

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (Venice 1727 - Venice 1804)

The Raising of the Cross

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, with framing lines in brown ink, over an underdrawing in black chalk.

Signed Dom.o Tiepolo f. at the lower right.
465 x 362 mm. (18 1/4 x 14 1/4 in.)

This large and impressive sheet is part of a distinctive group of over three hundred highly finished drawings executed by Domenico Tiepolo over a period of several years following his return from Spain in 1770, and probably through the 1790's. Entitled the 'Large Biblical Series' by James Byam Shaw, these large drawings in pen and ink wash – each measuring approximately 460 x 350 mm. - depict subjects taken mainly from the Old and New Testaments (primarily the Gospels, Parables and the Acts of the Apostles, particularly the lives of Saints Peter and Paul), as well as from fragmentary gospels and the Apocrypha. As one modern scholar has noted of this series, 'All vertical in format, often with lavish landscape or architectural settings, the drawings are the most exhaustive exploration of biblical subjects by a single eighteenth-century artist. Even in the context of Italy, where the traditions of religious painting remained very much alive despite the impact of the Enlightenment, Domenico's sustained fascination with biblical subjects is extraordinary, particularly since it is assumed that he drew them primarily to please himself, rather than at the behest of an ecclesiastical patron.'

While it has been proposed that these drawings may have been intended as book illustrations, the fact that many of the compositions are signed in full would suggest instead that they were always regarded by the artist as independent, finished works. Byam Shaw notes that, 'They are essentially 'album drawings', intended not as studies for painting or etching, but as works of art in their own right; and they belong to a period when drawing, rather than painting, was Domenico's chief occupation.'

Set in elaborate interior or landscape settings and often crowded with figures, the drawings of the 'Large Biblical Series' are among Domenico's masterpieces as a draughtsman, executed with an assurance of handling and a fluidity of tonal washes that is often quite breathtaking. As George Knox

has written, '[Domenico Tiepolo's] most extensive and perhaps his most remarkable work as a draughtsman...The Large Biblical Series is a summation in more ways than one. For the first time, Domenico draws on the full resources of the Tiepolo studio, his own visual memory, his folios of drawings, and the vast accumulation of drawings by his father...Even so, by far the greater part of these compositions are entirely original inventions.' It is likely that the artist kept the drawings in his studio until his death, as no prints were made of them.

Only recently discovered in a French private collection, this large and powerful drawing of The Raising of the Cross is a new and striking addition to the 'Large Biblical Series'. The dramatic composition, with its bold diagonals – a feature of several drawings in the series – adds much to the pathos and power of the scene. The rich, golden tone of the washes, another characteristic element of the drawings of the 'Large Biblical Series', though not always seen with such freshness as in the present sheet, is contrasted by areas where the artist has left the surface of the paper untouched to create highlights, as on the body of Christ and the figures below him, all bathed in bright light.

A superb example of Domenico Tiepolo's vigorous draughtsmanship, the present sheet was previously unknown to scholars and appears never to have been previously exhibited or published. The drawing once belonged to the Parisian collector Paul Suzor who, together with his brother Léon, owned a large number of drawings by Domenico Tiepolo. (Between them the two Suzor brothers owned thirteen of the Punchinello drawings from the *Divertimenti per li ragazzi* series, for example). While many of the drawings in the Suzor collection were dispersed at auction in the 1960's, the present sheet remained with Paul Suzor's descendants until 2010.

Provenance:

Probably Victor Luzarche (or Luzarches), Tours
Possibly Camille Rogier
Paul Suzor, Paris
Thence by descent to a private collection, France, until 2010.

Literature:

Adelheid M. Gealt, Giambattista and Domenico Tiepolo: Master Drawings from the Anthony J. Moravec Collection, exhibition catalogue, Bloomington, Indiana, 2016-2017, p. 60, fig. 3.24.

Artist description:

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo is assumed to have begun his career in the family studio by copying his father's drawings, although he also created his own drawings as designs for etchings, a practice which occupied much of his time in the 1740s and 1750s. His first independent drawings for paintings are those related to a series of fourteen paintings of the Stations of the Cross for the Venetian church of San Polo, completed when he was just twenty. Between 1750 and 1770, Domenico worked closely with his father as an assistant, notably in Würzburg, at the Villa Valmarana in Vicenza and the Villa Pisani at Strà, and in Madrid. From the late 1740s he also began to be entrusted with his own independent commissions, and the drawings for these display a manner somewhat different from that of his father, with a particular interest in lighthearted genre motifs.

Soon after Giambattista Tiepolo's sudden death in Madrid in 1770, Domenico returned to his native Venice, where he enjoyed much success as a decorative painter. He continued to expound the grand manner of history painting established by his father - the 'Tiepolo style', as it were – and by 1780 his reputation was such that he was named president of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice. Within a few years, however, he seems to have largely abandoned painting. In his sixties and living effectively in retirement at the Tiepolo family villa at Zianigo, on the Venetian mainland, he produced a large number of pen and wash drawings that are a testament to his inexhaustible gift for compositional invention.

For much of the last twenty years of his career, Domenico Tiepolo seems to have painted only occasionally, and instead worked primarily as a draughtsman, producing a large number of pen and wash drawings that may collectively be regarded as perhaps his finest artistic legacy. These drawings were, for the most part, executed as a series of several dozen or more themed drawings, many of which were numbered. Among these are several series of drawings of religious and mythological subjects, as well as a varied group of genre scenes, numbering around a hundred sheets, generally referred to as the so-called 'Scenes of Contemporary Life', and a celebrated series of 104 drawings entitled the *Divertimenti per li ragazzi*, illustrating scenes from the life of Punchinello, a popular character from the *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Domenico's highly finished late drawings, almost all of which were signed, were undoubtedly intended as fully realized, autonomous works of art. While it is certainly possible that they were produced as works of art to be offered for sale to collectors, almost none of the drawings appear to have been dispersed in Domenico's lifetime. The fact, too, that many of the drawings are numbered, possibly by the artist himself, and that most remained together in groups for many years after his death, would also suggest that they were retained in his studio throughout his life, as indeed he also kept numerous albums of drawings by his father. It is most likely, therefore, that these late drawings by Domenico were done simply for his own pleasure. Nevertheless, they have consistently enjoyed immense popularity since the artist's death, and continue to entice collectors today. As Catherine Whistler has noted, 'Domenico's spirited and inventive independent sheets have long been appreciated, particularly by French and American collectors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; his quirky sense of humor, acutely observant eye, and zestful approach to his subjects lend his drawings a peculiarly modern appeal.'

As Michael Levey has also noted of the artist, 'Domenico Tiepolo's drawings provide us with the more private side of him, but they also serve to represent his career at all stages. He drew continually: sometimes very closely in the manner of his father; at the opposite remove, in the late Punchinello drawings for example, his manner and matter could never be mistaken for anyone else's...The key to Domenico is in drawings: he began as a draughtsman and, one is tempted to say, all his paintings betray the draughtsman.'