

Stefano della Bella (Florence 1610 - Florence 1664)

Two Studies of the Head of an Elephant

Pen and brown ink and slight touches of brown wash, over an underdrawing in black chalk.
The left corners of the sheet cut.
Numbered 67 on the verso.
84 x 95 mm. (3 1/4 x 3 3/4 in.)

A closely related drawing - a study of an elephant curling its trunk - was mounted alongside the present pair of drawings and two other studies of elephants in the Tomkins album. The aforementioned drawing, until recently in a Swiss private collection, is particularly close in style and handling to the present sheet.

Named Hansken, the elephant depicted in this drawing was well known throughout Europe. He was born in Ceylon in 1630, and three years later arrived in Amsterdam aboard a Dutch East India Company ship, as a young animal. For the next twenty-one years - between 1634 and 1655 - Hansken was displayed in cities in Holland, Germany, Poland, Russia, Denmark, France, Switzerland and Italy. He died in Florence in November 1655, and his skeleton is today on display in the Museo di Storia Naturale 'La Speccola' in Florence.

Provenance:

Part of an album of drawings by Stefano della Bella assembled by Thomas Tomkins, London
His posthumous sale, London, Mr. Hickman's Gallery, 25-28 February 1818, lot 289
Robert Stayner Holford, M.P., Dorchester House, London and Westonbirt, Gloucestershire
By descent to his son, Lt. Col. Sir George Lindsay Holford, K.C.V.O., Dorchester House, London and Westonbirt, Gloucestershire
His posthumous sale, London, Sotheby's, 22 May 1928, lot 29B
Private collection
The album broken up and dispersed at auction; London, Christie's, 18 March 1975, the present sheet part of lot 15
Duke Roberto Ferretti di Castelferretto, Montreal
His sale, London, Christie's, 2 July 1996, part of lot 16
Private collection.

Literature:

Jolanta Talbierska, Stefano della Bella (1610-1664): Etchings from the Collection of the Print Room of the Warsaw University Library, Warsaw, 2001, p.101, under no.229; Detlef Heikamp and Michiel Roscam Abbing, 'Epitaffio per un elefante morto nella Loggia dei Lanzi', in Eike D. Schmidt and Maria Sframeli, ed., Diafane passioni: Avore barocchi dalle corti europee, exhibition catalogue, Florence, 2013, p.53, fig.20; Michiel Roscam Abbing, Rembrandts olifant: In het spoor van Hansken, Amsterlveen, 2016, pp.66-67, fig.31.

Artist description:

A gifted draughtsman and designer, Stefano della Bella was born into a family of artists. Apprenticed to a goldsmith, he later entered the workshop of the painter Giovanni Battista Vanni, and also received training in etching from Remigio Cantagallina. He came to be particularly influenced by the work of Jacques Callot, although it is unlikely that the two artists ever actually met. Della Bella's first prints date to around 1627, and he eventually succeeded Callot as Medici court designer and printmaker, his commissions including etchings of public festivals, tournaments and banquets hosted by the Medici in Florence. Under the patronage of the Medici, Della Bella was sent in 1633 to Rome, where he made drawings after antique and Renaissance masters, landscapes and scenes of everyday life.

In 1639 he accompanied the Medici ambassador to the Parisian court of Louis XIII, and remained in France for ten years. Della Bella established a flourishing career in Paris, publishing numerous prints and obtaining significant commissions from Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, as well as other members of the court and the aristocracy. Indeed, the majority of his prints date from this fertile Parisian period, and include scenes of life at the French court. After his return to Florence in 1650, Della Bella continued to enjoy Medici patronage. Over the next few years he produced drawings of the gardens of the Medici villa at Pratolino, the port of Livorno and the Villa Medici in Rome, and also became the drawing master to the future Duke, Cosimo III. He was also active as a designer of costumes for the various pageants, masquerades and ballets of the Medici court. After suffering a stroke in 1661, Della Bella appears to have worked very little before his death three years later.

Only a handful of paintings by Della Bella survive to this day, and it is as a graphic artist that he is best known. A hugely talented and prolific printmaker and draughtsman, he produced works of considerable energy and inventiveness, with an oeuvre numbering over a thousand etchings, and many times more drawings and studies. Significant groups of drawings by Della Bella are today in several public collections, with around six hundred sheets in both the Uffizi and the Louvre, and approximately 150 drawings apiece in the Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica in Rome and the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.