TOMASSO

John Cheere (1709-1787)

29. Samson Slaying a Philistine

England mid 18th century
Bronzed lead
48 x 0 cm (18 $^{7}/_{8}$ x 0 inches)

The bronzed lead statuette of Samson slaying the Philistine with the jawbone of an ass represents a fascinating chapter in 18th century British decorative arts. Dating from the mid-18th century and standing 22 inches tall, this sculpture is by John Cheere (1709-1787), who famously operated at Hyde Park Corner in London. The statuette exemplifies the skilled craftsmanship in lead casting that flourished during this period and reveals the complex history of sculpture reproduction, attribution, and artistic lineage between

Renaissance Italy and Georgian England.

The statuette's design follows a distinguished artistic lineage. It derives from Giambologna's marble sculpture created around 1562, which was commissioned by Francesco de' Medici for a fountain in Florence. This original work gained such renown that it served twice as a diplomatic gift—first presented to Spain's Duke of Lerma in 1601, and later in 1623, gifted to the Prince of Wales (later King Charles I) during his visit to Spain.

When in England, the Giambologna marble was identified by Sir Thomas Wentworth as depicting "Sampson with a Philistine betwixt his Legs, knocking his Brains out with the Jawbone of an Ass." Charles I subsequently gave the statue to his favourite, George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham, who installed it at York House in London. It was likely during this period that the original moulds were taken from the marble, enabling later lead reproductions. The sculpture passed through various hands, eventually reaching Buckingham House, which was acquired by George III in 1762. The king gave it as a gift to his Surveyor-General, Thomas Worsley, and it remained in Yorkshire until 1954 when it was purchased by the Victoria and Albert Museum, where it remains today.

The production of lead statuary at Hyde Park Corner in London represents a continuous tradition spanning the late 17th and 18th centuries. Several prominent sculptors operated workshops in this area, Richard Osgood (d. 1724) produced the first recorded lead replica of the Samson group in 1691 for Sutton House (later Chiswick House), John Nost I (d. 1710) continued this tradition, with an early 18th-century cast attributed to him at Harrowden Hall. After Nost's death, his nephew John Nost II (d. 1729) and the firm's apprentice Andrew Carpenter (c. 1677-1737) continued using his moulds. In 1737, brothers Henry Cheere (1703-1781) and John Cheere (1709-1787) took over the van Nost yard at Stone Bridge, Hyde Park Corner.

While Henry Cheere gained recognition as a major figure in mid-18th century England alongside rivals like Michael Rysbrack and Louis François Roubiliac, John Cheere was largely forgotten until the 1974 exhibition catalogue "The Man at Hyde Park Corner." His work was previously dismissed as mere mass production, but reassessment reveals remarkable artistry in his lead statues, which were cast from moulds and then meticulously hand finished.

John Cheere established a monopoly in lead statuary production after 1737 and became the largest producer in Britain of plaster statuary as well. His workshop employed a considerable workforce and sometimes subcontracted work, including some lead busts that appear to have been originals by Roubiliac.

It's important to note that all large-scale lead statues were originally finished with decorative surfaces—most painted to resemble marble, but occasionally bronzed or gilded. Cheere recommended oiling them every couple of years for maintenance, but this advice was often ignored, resulting in repeated repainting.

Five full-size lead groups of "Samson slaying the Philistine" (often mistakenly called "Cain and Abel" due to the missing ass's jawbone) are attributed to John Cheere, The Wimpole Hall Group, The Queluz, Portugal group (supplied by John Cheere in 1756), The Southill Park, Bedfordshire group (sold at Cheere's posthumous sale in 1788), The Anglesey Abbey group (acquired by Lord Fairhaven around 1951), and The Yale Centre for British Art group, sold by Tomasso (possibly originally from Purley Hall, Berkshire).

Other notable lead sculptures by Cheere include The Army Museum's equestrian statuette of the Duke of Cumberland, a bronzed lead statue of Andromeda at Osterley Park, and lead statuettes of Edmund Spenser, Alexander Pope, Matthew Prior and John Locke. The bronzing technique used on these lead sculptures was described by Friedman and Clifford as involving two compositions: the red and the yellow. The latter consisted of the finest copper dust, while the former included a small quantity of red ochre, well pulverized. Both were applied with varnish, and the work was dried over a chafing dish immediately after bronzing.

After Cheere's death, the contents of his workshop were auctioned in 1788, with the advertisement highlighting that many models and moulds had been made by famous sculptors including "Rysbrack, Stanley, Collins, Van Nost,

Sponge, Bacon & Co."

The present bronzed lead statuette of Samson represents an important example of the sophisticated reproduction techniques used in 18th-century decorative arts. Its bronzed finish is particularly significant, showing similarities to other documented works by John Cheere, including the equestrian statuette of the Duke of Cumberland in the National Army Museum.

This small-scale version allowed wealthy collectors to own replicas of famous sculptures that would have been recognised by educated viewers of the time. The subject matter, depicting strength overcoming adversity, made it particularly appealing for garden or interior decoration in grand houses of the Georgian period.

The present statuette of Samson slaying the Philistine stands as a testament to the artistic skill and business acumen of John Cheere and the Hyde Park Corner workshops. Though once dismissed as mere copies or mass production, these lead sculptures represent an important artistic tradition that merged fine art with decorative craftsmanship.

Through careful study of these pieces, we gain insight into the networks of artistic influence, patronage, and reproduction that characterised 18th-century British sculpture. The statuette demonstrates how classical and Renaissance masterpieces were adapted, reproduced, and made accessible to a wider audience of collectors through different materials and scales, creating a distinctive artistic legacy that continues to be appreciated today.

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