



Short Notice

Talking of Door Knockers

• MARIJN SCHAPELHOUMAN •

Simple objects probably don't stir the blood. But sometimes an everyday item can be so striking that it evokes images that are not actually there. Perhaps the most famous scene in which something of this kind occurs is found in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. In that tale, the old miser Scrooge is reminded on Christmas Eve that his partner in business, Jacob Marley, who was almost as tight-fisted as he, died exactly seven years ago to the day. After Scrooge had eaten his 'melancholy dinner in his usual melancholy tavern', he went home. He was just about to put his key in the lock when he noticed the door knocker. 'Now, it is a fact, that there was nothing at all particular about the knocker on the door, except that it was very large. It is also a fact, that Scrooge had seen it night and morning during his whole residence in that place; also that Scrooge had as little of what is called fancy about him as any man in the City of London, even including – which is a bold word – the corporation, aldermen, and livery. Let it also be borne in mind that Scrooge had not bestowed one thought on Marley, since his last mention of his seven-years' dead partner that afternoon. And then let any man explain to me, if he can, how it happened that Scrooge, having his key in the lock of the door, saw in the

< Detail of fig. 4

knocker, without its undergoing any intermediate process of change: not a knocker, but Marley's face.'

In his story Dickens says nothing about the actual shape of this perfectly ordinary door knocker. It is quite possible that what confronted Scrooge was something like the bronze example in the shape of an eagle's head in the Rijksmuseum (fig. 1).² In many of the screen versions of the story the knocker is shown in the shape of an



Fig. 1
ANONYMOUS,
*Door Knocker in
the Shape of an
Eagle's Head*, Italy,
c. 16th century.
Bronze with traces
of gilding, h. 22.8 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-17239.



animal's head, which without too much difficulty is transformed into the head of the dead Marley – with his spectacles on his forehead – and back again. Dickens was concerned to make it abundantly clear to his readers that there was nothing at all uncommon about this knocker, and there are examples that are far more unusual than the knocker that triggered Scrooge's imagination. How about the one in the form of a grinning satyr, which appears to be riding on the back of a meek-looking cow (fig. 2) and one, no less spectacular, with two huge lions gazing up adoringly at a surly-looking Hercules staring into space (fig. 3).³ But the most extravagant and highly imaginative door knockers that were ever made come from Bologna in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The Rijksmuseum, alas, does not have a bronze knocker from Bologna to display, but that deficiency, to a great extent, has been remedied by the

Fig. 2
FOLLOWER OF RICCIO
(ANDREA BRIOSCO,
c. 1470-1532),
*Door Knocker in the
Shape of a Monster
Diving Head First*,
1525-49.
Bronze, h. 27 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-16935.

Fig. 3
CIRCLE OF
TIZIANO ASPETTI,
*Door Knocker
in the Shape of a
Standing Hercules
with Two Lions*,
1575-1600.
Bronze, h. 23.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-NM-3309.

Fig. 4
UBALDO GANDOLFI,
*Design for a Door
Knocker*, 1760-80.
Pen and brown ink
over black chalk
with brown wash,
287 x 22 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. RP-T-2015-16;
purchased with the
support of Mr and
Mrs Van Hulsen-
Ognibeni/
Rijksmuseum Fonds.

recent acquisition of a magnificent, exuberant design for a door knocker drawn by – in all probability – Ubaldo Gandolfi (1728-1781) (fig. 4).⁴ The quite simple basic shape is made up of arcs of a circle, two concave at the top, two convex below, adorned with scrolls, drapes, foliar shapes and two female heads that terminate in acanthus leaves; there are also three putti, the one in the middle stretching out his



little arms in utter joy, while his somewhat more sedate companions look down on him from their lofty perches. Below the centre putto there is a grotesque mask in the form of a monster with a gaping maw. Ubaldo Gandolfi is often described as an artist with one foot in late Bolognese Baroque and the other in early Neoclassicism, and that image is strengthened by this drawing. The round, curling shapes still belong in the Baroque, but overall there is an evident striving for symmetry, while the fluting in the main form and the female heads are Neoclassical motifs. A striking aspect is the crisp, sustained rendering of light and shade executed with utter consistency, which points up the object's three-dimensionality; the viewer has no difficulty imagining what the door knocker would have looked like cast in bronze. The fact that Ubaldo Gandolfi worked as a sculptor as well as a painter is relevant here: he was used to thinking in three dimensions.

