

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Francesco Fontebasso (1707 - 1769)**

## **A Pagan Sacrifice**

Pen and two shades of brown ink, over an underdrawing in black chalk, on two joined sheets of paper.

Inscribed Di Francesco Fontebasso Veneziano at the lower right.

Further inscribed Di Francesco Fontebasso Veneziano M 281 and numbered 2923 on the backing sheet.

498 x 718 mm. (19 5/8 x 28 1/4 in.)

This unusually large and highly finished sheet is unrelated to any known painting by Fontebasso. Given its scale and high degree of finish, it was almost certainly produced as an autonomous work of art, valued in its own right and perhaps intended for sale to a collector. Fontebasso here displays his remarkable skill with the pen, with a network of hatched and crosshatched lines and the use of two shades of brown ink to achieve a sense of depth and luminosity. The figures in this drawing are characteristic of Fontebasso's muscular figural types, while their poses are also typical of the artist. The striding man at the right edge of the sheet, for example, is a compositional device often used by Fontebasso; as is the praying man at the left, who finds a counterpart in such paintings as *The Virgin Appearing to Saint Jerome* in a private collection, datable to the 1740's. The same kneeling figure also appears in one of Fontebasso's finished drawings of *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, in a private collection.

A new and exceptional addition to the corpus of drawings by Fontebasso, this large and impressive sheet is a splendid testament to the virtuosity of the Venetian artist's draughtsmanship at the height of his career.

## **Provenance:**

Private collection, Germany.

## **Exhibitions**

New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, *The Age of Elegance: The Joan Taub Ades Collection*, 2011, no.12A.

## **Literature:**

Esther Bell et al., *The Age of Elegance: The Joan Taub Ades Collection*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2011, pp.34-35, no.12A (entry by Anne Varick Lauder).

## Artist description:

A pupil of Sebastiano Ricci, Francesco Fontebasso spent a brief period of study in Rome before returning to his native Venice, where he produced a series of engravings after Ricci's paintings. He established his career in Venice, painting several altarpieces for local churches, and was soon in some demand as a fresco painter. In 1734 he decorated the ceiling of the church of the Gesuiti in Venice, and two years later painted a fresco cycle for the church of Santa Maria Annunziata in Trent. Fontebasso worked for members of the Venetian aristocracy such as the Barbarigo family, for whom he painted decorative fresco cycles in the Palazzo Duodo and the Palazzo Barbarigo.

Apart from his success as a fresco painter, Fontebasso made a particular specialty of small-scale devotional easel pictures and modelli, and also worked as an engraver and a designer of book illustrations. From 1756 onwards he was a professor at the Accademia Veneziana, and in 1761 he visited St. Petersburg at the invitation of the Empress Catherine II. Fontebasso remained in Russia for almost two years, completing a number of decorative projects for the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg and other Imperial palaces, as well as painting portraits and genre studies. Although appointed a Professor at the Imperial Academy of Arts, he chose to return to Venice in 1762, where he rose to the position of principe of the Accademia in 1768, shortly before his death.

As Filippo Pedrocco has noted, 'Fontebasso was a prolific draughtsman and produced sparkling, delicate work in the best tradition of the Venetian Rococo.'<sup>1</sup> Like his paintings, his drawings are best described as a synthesis of the manner of his teacher Sebastiano Ricci with the drawings of Fontebasso's slightly older contemporary, Giambattista Tiepolo. As Pedrocco points out, 'at different stages of his career his graphic work sometimes reflects the influence of one, sometimes the other. He was not simply a passive interpreter of their work, however, and was capable of achieving a high degree of poetry independent of their influence. Examples can be found among his many 'finished' drawings, evidently intended for collectors.' Most of Fontebasso's drawings are executed in pen and ink, and while only relatively few may be connected with his paintings, several can be related to the handful of etchings that he made.