



G.H.SNOWDEN

GAIA

BRONZE MASTERWORK OF THE 1927 PRIX DE ROME

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Approaching the 100th

Anniversary of Snowden Sculpture In America



The Snowden Family Trust . Established 1990



George Snowden in 1927



GAIA: A MASTERWORK of the AMERICAN PRIX DE ROME

Gaia was created by George Holburn Snowden during the era of the Great Gatsby at the Villa Aurelia in Rome. Molding *Gaia* with an exquisite sense of line and serene form, the bronze reflects the warm sunlight of the sculptor's studio that overlooked the eternal city. From the balustrade just outside his door, the artist's view opened onto the timeless precincts of the Vatican, the Coliseum and museums displaying early Etruscan treasures. Under the spell of Rome, *Gaia* was created a result of Snowden having won the most prestigious art prize of his time, the American Prix de Rome of 1927. Indeed, *Gaia* was created as a celebratory poem dedicated to Snowden's sojourn in Italy that spanned from 1927 through 1930. Importantly, *Gaia* stands as a historic milestone in the development of the significant sculptural style of American Arc Modernism; a style that Snowden perfected in the embrace of Italy and the peace that existed between the first and second world wars.

Above: Views of Snowden's studio and environs at the Villa Aurelia, the American Academy in Rome

Opposite:: Front view of bronze Gaia mounted on Porfirico Antico marble and Black Absolute granite





THE INSPIRATION OF GAIA

According to G.H. Snowden's journal of 1927, a mythic legend describing the earth goddess *Gaia* captured the sculptor's fancy as he perused the rare edition library of the American Academy in Rome. Opening the leather drawing notebook he was carrying with him, Snowden began sketching imaginative possibilities for shaping earth's nurturing feminine spirit into a memorable bronze.

Entering his studio, Snowden first began his new sculpture by inventively wrapping the central figure of *Gaia* in the folds of an extraordinary cloak. In Snowden's view, the sculpture's veil took its inspiration from a plant husk that envelops a budding seed. Snowden set about shaping *Gaia*'s lush drapery with a molded architectonic touch, orchestrating a series of graduated linen pleats that gained emphasis through gold embossments. For this aspect of his delicate work, Snowden used Rodin's tools that had been awarded to him on receipt of the Rome Prize by his mentor, Robert Eberhard. In the latter months of 1927, Snowden also developed his signature cartouche that embroiders the central fold of *Gaia*'s garment.

Above: Entrance to Snowden's studios at the American Academy in Rome, also housing the library where the sculptor found initial inspiration in Gaia's legend





GAIA: CREATING A NEW STYLE OF SCULPTURE

Snowden arrived in Rome from Yale University on hiatus as a professor of sculpture. Having moved into his private Roman studio at the American Academy, the sculptor surged ahead with fresh stylistic innovations. Indeed, Snowden immediately began imbuing *Gaia* with a sense of monumentality that transformed the work's lithe stylization. While he was aware of the international pulse of Art-Deco, Snowden's design for *Gaia* stemmed more from the fire of his imagination and his direct experience with exotic cultural motifs. By late 1926, the sculptor had just returned from a world-wide tour as a Rhodes scholar and Kimball Art Prize winner. As a result of his travels, Snowden desired to incorporate the exotic Sumerian, Assyrian and Etruscan cultural influences he had lately experienced into the new amalgam of *Gaia*.

Snowden's early drive for a different kind of expression is quite evident in *Gaia*'s quarter-life scale bronze. Here one can sense the sculptor's movement away from Mercié and Eberhard's 19th century Beaux-Arts climate. This is particularly felt in the lovely face of *Gaia* which becomes a universal mask of tenderness that goes beyond any specific feature. In Snowden's hands, *Gaia*'s countenance is filled with a mystery that is both ancient and newly modern. Through a hand rubbed finish applied with a jeweler's cloth, the bronze seems to project a universal inner light.

