

Felice Damiani (1530 - 1609)

The Baptism of Saint Augustine

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, heightened with white, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk, on blue-green paper.
The sheet lightly squared for transfer in black chalk.
Laid down on an 18th or early 19th century mount.
407 x 258 mm. (16 x 10 1/8 in.)

The present sheet has long been regarded as the work of the Pesarese artist Niccolò Martinelli, known as Il Trometta (c.1540-1611), and was first published as such by John Gere in his seminal 1963 article on that artist's drawings. Recently, however, this large drawing has been recognized by Denis Morganti as a rare and significant drawing by the Umbrian artist Felice Damiani, who was active between 1562 and 1608.

The drawing is a preparatory study for Damiani's altarpiece of The Baptism of Saint Augustine of 1594 in the church of Sant'Agostino in Gubbio, a painting regarded by several early writers as the artist's masterpiece. The 18th century scholar, Luigi Lanzi, wrote of the artist that 'His most studied and powerful work is at S. Agostino di Gubbio, the Baptism of the Saint, painted in 1594, a picture abounding in figures, and which surprises by the novelty of the attire, by its correct architecture, and by the air of devotion exhibited in the countenances. He received for this picture two hundred scudi, by no means a low price in those times.'

Only six other drawings may be attributed to Felice Damiani. The present sheet is particularly close in style and technique to a drawing of the Visitation in the British Museum, which was recognized by Hugo

Chapman as a study for one of Damiani's paintings in the Santuario della Madonna dei Lumi in San Severino Marche, executed in 1594.

Provenance:

Alister Mathews, Bournemouth (as Domenichino)
Purchased from him in 1955 by Ralph Holland, Newcastle
Thence by descent until 2013.

Exhibitions

Newcastle upon Tyne, Hatton Gallery, Old Master Drawings, From the XVIth to the XIXth century, 1960, no.14 (as Italian School, second half of the 16th Century); Newcastle upon Tyne, Hatton Gallery, Old Master Drawings, 1964, no.11 (as Trometta); Newcastle upon Tyne, Hatton Gallery, Italian and Other Drawings 1500-1800, 1974, no.23 (as Trometta); London, Courtauld Institute Galleries, Italian and other Drawings 1500-1800, from the Ralph Holland Collection, 1975, no.18 (as Trometta); Newcastle, Hatton Gallery, Italian Drawings 1525-1750 from the Collection of Ralph Holland, May-June 1982, no.13 (as Trometta).

Literature:

John Gere, 'Drawings by Niccolò Martinelli, Il Trometta', Master Drawings, Winter 1963, pp.9 and 17, no.29, pl.13 (as Trometta); Ralph Holland, Italian and other Drawings 1500-1800, exhibition catalogue, Newcastle, 1974, unpaginated, no.23, pl.X (as Trometta); Ralph Holland, Italian and other Drawings 1500-1800, from the Ralph Holland Collection, exhibition catalogue, London, 1975, p.5, no.18 (as Trometta); Ralph Holland, Italian Drawings 1525-1750, exhibition catalogue, Newcastle, 1982, p.4, no.13 (as Trometta); Denis Morganti, 'Su Felice Damiani disegnatore', Paragone, May-July 2013, p.12, pl.28 (as location unknown); Marco Simone Bolzoni, 'Per Felice Damiani a Napoli: un dipinto e un disegno', Nuovi Studi: Rivista di Arte Antica e Moderna, 2016, p.83, fig.152.

Artist description:

Relatively little firm biographical information exists for the Umbrian artist Felice Damiani, who was active between 1562 and 1608, although a large number of signed and dated paintings by him survive, from which a chronology of his career may be deduced. He was born in Gubbio and is thought to have trained there with the local painter Benedetto Nucci, although his study of Venetian painting is also evident in some of his early work. Later in his career, in the 1580's, Roman influences come to the fore, in particular the paintings of the Zuccari, Cesare Nebbia and Girolamo Muziano. Damiani was active mainly in Umbria and the Marches, painting altarpieces for churches in Foligno, Gualdo Tadino, Gubbio, Loreto, Macerata, Recanati, Spello, Todi and elsewhere. In 1585 he painted a Last Supper for the refectory of the Palazzo Apostolico in Loreto, and the same year painted frescoes of the Life of the Virgin for Count Antonio Brancaleoni in the Castello Brancaleoni in Piobbico. Among his most celebrated works are a series of paintings and frescoes for two chapels in the Santuario dei Madonna dei Lumi in the Marchigian town of San Severino Marche, executed between 1594 and 1597. After 1600 he continued to produce numerous altarpieces for churches throughout the Marche and Umbria.

Only seven drawings may be confidently attributed to Felice Damiani, whose draughtsmanship has tended to be subsumed under the vast corpus of 16th century Italian drawings generically described to artists in the 'circle of the Zuccari.' Nevertheless, to judge from the small group of finished compositional drawings by Damiani that have been identified, the artist may be characterized as one of the more interesting and talented draughtsmen active in central Italy at the end of the 16th century.