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John Gibson RA

A British Sculptor in Rome

Tennant Gallery

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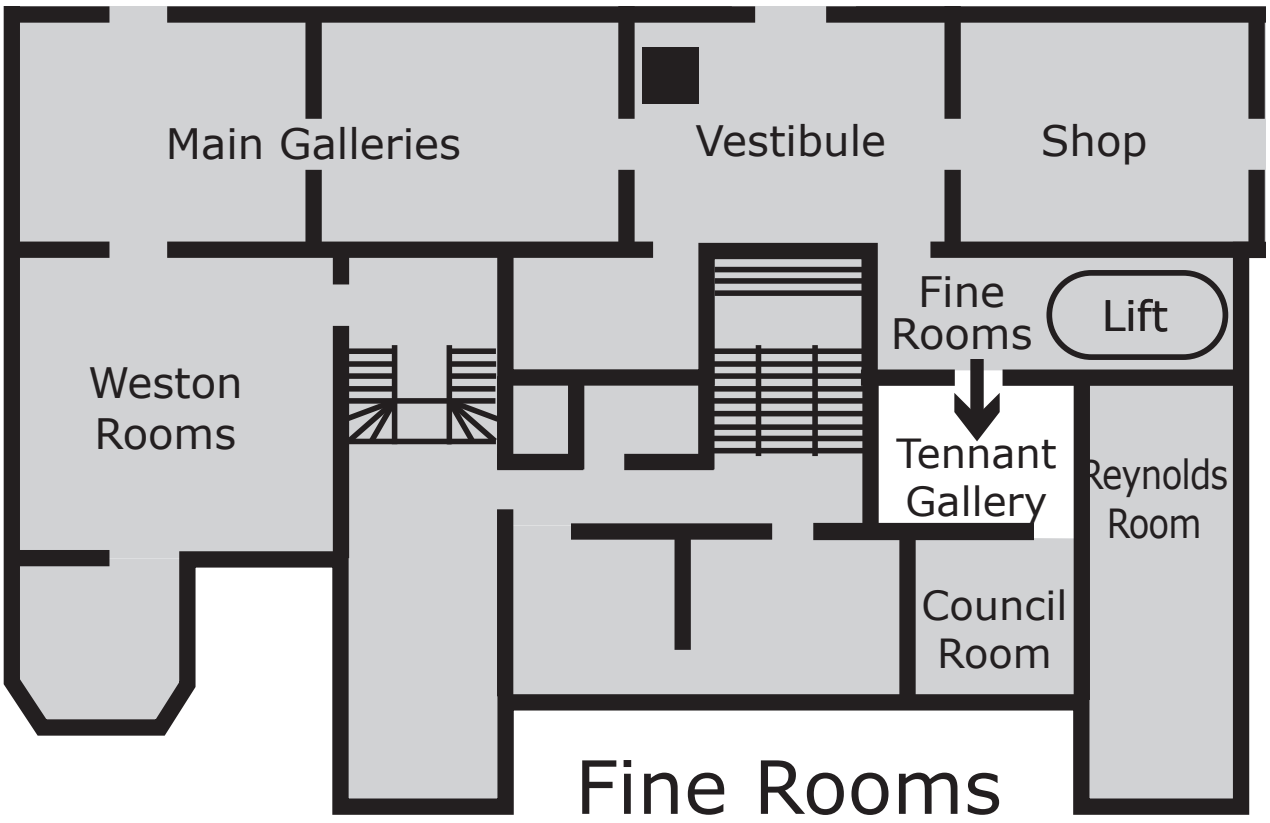

