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The Art of Freedom

**Onorio Ruotolo
and the Leonardo Da Vinci
Art School**

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Don Ciccio Sisca, 1913

The
Art
of
Freedom

**Onorio Ruotolo and the Leonardo
Da Vinci Art School**

Curators
Joseph Sciorra and Peter Vellon

Catalogue for an exhibition at the Italian American Museum
March 9 - May 28, 2004

In Memory of Lucio Ruotolo

Onorio Ruotolo

A Life in Art and Politics

Sculptor, critic, editor, author, poet, illustrator, cartoonist, teacher, Onorio Ruotolo was known as the “Rodin of Little Italy.” His sculpture was a model of realist academic art, grounded in the classics yet with a prevailing concern for social justice.

Ruotolo was born on March 3, 1888, in Cervinara (province of Avellino), Campania, Italy, but grew up in Bagnoli Irpino where his father worked as an engineer. At the age of twelve, Ruotolo began his studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Naples, where he studied for six years. He apprenticed for two years with the Neapolitan sculptor Vincenzo Gemito (1852-1929). Ruotolo’s 1926 article “Vincenzo Gemito e la sublime follia del suo genio” (“Vincenzo Gemito and the Sublime Insanity of his Genius”) was internationally circulated and prompted the Italian government to rescue Gemito from public charges of insanity and his social seclusion.

Ruotolo sailed from Naples to the United States in January 1908. His motives for immigrating were two-fold; one, to escape military conscription and two, the parents of the woman he wished marry had refused his offer of marriage.

Soon after arriving, Ruotolo began a series of plaster busts depicting in realistic fashion immigrants and the destitute tenement dwellers of his adopted city, such as “The Paralytic” (1909); “Indigent” (1909); “The Drunkard” (1911); “Rose the Organ Grinder” (1914), among others. Among his better known pieces is the free-standing statue entitled “Doomed” also known as “The Condemned” (1917), which was Ruotolo’s protest against capital punishment and based on a death row prisoner at Sing-Sing. Writing in 1931, author John May observed, “While he worships the heroic his sympathies are with those whom life has maimed and oppressed.”

During World War I, the artist created a body of work that called attention to the horrors of war. “The Other Heroism” (1916); “The Tragedy of the Mines” (1916); “Red Cross” (1917); “Les Emurees,” also known as “Buried Alive”

(1918); and, “The Wishing Squad” (1916) brought attention to Ruotolo’s artistic and social vision. In *The Figure in American Sculpture: A Question of Modernity* (1995), Ilene Susan Fort writes that Ruotolo’s “rejection of ugliness in favor of the traditional notion of beauty suggests the pervasiveness of a nineteenth century romantic sensibility even in the treatment of the horrors of modern warfare.”

During this period, Ruotolo, along with poet-activist Arturo Giovannitti (1884-1959), co-founded the short-lived progressive cultural magazine *Il Fuoco* in 1914. This “bimonthly magazine of art and struggle” was dissolved after a year because of an ideological disagreement between Ruotolo and Giovannitti about Italy’s entry into the war. Ruotolo later went on to create *Minosse*, a socio-literary publication.

Another aspect of Ruotolo’s composition was his creation of portraits of famous personages from the fields of art and politics. His works include Theodore Dreiser (1918), at the Washington National Portrait Gallery; Arturo Toscanini (1919), at La Guardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts; Enrico Caruso (1921), at the Metropolitan Opera House; Dante (1921); and Thomas Hart Benton (1940), among many others. His political portraits include that of Vladimir Lenin (1918); Eugene Debs (date unknown); and Giacomo Matteotti (1941), the Italian socialist leader assassinated by Fascists in 1924. Ruotolo also created a bust of Benito Mussolini (1932), currently located at the University of Bari, Italy. In her appreciation of the artist’s portraits, Francis Winwar wrote, “Posterity should see not so much the physical likeness of the sculptured, as the qualities that made the person worthy of perpetuation.”

During the 1920s, Ruotolo received commissions for mausoleums and memorials. The Wilson Memorial (1929) at the University of Virginia; the Paino Mausoleum, St. John’s Cemetery; “From Darkness to Light” and the Fusco Memorial, called “The Idyll of Death,” Woodlawn Cemetery; “The Pilgrimage of Life,” Paino and Ambrette Memorial, Calvary Cemetery; and the Calderone Family Mausoleum (1928), Greenfield Cemetery. In 1929, Ruotolo designed “The Mother Heroes,” a war memorial erected in Cervinara’s main piazza.