Above: Staircase to Snowden's private rooms at the Villa where the sculptor lived and worked from 1927 to 1930





GAIA: ENGAGING A DIALOGUE OF ELEMENTS

A vivid sense of presence flows from *Gaia* as the regal spirit of fertile earth. The vitality one senses in the work likely stems from the sculptor's ability to contrast a range of subtle qualities. One aspect of the bronze's liveliness under salon lighting proceeds from *Gaia's* smooth mass that contrasts to its jewel-like ornament. Primeval seed pods held in *Gaia's* hands molded in the style of Etruscan floral raiment form the work's exquisite jeweler's art. Such brilliant detail offsets the clean volumes of *Gaia's* figure. Within the design an intriguing conversation rises up between the fragility of bronze detail versus the work's overall substantial weight.

Gaia projects a larger-than-life monumental ethos in the midst of its maquette-scale dimension. Contributing to this feeling is the realization that *Gaia* rides the sensitive crest of a divide that exists between flat panel bas-relief and sculpture-in-the-round. Indeed, a suggestion of finely worked bas-relief can be felt in *Gaia's* enveloping drapery that functions as a wall background out of which the figure rises. Conjuring a dialogue between subtle polarities, the work cuts an early 20th century profile while communicating a classic legend.

Above: View of the Roman sculpture room that exhibited Gaia in 1928









GAIA'S PATINA

The City of Rome surrounded the sculptor with opportunities to study patinas that had developed over the ages on statuary, buildings and artifacts. Indeed, Snowden's facility with handling variants of Rodin's Fournier patina expanded under the influence of new tonal and textural qualities on display in Rome.

Snowden's journals recount numerous attempts to create a glowing surface patina that was built from thousands of acid droplets that would evoke the crystalline structure of precious Roman Giallo Dorato marble. An application of tempered gold and varying heats led to Snowden's triumph in blooming a wonderfully toned ombre amber patina on *Gaia's* surface. Snowden's artistic efforts were lauded on *Gaia's* unveiling in Spring of 1928, when King Victor Emmanuel III attended the sculptor's first studio reception.

Above clockwise: Portico of the Villa Aurelia lighted for an evening reception; their Majesties King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy and his wife, Queen Elena of Montenegro, arrive at the American Academy in Rome





DEFINING GAI A'S STYLE

Snowden's sculptural style on arrival in Italy set about transforming the malleable qualities of bronze into the solidified qualities of luminous marble. Through patina and form, Snowden smoothed the anatomy of *Gaia*'s figure into a slender pillar of remarkable purity. Coming from the hands of Snowden, *Gaia* exudes a tactile and sensuous warmth .

Gaia's form inspired Snowden to continue to pursue a new stylistic avenue in subsequent works. Acting on the success of *Gaia*, Snowden began to move away from the small-scale geometric linearity of Art Deco. Working on *Gaia*, he also began to move away from the Beaux Arts tendency toward realism that had illuminated his Prix de Rome prize winning work, *Flora*.

In Rome, Snowden began to sculpt figurative anatomy in terms of an underlying abstract pattern. Inspired by *Gaia*, Snowden was creatively melting his forms into highly organized monumental volumes. Moreover, a deep sense of human nobility was lighting every aspect of his work, fired by a humanitarian drive to incorporate archaic and classic cross-cultural motifs and iconographies. In Italy, such exotic motifs began to figure in his work, not just as topical surface ornamentation, but as deeply integrated aspects of anatomy and composition.

Indeed, a range of innovations came to rapidly define Snowden's creation of American Arc-Modernism. The style exerted a wide influence on public sculpture and on the larger sphere of figurative art that was commissioned by the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. In retrospect, *Gaia* stands at the historic threshold of Snowden's transforming sculptural vision; a seminal work that embodies Snowden's early historic development of the visual language of the 1930's.