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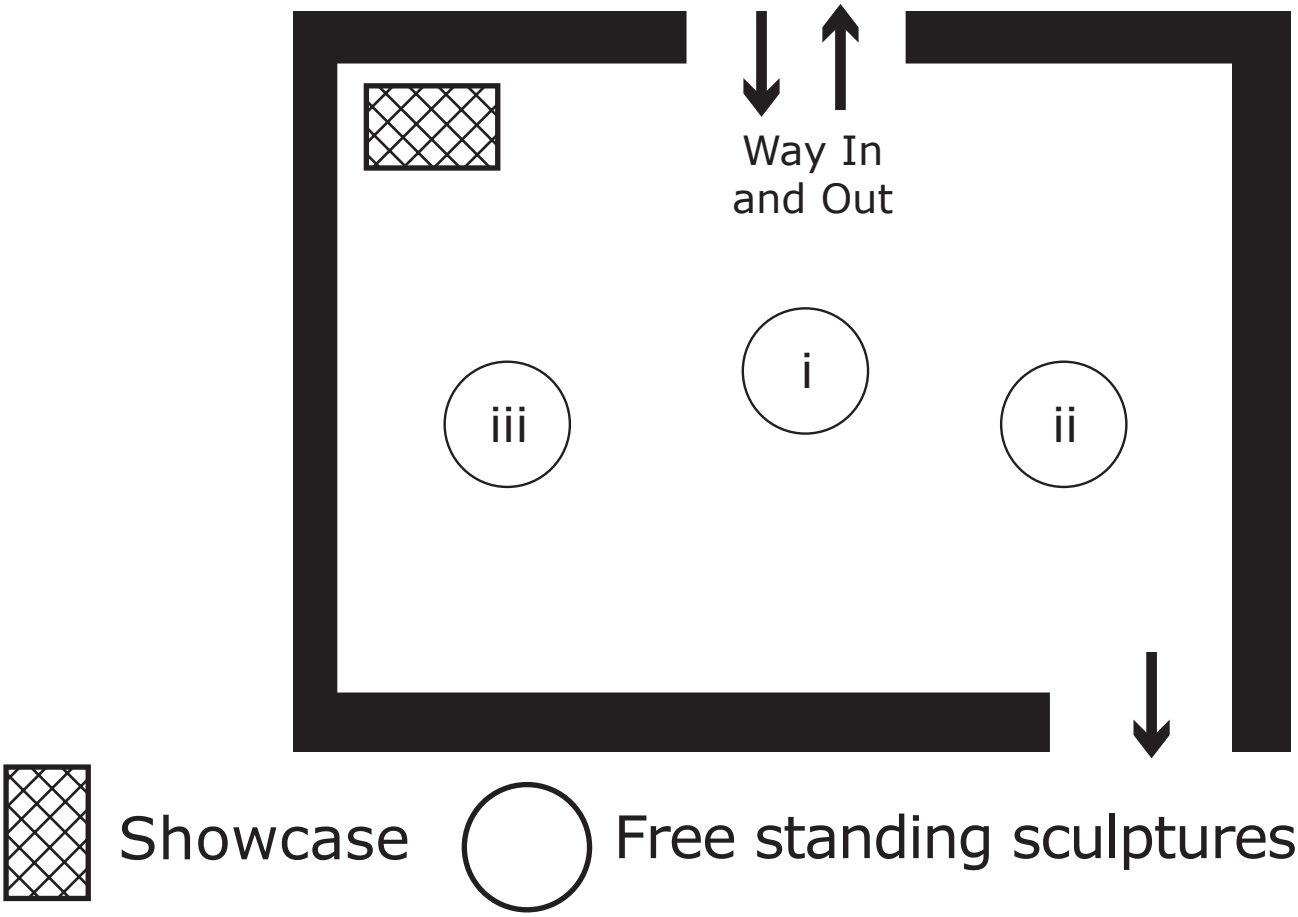

John Gibson RA
A British Sculptor in Rome

The John Madejski Fine Rooms

8 September – 18 December 2016

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John Gibson RA

A British Sculptor in Rome

“In England my life would be spent in making busts and statues of great men in coats and neckties; here I am employed upon poetical subjects which demand the exercise of the imagination, and the knowledge of the beautiful.”

– John Gibson

During the nineteenth century, John Gibson (1790–1866) was Britain’s most celebrated and successful sculptor. His elegant neoclassical works set the standard for his British peers over a period of nearly fifty years, yet his career path was unusual.

Born near Conwy, Wales, Gibson grew up in Liverpool, where he trained as a wood carver, and later as a stonemason.

However, his talent and passion for classical art soon came to the attention of wealthy Liverpudlian patrons who provided him with funds for a three-year stay in Italy.

Arriving in Rome in October 1817, Gibson joined the studio of Europe's leading sculptor, Antonio Canova (1757–1822). This was a pivotal moment for the young artist, who was captivated by Rome, its lively artistic community and unrivalled collections of ancient art.

Gibson thrived and, encouraged by Canova, was soon able to set up his own studio in the city.

In his own work, Gibson, like Canova, sought to achieve a similar blend of grace, naturalism and idealised beauty as that found in ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. His versions of well-known classical and literary subjects proved highly popular and won him an international reputation.

At the height of his career, Gibson ran one of the largest sculpture workshops in Rome. Although he remained in Rome for the rest of his life, he maintained strong links with his native country and played a key role in the artistic exchange between Britain and Italy.

All works on display are by John Gibson RA unless otherwise indicated and all except ‘Narcissus’ are from his bequest of 1866 in which he left most of the contents of his studio to the Royal Academy of Arts.

Introduction to The Tennant Gallery

Between Rome and London

"Go to London?...No – what is local fame? If I live I will try for more than that. I may fail – yes – but Rome shall be my battle-field, where I am surrounded by the most powerful competitors."

– John Gibson

John Gibson never moved back to Britain, but was nevertheless elected a Royal Academician in 1836.

