

Joseph Nollekens, R.A.



Designs for Hebe, Goddess of youth, and the eagle

Reference: 11083

Dimensions:

Height: 32 cm / 12⁵/₈ in

Width: 37 cm / 14⁵/₈ in

Pen and brown ink, drawn on the back of a Royal Academy invitation to elect Associates dated 30th October 1776 inscribed: Jos Nolleke..and signed: F.M. Newton RA./.

32 x 37 cm

This spontaneous drawing of 1776 provides a rare insight into the working practices of the sculptor at the height of his powers. There is no recorded statue of Hebe but here she is drawn in three different poses with the eagle, illustrating how Nollekens considered several alternatives of a possible statue in marble.

We are grateful to Dr Danielle Thoms for suggesting that the drawing might be connected in some way to the work Nollekens undertook for Lord Yarborough around this time. Yarborough was a significant patron throughout the sculptor's

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career, and in 1778 took delivery of the Venus Chiding Cupid which he had commissioned from Nollekens at some point in the early 1770s, possibly as a companion to his figure of Mars acquired from John Bacon. It's now in the Usher Gallery, Lincoln, and the standing figure of Venus is not unlike these sketches of Hebe, with elongated 'Giambologna-esque' limbs and a gently spiralling posture. While there is no known reference to an actual, executed figure of Hebe with the eagle, it is plausible that these sketches were produced with another possible Yarborough commission in mind.

The Victoria and Albert Museum has similar drawings by Nollekens of the same date.

One (E643 1950) depicts two deities, the one on the right most likely to be a preliminary sketch for his statue of Diana, one of four statues of goddesses executed for the 2nd Marquess of Rockingham between 1776 and 1778 (now in the V&A). These were originally in Lord Rockingham's house in London, but were brought to Wentworth Woodhouse, near Rotherham, Yorkshire after his death in 1782, by his nephew, William Fitzwilliam, 4th Earl Fitzwilliam. The statues remained at Wentworth Woodhouse until 1986.

The other three statues of Juno (1776), Venus (1773) and Minerva (1775) are now in the Getty Museum, Los Angeles. These three originally formed part of a Judgement of Paris series, but it is unclear what happened to the statue of Paris, which would appear to have been replaced by the one of Diana. Another drawing (E581 - 1950) depicts four classical deities, similar in character and date to this group of statues.

The reverse shows that Nollekens drew on the back of an invitation to the Royal Academy. Francis Milner Newton, R.A., (1720-1794) was one of the founders of the Royal Academy and its first Secretary. The invitation was sent out to all members of the Royal Academy, summoning them to a General Assembly, at old Somerset House. George III had given apartments in the palace in 1771 and the Royal Academy operated its schools there until it was demolished, to be replaced with the current building. General Assemblies were attended by all available members of the Academy and occurred several times a year. On 4th November Nollekens joined the President, Keeper and Secretary of the Academy and fifteen other members. They heard that the King had formally agreed to recent Academy decisions and passed a resolution that each year, at the exhibition, no painting or sculpture would be moved or taken after down the Royal private view. They then entered into an election, whereby William Parry and John Singleton Copley were elected Associates.

Nollekens is generally considered to be the finest British sculptors of the late 18th century. He was born in London on 11th August 1737, the son of a Flemish painter, Josef Frans Nollekens (1702-1748), who had moved from Antwerp to London in 1733. In 1750, he was apprenticed to the sculptor Peter Scheemakers (1691 - 1781), another Flemish immigrant in London.

In 1760, he moved to Rome, where he continued studying, as well as working as an antiques dealer, restorer and copier. Sculptures he made in Rome included a marble of 'Timocles Conducted before Alexander', for which he was awarded fifty guineas by the Society of Arts, and busts of David Garrick and Laurence Sterne, who were visiting the city.

Nollekens returned to London in 1770. His reputation preceded him and, once he had set up his studio in Mortimer Street, he received many commissions from fashionable society and built up a large practice. In Rupert Gunnis's words 'he soon became to contemporary sculpture what Reynolds was to painting' (Dictionary of British Sculptors 1660 - 1851,

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London 1951). Although he preferred working on mythological subjects, it was through his portrait busts that he became famous, as one of the most fashionable portrait sculptors in Britain.

He enjoyed the patronage of King George III and went on to sculpt many leading figures, including William Pitt the Younger , Charles James Fox , the Duke of Bedford and the Marquess of Rockingham. He also made busts of figures from the arts such as Benjamin West . Most of his subjects were represented in classical costume.

Nollekens became an associate of the Royal Academy in 1771 and a full Academician the following year. He exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy from 1771 – 1816. He died in 1823, leaving a fortune of £200,000.