The Leonardo Da Vinci Art School

In December 1923, Ruotolo's commitment to the arts and social justice inspired him to found and direct the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School at 288 East 10th Street, off Avenue A and nearby Tompkins Square Park in Manhattan's Lower East Side. The first of its kind in the country, the "Leonardo"—as it was affectionately called—was committed to providing free art instruction to young men and women from the working poor. According to the school's yearbook, it was founded "without utilitarian or commercial aims... [and] it conducts its work without prejudice of race or religion, keeping its doors open to all who are eager to learn." Initially, sessions were only held during the evening since most of the students were employed and working during the day. The tuition fee was six dollars a month for only those who could afford it. Those who were unable to pay only had to demonstrate some talent for the arts and admittance was free.

The Leonardo was eventually reorganized in 1934 and reopened at 149 East 34th Street. Having secured political support and labor union backing, the school's mission was expanded to include free admission through the establishment of the Friends of Italian Arts Association. To that end, the school eliminated tuition requiring students to only provide their own art materials. The school maintained the same ideals and progressive principles it had established earlier. None of the employees of the school, whether administrative or instructional, received financial remuneration of any kind for their services. At the dedication to the school, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia unveiled a fresco symbolic of the New Deal and stated "I unveil this fresco dedicated to the progressive President [Franklin D. Roosevelt] of the United States and inaugurate the new progressive school of art, the Leonardo Da Vinci Art School."

At the time, the Leonardo was the only school in New York which taught the technique of fresco painting. Among other classes offered were those in drawing and painting, mural painting, cartooning, sculpture, wrought iron, wood carving, pottery and ceramics, English and Italian literature, music, and drama, to name a few.

Ruotolo directed the Leonardo for two decades, mentoring numerous artists,

including the sculptor Isamu Noguchi. Ruotolo persuaded Noguchi to drop out of medical school at Columbia University and then offered him work in his studio so he could quit his restaurant job. Noguchi wrote, “I shall always be grateful to him and the Italian community in New York.” Ultimately, Noguchi felt confined by academic art at the Leonardo and noted, “everything I learned I had later to unlearn.”

Unfortunately, with the onset of World War II contributions diminished significantly. Sources suggest that the school was evicted from its third and final location at 130 East 16th Street on April 28, 1942. Although the Leonardo’s tenure was just shy of twenty years, the noble and progressive ideals of its founder assured its substantial impact on the working class. To Onorio Ruotolo, it was the Leonardo which “diffused among the children of workers, the Light of Art.”

Impaired by a stroke, Ruotolo spent the last twenty years of his life writing and publishing poetry. His collections include *Nel fuoco del rimorso* (1949); *Il mio primo maestro: Poemetto* (c. 1948); *Convito d’amore: Poemetto* (1949); and *Accordi e dissonanze* (1958).

Beginning in 1930, Ruotolo disavowed his earlier political beliefs and even his associations. According to his son Lucio, “[H]e became increasingly to oppose all politics as manipulative and self-serving.” Ruotolo de-politicized the nature of his past friendships with Konrad Berkovici, Arturo Giovannitti, David Greenberg, Helen Keller, John Macy, Carlo Tresca, and others.

From 1950 to 1957, Ruotolo served as the educational director of the Shirtmakers Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. The 78-year-old Onorio Ruotolo died of a heart ailment at his home at 20 Bank Street, Greenwich Village on December 18, 1966.