Supporters encouraged him to relocate to London in order to capitalise on his newfound status as an RA, but in his memoirs, quoted above, he explained his preference for Rome.

There, he not only had access to major collections of classical art, he was also part of the wide circle of international artists that formed around Canova and the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1789-1838).

Gibson’s success, however, was greatly boosted by the increasing numbers of wealthy British visitors in Rome.

At this time, aristocratic travellers on the Grand Tour were joined by a wider and increasingly affluent cross-section of society, especially industrialists and their families.

Gibson’s studio became an important meeting place for artists and their patrons. He received numerous commissions for marble versions of the plaster models on view in his studio, most of which were shipped back to Britain.

Gibson also became interested in the state of British sculpture.

He helped to found a small “academy” in Rome for British students, serving as its director for three decades.

He regularly exhibited his works in London, notably at the Royal Academy, the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the International Exhibition of 1862. By this time Gibson was known as “Britain’s first sculptor” and the display featured a whole pavilion of his polychrome statues.

Although some critics dismissed Gibson as the “too faithful follower” of Canova, his achievements and international fame paved the way for the success of Victorian sculpture as a whole.

Cupid and Psyche

The story of Cupid and Psyche, from the ancient Roman text 'The Golden Ass' by Apuleius, has frequently been depicted in art.

The narrative follows Psyche, who represents the soul, as she overcomes many obstacles to find and marry Cupid. She is often shown with butterfly wings because the butterfly was a traditional emblem for the soul.

This theme saw a particular revival in neoclassical sculpture, after being the subject of Canova's 'Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss' (1793; Musée du Louvre, Paris, and State Hermitage, St Petersburg).

Indeed, by 1827 there were so many versions that Tullio Dandolo wrote in the journal 'Il Tiberino' that he could retell the whole story simply by describing the various statues by his contemporaries.

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Gibson was fascinated by the tale and explored it in his third life-size marble statue ‘Psyche Borne by the Zephyrs’ (1821–1827), as well as in many drawings and reliefs.

Pan Helping Psyche from the River

c. 1843

Pen and ink on wove paper

Psyche and her Sisters

c. 1843

Pen and ink on wove paper

Psyche and Proserpine

c. 1843

Pen and ink on wove paper

Psyche and the Eagle

c. 1843

Pen and ink on wove paper

Hero and Leander

The works on display here depict episodes from the tragic story of Hero and Leander.

Hero, a priestess of Aphrodite, fell in love with Leander who lived on the opposite side of the Hellespont. Each night, guided by Hero holding up a burning torch, he would swim across this channel.

One night, however, a storm broke out causing him to drown. In despair Hero threw herself into the sea.

‘The Meeting of Hero and Leander’ was executed in the early 1840s for the sculpture gallery of the 6th Duke of Devonshire.

In his memoirs Gibson dates the composition to the years 1821–1822, but a receipt in the archives at Chatsworth House and entries in the Duke’s diaries clearly show that it was made twenty years later.

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This is also suggested by Gibson's preparatory drawings for the relief, which display the more refined style of draughtsmanship typical of his later career.

The Meeting of Hero and Leander

c. 1842

Plaster cast

Hero Grieving over the Body of Leander

c. 1842

Pen and ink on wove paper

The Meeting of Hero and Leander

c. 1842

Pen and ink with wash and gouache on wove paper

Cupid and Psyche: Drawings and Illustrations

Throughout his life, Gibson experimented with drawings of the narrative scenes from ‘Cupid and Psyche’. Stored in his studio in large albums and portfolios, they served as design books for visitors and patrons to browse.

Gibson’s compositions show his profound engagement with the story and his exploration of different styles and ideas.

His various versions of the ‘Marriage of Cupid and Psyche’ specifically reveal his interest in the reliefs of Bertel Thorvaldsen, such as ‘Cupid Revives Psyche’ (1810) in the Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen.

A series of Gibson’s compositions was published to illustrate Elizabeth Strutt’s book ‘The Story of Cupid and Psyche’ in 1851.

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Gibson stated in a letter to Henry Sandbach that she had asked him to produce drawings for the book but, having no time to execute new ones, he gave her examples he already had.

Bertel Thorvaldsen (1789–1838)

Cupid Revives Psyche

1810

Marble

49.5 x 78.0 cm

Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen

After John Gibson RA (1790-1866)

Cupid and Psyche embracing

1851

Engraving

15 x 22.7 cm

Psyche Borne by a Zephyr

Pen and ink with wash on wove paper

Cupid and Psyche

Pen and ink with wash on wove paper

The Marriage of Psyche and Celestial Love

c. 1844

Plaster cast

Cupid and Psyche

Pen and ink with wash over pencil on wove paper

Cupid and Psyche

Pencil and wash on wove paper

Gibson and Canova

When John Gibson arrived in Rome, Antonio Canova was at the height of his powers. He had, by this time, worked for most of the crowned heads of Europe, from George IV and Napoleon to Francis II of Austria and Pope Pius VII.

