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Saint Louis Art Museum acquires Calvi’s bust of ‘Selika,’ a 19th-century work complementing museum’s ‘Othello’

ST. LOUIS, May 2, 2023—The Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM) announced today that it has acquired the striking marble and bronze sculpture “Selika” (1874), by the Italian sculptor Pietro Calvi (1833-1884). Depicting the character of the African queen “Selika” from the 1865 opera “L’Africaine,” Calvi presents her at a reflective moment: the white marble that frames her body provides a dramatic plumed headdress, while the cast bronze comprising her head and upper torso highlights the features of her face, along with her necklace and earrings. The work is the pendant piece to Calvi’s “Othello” (c. 1870), acquired by SLAM in 2020; “Selika” will go on view at the museum this winter, and will be installed near “Othello.”

Pietro Calvi was widely recognized during his lifetime for his skill and creativity as a sculptor. Born in Milan in 1833, he studied at the Accademia di Brera, learning techniques for working with both marble and bronze. An interest in ethnography led him to explore the creation of sculptures featuring people or popular characters of color—not a common subject for sculpture in this period. The results were dramatic works that combined white marble with the dark patina of cast bronze, an uncommon and even rebellious approach that moves away from the purity of the white marble works that had long dominated. Calvi’s sculptures were widely exhibited, including at the Parma Exhibition of 1870—a noted, pan-Italian exhibition intended to celebrate the newly unified states of Italy—as well as at the Royal Academy in



Pietro Calvi, Italian, 1833–1884; “Selika”, 1874; marble and bronze; 38 x 19 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Bequest of Edith J. and C.C. Johnson Spink, Gift of the Ford Foundation, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Marcus Rice, Bequest of Pearl B. Wright, and Bequest of Dr. Byron Mansfield Wagner and Jedonna Prince Wagner, all by exchange 6:2023; Courtesy Bowman Sculptur

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London, the Paris Salon, and in a number of world's fairs. In fact, Calvi exhibited pendant busts of "Selika" and "Othello" at the Royal Academy in 1872. In addition to his own works, Calvi also contributed to the sculptural programs of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele and the Duomo cathedral in Milan.

"These two works, 'Selika' and 'Othello,' demonstrate Pietro Calvi's unique artistic vision, as well as his skill in working with two very different and often challenging materials," said Simon Kelly, curator of modern and contemporary art at SLAM.

"While the characters of 'Othello' and 'Selika' may be seen differently in the 21st century than they were in Calvi's time, we can appreciate the ways in which the artist sought to capture crucial moments in their narrative with delicacy and beauty. The opportunity to add 'Selika' to our collection, and our presentation of 'Othello,' enhances the viewer's experience of both works."

The depiction of "Selika" was likely inspired by the character of the same name from Giacomo Meyerbeer's 1865 opera "L'Africaine" (The African Woman). In the opera, Selika is an African queen who shows mercy by sparing the life of Vasco da Gama, a European adventurer. However, at the end of the opera, she commits suicide because da Gama, her lover, has absconded with another woman. Calvi's sculpture appears to capture Selika at a poignant moment of reflection, perhaps just before she inhales the poisonous scent of the flowers of the manchineel tree. Calvi has also cast the flowers in bronze, and they are carefully held in her hand and protruding from the marble shawl that surrounds her. Much better known in the 19th century than today, the character of Selika served as a model for Black singers, most notably in the United States the soprano Marie Selika Williams. Born Marie Smith (c. 1849 – May 19, 1937), she adopted the stage name Madame Selika, and during her successful international career was the first Black singer to perform at the White House, in 1878, and also performed for Queen Victoria in London in 1883.

In addition to joining SLAM's other work by Calvi, the acquisition connects to a different work made two centuries earlier: Melchior Barthel's "Bust of a Black Man," a black and white marble bust made in the 1660s by a German artist who was commissioned to create a series of African figures for a Venetian tomb. Barthel's work uses marble in contrasting colors—with white marble forming the collar of the figure's clothing, and the head sculpted from a dark-hued marble.

The Saint Louis Art Museum is one of the nation's leading comprehensive art museums with collections that include works of art of exceptional quality from virtually every culture and time period. Areas of notable depth include Oceanic art, ancient American art, ancient Chinese bronzes and European and American art of the late 19th and 20th centuries, with particular strength in 20th-century German art. Admission to the Saint Louis Art Museum is free to all every day. For more information, call 314.721.0072 or visit slam.org.



Pietro Calvi, Italian, 1833–1884; "Othello", c.1870; marble and bronze; height: 35 1/2 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Bequest of Morton D. May, Bequest of Edith J. and C.C. Johnson Spink, Gift of Margaret Donk Waters, and Gift of Professor and Mrs. Theo Haimann, all by exchange 13:2020a,b