# Giulio Monteverde as a master portraitist

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Giulio Monteverde (1837-1917) is undoubtedly one of the most important Italian sculptor in the second half of XIX Century.

1 – Giulio Monteverde, *Olimpia Sella-Defilippi*, terracotta. Genoa, Galleria d'arte Moderna

However, a monographic study is missing yet[1].

His role on the political scene was relevant as on the artistic field, especially after 1880 when he started his political career leading him to became senator in 1889.

Just like his friend, Giuseppe Saracco (1821-1907), born as Monteverde in Bistagno, senator too and who was prime minister in the reign of Italy between 1900-1901.

The two men were both in Rome, Monteverde from 1865 after he won the Traverso prize from Accademia Ligustica in Genoa, Saracco after a great career in Turin thanks to Cavour and Quintino Sella (1827-1884) who was for several times minister of economic affairs[2].

Sella was confident to Saracco not only for political reasons. Saracco married on the 18th november 1871 a cousin by Quintino, Virginia Sella. The woman was born on 10th may 1848; she was sister of Olimpia Sella Defilippi (1846-1917), portrayed by Monteverde in a stunning terracotta now display on Galleria D'Arte Moderna in Genoa-Nervi, not far from Carpeaux masterworks (Fig. 1)[3].

The marriage Saracco-Sella suddenly ended the 4th April 1876 when Virginia dies.

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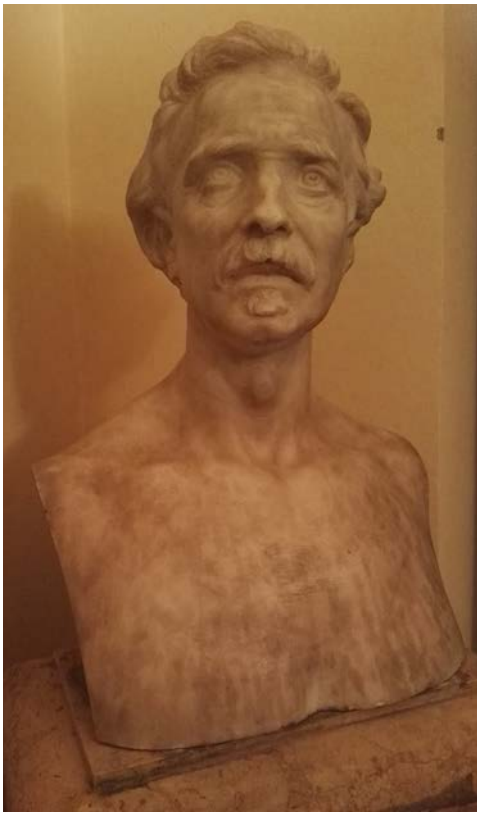
Friendship between Saracco and Monteverde was not strong as Sella-Saracco, as the sculptor remember, even for the important fountain work La Bollente in Acqui Terme, done by the architect Ceruti in 1879 when Saracco was mayor of the city and Monteverde famous at the time in Rome[4].

Saracco, after Virginia's death, never married again, also because he lost his first wife Luigia Scarampi and had legal troubles with her family in 1869, immediately after her death.



2 – Giulio Monteverde, *Vittorio Monteverde (father's artist)*, marble. Municipio, Monastero Bormida

Saracco never had sons and managed a monastic life till he dies 19th January 1907 in Bistagno.

In the meantime, Monteverde grow up and became with Leonardo Bistolfi and Vincenzo Vela one of the most requested national sculptor, engaging himself in political and ideological themes.

In 1870, he sculpted the well-known *Young Columbus*, in 1871 the *Genius of Franklin* and in 1873 the celebrated group of *Edward Jenner* exhibited at the universal fairs in Vienna and in Paris (1878)[5]. Then he created monuments to Mazzini for Buenos Aires and Vittorio Emanuele II for Rovigo (1881).

After notable funeral groups, he changed his style to a much more symbolism mannerism as confirmed in *Idealità e Materialismo*, plaster at the Monteverde museum in Bistagno (1911).

In October 1912, the community of Acqui Terme decide to commemorate the figure of Giuseppe Saracco and call the only prominent person alive from Bistagno, Giulio Monteverde obviously, who – from 1865 never return to Acqui, except in a shortly stay on 1874 as we will see after.

As the Gazzetta d'Acqui report 26-27th October 1912, there was an incredible feast in presence of Monteverde, who was considered as a hero by all folks from Bistagno and Acqui Terme[6].

Monteverde was excited and decided to create a monument to Giuseppe Saracco, realized till his death on October 1917 (plaster in Monteverde museum and bronze in Acqui Terme main square).

The result is a masterwork by him, imagine Saracco in the Parliament during an emphatic speech like a flame in his skinny human shape.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3, 4 – Giulio Monteverde, *Virginia Sella-Saracco*, marble. Private collection

It was also the occasion to rebuild relationship between Monteverde and Bistagno; the sculptor decided to donate his outstanding marble of the Virgin and child for the parish church.

