cm)

Depht: in. (cm)

**Conditions:** Missing right hand thumb of the older son and some few restorations only in this area.

**Comparative examples:**

The only other known example of this group – on a rectangular base – is in the Museo Civico 'Gaetano Filangieri' in Naples (inv. 40), published by: Alvar Gonzalez Palacios, *Tagliolini e la Porcellana di Napoli*, Torino, 1988, fig. 11; Angela Caròla-Perrotti, *Le Porcellane dei Borbone di Napoli*, 1986, no. 491; Giuseppe Morazzoni, *Le Porcellane Italiane*, vol. II, 1960, pl. 367.

The present piece represents the Trojan priest Laocoon and his two sons being attacked by two sea serpents, closely referencing the antique marble group that resurfaced in Rome in 1506, today in the Vatican. Since its discovery, the sculpture has been identified with a marble group depicting the same subject described by the Roman writer Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*. Originally in the palace of the future Emperor Titus, the group was attributed by Pliny to three Greek sculptors from the island of Rhodes, Hagesandros, Athenodoros and Polydorus.

In 1520 Pope Leo X Medici commissioned a copy of the sculpture as a gift to King Francis I. Baccio Bandinelli (1488–1560) took on this demanding task, using the occasion to demonstrate his skills as a sculptor, carving the group from a single block and integrating its missing parts, most notably Laocoon and his son's right arms (Laocoon's present right arm having been rediscovered only in the early-20th century). The present Neapolitan biscuit sculpture is therefore closer to Bandinelli's version, rather than to the antique original.

The practice of making porcelain copies after famous sculptures first became popular in Meissen, and was later revived in Italy in the Doccia manufactory and by Giovanni Volpato in Rome. Tagliolini's production falls in line with this tradition, but is also informed by the erudite, exquisite taste for classical sources typical of Neoclassicism throughout Europe. With the exception of the beautiful figure of the Pietà (Naples, Museo Filangieri, see A. Caròla-Perrotti, *Le Porcellane dei Borbone di Napoli*, 1986, no. 438), religious sculpture was more the exception than the rule at the Real Fabbrica Ferdinanda. Under the artistic direction of Domenico Venuti, one of the foremost archaeologists of the period, from 1779 onwards the Neapolitan manufactory embraced the Neoclassical aesthetic, heavily influenced by

both recent archaeological finds and the large collection of antiquities of the King of the Two Sicilies. In 1787 Ferdinando IV brought to Naples the Farnese Collection, one of the most famous collections of antique sculpture of the time, which he inherited from his maternal grandmother Elisabetta Farnese, Queen of Naples from 1735 to 1759, and later Queen of Spain from 1759 to 1788. Many of these marble sculptures, such as the famous Hercules and Flora Farnese, were translated into large-scale biscuit porcelain. Additionally, many small-scale busts were made to be incorporated into table designs, as those recently published by Angela Caròla-Perrotti in her book *L'Arte di imbandire la tavola* (2017).

The Laocoon group is among the largest of such biscuit copies after antique sculptures, rivalled in size only by the equally impressive *Toro Farnese* (Naples, Museo di San Martino). Due to its impressive scale, it had to be cast in fifteen separate pieces, which were later put together, an extraordinarily complex process whose success could be jeopardised at several stages in the production – this is perhaps the reason why only two examples of this group are known to have ever been produced.

Trained as a sculptor in Rome, Filippo Tagliolini won several prizes in sculpture competitions at the Accademia di San Luca in the 1760s. After working for the Cozzi porcelain manufacture in Venice, in 1780 he was employed as a modeller in the Imperial Manufacture in Vienna. The following year he produced his first work for the Real Fabbrica Ferdinanda in Naples, a white biscuit portrait of the Neapolitan Royal family (Saint-Aygulf, H.R.H. the Duke of Castro). In Naples he worked as both a porcelain modeller and a restorer of antique sculptures. For example, he restored the famous Flora Farnese providing it with a head (the arms had been restored in Rome by Carlo Albacini). Having trained in Rome, he was well acquainted with both classical sculpture and Baroque art, and his production is equally informed by both these aesthetics. Tagliolini gave full demonstration of his skills in two other large-scale biscuit sculptures of his own invention, *La Caduta dei Giganti* (*The fall of the Giants*, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte) and *Il Carro del Sole* (*The Chariot of the Sun*, Naples, Leonetti di Santo Janni collection).