

THE AMBUSH



Ennio Tomai

(L'Aquila 1893 – Napoli 1969)

Misure: 38 x 54 x 20 cm

Tecnica: scultura in bronzo

Signed on the base: "Tomai"

Under the base: antique exhibition label with title "Gazza" and price "2,000 lire".

Provenance: Rome, artist's heirs

Exhibitions: Naples, II Mostra del Sindacato Fascista di Belle Arti, 1930, No. 153.

Bibliography: *La II Mostra del Sindacato Artisti napoletani*, "Il Corriere", October 4, 1930; *Ennio Tomai scultore*, exhibition catalogue edited by P. Del Cimmuto (Rivisondoli, Pinacoteca Civica, August 7 - September 15, 2017), Ascoli Piceno: Artificio Edizioni, 2017, p. 27.



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Tomai was a multifaceted artist who worked in sculpture, painting, cinema and applied arts. He was born in L'Aquila in 1893 but moved to Naples in the early 20th century to attend the Academy of Fine Arts. Intolerant of rules, he preferred to work in the studio of sculptor Filippo Cifariello. In the meantime, he made his debut as a watercolourist at the Exhibition of the Società degli Amatori e Cultori of Rome in 1912, and three of his bronze works were displayed at the Esposizione Nazionale Giovanile di Belle Arti in Naples where he was immediately noticed by the critics. Although Neapolitan realism seemed still strong in his early works, some evocations of Art Nouveau were already visible, and would be fully revealed in the following two years, during a period of further training abroad. He travelled between Paris and Odessa where he established connections with the local aristocracy and received his first important commissions - including the *Portrait of the critic Boris Ivanovič* (painted in Odessa and exhibited at the Roman Secession in 1914).

During the war years he devoted himself to illustration, collaborating between 1916 and 1917 with the magazine "L'Arte Muta". From the graphic works of this phase, the choice of a plain line of Secessionist inspiration emerges, which can also be seen in the set designs and advertising posters of some silent films, created for film companies in Naples. In such a rich mixture of arts and experiences, a sculptural style of international appeal gradually emerged, divided between monumentalism and original decorativism; elegant Art Nouveau rhythms were joined by harmonious and balanced forms derived from his study of Renaissance sculpture, which led to the war memorials he created during the 1920s. At about the same time, the sculptor developed a strong interest in the world of ornithology. His passion, which was to be his signature feature from now on, led him to move to Villa Haas at the Vomero, a house-studio where he could investigate the fascinating nature of the various bird species and where he executed some refined bronzes that appeared in the most important Italian exhibitions of the 1920s and 1930s. In 1925, Tomai exhibited *The Last Coquetry* at the First Exhibition of Neapolitan Art, and the following year he participated with a group of bird sculptures in the first exhibition of the



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Gruppo degli Artisti Abruzzesi residenti a Napoli. At the exhibition of the Sindacato di Belle Arti di Napoli in 1929, the “singular and interesting” (Artieri 1929, p. 249) *Lapwing* appeared, in which Tomai combined meticulous observation of the animal's attitudes with a concise formal grace, which is also evident in *Ambush*, an original casting that can be identified with the *Thieving Magpie* of the 1930 Mostra Sindacale Napoletana. In the elegant mixture of burnished bronze and gilded bronze, in the uniform synthesis of the surfaces, in the full volumes, in the naturalness of the magpie's pose while intent on capturing a little snail climbing on the base, all the refined stylistic nuances of Tomai's *animalier* style are condensed. “In his polished bronzes he achieves noble and expressive forms through careful and sagacious modelling”. These are the words used to describe the iconic and at the same time decorative *Swallows* exhibited in 1926 at the Exhibition of Neapolitan Artists in Leghorn. Deco sensibility and naturalism, but also the firm linearity of the “Novecento”, emerge from Tomai's most original animal sculptures, which also appeared at the Venice Biennale and the Quadriennale in Rome during the 1930s.

Elena Lago

Bibliography

G. Artieri, *Cronache napoletane. La I mostra sindacale campana a Posillipo*, "Emporium", LXX, 1929, 418, p. 249.

L. Servolini, *Cronache livornesi. Mostra di artisti napoletani a Livorno*, "Emporium", LXIV, 1926, 384, p. 389.

Ennio Tomai, exhibition catalogue edited by P. Del Cimmuto (Rivisondoli, Pinacoteca Civica, 7 August - 15 September 2017), Ascoli Piceno, Artificio Edizioni, 2017.

Déco in Italy. L'eleganza della modernità, exhibition catalogue edited by F. Parisi, (Forte di Bard. Bard, 2 December 2022 - 10 April 2023), Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, 2022.



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