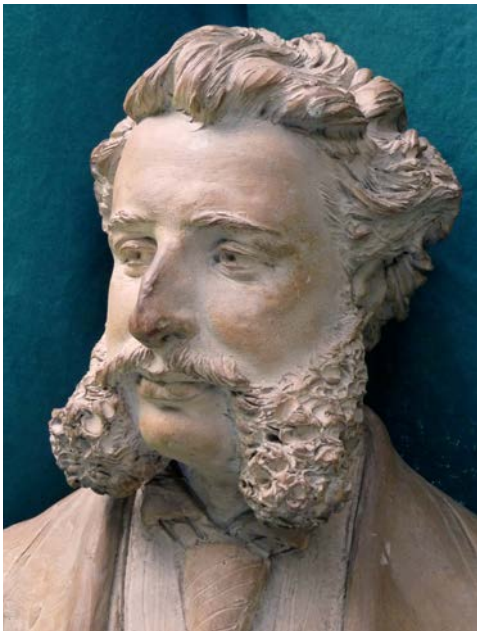
Is a marble group done after seen the *chef-d'oeuvre* of Nicolò Barabino, *Madonna dell'ulivo* (Church of Santa Maria della Cella in Sampierdarena, bought by Queen Margherita in the occasion of Biennale in Venice, 1887). The representation in neo-gothic style influenced many sculptors and painters; after Monteverde, Michele Tripisciano (plaster in Caltanissetta, Palazzo Moncada,

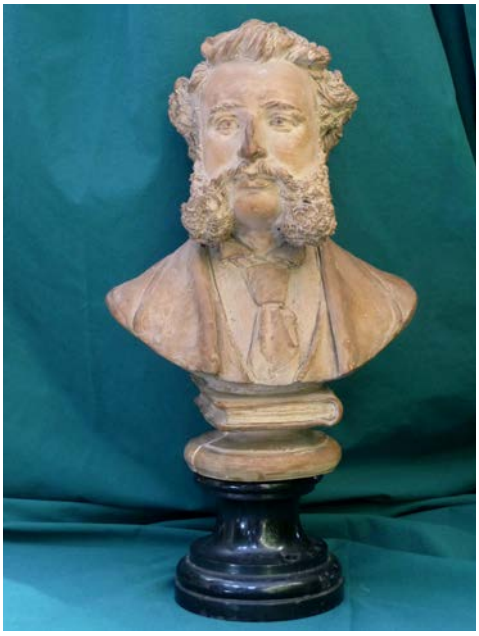
1894 ca.) and Giuseppe Barison (*Quasi oliva speciosa in campis*, Trieste, private collection, 1899).

But, he always considered Bistagno only a birth occasional place and not so important as another town much more relevant in his mind: Monastero Bormida where his family settled when he was young boy.

A trip in Monastero reveals something really interesting, the bust of his father with a passionate letter by Monteverde himself who donate this marble "per aver trascorso qui i miei anni della giovinezza" (Fig. 2). The bust is not a masterwork by Monteverde, but is important to certificate his presence in the territory with relevant distinction.

But Bistagno and Saracco? A new important bust in a private collection signed and dated Roma 1876 tells the relationship with the friend: she is Virginia Sella, the second and last wife of Saracco who Monteverde engraved in a rare striking marble. The woman, very similar to the sister Olimpia, is described in every single detail from hair to dress. With a great sense of compassion and union (Virginia dies the 4th April 1876), Monteverde includes a necklace with a letter S. Saracco-Sella of course (Figg. 3-4)[7].





5, 6 – Giulio Monteverde, *Davide Rabbeno*, terracotta. Gipsoteca "Giulio Monteverde", Bistagno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We would like to reveal in this occasion three busts – terracotta's busts – that open to notable interesting considerations about Monteverde early activity and Bistagno, where is now his plaster gallery.

Recently, the collection of the Gipsoteca in Bistagno was enriched by a stunning acquisition, the portrait of the journalist Davide Rabbeno (1844-1882)[8].

It's a bust described in every single detail by Monteverde, but particularly in an affecting way (Figg. 5-6); the freshness of hair and moustache, the necktie and the lively expression of the art critic, introduced by a book in the pedestal. On the back the long inscription: "Roma 1872. Pegno d'affetto all'amico Davide Rabbeno. G. Monteverde" (Fig. 7).

The critic spent many enthusiastic words on the Gazzetta di Parma in the occasion of the *Prima Esposizione Nazionale d'Arti Belle* on 1870, the first time where Monteverde displayed a work in public, *Le Prime Impressioni di Colombo*, his universal recognized *chef-d'oeuvre*. Unfortunately, in this occasion, the first prize went to *Nostalgia*, a work by the very less know but parmense sculptor Cristoforo Marzaroli.

