

# · AGNEWS ·

EST. 1817

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***Axel Waldermaar Johannesen (Oslo 1880–1922)***

*Multi-headed giant, possibly Thrivaldi, with portrait heads of Henrik Ibsen, Ludvig Holberg and others*

Indistinctly signed or inscribed and dated (lower left): '1917 Johannesen' (?)

Plaster

17 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (45 cm.), high



## **Provenance**

Private collection, France.

In Norse mythology, the giants or 'jötunn', sons of the hermaphroditic giant Ymir, were creatures of great power and in perpetual combat with the gods. Some, including Thrivaldi, had multiple heads. The main head of our Thrivaldi seem to represent the playwright and giant of Norwegian theatre Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906, fig. 1). The distinctive 'mutton chops' are very similar as is the intensity of his direct gaze which Edvard Munch famously captured in his painting of Ibsen from 1898, and which he turned into a lithograph in 1902 (fig. 2). The latter might have inspired this remarkable plaster which is by the sculptor and painter Axel Waldemaar Johannesen (Oslo 1880-1922). Although largely forgotten today, Jappe Nilssen, the 'discoverer' of Munch, and the sculptor Gustav Vigeland, who himself made a bust of Ibsen in 1903 (fig. 3), expressed great enthusiasm about Johannesen's work. Munch himself, after visiting an exhibition of Johannesen's paintings at the Blomquist Gallery, one of Oslo's leading galleries, commented that he counts 'among the most remarkable paintings that I have encountered!'

Born in 1880, Aksel Waldemar Johannesen studied sculpture at the State Art School in Oslo. Together with his wife he founded a workshop for traditional clothing and folk art. He maintained close contact with the Norwegian literary couple Arne and Hulda Garbor, the founders of the Norwegian Theatre, for which he designed sets and costumes. The head on the right of Ibsen's head in our plaster slightly resembles Arne Garbor's facial features (fig. 4). Johannesen began painting in 1912, although his work as a painter

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remained for the most part unnoticed by those around him. Until his early death he produced numerous paintings, but refrained from letting them pass out of his ownership. In these works Aksel Waldemar Johannessen devoted his attention to socially critical themes from the world of workers, drinkers and prostitutes, depicting their sensuality and their deprivations. His paintings provide insight into the disturbing abysses of human existence. Many works are painted with a stark realism and have a strikingly expressive effect. Like many of the protagonists in his paintings, the artist was also headed toward a dramatic end. Aksel Waldemar Johannessen's early death at the age of 42 was a consequence of excessive alcohol consumption. Aksel Waldemar Johannessen did not live to experience the first exhibition of his paintings, which was presented by a leading Oslo gallery. After his death, the paintings soon fell into oblivion. His work remained unknown until it was rediscovered by the Norwegian art aficionado Haakon Mehren in 1990, who has subsequently written two books on the artist and produced a documentary on him. Since then Johannessen's paintings have come to be considered a significant Norwegian contribution to Expressionism, and in 2009/10 there was a major retrospective of his work at the Leopold Museum, Vienna, *Aksel Waldemar Johannesen, An Expressionist from Norway*, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 – January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2010.

We are grateful to Haakon Mehren for confirming the attribution of the present piece to Axel Waldemaar Johannesen. He believes that our plaster is one of only three known sculptures by the artist, and the only one on public view is in the lobby of the new Oslo opera house where the artist was the set designer. He points out that the plaster is a biting attack on the literati of Oslo in 1900. As such the plaster is a scathing indictment of the Oslo and Norwegian cultural elite, of which Johannesesn was an avowed enemy, having been rejected by them.

Mehren believes that figure to the left of Ibsen, with its very different hairstyle, is almost certainly a very important figure in Norwegian history, namely Ludvig Holberg (1684 – 1754). Holberg was a 17<sup>th</sup> century playwright, a sort of Scandinavian Molière, who changed the (then) Danish-Norwegian language. Being considered the father of Norwegian (and Danish) modern literature, Holberg would have to be included in Johannessen's somewhat sinister "homage" to the Norwegian literati.

