

Domenico PIOLA (Genoa 1627 - Genoa 1703)

The Triumph of Bacchus

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, squared for transfer in red chalk.

Inscribed Lepiola at the lower right.

Laid down on an 18th century French mount, with the anonymous mountmaker's drystamp ARD (Lugt 172) at the lower right of the mount.

231 x 310 mm. (9 1/8 x 12 1/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON, TX.

With its spirited use of pen and wash, this drawing is one of the very finest and most elaborate examples of Domenico Piola's fluent and spirited draughtsmanship. Although squared for transfer, it remains unrelated to any known painting or fresco by the artist. A large and finished drawing by Piola of a related subject of A Bacchanal with the Drunken Silenus on an Ass was on the art market in London in 1971 and was, until recently, in a private collection in Genoa, while a painting of a similar composition, though different subject, is the large Chariot of the Sun in the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa.

Provenance:

Private collection, France.

Literature:

Daniele Sanguinetti, 'I percorsi di Domenico Piola', in Daniele Sanguinetti, Domenico Piola 1628-1703: Percorsi di pittura barocca, exhibition catalogue, Genoa, 2017-2018, pp.15-16, fig.9.

Artist description:

Working almost exclusively in his native Genoa, Domenico Piola can be counted among the most

important and influential artists active in Liguria in the second half of the 17th century. He was initially a pupil of his older brother Pellegro Piola, and after the latter's death in 1640 completed his training with the painter Giovanni Domenico Cappellino. Piola became the leading member of a local artistic dynasty in Genoa, and one of the most sought-after decorative fresco painters in the city. Indeed, the 18th century art historian Carlo Giuseppe Ratti, in his biography of the artist, notes that there were so many houses in Genoa decorated by Piola that it would be too tiring to list them all ('son tanti di stancare qualunque penna'). Over a fifty-year career, Piola produced large-scale fresco decorations for numerous churches, palaces and villas in and around Genoa and elsewhere in Liguria. He occasionally collaborated with Valerio Castello, for example in frescoes in the churches of Santa Marta and Santa Maria in Passione, until the latter's death in 1659, when he took over some of Castello's unfinished commissions, notably the fresco decoration of the Palazzo Balbi-Senarega. Piola was also a gifted painter of easel pictures and altarpieces. As has been noted of the artist, 'Piola developed a pictorial language grounded in solid draftsmanship and a precise rhetoric of gesture, resulting in a style that was almost as classicizing as it was baroque. His many canvas paintings from midcentury onward were of such quality and consistency that their style would be transmitted with little change to his numerous followers.'

After the great plague of 1656-1657, in which nearly half of Genoa's population perished, Piola became one of the most prominent and successful artists in the city. In the 1660s he worked as a fresco painter, in collaboration with the quadraturista Paolo Brozzi, in the Palazzo Pantaleo Spinola and the churches of San Siro, Santi Gerolamo e Francesco Saverio and Santa Maria in Passione. At the height of his career, Piola was the undisputed leader of the Genoese school. The 1670s and 1680s mark the peak of his activity as a frescante in Genoa, although the French naval bombardment of the city in May 1684 led to the destruction of much of his work in several Genoese churches and palaces. (Piola's frescoes in the monastery church of Santa Maria in Passione were similarly destroyed during the aerial bombardment of Genoa in 1942 and 1944, during the Second World War.) The rebuilding of many buildings in Genoa after 1684 provided numerous opportunities for Piola and his son-in-law Gregorio de Ferrari to paint decorative fresco cycles, and the two artists worked side by side, such as at the Villa Balbi dello Zerbino. Piola's career as a fresco painter culminated in the allegorical ceiling frescoes of Autumn and Winter in the Palazzo Brignole-Sale (now the Palazzo Rosso), painted between 1687 and 1688. Among the most important commissions of his late years was the extensive fresco decoration of the Genoese church of San Luca, completed around 1695, on which he was assisted by his son Paolo Gerolamo. Domenico Piola supervised a large and busy studio, known as the 'Casa Piola', which included his three sons Paolo Gerolamo, Giovanni Battista and Anton Maria. He left a significant body of work and, with the Casa Piola active until the 1760s, his influence remained paramount in his native city for many years after his death.

Domenico Piola remains one of the most prolific Genoese draughtsmen of the 17th century, despite the fact that many of his drawings were destroyed in a fire in his studio caused by the naval bombardment of the city in 1684. (As such, it may be assumed that much of the artist's surviving drawings should be dated to the last two decades of his career.) Piola's facility as a draughtsman was aptly described by his biographer Ratti, who notes that the artist 'used to spend the whole evening drawing at the small table, setting down ideas on paper in pen with light shading in bistre...the facility of this method of drawing came no less easily to him than that of painting. Hence he made so many drawings that besides the largest number destroyed by a fire in his house and apart from those in the possession of foreigners and other painters in the city, his heirs preserved more than four thousand of them. And the wonder is that in such a copious number, one never encounters in any one example an invention similar to others already executed by him.'