

**WILLIAM TYLER**

1728–1801

**OEDIPUS BEFORE THE TEMPLE OF THE FURIES AT COLONUS**

Terracotta

19 x 25 ½ inches; 480 x 650 mm

Signed and dated: 'W Tyler Excu. 1765'



Collections:

Cyril Humphris, London;

Humphris sale, Sotheby's, New York, 10-11 January 1995, lot 74, as Diogenes;

English private collection, to 2023;

Anonymous sale, Sotheby's, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2023, lot 52 as Diogenes;

Lowell Libson & Jonny Yarker Ltd.

Literature:

Ingrid Roscoe, *A Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain, 1660-1851*, New Haven and London, 2009, p. 1269, no. 72, as Diogenes.

Exhibited:

Possibly London, Society of Artists, 1765, 'a monumental medallion; a model', no.181.

This finely modelled terracotta relief is a fascinating work of European neo-classicism. Signed and dated by William Tyler 1765, the relief is based on a design made in Rome by Anton Raphael Mengs, recorded in a finished drawing now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The drawing was one of several designs Mengs made in preparation for carved gems for British patrons in the early 1760s. Precisely how Tyler, who seems not to have travelled to Italy, became aware of Mengs's design is unclear. Tyler, a pupil of Louis-François Roubiliac, was a remarkably fluent sculptor and inventive designer who produced a series of distinguished funerary monuments, he was a founder Royal Academician and heavily involved in the administration of the Academy throughout its first thirty years. Tyler exhibited a number of 'models' of bas-reliefs at the Society of Artists in the 1760s and the present work may be identifiable as 'a monumental medallion, a model' shown in 1765.

Tyler was a successful and productive artist who completed a steady stream of ambitious sculpted funerary monuments from 1760 until his death in 1801. Tyler's origins are obscure, although he described himself the 'son and grandson of a citizen [of London] and many

years student under the late Mr Roubiliac.<sup>1</sup> Tyler was established by the early 1760s when he competed for two significant sculpture commissions, first for the monument to General Wolfe for Westminster Abbey, secondly for the statue of George III at the Royal Exchange. In both cases the commission went to Joseph Wilton. Tyler was involved with the foundation of the Foundling Hospital and exhibited at the Society of Artists from its inception. In 1765 he became one of the Society's directors and in December 1768 he was one of the three sculptors, along with Joseph Wilton and Agostino Carlini, to be elected a founder member of the Royal Academy.

Tyler's surviving sculptures, as Malcolm Baker has observed, owe much to Roubiliac, particularly 'in the subtlety with which his portrait busts are carved.' His best funerary monuments, such as tomb of Sir John Cust at Belton or Samuel Vassall in King's Chapel, Boston have a lively dynamism which shows that he was a designer of considerable flair. Tyler had a close relationship with several architects, designing complex monuments with Henry Keene and Robert Adam. It is possibly in this context that the present grand terracotta model should be viewed.

Throughout the 1760s Tyler shows a sequence of models of reliefs at the Society of Artists: in 1764 'a basso-relievo, the story of Narcissus', in 1765 'a tablet, Bacchus Sleeping' and 'a lion couchant' and in 1766 'a model of the Thames, with his commercial attributes.' All these works point to Tyler's relationship with architects, the tablets being ideal for the centre of chimneypieces, several of which he is recorded carving for Milton Hall in Cambridgeshire and Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire. The present beautifully modelled terracotta may well have been conceived as an overmantel or for inclusion in architectural schemes. One of the features of the new neo-classicism being championed by Robert Adam was a reliance on classically inspired ornament to articulate interiors. Adam harvested designs from a plethora of antiquarian sources to provide plaster and painter reliefs for his rooms. As Adriano Aymonino has recently demonstrated, Adam frequently took antique details out of context, radically altering their scale to fit his interiors, for example, he often reproduced designs from antique gems on an architectural scale, he also regularly mixed modern sources with the antique to provide a rich and varied language of ornament.

