

# COLNAGHI



José Alvarez Cubero  
*Portrait Bust of Gioachino Rossi*

# COLNAGHI

JOSÉ ALVAREZ CUBERO

(Priego de Córdoba 1768 – 1827)

GIOACHINO ROSSINI (1792 – 1868), Rome, *ca.* 1819 – 1827

marble

H 68 x W 36 x D 28 cm;

H 26 3/4 x W 14 1/8 x D 11 in.

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## Provenance

Commissioned by the 14th Duke of Alba, Carlos Miguel Fitz-James y Stuart (7<sup>th</sup> Duke of Berwick) and delivered in 1828;

Likely to have been given to Rossini on his visit to Madrid in 1831;

Private Collection, (Germany, acquired in the 1980s.



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# COLNAGHI

This exquisite neoclassical white marble bust by the renowned Spanish sculptor José Álvarez Cubero (1768-1827), represents Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868), the greatest and most influential of the Italian Romantic composers of the nineteenth century. The illustrious composer is portrayed as an attractive young man, bare-chested, with delicate facial features and a prominent forehead. His abundant curly locks cascade along his cheeks, forming luxuriant sideburns that gently frame his face.

Circa 1819 Álvarez Cubero sculpted his first bust of Rossini for Infante Sebastián Gabriel de Borbón y Braganza (1811-1875). This bust, now housed in the Museo del Prado, bears the name of the sitter on the reverse, accompanied by the sculptor's signature, an uncommon practice for Álvarez Cubero (figs. 1a-b).

The present bust, the second of its kind, was known to exist<sup>1</sup>, but has only recently been rediscovered in a private collection in Germany. Nearly identical to the version at the Prado, this bust was commissioned by Álvarez Cubero's patron, Carlos Miguel Fitz-James Stuart y Silva, the 14<sup>th</sup> Duke of Alba (1794-1835)<sup>2</sup>.

Following the sudden death of Álvarez Cubero, several of his works created for the Duke of Alba were transported from his Roman studio to Spain. A document dated August 6, 1828, preserved in the Duke's archives, references a marble bust of Rossini alongside its plaster counterpart: *"pertenecientes al S.<sup>r</sup> Duque de Berwik: Una Venus con un amorcito sacandola una Espina; Un Busto que representa al Maestro de Musica Rossini; Otro de igual representacion en Yeso; Una Estatua que representa la Marquesa de Ariza difunta"*<sup>3</sup>, (figs. 2a-d).

However, following the death of the 14<sup>th</sup> Duke of Alba in 1835, the inventory and catalogue of the works acquired by him do not mention a marble bust, referencing only the plaster bust of Rossini. A subsequent inventory from 1870 similarly lists only the plaster version. This plaster bust is most likely the one currently housed in the Museo de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Sanchez 2011, 172-173; Azcue 2011, 331 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Sanchez 2011, 172 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Translation: *"belonging to the Duke of Berwick: A Venus with an angel removing a thorn; A Bust that represents the Master of Music Rossini; Another one of equal representation in gesso; A Statue representing the deceased Marquise of Ariza"*. See Azcue 2011, 331 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Azcue 2011, p. 333

# COLNAGHI

It follows that between 1828 and 1835, the marble bust of Rossini, sculpted by Álvarez Cubero for the Duke of Alba's collection, must have changed ownership. One plausible explanation is that the Duke presented the marble portrait to Rossini himself in 1831.

The Duke of Alba was an ardent admirer of the renowned composer from Pesaro, and the two became close friends, as documented in the Duke's diaries. Their first meeting took place in 1814, when Rossini and his future wife, the Madrid-born mezzo-soprano Isabella Angela Colbrán (1784–1845), were introduced to the Duke at a gathering in the Bolognese salon of Madame Martinetti. They crossed paths again in 1816 in Naples, by which time Colbrán had become the prima donna of the Teatro di San Carlo, with Rossini serving as its principal composer. In 1821, the Duke stayed at Colbrán's residence in Bologna while en route to Paris<sup>5</sup>.

