

VINCENZO GEMITO

(Naples 1852 - 1929)

A foundling pushed through the hatch of the Pio Casa dell'Annunziata in Naples immediately after his birth, Gemito is best known for his sculptures of scugnizzi - the poor, parentless children of Naples from which he sprang. Brought up by a house-painter and his wife, he received the nickname "Gemito" from his constant early wailing. At nine he was sent off to work for the local sculptor Emmanuele Caggiano, helping him on the statue of Victory for the column in the Piazza dei Martiri. After an accident caused by imitating an acrobat, which resulted in brain-damage that manifested itself in bouts of insanity in later life, he ran away. In 1864 he became Stanislao Lista's assistant and learnt to model in wax and clay, which he always preferred to working marble. In 1868 he exhibited a Giucatore di carte, and then began to make busts both of the common people of Naples, and of his fellow artists, distinguished for their immediacy and spontaneity - notably those of Verdi in 1872 and Fortuny in 1873. Having won acclaim with these in Italy, he won international fame as a sculptor of revolutionary directness with his Pescatore at the Salon of 1877 in Paris, where he went to live with Mancini from 1877 to 1880. Returning to Naples, he devoted himself particularly to bronzes, making some of the most famous works of his career, including the Filosofo, which won the highest prize at the Universal Exhibition of 1900 in Paris, and the Acquaiolo. Driven mad with despair by the death of his model and wife Anna Cutolo, he spent the last years of his life living like a hermit, sculpting and drawing in his lucid intervals.

Head of Dante

Terracotta

H. 35 cm.

Signed in pencil on the shoulder: Gemito

Portrait heads were a speciality of Gemito's in the earlier part of his career, but these were usually studied from the life. Nonetheless certain great figures from the past inspired the sculptor to make imaginary portraits of them, amongst them Alexander the Great, Charles V, and Dante, the subject of the present bust. The present terracotta was used as the model for a bronze bust, of which there is a version belonging to Lady Matheson on loan to the

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National Trust at Montacute. This is unsigned, but is inscribed with the date 1886 and the name of the founder, Sabatino, Napoli. The latter stands for Sabatino de Angelis, whom Alfred Gilbert also employed to cast his Perseus. It can be presumed that the present bust in terracotta is contemporary with or slightly antedates this bronze.