

# Artwork of the Month, February 2021

Peter Brown, MBE, FSA

Sculptures formerly at Wentworth Woodhouse, c. 1755



Figure 1

2. *Young Centaur (tempted by love)* 3. *Old Centaur (bound by love)*  
height (to top of raised arm) 102 cm      height 90 cm



Figure 2



Figure 3

*Peter Brown, formerly Director of Fairfax House, writes about the Wentworth Woodhouse Centaurs. These exquisite sculptures were acquired by the 2nd Marquess of Rockingham in 1761. They lived in his Grosvenor Square townhouse until his death in 1782, and thereafter at Wentworth Woodhouse until 1949, when they were purchased – for £178 – on behalf of the York City Corporation. Until 1975 they sat in niches at the far end of the Assembly Rooms. They were then sentenced to the Art Gallery’s storeroom, from which they emerged for the Masterpieces from Yorkshire Houses exhibition in 1994 and – recently in 2019, and to striking effect – in the show in which Poussin’s Triumph of Pan was exhibited. They may currently be seen in the Burton Gallery. They are almost certainly the work of Bartolomeo Cavaceppi, whose studio carved many copies of the most famous ancient statues.*

The **Young Centaur** with his right arm raised in celebration, is ‘ecstatic with joy and laughter, delighted with the presence of the young god on his back’.<sup>1</sup> He displays the pelt of a wild boar or goat, draped across his left arm, and holds a knurled club, which may, perhaps, be meant to represent the spinal column of the unfortunate animal.



Figure 4 and 5

The centaur's face is satyr-like, with pointed ears and mischievous grin, and this may reflect the many associations in ancient mythology, between centaurs and Bacchus (Dionysus), the god of wine and fertility.



Figure 6

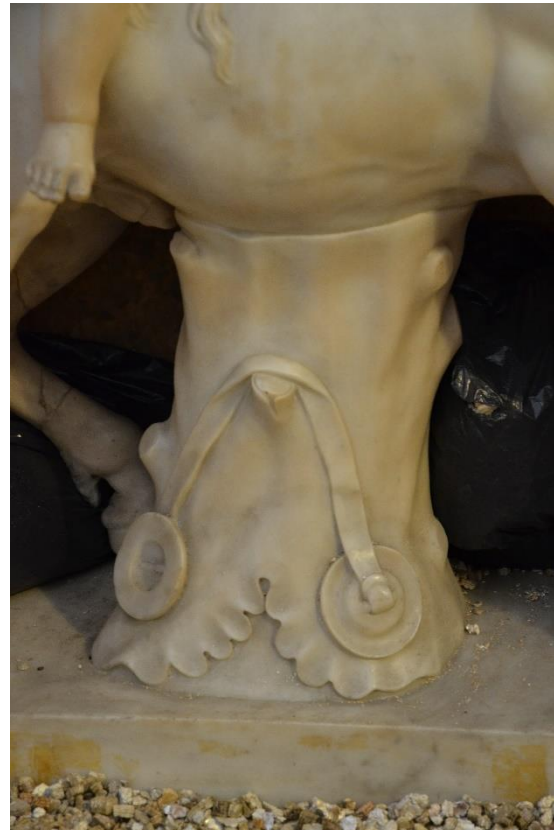


Figure 7

It is likely that the infant figure represents the 'invincible force of love'. What is remarkable is the fine modelling of the composition. The centaur's muscles are powerfully represented, although not given too much emphasis, and the attention to detail is of a very high standard.

The *Old Centaur*, as seen from his ungainly posture, is in a state of anguish, tortured by desire and with a face marked by rage and concern. On his left shoulder is a pelt of a panther or leopard (animals often associated with Bacchus), and claws from one paw dig into his shoulder. The tail of the animal's pelt is being used to bind the centaur's arms behind his back.

The young figure of Eros, riding freely on his back, is, like the infant figure on the other statue, crowned with vine leaves and grapes. His body is a realistic depiction of chubby flesh being squeezed by a type of belt traditionally given to trainee riders in Hellenistic times.