Tyler's complex figural group is borrowed directly from Mengs's design, a drawing Mengs seems to have made in around 1760. According to an inscription on the verso of Mengs's drawing now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and identified here as being in the hand of the dealer Thomas Jenkins, states that the drawing was specifically made: 'as an imitation of the antique in order to be engraved, Pichler accordingly copied it for me, who procured the drawing of Mengs himself in 1763 upon a fine onyx. L<sup>d</sup> Montagu has its companion, Priam at Achilles's feet, drawn by Mengs & engraved by Pichler.' Jenkins was one of the major figures in the Roman art world from the early 1760s. On Mengs's departure from Rome for Spain in 1763, he acquired a considerable number of works from Mengs's studio, including the design of *Oedipus Before the Temple of the Furies at Colonus*. Mention on the verso of the drawing of John Montagu, Marquess of Monthermer is notable. Whilst in Rome, Montagu became a good client of Jenkins's, as well as sitting to Mengs for his portrait. A drawing at Pavlovsk by Mengs recording an ancient cameo of the head of

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<sup>1</sup> Ingrid Roscoe, *A Biographical Dictionary of Sculptors in Britain 1660-1851*, New Haven and London, 2009, p.1294.

Minerva from the collection of Montagu is carefully inscribed by Jenkins that it was gift from the artist in 1762.<sup>2</sup> Whilst neither Mengs's design for *Priam at Achilles's Feet* nor Anton Pichler's carved gem after the design survive, we know of its appearance thanks to plaster impressions made and marketed in Rome by Cristiano Dehn.

The plaster impression is included in Dehn's monumental catalogue of casts after engraved gems published by Francesco Mario Dolce and dedicated to the Society of Antiquaries in London in 1772. The *Descrizione Istorica del Museo di Cristiano Dehn* also includes an account and impression of Pichler's gem of *Oedipus Before the Temple of the Furies at Colonus* where it is stated that the gem is in the collection of 'Sig. Robinson.'<sup>3</sup> As Steffi Roettgen first pointed out, this is almost certainly the traveller and collector Thomas Robinson who sat to Mengs in 1760 and who bought extensively from Thomas Jenkins. The statement on the verso of the Mengs drawing at the Met suggests that Pichler did not carve the gem until after Mengs had left for Madrid in 1763, meaning it was probably not dispatched to Robinson until sometime later. All this points to Tyler's relief having been made either from Pichler's gem, or more likely one of Dehn's impressions, very soon after its completion and arrival in Britain.

The fact that Dehn included the two Pichlers after Mengs's designs in trays of impressions of antique gems, underscores their value to contemporaries as authentically 'antique' designs. Again, as Steffi Roettgen has pointed out, the subject Mengs treats, the blind Oedipus, led by his daughters Ismene and Antigone to the temple of the Eumenides at Colonus was iconographically unique; it appears to be the first time a modern artist treated the subject of Sophocles's play. The composition is laid out like a relief in a horizontal oval, at the centre Antigone embraces her seated father, framed on either side by Ismene and the exiled Polynices, lamenting Oedipus's miserable condition.

Tyler has more or less translated Mengs's design into terracotta, although throughout he makes subtle, but significant alterations. The frieze-like composition of Mengs's design is given more three-dimensionality, Antigone, rather than being seen in strict profile, is positioned to give greater depth and volume to the composition, this, in turn, allows Tyler to give greater emphasis to Oedipus's blind state. Details, such as the sculpture in the pediment of the temple have been altered. In short, Tyler has adapted the design to best capitalise on the larger scale and greater sculptural potential of terracotta. Long incorrectly identified as depicting Diogenes and Alexander the Great, the recognition of the source finally makes sense of Tyler's signature - 'Excu' rather than 'Inv' – and enables us to associate it with the 'monumental medallion; a model' shown at the Society of Artists in 1765. The identification of the source also reveals this large relief to be an unusually ambitious record of the rapid transmission of neo-classical designs across Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> Steffi Roettgen, *Anton Raphael Mengs 1723-1779: Das malerische und zeichnerische werk*, 1999, Munich, vol.I, cat. no. Z65, pp.444-445.

<sup>3</sup> Francesco Maria Dolce, *Descrizione Istorica del Museo di Cristiano Dehn*, Rome, vol.II, p.46, no.37.



Cristiano Dehn, after Anton Pichler  
Plaster impression, 1772  
1985.1004.1.j  
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Anton Raphael Mengs  
*Oedipus before the Temple of the Furies between his Daughters Antigone and Ismene*  
Pen and brown ink, brown wash, heightened with white gouache, over graphite  
7 ½ × 8 ¾ inches; 190 × 223 mm  
ca. 1760–61  
Harry G. Sperling Fund, 2014  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
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