Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Guido RENI (Calvenzano 1575 - Bologna 1642)

The Head of a Young Woman Looking Upwards

Black and red chalk, with touches of white chalk, on pale brown paper.

Inscribed No 35, Reni Guido and 1609 no 23 Guido Reni at the bottom of the sheet.

Further inscribed Raccolta di S.M.G. San Germano on the former backing sheet.

377 x 270 mm. (14 7/8 x 10 5/8 in.)

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

Guido Reni often produced individual, large-scale chalk drawings of heads as studies for the figures in his paintings. The present sheet was first published, as a work of Reni's Roman period, by the late Stephen Pepper in 1981, and the attribution has since been confirmed by Babette Bohn and other scholars. While the drawing is not related to any surviving work by the artist, Pepper suggested that the 17th century inscription 'Raccolta di S.M.G. San Germano' on the old backing sheet may refer to a certain Bartolo di Villa San Germano, a figure mentioned in an interesting passage in Malvasia's biography of Reni. As Malvasia relates, 'Guido also gave works by his hand to whomever he found pleasing, and whomever, by showing they were disinterested, won him over...[including] a very lovely little Madonna for a certain Bartoli of Villa di S. Germano in the diocese of Rimini, a very handsome robust old man 105 years old, whose venerable head Guido painted a good eight times; but the painting was wickedly taken away from him by a gentleman in the Roman countryside, where he, Bartoli, was showing it to everyone and receiving incredible alms for it.' The present sheet may perhaps be related to this now-lost Madonna, although this can only be conjecture.

Alternatively, Pepper proposed that the drawing may have been a study for a fresco, as the precise technique and defined contours of the sheet would suggest. (In a letter of 1993, Pepper reiterated his conviction that the present sheet was intended as a study for an unknown fresco project by Reni, further noting that 'the feathery touch of the shading around the nostrils and the cheeks [is] typical of the master.') The date of 1609 inscribed on the sheet is in keeping with the period of Guido Reni's most frequent use of the fresco medium and, if correct, would make the drawing one the few studies that survive from this phase of his career. The scarcity of early drawings by Reni, however, complicates any attempt to establish a definitive dating of the present sheet to this period. Catherine Johnston has, however, tentatively noted some similarities between the head in the present sheet and that of the allegorical figure of Night, albeit in reverse, in a ceiling fresco by Reni of The Separation of Night and Day - an early work variously dated between 1599 and 1604 - painted for the Palazzo Zani in Bologna and now at Kingston Lacy House in Dorset.

The physiognomy and pose of the head in this drawing is, as Aidan Weston-Lewis has further pointed out, also very close to that in a painting by Reni of Lucretia that is known in at least two autograph versions, including one in a private collection in New York and another in an Italian private collection. It is also close to the head of the Magdalen in Reni's painting of The Penitent Magdalene of c.1627-1628 in the collection of the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Quimper.

Provenance:

Michele Moatti, Paris
William H. Schab Gallery, New York, in 1981
Anonymous sale, New York, Sotheby's, 13 January 1988, lot 129
Anonymous sale, London, Christie's, 7 July 1992, lot 170
P. & D. Colnaghi, London, in 1993
Private collection, Madrid.

Literature:

Stephen Pepper, 'Guido Reni at the Albertina', The Burlington Magazine, September 1981, p.574, fig.96; Mario di Giampaolo, ed., Disegno italiano antico: Artisti e opere dal Quattrocento al Settecento, Milan, 1994, illustrated p.193; Ursula Verena Fischer Pace, Klassik Stiftung Weimar. Graphische Sammlung: Die italienischen Zeichnungen, Vol.I, Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2008, p.259, under no.588.

Artist description:

Guido Reni was a pupil of Denys Calvaert in Bologna and, like Domenichino and Francesco Albani, transferred in 1595 from the studio of the Flemish artist to the Carracci's Accademia degli Incamminati. His earliest major work, a Coronation of the Virgin painted in c.1595 and now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna, shows the influence of both Calvaert and the Carracci. A number of altarpiece commissions for churches in and around Bologna followed before Reni moved to Rome in 1601. He remained there for some thirteen years and received several important commissions; unlike Albani and Domenichino, however, he did not join the Roman workshop of Annibale Carracci. Among Reni's most important Roman works were the decoration of the chapel of the Annunciation in the Palazzo Quirinale, painted in 1610, and the ceiling fresco of the Triumph of Aurora for the Villa Borghese, completed in 1614. Reni returned to Bologna that year and after the death of Ludovico Carracci in 1619 was established as the city's leading painter. He remained the dominant figure in local artistic circles for the next three decades, enjoying the patronage of collectors and connoisseurs not only in Italy but also in Spain and France. Among the important works of this period are four large scenes from the legend of

Hercules painted between 1617 and 1621 for Ferdinando Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua; these are now in the Louvre. In the late years of his career his painting style became looser and broader, with figures of a somewhat ethereal quality painted with silvery tones.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Reni does not seem to have made much effort to preserve his drawings. The biographer Cesare Malvasia noted of the artist that 'Of his drawings he kept no account, letting them lie all over the room for everyone. Although they all handled them, because of a certain sense of respect there were few who dared to steal them…He brought out bundles of drawings for any stranger who turned up and asked about them'2, and adds that at Reni's death large groups of drawings and sketches were sold for minimal sums. As Ann Sutherland Harris has written, 'Modern collectors and curators of drawings at major museums anxious to possess one of Reni's splendid chalk studies of drapery or a handsome head gazing at the sky are well aware of the difficulty of acquiring examples of these studies now, yet after the artist's death, according to Malvasia, Reni's drawings were virtually given away in bundles.'3 Although the inventory of the contents of Reni's studio after his death lists more than nine hundred drawings, less than a third of these survive today, of which the largest group - numbering around fifty sheets - is in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.