

This is a detail from Gaetano Gandolfi's painting 'Jupiter and Semele'. The central figure is Semele, depicted as a young woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a white, flowing dress. She is reclining on a rocky, golden-brown surface, looking upwards with an expression of awe or divine inspiration. Her right arm is raised, with her hand near her head. To her left, a large, muscular, golden-brown figure, likely Jupiter, is partially visible, reclining and looking towards her. In the upper right corner, a cherub-like figure is seen from the back, looking down at Semele. The background is a soft, hazy pinkish-brown. The overall style is neoclassical, with a focus on dramatic lighting and emotional expression.

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Gaetano Gandolfi
Jupiter and Semele



Gaetano Gandolfi
(San Matteo della Decima, 1734
- Bologna, 1803)

Jupiter and Semele

Oil on canvas; 44 x 30.5 cm

Never relined; original stretcher and frame.

Gaetano Gandolfi was one of the unquestioned champions of Italian painting in the second half of the 18th century. After receiving a solid training at the Accademia Clementina in Bologna in 1760 thanks to his protector Antonio Buratti, he won a trip to Venice where he was able to familiarise at close quarters with the work of the great Venetian masters, from Titian to Tiepolo. He also rubbed shoulders with leading foreign figures, he made the acquaintance of French painter Honoré Fragonard and he enjoyed a bond of immense esteem and friendship with King George III's librarian

Richard Dalton, who commissioned him to draw the most celebrated altarpieces (now in Windsor Castle). The only time Gandolfi ever left Italy was when Dalton invited him to visit London in 1788. He stopped in Paris on his way to England in order to meet the painters of the Académie Royale de Peinture. Gandolfi was modest, retiring and reserved in his private life, yet his art is remarkable for its rich (albeit far from pompous) style abounding in fresh and lively exuberance. He was as much at home with secular as with religious painting, with stories from the Bible as with mythological subjects.



Fig. 1 Gaetano Gandolfi, *Jupiter and Semele*, private collection

We know of another version of the study (horizontal in format, measuring 57.5 x 73 cm) which Donatella Biagi Maino has dated to the 1770s (D. Biagi Maino, 1995; **Fig.1**).

It is interesting to note that, unlike the study under discussion here, it is missing the female figure seen from behind in the middle ground and the two putti holding the curtain. It has been

published in: P. Bagni, *I Gandolfi. Affreschi, dipinti, bozzetti, disegni*, Bologna 1992, p. 282, n. 266; D. Biagi Maino, *Gaetano Gandolfi*, Turin 1995, pl. LXXXVII, p.375, n.119; D. Biagi Maino, edited by, *Gaetano e Ubaldo Gandolfi. Opere scelte*, exhibition catalogue, p. 95, n. 31, ill., and attendant bibliography; L. Bianchi, *I Gandolfi*, Roma 1936, pl. XL; R. Roli, *Pittura bolognese (1650-1800). Dal Cignani ai Gandolfi*, Bologna 1977, p.128, fig. 276b.



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