Figure 8

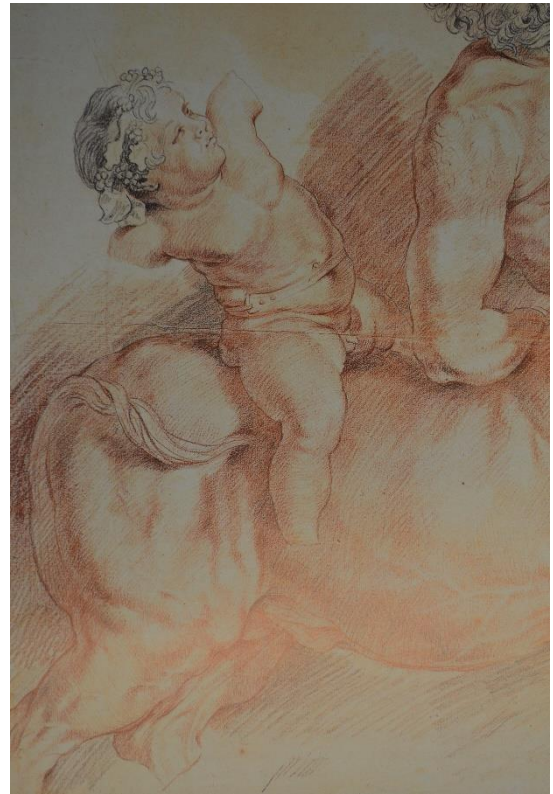


Figure 9

The composition of this group (although only two-thirds size) is similar to a damaged statue said to have been discovered on the estates of the Fonseca family, adjoining the Lateran in Rome, in around 1600. Peter Paul Rubens, who was twice in Rome between 1600 and 1608, sketched the statue in its damaged state from different angles, and other sketches show some interesting details. The statue was restored by Nicholas Cordier around 1607, and engraved by François Perrier, for inclusion in his famous book on the hundred most important antiquities of Italy. This *Centaur with Cupid* entered the Borghese collection, and remained there until acquired by Napoleon Bonaparte for display in Paris in about 1810, and it now forms part of the collection in the Louvre. There are many similarities between the *Borghese Centaur with Cupid* and the Wentworth Woodhouse (WW) version of the *Old Centaur*. The infants on their backs, for example, could be twins, although in some respects the WW version is more finely modelled.



Figure 10



Figure 11

A more informative comparison, with even more strikingly similar features, is with the so-called *Furietti Centaurs* now in the Capitoline Museum in



Figure 12 and 13

Rome. Discovered by Monsignor Furietti during the excavations of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, they were later bought from Furietti's heirs by Pope Clement XI in 1765. The statues are thought to date from around 100 AD, although

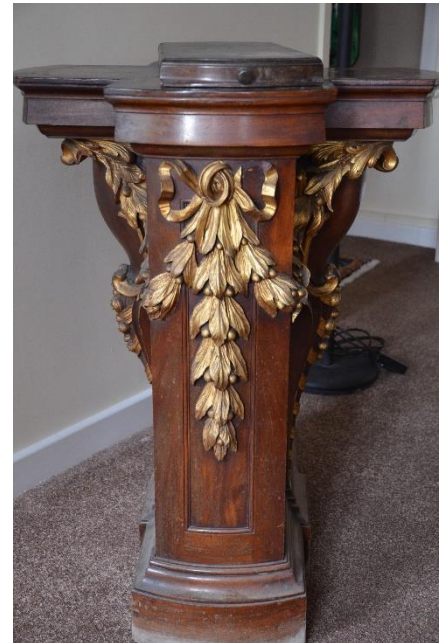
some scholars suggest they may be even earlier. The *WW Centaurs* are only two-thirds size, but careful comparison with the *Furietti Centaurs* suggests that the *WW Centaurs* are copies that combine the *Furietti* torsos with the *Borghese* infant and another version of an infant on a statue in the Vatican of a *Centaur with Hare*.

## STANDS



The mahogany stands made for displaying the Centaurs have now been reunited with the statues and a close study reveals a remarkable degree of design and composition. Nicholas Penny felt these stands to be ‘of special interest, with scrolled shields and swags splendidly carved and gilt’.

Figure 14  
Figure 15



The top plates, for example, which match the size of the bases of the statues, have a clever ball-and-cup mechanism, allowing the statues to be rotated (there are even notches cut to house felt strips intended to prevent scratching). As a result, the statues can then be positioned from the front or side, and moved with little physical effort. Constructed of oak with mahogany veneers and mouldings, they are designed in a restrained English rococo fashion. The makers of these remarkable stands are, as yet, unknown, but they might have been provided by the Wakefield firm of Wright and Elwick, which regularly appears in Lord Rockingham’s accounts. However, a London firm is more likely, given that the Centaurs were first on display in the London townhouse from 1761 to 1782, before being transferred with the other contents to Wentworth Woodhouse on the death of Lord Rockingham.

***The full text of Peter’s paper, complete with scholarly apparatus and acknowledgements, will be issued in due course as an Occasional Essay.***

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1. Wentworth Woodhouse, by Nathaniel Whittock, c.1830
- Fig. 2. Young Centaur (tempted by Love)
- Fig. 3. Old Centaur (bound by Love)
- Fig. 4. Young Centaur with Eros on his back
- Fig. 5. Pelt of an animal on his arm
- Fig. 6. Arm raised in celebration
- Fig. 7. Stand decorated with cymbals
- Fig. 8. Old Centaur being ruled by Eros
- Fig. 9. Rubens sketch of the excavated Centaur.
- Fig. 10. Claws of pelt digging into the Centaur's chest
- Fig. 11. Tail of the pelt binding the wrists together.
- Fig. 12. Young Furietti Centaur (black marble)
- Fig. 13. Old Furietti Centaur (black marble)
- Fig. 14. Mahogany stand
- Fig. 15. Mahogany stand (detail)

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<sup>1</sup> A. Pasquier and J-L Martinez, *100 chefs-d'oeuvre de la Sculpture grecque au Louvre*, Paris, 2007.