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WALL TEXTS
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Am Kupfergraben, 10117 Berlin
Opening hours: Tue – Sun 10 am – 6 pm, Thu 10 am – 8 pm

Canova and the Dance
21 October 2016 – 22 January 2017
An exhibition by Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, in collaboration with Museo Canova, Possagno, and Museo Civico, Bassano del Grappa

The Italian sculptor Antonio Canova (1757 in Possagno – 1822 in Venice) had a lifelong passion for dance. In his *Travel Journ*als from 1779-80 he already revealed his fascination with music, theatre, and dance through his detailed reports of performances he had attended in Florence, Rome and Naples. Toward the end of the 18th century these cities were prominent centers for the development of melodrama and dance. In Rome he had seen Giovanni Battista Borghi's opera *Tito Manlio*, which was accompanied by two dances, and wrote down the names of the principal dancers: Onorato Viganò and Giacomo Tantin. In the San Carlo Theater in Naples, he was deeply impressed by performances by the French choreographer and ballet dancer Chrles Le Picq, one of which depicted the *Rape of the Sabine Women*. Canova also attended discussions about the theater in the salons of the cultural centers of Italy. Antonio d'Este, a sculptor friend of Canova, recounts in his memoirs that on feast days both often took walks in the mountainous surroundings of Rome or in Trastevere *to watch the peasant girls dancing; a dance that fascinated him (Canova) with the innocence of its dancers and from which, by watching the natural movements of these girls, he always drew a lesson -- to the advantage of his art.*

Only in 1790 did Canova start to work on the subject artistically. He was not only inspired by performances of dance, which he knew first-hand, but also by depictions of dancers on antique wall paintings, which were discovered in the *Villa Cicero* in Pompeii in 1759. His numerous drawings laid a wide-ranging artistic foundation for the watercolors, canvas paintings, and marble sculptures that he created during the last decade of the 18th and the early 19th centuries. The peak of his preoccupation with the dance is his three almost life-size *Dancers*, which are shown together in this exhibition for the first time.

Canova's Marble Dancers
In the early 19th century Canova created three sculptures of *Dancers*, each visualizing a different aspect of the theme. The first work, the *Dancer with Hands on Her Hips*, was commissioned by Joséphine de Beauharnais, Napoleon's first wife. It entered the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg in 1815. In 1809 the plaster model for the *Dancer with a Finger on Her Chin* was made for the banker Domenico Manzoni from Forlì. Canova then created the *Dancer with Cymbals*, the centerpiece of this exhibition, for Count Andreas K. Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador in Vienna, between

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1809 and 1812.These three *Dancers* embody Canova's ideal of female grace. His passion for the dance and his interest in composing human bodies seemingly liberated from the laws of gravity are already present in the sculpture of *Hebe*, made in 1796. It is a technical masterpiece as the toes of the goddess only gently touch the ground. According to Canova's own words, he was stimulated by works of classical sculpture, vase paintings and murals from Herculaneum. Antique sculptures such as the *Dancing Maenad* inspired Canova's marbles, which even surpass their models in the subtlety and sensibility of the surface treatment. The latter was already remarked upon with admiration by his contemporaries.

The drawings
Drawing played a fundamental role in Canova's work. The pencil was equivalent to the chisel, both *tools leading to immortality.* Melchiorre Missirini, Canova's friend and secretary, recounts this story in the biography that appeared shortly after the artist's death. According to the writer Leopoldo Cicognara, Canova created *an immense number of graceful drawings of male and female dancers, studying each gentle pose, thereby making a seemingly exhaustive treatment of the gracefulness of dance, which had fascinated the ancients.* These mostly small-scale, quickly drawn sketches in pencil, done in sketchbooks, exemplify the artistic interest in dance with the spontaneity of their formal and compositional language. On the other hand, a completely different aspect of drawing is explored in the representative pen drawing of a *Male Dancer* exhibited in the center of the room. Contour and drawing are precisely executed, comparable to Canova's numerous academic drawings or studies of antique works of art. These drawings, most of which were created in the last decade of the 18th century, formed an artistic repertoire that Canova could later draw on for the compositions of his watercolors, canvas paintings, and marble sculptures.

The sculptor's self-portrait, captured in front of a mirror, empathically illustrates Canova's passion for both drawing and dance. It is a work of mysterious intimacy, showing the artist in advanced age, capturing his thoughts on a sketch-pad. The *Dancer,* turned towards the artist in profile, has been interpreted as an *Allegory of Inspiration*.

The watercolor paintings
Canova's friend, the sculptor Antonio d'Este, relates the following about the creation of these works: *Every day he (Canova) drew the nude in outlines, male and female, then dressed it, always differently, with fabrics, scarfs, veils and continuously altered the form of their folds, with the result of then contrasting them with classical types. And he did not stop after he had created many compositions in the early hours of the morning, which, painted in watercolor, look like the paintings from Herculaneum; h this was the high esteem in which he held the antique masters of the fine arts.* According to an entry in the first catalogue of Canova's works printed in 1817, his watercolor paintings, dedicated to *ideas for dances and playful nymphs and gods of love, muses, philosophers etc.,* were only intended for Canova's own *study and delight.* He had created these works in Possagno, his birthplace, where he retreated in 1798/99. They were sent

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to Rome and then back to Possagno after the artist's death and were later reproduced in prints.

Above all, his repeated visits to the excavation sides in Herculaneum and Pompeii inspired Canova. He was especially impressed with the antique frescoes showing floating *Dancers* in diaphanous garments discovered in the *Villa Cicero* in 1749. The archeologist and writer Johann Joachim Winckelmann described them in 1762 as *the most perfect things I have ever seen, not just amongst old but also modern works,… both in terms of invention and refinement as well as in execution, because they are fleeting like a thought, and beautiful as if painted by the hand of the graces.* In the second half of the 18th century the fresco paintings were often reproduced in drawings and prints that could even be found in castles in Prussia (for example in the marble palace in Potsdam). For Canova these frescoes were the most important visual source for his own artistic interpretation of the subject. Even many years after he had seen them, they inspired him to conceive his very distinctl compositions in watercolor, which were fittingly described as *neo-Pompeiian miniature paintings.*

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