It is a recurrent trope in the literature on the various artists with the surname Gandolfi, which by now is quite extensive, that the work of one is not always easily distinguishable from the work of another. Ubaldo's drawings and those of his younger brother Gaetano (1734-1802), in particular, can still give rise to confusion. Peter Fuhring included the Rijksmuseum drawing in his catalogue of the Houthakker Collection with an attribution to Gaetano.⁵ Shortly afterwards Donatella Biagi Maino published a design in Milan very similar in form and drawing style to Houthakker's sheet as a work by Ubaldo.⁶ Prisco Baldi, who two years later produced his weighty tome about Rinaldo, Ubaldo, Gaetano and Mauro Gandolfi, was evidently unaware of the drawing in the Houthakker Collection and the one in Milan. He did, though, describe other designs for door knockers, all of which he attributed to

Ubaldo Gandolfi.⁷ Mimi Cazort then took him to task: she maintained that two of those seven drawings were not by any of the Gandolfis.⁸ All in all there remains a group of six designs for door knockers that the various authors agree have to be the work of Ubaldo. To my mind the drawing discussed here fits seamlessly into this group and can therefore without doubt be attributed to Ubaldo Gandolfi.

Ubaldo Gandolfi rarely if ever dated his drawings, so most authors have not risked dating his designs for door knockers. Mimi Cazort is the exception; she thinks that the design for a knocker in Ottawa could have been made between 1760 and 1765. It seems to me that in view of its Neoclassical features our drawing was made somewhat later: perhaps around 1765 to 1770 would not be too rash a proposition. The similarity in style to a drawing in New York, a design for an altarpiece dated 1766, in any event does not conflict with my suggestion.⁹

This leaves us with the question as to whether Ubaldo's design was ever actually executed in bronze. To date no bronze knocker corresponding to any of the various designs has been found. On the other hand, Ubaldo's older brother Rinaldo (1718-1780), an instrument maker and clockmaker, was also a bronze caster.¹⁰ It seems highly likely, therefore, that Ubaldo might have drawn his designs at the specific request of his brother when Rinaldo was presented with an actual commission. Who knows what things of beauty are still to be found in and around Bologna? In the meantime we can count ourselves lucky that this appealing design has been added to the Rijksmuseum's modest collection of eighteenth-century Italian drawings.

NOTES

- 1 *A Christmas Carol: The Original Manuscript* by Charles Dickens, New York 1971, pp. 20-22.
- 2 See Jaap Leeuwenberg assisted by Willy Halsema-Kubes, *Beeldhouwkunst in het Rijksmuseum*, coll. cat. Amsterdam 1973, p. 391, no. 669b (ill.). The ring that the creature originally held in its beak is missing.
- 3 Leeuwenberg and Halsema-Kubes 1971 (note 2), p. 387, no. 657 (ill.).
- 4 Provenance: De Giudice Gallery, Genoa, 1963; Lodewijk Houthakker Collection, Amsterdam; Ineke Hellingman Collection, Amsterdam; purchased with the support of Mr and Mrs Van Hulsen-Ognibeni/Rijksmuseum Fonds, 2015.
- 5 Peter Fuhring, *Design into Art: Drawings for Architecture and Ornament. The Lodewijk Houthakker Collection*, vol. 1, London 1989, p. 359, no. 555 (ill. in mirror image), p. 365 (colour ill.).
- 6 Donatella Biagi Maino, *Ubaldo Gandolfi*, Turin 1990, pl. 44; the drawing is in Milan, Castello Sforzesco.
- 7 Prisco Bagni, *I Gandolfi: Affreschi, Dipinti, Bozzetti, Disegni*, Bologna 1992, pp. 598-601, nos. 566-72 (ill.).
- 8 Mimi Cazort, *Bella Pittura: The Art of the Gandolfi*, exh. cat. Ottawa (National Gallery of Canada) 1993, p. 57; Cazort describes Bagni's nos. 566 and 571 as 'not by a Gandolfi'.
- 9 Attributed to Ubaldo Gandolfi, *Christ in Glory with St Lawrence, St Anthony of Padua, St Ignatius of Loyola and St Eligius*, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 80.3.512. The drawing is a design for Ubaldo's altarpiece in the church of San Mamante, Medicina, near Bologna, see Bagni 1992 (note 7), p. 92, no. 80 (the drawing) and p. 91, no. 79 (the painting).
- 10 On Rinaldo Gandolfi, see Bagni 1992 (note 7), pp. 43-52.