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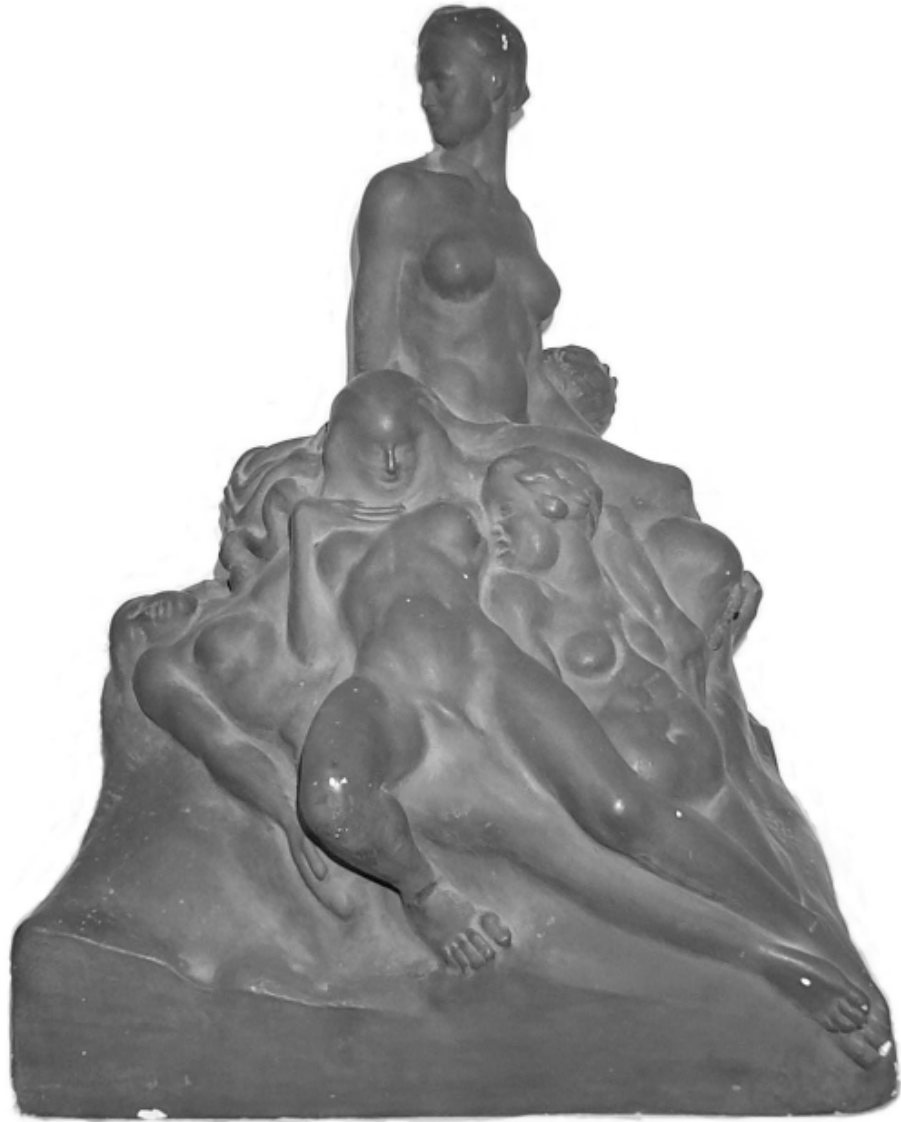
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Helen Keller, 1919



Lincoln and Black Child, 1916



The Seven Deadly Sins, 1926



Cardinal Mercier, 1919

List of Objects

Indigent, 1909

Unsigned

Painted plaster

17" x 9 1/2" x 10 1/2"

The Paralytic, 1909

Also known as "The Derelict"

Signed

Painted plaster

13 1/2" x 10 1/2" x 9 1/2"

The Drunkard, 1911

Also known as "Old Musician"

Signed

Painted plaster

12" x 6 1/2" x 8 1/2"

Don Ciccio Sisca, 1913

Signed

Dated: "N. Y. XXIV AGOSTO MCMXIII"

Painted plaster

18 3/4" x 15" x 12 1/2"

Helen Keller, 1919

Signed

Painted plaster

13 1/4" x 14 3/4" x 9"

Black Victim, 1916

Also known as "The Slave"

Signed

Painted plaster

14" x 6" x 9 1/2"

Lincoln and Black Child, 1916

Also known as "The Father of a Race"

Unsigned

Painted plaster

18 ½" x 16" x 13 ½"

And Jesus Wept, 1914

Unsigned

Painted plaster

24" x 18 ¾" x 1 ¾"

Cardinal Mercier, 1919

Also known as "Prince of Sorrows"

Unsigned

Painted plaster

17 ¼" x 17 ¾" x 13 ¼"

Konrad Bercovici, undated

Unsigned

Painted plaster

10" x 14 ½" x 9 ¼"

The Seven Deadly Sins, 1926

Signed

Painted plaster

21 ½" x 18" x 18"

Betsy Ross, 1940

Unsigned

Painted plaster

13 ¾" x 7 ¼" x 6"

Howard Scott, 1942

Unsigned

Painted plaster

16 ¾" x 8 ½" x 8 ¼"