

GALERIE LAMY
CHABOLLE



A Bronze Relief depicting *Reason guiding
Science through Conscience*

Patinated bronze

France

1790-1810

34 x 31 cm



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The gesture of Minerva, placing a butterfly on the head of another woman, is borrowed from a type of ancient sarcophagus where Athena, or Minerva, breathes the soul into Protoplasm, *i.e.* the first man fashioned by Prometheus. Such a sarcophagus, from the collections of Camille Borghese, has been in the Louvre since 1807, where Minerva's gesture is simplified so that the wings of the characteristic butterfly cannot be distinguished.

On a Capitoline sarcophagus of the same type, however, where, as in the Louvre, Prometheus, seated, holds, with his left hand, the Protoplasm standing on his lap on whose head Minerva, on his right, places a hand, the butterfly, which she holds by both wings, is clearly visible. Berthel Thorvaldsen repeats the same gesture in a series of *bassorilievi*, probably conceived in Rome around 1806-1807 and listed in the catalog of the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen as *Minerve granting the soul to the human being created by Prometheus*.

Here, then, is a rare but not unprecedented motif, thus adapted to the iconography of the Republic and the Enlightenment: Minerva, allegory of Reason or Wisdom, and who wears the *aegis* on her breast, places a butterfly on the head of a young woman, in whom we should no doubt see a personification of the Sciences — surrounded by books, a globe, a telescope, and an oil lamp signifying by whose light one lights up on nights of study. Minerva thus represents Reason guiding the Sciences by means of the soul, so to speak — and to quote *Pantagruel*'s famous quote — “conscience, without which science would be but the ruin of the soul.”

The origin of this relief is not known: its dimensions and patina make it unlikely that it was intended as an applique for the base of a clock or a frieze for a mantelpiece. The remarkable quality of the modelling and chasing, in particular the *panneggio bagnato* of Phidias and Arogacrite — here a demonstration of virtuosity and also a reference to the Athena Parthenos — supports the hypothesis of a relief conceived as a work of art in its own right, although the position of the

seated woman suggests a continuation of the scene on the right, which is confirmed by the shape of the terrace.

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