The library of the Palacio de Liria, the Madrid residence of the Dukes of Alba, preserves several autographs of Rossini's compositions, along with printed editions bearing friendly dedications to the Duke. Their relationship was so close that, in 1820, Rossini - through his wife - lent a considerable sum to the Duke, who frequently spent lavishly on countless works of art for his extraordinary collection. A letter housed in the Liria Palace archives, written in impeccable Spanish and dated February 17, 1831, reflects this bond. In it, Rossini amicably reminds the Duke of his outstanding debt of 16,000 ducats, including accrued interest<sup>6</sup>.

Later in 1831, Rossini traveled to Madrid, primarily to settle the debt. According to a compelling hypothesis by Leticia Azcue Brea, head curator of sculpture at the Museo del Prado, the marble bust may have been presented to Rossini as a compensatory gift during this visit.

In the 20th century, the bust resurfaced in a private collection in Germany.

## José Álvarez Cubero (1768-1827) (fig. 3)

José Álvarez de Pereira y Cubero was the most prominent and celebrated Spanish neoclassical sculptor, and the only one to achieve widespread recognition across Europe

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<sup>5</sup> Sanchez 2011, 172-173.

<sup>6</sup> "V.E., please do not forget that on September 2, 1820, Mrs. Isabel Colbrán, my wife, made a loan to [you, the] V. E., of 16,000 ducats of Naples at the interest [rate] of that kingdom and in the manner and form that the laws there prescribe. This capital, the fruit of our efforts, was entrusted to you [...] for the particular friendship and affection that you have always showed me...", cf. Barreiro Lastra, H., *Presencia de Rossini en Madrid: febrero de 1831. Antecedentes y derivaciones*, unpubl. doctoral thesis, Madrid 2006.

# COLNAGHI

during his lifetime. Today, many of his works are housed in the Museo del Prado. Known for his remarkable expressive ability, Álvarez Cubero seamlessly fused emotional depth with the refined elegance characteristic of the neoclassical style, drawing inspiration from Greek and Roman models. Often referred to as the "Spanish Canova," Álvarez Cubero earned this title in homage to his friend and esteemed mentor, the renowned Italian neoclassical sculptor Antonio Canova, whose influence profoundly shaped his artistic output.

José Álvarez Cubero was born in Priego de Córdoba, the son of a stonemason. His artistic training began under his father's guidance and continued under the mentorship of his godfather, the retablo sculptor Francisco Javier Pedrajas. Together, they collaborated on several projects, including the decoration of the chapel of the church in Priego. One of Álvarez Cubero's earliest notable works from this period is the statue *Lion Fighting a Snake*, created for the celebrated King's Fountain.

In 1791, Álvarez Cubero relocated to Córdoba, where, with the support of the local bishop, he pursued studies in neoclassical sculpture at the Escuela de Bellas Artes. Following this, he moved to Madrid to continue his education at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. In 1799, Álvarez Cubero was awarded the Academy's first prize, which earned him a generous grant from King Charles IV, enabling him to further his training in Paris and subsequently in Rome.

In 1804, while in Paris, José Álvarez Cubero completed his renowned statue of *Ganymede*, which earned him a gold medal and a prize of 500 francs. The following year, he relocated to Rome, where he met Bertel Thorvaldsen and formed a lasting friendship with Antonio Canova, the unrivaled master of neoclassical sculpture. By 1806, Canova entrusted Álvarez Cubero with a prestigious royal commission from King Charles IV, tasking him with creating a series of statues to adorn the Casa del Labrador at Aranjuez.

From that point forward, Álvarez Cubero consistently received significant commissions, particularly from King Charles IV and later his son, Ferdinand VII. However, in 1808, his career faced a setback when he was briefly imprisoned and stripped of his royal grant for refusing to recognise Joseph Bonaparte as the new King of Spain.