More interesting for discussion reasons, the two busts representing an old wo-

7 – Giulio Monteverde,
*Davide Rabbeno*, particular of the back.
Gipsoteca "Giulio Monteverde", Bistagno

8, 9 – Giulio Monteverde,
*Giovanni Rondanino*, terracotta.
Gipsoteca "Giulio Monteverde", Bistagno

man with a swallow and a gentleman with a clarinet (Figg. 8-12)[9]. They are, in quality, excellent as the one depicted by Davide Rabbeno.

In those years, they were interpreted in different ways, but I think the striking one is the hypothesis by Giovanni Domenico Bocchiotti, whom I would like to thank for those results.

In a letter dated from Rome 13th February 1874, Monteverde wrote to Carlo Barberis – a notable of Bistagno – that he will go to Acqui in the good season for the health of his son[10].

After a lot of time, exactly on November 1915, in Acqui for a fundraising about the soldiers of the First World War, the citizenship organized an exhibition of art where "*il venerando Senatore Monteverde, di cui si sono ammirati due piccoli magnifici busti*"[11].

Magnificent busts, is the case. But who are them?

Let's start with the symbols. The lady is recognizable by the swallow, *rondine* in italian language and the gentleman by a clarinet and he is linked in a parental grade with her. They are both dated by Monteverde in


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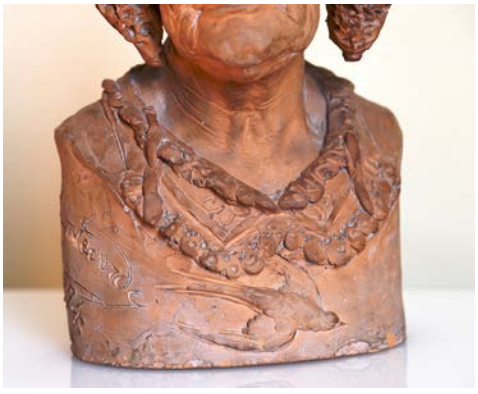
10, 12 – Giulio Monteverde,
*Ottavia Racino*, terracotta.
Gipsoteca "Giulio Monteverde", Bistagno



1874. Is the moment when Monteverde was in Acqui.

He is an orchestral element and, the uncle of Monteverde, Giovanni Rondanino (remember Rondine) was part of the Filarmonica in Acqui. The man lived not so much time (1803-1856) and dies at 53 years old. He was married to Ottavia Racina (1802-1881).

Monteverde depicted her at the age of 72 years old alive and his husband – obviously from a photograph or a drawing – younger than she.

Is a different level of thinking sculpture: Monteverde was not only a prodigious talent with marble or terracotta, but also a sensitive artist.

Note

[1] S. Arditi (ed.), *La gipsoteca "Giulio Monteverde"*, Bistagno 1987; M. Grasso, *Monteverde, Giulio*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 76, Roma 2016, *ad vocem*. I would like to thank Giovanni Domenico Bocchiotti: with him I constantly think and discuss with passion about Monteverde.

[2] A. Pirni (ed.), *Giuseppe Saracco: l'uomo e lo statista nell'Italia post-risorgimentale*, *Memorie della Facoltà di Giurisprudenza*, serie II, vol. 26 (2009).

[3] R. Vitiello, *La "Galleria Monteverde": la fotografia come fonte per il percorso di uno scultore*, in "Bollettino dei Musei Civici Genovesi», XXIII, 68-69, maggio dicembre 2003, pp. 52-60.

[4] A. Pirni, *Il centro storico di Acqui Terme: i diversi momenti della rinascita complessiva*, Genova, 2003.

[5] M. Gardonio, *Scultori italiani a Parigi tra Esposizioni Universali, mercato e strategie*, in *Saggi e memorie di storia dell'arte*, 33 (2009), pp. 333-404.

[6] "Gazzetta D'Acqui", 26-27 ottobre 1912.

[7] Recently appeared on auction sale Balclis, December 20, 2011 Barcelona, Spain, Lot 601: Giulio Monteverde Bistagne 1837-Rome 1917 73 cm. Now in private collection.

[8] For the context: M.C. Maiocchi, *Dal mercato al museo: l'arte italiana moderna e le Esposizioni Nazionali di Parma e Milano (1870-1872)*, in *La Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna*, Roma 2011, pp. 5-25.

[9] *Gipsoteca Giulio Monteverde: guida alla collezione di Bistagno*, Bistagno 2004.

[10] *Genoa, Museo del Risorgimento*, Genova, 1915, p. 352 (lettera n. 1123).

[11] *Mostra Artistica in Acqui*, 23-25 novembre 1915.

*The article is a deep understanding about a production not well known of Giulio Monteverde: portraits. The result is that a notable sculptor of the period XIX-XXth Century in Italy was able not only to made historical or allegorical subjects, but also a more private and informal portraits.*

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