



Villa Carlotta

Via Regina, 2 - 22016

Tremezzina - Loc. Tremezzo, Como

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Informations and booking: [segreteria@villacarlotta.it](mailto:segreteria@villacarlotta.it)

## THORVALDSEN'S FRIEZE: STORY GUIDE BY PANEL

### PANEL 1



The artist in person, in the company of his patron, welcome us to our exploration of the Carrara marble frieze, *Alexander the Great's Triumphal Entry into Babylon*, produced in Rome between 1818 and 1828 by Bertel Thorvaldsen. In one of the side panels closing the composition, the Danish sculptor is shown presenting his newly-finished magnum opus for the Tremezzo villa's *Salone dei Marmi* to its owner, Giovanni Battista Sommariva.

Although these sculptures were made in the early nineteenth century, Thorvaldsen and Sommariva wear the garb of the ancients like the characters depicted in the frieze: a detail that expresses perfectly the passion for the world of Greek and Roman antiquity that inspired artists and collectors in the Neoclassical age

### PANEL 2

#### **Alexander the Great in his Chariot with Victory**



Alexander the Great, holding a long sceptre that symbolizes his power, proceeds in a chariot drawn by four steeds and driven by a woman with two large wings. She is the personification of Victory (Nike), depicted in the image handed down by classical mythology.

Alexander's entry into Babylon is a famous episode in Greek history, which took place in



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331 BC, during the conquest of the Persian Empire by the young King of Macedonia, considered the greatest leader of all time. The subject chosen for these sculptures, originally conceived for the Quirinale Palace in Rome, is by no means casual: the intention was to ensure that Alexander's triumph reflected the image of Napoleon, celebrated for his exceptional military capabilities but also for his conquest of Rome without bloodshed, as had been the case with Babylon over two thousand years before.

PANEL 3

### **Bucephalus**



Immediately behind Alexander appears his famous steed, Bucephalus, with two squires struggling to hold him back.

Legend has it that Alexander's father, King Philip the Macedonian, had bought a remarkable horse but impossible to tame and so wanted to return it to the seller. The young Alexander, still a teenager, was the only person able to mount the animal, realizing that the cause of the horse's nervousness was fear

of his own shadow. From that day on, Bucephalus and the young prince were inseparable, always in battle together until the Macedonian army's last great clash at Hydaspes, fought against the Indian King Porus in 326 BC, in an area that is now the Punjab, between India and Pakistan. In that region, in honour of his beloved horse killed in the battle, Alexander founded a city, calling it Alexandria Bucephalous.

PANEL 4

### **The Commanders of the Macedonian army – The Cavalry**



At the head of the Macedonian army are its commanders, chosen from among Alexander's most trusted friends, immediately followed by the cavalry, one of the arm's strengths.

The subject offers Thorvaldsen the opportunity to depict a series of splendid horses seen in profile.



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The artist's ambition to revive the purity and nobility of ancient art achieves one of its peaks. Here and in the other Macedonian knights depicted along the frieze, the Danish sculptor revealed his fascination with the Parthenon marbles, which had recently been taken from Athens to London by Lord Elgin.

At long last, a dream came true for European artists who wanted to see the originals of Greek art, known until then only in written descriptions and Roman copies. The impact of those sculptures on Neoclassical art was astonishing. Thorvaldsen knew the Parthenon marbles thanks to drawings, prints and the few fragments visible in some Rome collections. In 1815, Antonio Canova (several of whose works are found in the Villa Carlotta museum, including *Palamedes*, the *Muse Terpsichore*, *Love and Psyche*) went to London to study the marbles brought from Athens and on that occasion his opinion became emblematic, likening them to real flesh and bone.

PANEL 5

### **The Elephant and the Captured Persian Commander**



It was customary in ancient times for a victorious army to parade the defeated enemy and the spoils of war before the crowds. An elephant, captured during the battle with Darius' army, was loaded with weapons taken from the enemy, while at its side walks a Persian prisoner of high rank, his hands tied behind his back and his eyes downcast in humiliation.

The frieze was an immediate and extraordinary success. Drawings were made for engravings that contributed to spreading the fame of the work and its author throughout Europe.

As early as 1813, Thorvaldsen commissioned the German painter Friedrich Overbeck (Lubeck, 1789 – Rome, 1869), who had recently moved to Rome, to make a series of drawings of the frieze so a series of prints could be made. Before the invention of photography, engravings were the most effective means of circulating the image of an artwork to a wide audience and making it famous, helping to increase the fame of its creator.