Through Canova's intervention, Álvarez Cubero was eventually released on the condition that he produce a series of reliefs depicting scenes from antiquity for the Emperor's bedroom in the Quirinal Palace in Rome. Although Álvarez Cubero completed the reliefs, they were never installed at the Quirinal and are now part of the Vatican Museum's collection.

In 1816, José Álvarez Cubero was appointed *Escultor de Cámara*, joining the ranks of Spanish court artists. During this period, he produced several significant works, including three seated figures: *Maria Louisa de Parma* (Museo del Prado), *Queen María Isabel of Braganza* (Museo del Prado), and the *Marquesa de Ariza* (Fundación Casa de Alba). The latter was commissioned by Carlos Miguel Fitz-James Stuart, 14th Duke of Alba, who would continue to provide Álvarez Cubero with important commissions.

Álvarez Cubero's most celebrated masterpiece is *The Defence of Zaragoza* (Museo del Prado) (fig. 4). Completed in 1823, the sculpture was brought to Madrid in 1826, despite offers from Emperor Francis II of Austria and his minister, Metternich, to acquire it for Vienna. The work, considered the pinnacle of Spanish neoclassicism, blended heroic contemporary subject matter with the formal language of classical antiquity.

Álvarez Cubero was a distinguished member of numerous prestigious institutions, including the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, the academies of Carrara, Naples, and Antwerp, the Institut de France in Paris, and the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid. In 1823, he was elevated to *Primer Escultor de Cámara* at the Spanish court. Though he continued working in Rome, Álvarez Cubero was eventually appointed director of the *Cámara*. He returned to Madrid in 1826 but passed away shortly thereafter.

## **Carlos Miguel Fitz-James Stuart y Silva, 14<sup>th</sup> Duke of Alba (1794 – 1835) (fig.5)**

Carlos Miguel Fitz-James Stuart y Silva, 14th Duke of Alba, 7th Duke of Berwick, and 12th Duke of Huescar, was an ardent collector who invested substantial sums in fine art. Inspired by his mother, the Marquésa de Ariza, the Duke developed a deep passion for art, ultimately becoming the most significant collector in the Alba family since the 17th century. He is now recognised as one of the most influential patrons and collectors of 19th-century Spain.

In 1814, the Duke embarked on extensive travels across Europe, acquiring numerous paintings and sculptures along the way. In 1819, he departed for Italy, where he resided until 1823. During this period, he cultivated relationships with prominent artists, including many painters, while frequently visiting the studios of celebrated sculptors Antonio Canova and Bertel Thorvaldsen. His diaries from this time record negotiations to acquire works from artists such as Lorenzo Bartolini, Antonio Solá (1787–1861), and the esteemed José Álvarez Cubero (1768–1827). Additionally, the Duke provided generous stipends to Spanish artists who travelled to Rome to further their studies.

Upon his return to Spain, the Duke imported approximately 70 crates of artworks. In 1824, he attempted—albeit unsuccessfully—to establish a prestigious public art gallery to house his vast and refined collection. Financial difficulties, exacerbated by his extravagant expenditures and the accumulating interest on loans, led to the sale of several artworks, while others never reached Spain<sup>7</sup>.

## Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868) (fig. 6)

No composer in the first half of the 19th century matched Gioachino Rossini in popularity, prestige, or artistic influence. His contemporaries regarded him as the preeminent Italian composer of his era. Rossini's innovations and successes overshadowed the operatic traditions of his predecessors, establishing new artistic standards by which subsequent composers were measured.

The careers of Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti unfolded in Rossini's formidable shadow, with their artistic identities shaped in response to his operatic legacy. It was not until the emergence of Giuseppe Verdi that Rossini's dominance in Italian operatic life began to wane, marking a shift in the artistic landscape.

Born in Pesaro to musician parents, Gioachino Rossini began composing at the age of 12. In 1806, he enrolled at the Liceo Musicale in Bologna, where he studied singing, cello, piano, and composition.