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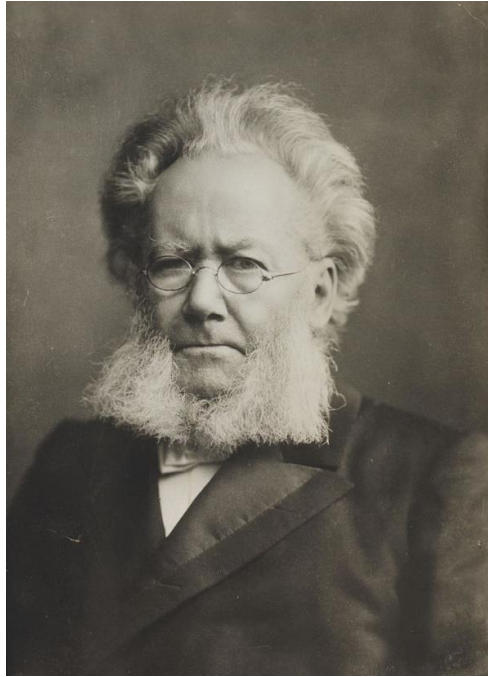


Fig. 1: Photograph of Henrik Ibsen, February 1891,  
Julius Cornelius Schaarwächter (1847–1904), National Library of Norway.



Fig. 2: Edvard Munch, *Henrik Ibsen at the Grand Caffee, Kristinia*, 1902, lithograph, private collection.

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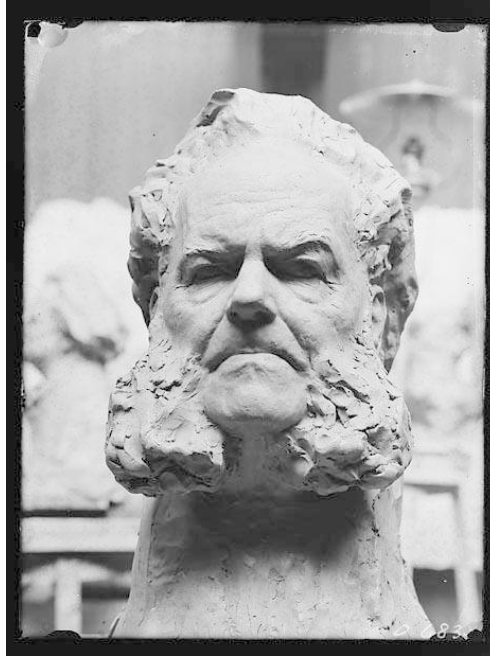


Fig. 3: Gustav Vigeland (1869 - 1943), *Henrik Ibsen*, 1903, plaster, Vigelandmuseum, Oslo.

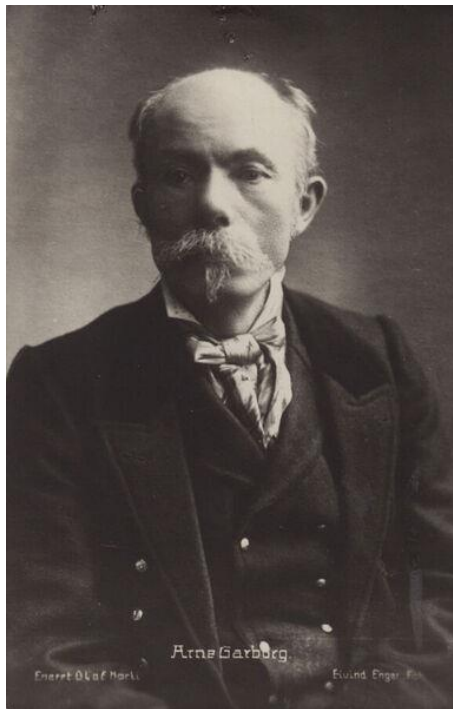


Fig. 4: Portrait of Arne Garborg, 19<sup>th</sup> century.