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Gibson frequented Canova's workshop from October 1817 to October 1822, and these early years in Rome were crucial for the rest of his career.

He was introduced not only to his master's workshop practices but also to important patrons, including Sir George Beaumont and William Spencer Cavendish, 6th Duke of Devonshire.

Canova's studio became a meeting point for young artists from all over Europe and beyond.

He fostered a dynamic atmosphere of artistic exchange between himself and the next generation of sculptors, and the effects of this can be seen in the shared techniques and themes explored by Canova, Gibson and other contemporaries.

The younger sculptor's early works provide ample evidence of his close engagement with his master's output.

Sir Edwin Landseer RA

1802–1873

Portrait of John Gibson RA, c. 1850

Oil on canvas

Sir Edwin Landseer depicted his fellow Royal Academician John Gibson as a “sculptor-philosopher“. His eyes overshadowed by heavy brows, Gibson appears deep in contemplation.

He wears a white collar and black jacket covered by a heavy garment, perhaps a studio smock, but his hands are hidden from the viewer as if to emphasise the sculptor’s intellect above the manual element of his work.

Dionysus from the East Pediment of the Parthenon Frieze

c. 1817

Black chalk on wove paper

Gibson’s interest in reclining figures can also be connected with the sculpture of ‘Dionysus’ from the East Pediment of the Parthenon marbles, which he drew early in his career.

It is possible that Gibson made this drawing directly from the marbles while visiting London on his way to Rome in 1817, or that he drew from a cast of this figure which Canova had in his workshop.

Reclining Female Nude Viewed from the Back

c. 1817

Black and white chalk on wove paper

This drawing of a dark-haired life model was almost certainly made in Rome.

The reclining female nude is a motif that appears in many of Canova’s drawings, maquettes and finished compositions, most notably his ‘Sleeping Nymph’ (1820–1824) in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Free-standing sculptures

i

Hunter and Dog

c. 1847

Plaster cast

In 1851 Gibson exhibited his ‘Hunter and Dog’ (also known as the ‘Greek Hunter’) at the Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. The sculpture was greatly admired and helped to cement Gibson’s reputation in Britain.

Four versions were made: for Henry Sandbach, the Earl of Yarborough, J. Leigh Clare and the Australian Joshua Frey Josephson. It was also reproduced in various media, including on a bronze medal and as a bronze statuette.

ii

Narcissus

1838

Marble

‘Narcissus’ was a key work in Gibson’s career and one he repeated four times. This one was Gibson’s “Diploma Work”, presented to the Royal Academy after his election as an Academician in 1836.

According to Ovid’s ‘Metamorphoses’, the young Narcissus fell fatally in love with his reflection as a result of a divine curse. The ancient poet described the young man as so transfixed by his own image that he appeared to be made of stone.

Gibson highlighted this element of the narrative, showing Ovid’s youth of “Parian marble”.

As with many of Gibson’s sculptures, his inspiration from classical art and literature was combined with observations from daily life.

He recalled producing the sculpture after catching sight of a boy in a similar attitude while out walking on the Pincian Hill in Rome.

iii
The Sleeping Shepherd Boy

1818

Plaster cast

This was Gibson’s first large-scale model and, according to the artist, it was produced under guidance from Canova.

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The naturalistic pose of the sleeping boy reveals the influence of Gibson’s studying from life. But it also suggests his knowledge of a specific classical composition: the ‘Endymion’ relief in the Capitoline Museum, Rome.

According to an ancient Greek myth, Selene, goddess of the moon, fell in love with the shepherd Endymion and asked Zeus to put him into an eternal sleep so that she could visit him every night.

This subject was also depicted by Canova and other artists in his circle, such as the Bavarian sculptor Konrad Eberhard (1768–1859).

Showcase

a.

Study of Two Heads

Possibly for ‘Hylas Surprised by the Naiads’

1820s

Black chalk and pencil with wash on wove paper

b.

Unknown artist

Drawing after Antonio Canova’s ‘Sleeping Nymph’

c. 1820

Pencil on paper

c.

A draft letter from John Gibson accepting his Diploma from the Royal Academy of Milan.

He mentions his training with Canova in the text

d.

Giuseppe Girometti (1780–1851)

Medal Commemorating Antonio Canova

1823

Bronze

e.

C.F. Voight (1800-1874)

Medal Commemorating Bertel Thorvaldsen

1837

Bronze

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Thank you.

Molly Bretton, Access Manager

InTouch at the RA

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