

Vincenzo Gemito (1852-1929)

Sculptor of the Neapolitan soul

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Petit Palais
Musée des Beaux-Arts
de la Ville de Paris

Tuesday to Sunday 10am to 6pm
Late opening Friday until 9pm

INFORMATIONS
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At the opening of our Neapolitan season, the Petit Palais is pleased to present work by sculptor Vincenzo Gemito (1852-1929) that has never been seen in France.

Gemito started life abandoned on the steps of an orphanage in Naples. He grew up to become one of the greatest sculptors of his era, celebrated in his hometown and later in the rest of Italy and Europe. At the age of twenty-five, he was a sensation at the Salon in Paris and, the following year, at the 1878 Universal Exposition. He was by turns criticised and adored by critics, but was responsible for introducing realism into Italian sculpture. Back in Naples, he continued to produce work in spite of bouts of madness.

After his death, he gradually disappeared from art history, dismissed as an artist of the picturesque, which unfairly ignored his pre-eminent role in the sculpture of his time. With nearly 120 works on display, the exhibition is a wonderful chance to rediscover this great artist. It has been organised by the Petit Palais in collaboration with the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, which will later host the exhibition.

The exhibition is presented in chronological order and offers visitors the opportunity to follow the different stages of this astonishing career.

Like all poor children in Naples, Gemito was a street kid along with his friend Totonno, Antonio Mancini, who also became a famous painter. **At the age of ten, they learned the rudiments of painting and sculpture. Both of them were fascinated by the rooms in the National Museum of Naples where they discovered the bronzes of Pompeii.** But they also drew inspiration from everyday life; they used to watch the children fishing in the harbour and the craftsmen making figurines for nativity scenes in the Via San Gregorio Armeno workshops. At seventeen, Gemito exhibited his masterful *Giocatore* – the Card Player sitting on the ground with his head bent over his game –, a spectacular realist plaster cast that was acquired almost immediately by the Royal House of Naples.

Along with a group of young artists, he set up a studio in an abandoned cloister where he sculpted a lot of terracotta heads of young people: *Moretto* (Little Moor), *Scugnizzo* (Street urchin), *Fiocinere* (Harpooner), *Il Malatiello* (Sick Boy), every single one of them amazingly alive and natural

In 1873, at the age of twenty-one, he started on a series of life-size busts of more famous figures such as the painters Morelli, Michetti, and Mariano Fortuny, and notably an intense depiction of the composer Verdi which brought him instant fame. Gemito moved to Paris in 1877, where he made busts of Giovanni Boldini and French sculptor Paul Dubois. Giuseppe de Nittis, who had already made his mark in Paris, introduced Gemito and Mancini, who had joined him there, to everyone who counted in the world of art. The following year, they showed their works at the Universal Exposition.



Vincenzo Gemito, *The Head of a young boy*. Museo e Certosa di San Martino, Naples. Fototeca del polo museale della campania
Photo STUDIO SPERANZA

Vincenzo Gemito, Bust of Anna [Busto di Anna], vers 1886
marbre, 40 x 28 x 28 cm
Musée de Capodimonte, Naples, Italie
Photo Studio Speranza



Gemito with the bust of Anna
Photo Lembo, collection privée

Gemito caused a sensation with his Neapolitan Fisherman; the heightened realism of it elicited surprise, disapproval or disgust from most of the critics. This highly innovative work was nevertheless hugely popular with the public. The «ugliness», **the animality and the smirk of the squatting boy, also attracted the attention of artists like Rodin and, most probably, Degas.** The young sculptor gained the unexpected support of Ernest Meissonnier, an illustrious academic painter, who took him under his wing.

Gemito returned to Naples in 1880 where his beloved partner Mathilde Duffaud died the following year. He retreated to the island of Capri. But he eventually met and married Anna Cutolo, a model who was already posing for Morelli. Anna's great beauty was the inspiration for many pieces, including a magnificent marble bust that is now in the Museo di Capodimonte. Gemito also constructed his own foundry to revive the lost-wax process for bronze casting. The crowning accolade came in 1885, when Gemito received two official commissions from King Umberto I: a monumental marble statue of Charles V to grace one of the niches on the façade of the Royal Palace, and a huge silver table centrepiece. While these difficult commissions were certainly prestigious, they were quite different from his usual subjects and they took their toll on the sculptor's mental health. **In the course of his relentless research, he sank into depression and then madness.** During a period of confinement, which was followed by voluntary exile, **Gemito spent most of his time drawing for his own enjoyment, forsaking sculpture altogether.**

An outstanding draughtsman, he drew a considerable number of portraits and figures. Those from the 1910s are among the most spectacular; they foreshadow all the figurative art of the 1930s and 1940s and inspired artists like Chirico. While still producing these pioneering drawings, Gemito, now back on his feet, embarked on the final phase of his sculptural work. He took his subjects from the classical repertoire in an effort to attain a lost ideal. He became particularly interested in the figure of Alexander the Great and produced many pieces of silverware: silver bowls and medallions, such as the spectacular gilded silver head of Medusa, on loan from the J-Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles). So ended the remarkable career of the foundling from the streets of Naples who became a famous and reclusive artist, and who undeniably deserved his return to grace in the city that had made him internationally famous 140 years ago.

As a complement to the exhibition, there is a space devoted to the lost-wax process for bronze casting – a complex technique that Gemito helped to revive in the 19th century. There is a short film and some easy-to-use touch-screen terminals. One digital device shows the different stages of manufacture, from plaster model to bronze cast, by way of the wax copy.

GENERAL CURATORS:

Christophe Leribault, Director of the Petit Palais

Sylvain Bellenger, Director of the Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte

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ACADEMIC CURATORS:

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Cécilie Champy-Vinas, Curator, head of sculptures at the Petit Palais

Carmine Romano, Art historian