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PANEL 6

### **The Satrap Mazaeus with his Children – Peace**



Mazaeus the Satrap or governor of Babylon emerges from the walls to hand over the city to the victor and thus avoid unnecessary bloodshed. Thorvaldsen depicts him with great dignity, escorted by two soldiers, while his trepidation is obvious as he sends his five small children to Alexander. Peace is depicted at the head of the procession, shown as a winged female figure holding an olive branch

and a fruit-laden cornucopia, symbolizing the prosperity that only Peace can assure for the world. In 1829, Melchior Missirini, scholar and art expert who drafted the first biography of Antonio Canova, published a commentary on the Alexander frieze. One of the panels Missirini appreciated most was that of Mazaeus and his children, moving fearfully to meet Alexander. He was impressed by the sculptor's ability to imbue the scene with a psychological impact, knowing how to arouse the emotions of the viewer: "their [the children] different movements are stunning, as is the character of the different ages and the difference in their garb; but nevertheless the father [...] with his humble offering up of himself, touches our hearts most and moves us to pity".

PANEL 7

### **Women Scatter Flowers on Alexander's Path – Bagophanes Burns Perfumes on the Altars**



Three women in oriental-style headgear scatter flowers on the road to the gates of Babylon, along which Alexander the Great and his army will soon pass. It is a festive scene, a counterpoint to the timid stance of Mazaeus and his children, and opens the proces-





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sion of gifts offered by the Babylonians to the new sovereign from Europe. Behind the women, accompanied by two musicians, another dignitary of high rank enters: Bago-phanes, the treasurer and commander of the fortress of Babylon. With all his authority, he orders three servants to set up a silver altar for burning precious oriental perfumes in honour of Alexander.

Beside him a young man holds a casket, probably full of incense and perfumed essences. The toiling men busy around the large brazier are exploited by Thorvaldsen to sidestep too much uniformity in the flow of the story, as he introduced an episode bringing variety to the majestic compositional pace.

PANEL 8

### **The Gift of Lions and Panthers – The Magi and the Astronomers**



Gifts for the conqueror appear after the homage of the two highest authorities of Babylon, Mazaeus and Bagophanes.

As Alexander's passion was for horses, the first gift was of some magnificent specimens, followed by wild animals like panthers and lions, brought with chains by their tamers.

Behind the procession of gifts appear three old men deep in thought: the magi, priests of Zoroastrianism, the most widespread religion in the Persian empire, followed by an astronomer, depicted with the globe in his hand, indicating his ability to interpret the course of the stars and predict the future, reminding us that Mesopotamia had been the cradle of the study of celestial motions since the third millennium BC.

PANEL 9

**The People of Babylon Crowded on the Walls and the Shepherd with his Flock**



The procession out of Babylon closes to welcome Alexander the Great with the Zoroastrian priests and astronomers. Behind a military guard we see the walls of the Persian city, where the curious inhabitants stand and observe. Nearby, a shepherd has gathered his flock, also destined to enrich the loot of the Macedonian army.

Next to him, his wife with a small child in her arms, while an older child, heedless of the bustle around him, strokes a sheep's face: another episode of daily life added by Thorvaldsen to give colour to the solemnity of his story and show his skills in depicting non-courtly subjects.

PANEL 10

**The Euphrates River – Merchants' Boat and Fisherman**



The story of the frieze closes with the evocation of the Babylon landscape, dominated by the River Euphrates. Thorvaldsen depicts it with the iconography handed down through classical art: a man leaning on an amphora that pours out water, with an oar and a bundle of ears of wheat in his hands.



They are symbols of the river as a navigable waterway and as the lifeblood of agriculture.

Behind the river, a glimpse of the Tower of Babel (which is to say Babylon) and next to it a ferocious beast, a tiger. Thorvaldsen added it "by mistake", intending to evoke the



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Tigris, but in reality the river does not touch on the city.



A little farther on, a boat crosses the Euphrates, with two merchants trying to take their merchandise to safety, their flight in no way disturbing the concentration of a fisherman who has just caught his prey. Thus, the narrative of the heroic deeds of Alexander the Great closes with a scene of the humblest reality, giving the frieze the unexpected variety of style registers that make it one of the greatest masterpieces of nineteenth-century European sculpture.