Above: A view onto George H. Snowden's mature American Arc-Modernist work: the largest single block carvings in America, the 10 ton block Pink Georgia marble carvings flanking the entrance to the Mario Merola courthouse, New York, 1933





PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROME PRIZE

In retrospect, the Rome Prize was an enclave that provided Snowden the means to gain a perspective on his art. The Italian experience proffered an ideal studio that provided both peace and refuge from the celebrity status that surrounded Snowden on winning the era's most prestigious art prizes. Moreover in Rome, the sculptor was given room to dream and breathe, leaving behind a range of teaching responsibilities at the Yale School of Art; responsibilities that had burgeoned on his appointment to the teaching staff before his graduation from Yale's undergraduate program. Settling into his studio that overlooked all of Rome, Snowden felt liberated to step beyond his mastery of the legendary secrets of Rodin's atelier, entering into a realm of sculpture that was uniquely his own.

Snowden's contribution to historic American figurative monumental sculpture continues to appreciate. Contemporary art historians cite the sculptor's upbringing in industrialized New England as having influenced Snowden's artistic expression in Italy. Significantly, the advance of speed technology that came about through the popular rise of the personal automobile in the 1920's was thought to have influenced the streamlining of Snowden's vision. Certainly the post World War I modernist drive to pare down the adjectives of art was leavened onto the greater expression of Snowden's developing work in the years leading up to the Great Depression.

Yet all these influences were mellowed against the sun soaked grandeur of Rome that bathed Snowden's sculptural art into something larger than its temporal background or circumstance. The Rome Prize and the desire to win it, formed the impetus for the formation of both small and large scale sculptural works. The Prix de Rome was the whetstone against which personal sacrifice and dedication transformed art into masterpieces of brilliant craftsmanship—inspiring the creation of art that was suffused with a sense of spiritual worth. Such cultural, aesthetic and spiritual tendencies were translated into the impulses of Snowden's stylistic advances that would mark his American monumental projects. Indeed, on returning to New York, Snowden's signature Arc-Modernist style illumined his unique designs that were showcased into Adolph Alexander Weinman's Works Progress Administration contracts. In retrospect, Snowden's sculptures that are now national historic landmarks, significantly influenced a generation of artists in defining the glyptic aesthetic of the 1930's.

Above clockwise: View of George H. Snowden's MAJESTY OF LAW MONOLITHS on the Grand Concourse porch of the Mario Merola Courthouse, New York; insets: Obverse detail of THE TRIUMPH OF JUSTICE MONOLITH; Reverse detail of the TRIUMPH MONOLITH

SYNOPSIS

GAIA , 1927

Bronze

17 x 8 x 7 inches

Bruno-Cafe' Fournier Patina

Signed at the rear with Snowden's triangular "GSH" signet. Inscribed with a full signature example on the bottom of the left cloak: GEORGE H. SNOWDEN 1927

On period marble base

Provenance: By descent within the sculptor's estate to the present

Description:

Gaia figures in early Greek mythology as the fundamental earth goddess. As a primordial symbol of the earth, Gaia was also the first mother of the gods. In this small statue, Snowden deftly communicates not only Gaia's regal nobility as the first goddess, but conveys her primary fecund promise: she holds two small stylized decorative seed pods in her hands.

The sculptor further emphasizes Gaia's fertility in shaping a coronal wreath of flowers that resembles a veiled Etruscan headdress. Here the sculpture's haloed wreath is punctuated with star-shaped primroses and a cascade of grape-like buds that end in single daisies. The hairline is finely ornamented with roundels that are offset by the sharp linear lines of the parted hair that reach to the crown. The apex of Gaia's parted hair is cordoned with a triangular jewel.

Indeed, a sense of subtle exoticism suffuses the work with an otherworldly ethos. In this early sculpture, the more realistic Beaux-Arts treatment of facial features gives way to a more idealized architectonic mask. The sculptural composition moves with easy grace, wherein Snowden not only begins to streamline anatomical structure, but proffers a more dramatic stylized vision of Orientalized drapery. The drapery itself communicates not only complex articulation, but evidences Celtic and Grecian motifs in artfully embroidered sculptural passages.



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