

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Early 16th Century Milanese School

Saint John the Baptist

Black chalk.

A small made up section at the lower left centre.

Diameter 113 mm. (4 3/4 in.)

This fine drawing would seem to date from the first half of the 16th century, and to depend on Leonardesque prototypes; as such, the drawing is most likely to be the work of an anonymous Milanese follower of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). For many years after Leonardo's death, a significant number of artists working in Milan were strongly influenced by the example of the paintings and drawings of the master, who was active in the city between 1482 and 1499, and again between 1508 and 1513. Among these so-called 'Leonardeschi' were the young Giovanni Francesco Melzi, who became Leonardo's heir, as well as Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio and Margo d'Oggiono, all of whom were trained in Leonardo's workshop in Milan. Other artists also much influenced by Leonardo's work included Giovanni Agostino da Lodi, Andrea Solario, Giovanni Ambrogio de Predis and Bernardino Luini, among several others. As Giulio Bora has noted, 'The youngest and most devout follower of Leonardo, Francesco Melzi is reputed to have contributed towards keeping the Master's heritage alive in Milan well into the sixteenth century. He brought the new-generation artists into contact with the immense corpus of drawings left to him by Leonardo, encouraging the renewed interest encountered during the course of the 1560s.'

In the notes for a manuscript treatise on painting, written in Milan between 1490 and 1492 and later transcribed by Francesco Melzi, Leonardo da Vinci laid great emphasis on portraying heads in relief: 'One who portrays in relief ought to position himself so that the eye of the figure being portrayed is equal with the eye of the one portraying. And this is to be done for a head that you have to portray from life...'

This may explain why, as Pietro Marani has noted, 'Leonardo's followers in Milan focused almost exclusively on heads, faces and facial expressions in the enormous number of drawings they left behind.

Such studies might also be called a type of portrait though they are not exactly that.' It has been suggested that Leonardo may have based these precepts on the training he himself received in the Florentine studio of Andrea de Verrocchio in the late 1460's and early 1470's, where a number of highly refined drawings of idealized heads were produced by Verrocchio and several of his pupils, including Leonardo, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Lorenzo di Credi.

A close stylistic and thematic relationship may be noted between the present sheet and a number of finished late drawings of male heads by Leonardo, drawn in both black chalk and red chalk or a combination of the two. Examples of these are to be found among the vast number of drawings by Leonardo in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, including two late studies in black chalk of the head of a youth and the head of a bearded man, as well as a slightly earlier drawing of a young man, executed in red and black chalk on red prepared paper. Leonardo's drawings of heads dating from the near the end of his life tended towards the use of black chalk, rather than the silverpoint he preferred earlier in his career, and a flat, relief-like profile, and it is this type of late drawing that seems to have inspired the anonymous author of the present sheet.