Rossini's operatic career commenced in 1810 with a commission from the Teatro San Moisè in Venice. This marked the beginning of a series of operas he composed for the theatre, leading to rapid commissions from other venues. His international reputation was soon established with the premieres of *Tancredi* (1813) and *L'Italiana in Algeri* (1813).

Following his success in Venice, Rossini moved to Milan, where he staged and revised his Venetian operas for the Teatro Re. During this period, he also composed two new operas for La Scala, further cementing his status as one of the most celebrated composers of his time.

The year 1815 marked the beginning of Rossini's Neapolitan period, during which he became almost exclusively devoted to *opera seria*. By this time, the demand for his music

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<sup>7</sup> Azcue 2011b, 97-98.

# COLNAGHI

had grown significantly, prompting Rossini to accept numerous commissions for major works from cities across Italy.

Between 1810 and 1823, Rossini composed 34 operas for the Italian stage, with performances in Venice, Milan, Ferrara, Naples, and beyond. His innovative compositions brought the tradition of *opera buffa* to its zenith, exemplified by *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Concurrently, Rossini made substantial contributions to the *opera seria* repertoire, producing landmark works such as *Otello*, *Tancredi*, and *Semiramide*.

In 1824, Rossini was invited to Paris by the Opéra, where he composed *Il Viaggio a Reims* to commemorate the coronation of Charles X. During his time in Paris, he also created French adaptations of several of his Italian operas. His final opera, *Guillaume Tell*, premiered in 1829. By the early 1830s, Rossini left Paris for Bologna and gradually withdrew from composing, producing little thereafter. His decision to step away from opera for the remaining 40 years of his life remains enigmatic. Factors such as deteriorating health, substantial accumulated wealth, and the emergence of grand opera may have influenced his retirement. In 1855, Rossini returned to Paris, where he gained renown for his Saturday musical salons, attended by prominent artists and musicians, including Franz Liszt, Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and Joseph Joachim. His final significant composition, the *Petite Messe Solennelle* (1863), stands as a testament to his enduring artistry. Rossini died in Paris in 1868. His music continues to enjoy widespread acclaim, and many of his operas remain staples in the repertoire of prestigious opera houses around the world.



# COLNAGHI



Fig. 1a. José Álvarez Cubero, bust of Rossini for the King of Spain (Museo del Prado - Madrid, Inv. Number E000808).



Fig. 1b. R. Morghen (engraver) & E. Cateni (draughtsman), engraving of the Prado-bust, Firenze 1822.

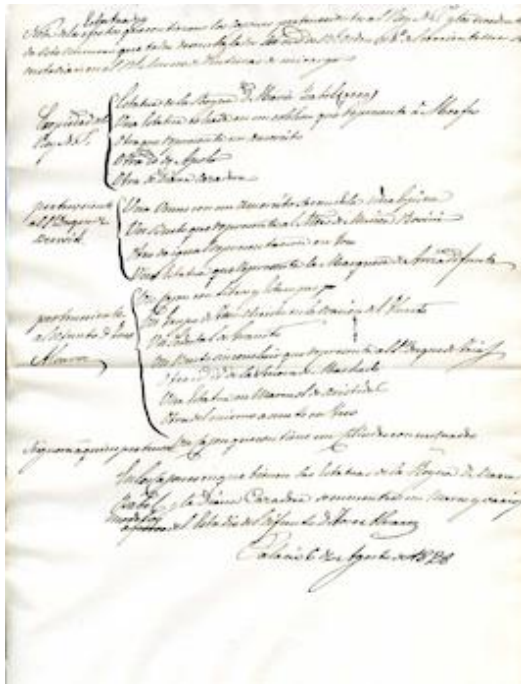


Fig. 2a. List of statues and items contained in the crates belonging to the King, the Duke and the family of the artist (6th August 1828) (Museo del Prado - Archive: Box 357 / File 11.202 / Exp. No 9).

