

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Godfried MAES (Antwerp 1649 - Antwerp 1700)

The Head of Medusa

Pen and brown ink, with traces of black chalk, within framing lines in brown ink. Signed and dated G: Maes (with a paraphe): del: / 1680. in brown ink at the bottom. 243 x 180 mm. (9 1/2 x 7 1/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.

A tour de force of bold penwork, this extraordinary sheet may be ranked among the finest known drawings by Godfried Maes. Highly finished and elaborately signed and dated, with drawn framing lines, it must have been produced by the artist as an autonomous work of art, to be sold to a collector. Indeed, the present sheet can be regarded as a successor to a type of sophisticated drawing known as a 'federkunststuck' – an elaborate pen and ink drawing made as a virtuoso imitation of an engraving – produced by such artists of the previous generation as Hendrick Goltzius and Jacob Matham.

Maes treated the subject of the Gorgon Medusa in at least two other drawings, both from the series of finished composition drawings of scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A drawing of Perseus Flies Away with the Head of the Medusa was sold at auction in Paris in 2012, while a drawing of Perseus Shows the Head of Medusa is in the Rijksprentenkabinet in Amsterdam. Another of Maes's drawings of Ovidian subjects, Athamas Tearing Apart his Children, depicts a similar figure of Tisiphone, one of the Three Erinyes, or Furies, of Greek mythology, who had snakes for hair; the drawing was recently on the Paris art market.

Provenance:

Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 11 July 2001, lot 39
Didier Aaron Inc., New York
Private collection.

Exhibitions

Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection, 2009, no.93; Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, Rubens, Rembrandt and Drawing in the Golden Age, 2019-2020, no.111.

Literature:

The Burlington Magazine, March 2002 [advertisement]; Clifford S. Ackley, 'The Intuitive Eye: Drawings and Paintings from the Collection of Horace Wood Brock', in Horace Wood Brock, Martin P. Levy and Clifford S. Ackley, Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection, exhibition catalogue, Boston, 2009, pp.95-96, no.93, illustrated p.97; Victoria Sancho Lobis, Rubens, Rembrandt and Drawing in the Golden Age, exhibition catalogue, Chicago, 2019-2020, p.305, no.111, illustrated p.274.

Artist description:

The Flemish painter and draughtsman Gottfried Maes studied in his native Antwerp with his father and with the painter Pieter van Lint. He was admitted to the painter's guild in Antwerp in 1672, becoming dean of the guild ten years later. He spent his entire career in Antwerp, receiving commissions for altarpieces and history paintings from churches and collectors in Antwerp, Brussels and Liège. Much of his work is in a grand scale, such as a large altarpiece of The Martyrdom of Saint George, painted in 1681 for the Antwerp church of St. Joris and today in the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp, and Maes may be regarded as among the last of the Flemish Baroque artists. Among his important patrons was Eugen Alexander Franz, Prince of Thurn and Taxis, for whose palace in Brussels he painted an allegorical ceiling painting glorifying the Thurn and Taxis family. Maes worked as a designer of tapestry cartoons, often in collaboration with the tapestry workshop of Urbanus Leyniers in Brussels, and also produced book illustrations and a number of etchings. One of his last major decorative projects was the ceiling decoration of the Palace of Coudenberg in Brussels for the governor of the Spanish Netherlands, Maximilian II Emanuel, Elector of Bavaria; on which he worked between 1697 and 1700.

A gifted draughtsman, Maes produced numerous drawings, both as preparatory studies for paintings and as finished, independent works. Arguably the most significant example of the latter group are a series of 83 elaborate pen and wash drawings illustrating various episodes from Ovid's Metamorphoses. Perhaps intended as book illustrations or designs for prints, these refined drawings were, however, never reproduced or published in his lifetime. In 1717 the artist's widow sold all the drawings to the art dealer Jacob de Wit, and they were eventually used as illustrations for a 1732 translation of the Metamorphoses into French. The original drawings by Maes remained together until 1762, when they were dispersed at auction in Amsterdam.

Drawings by Maes are today in the collections of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Musea Brugge in Bruges, the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne, the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, the Hamburger Kunsthalle in Hamburg, the British Museum in London, the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, the University Library in Leiden, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Louvre and the Fondation Custodia in Paris, the Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the Eesti Kunstimuseum in Tallinn, the Biblioteca Reale in Turin, the Albertina in Vienna, and elsewhere.