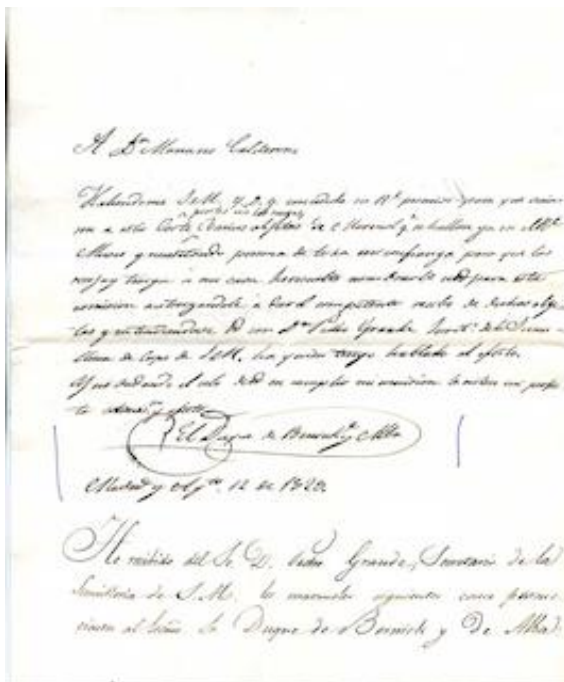


Fig. 2b. Authorization from the Duke of Berwick & Alba to Pedro Grande, Secretary of the Royal Household, to withdraw from the Royal Museum the marbles brought back from Rome (12th of August 1828) (Museo del Prado - Archive: Box 357 / File 11.202 / Exp. No 9).

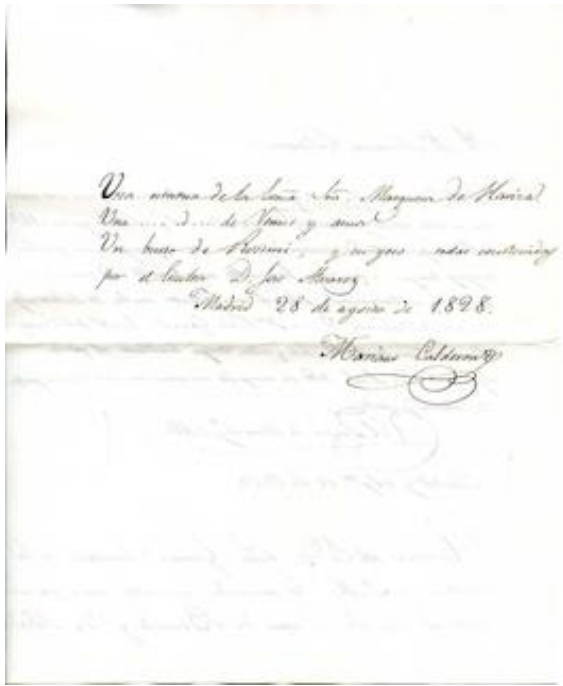


Fig. 2c. Receipt for collection of the works at the Royal Museum (28th of August 1828) (Museo del Prado - Archive: Box 357 / File 11.202 / Exp. No 9).



Fig. 2d. José Álvarez Cubero, stucco bust of Rossini, (Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando - Madrid, Inv. E-456 (Inv. Carmen Heras), R/261).



Fig. 3. José Álvarez Cubero, lithograph by C. Palmaroli, 1835, after a drawing by Juan Antonio de Ribera y Fernández.



Fig. 4. José Álvarez Cubero, The Defence of Zaragoza, 1818-1825, (Museo del Prado - Madrid, Inv. E000789).



Fig. 5. Antonio Raffaele Calliano (1785-1824), portrait painting of the 14th Duke of Alba.



Fig. 6. Étienne Carjat (1828-1906), woodburytype of Rossini, printed 1876, (Metropolitan Museum of Art – NY, Inv. 1992.5148.56).

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