

Domenico Cresti Passignano (1559 - 1638)

The Head of a Youth

Red chalk.
Irregularly trimmed.
Inscribed Del Pasigniano on the old backing sheet.
282 x 200 mm. (11 1/8 x 7 7/8 in.) at greatest dimensions.

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

The present sheet bore an old and probably contemporary attribution to Passignano, and is a fine example of the 'morbidezza' or softness noted by Baldinucci as a particular characteristic of the artist's drawings. The delicate handling of red chalk and the treatment of hair is found throughout the artist's oeuvre as a draughtsman, and is seen for example in a study of a seated male nude, formerly in a French private collection and sold at auction in 1987. The facial type of this pensive young man is likewise found in numerous paintings and drawings by the artist. It has been suggested that the soft, sensual expression characteristic of such youths in Passignano's work may reflect something of the influence of Caravaggio's paintings, which he would have seen in Rome in the first decade of the 17th century.

Artist description:

Domenico Cresti, known as Passignano after his birthplace in Tuscany, was sent to Florence at the age of nine to apprentice in the studios of the painters Girolamo Macchietti and Giambattista Naldini. He completed his training with Federico Zuccaro, whom he assisted on the decoration of the cupola of the Duomo in Florence in the second half of the 1570s, and whose style was to be of particular significance for the young artist. Passignano accompanied Zuccaro to Rome in 1580, where he worked on his first

known independent commission; the decoration of the suburban Villa Montalto for Cardinal Felice Peretti, later Pope Sixtus V. Soon afterwards the young artist settled in Venice, where he spent several years in the 1580s. Among the few extant paintings from the artist's Venetian period is an altarpiece of The Crucifixion painted for the church of San Marziale in 1586. Passignano's careful study of such local Venetian painters as Tintoretto and Jacopo Palma Giovane was to be reflected in his own work throughout his later career; indeed, his paintings have often been characterized as a fusion of Tuscan draughtsmanship with Venetian colour. As the Passignano scholar Joan Nissman has pointed out, 'the importance of his years in Venice should not be underestimated. The figure types of Tintoretto and particularly Palma Giovane, and the rich atmospheric paintings of these artists and those of Titian and Veronese, had a lasting effect on his style. He was to introduce a softer and darker style of painting as an alternative to the smooth, bright, and glistening colors favored in Florence.'

Soon after his return to Florence at the end of the 1580s, Passignano contributed to the ephemeral decorations created for the wedding of the Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici and Christine of Lorraine, and painted a pair of frescoes for the Cappella Salviati in the church of San Marco, which established his reputation in Florence as a fresco painter. He was admitted into the Accademia del Disegno in 1589, and over the next decade earned a number of important ecclesiastical commissions in Florence, including a Preaching of Saint John the Baptist for San Michele Visdomini and a Resurrection for Santissima Annunziata, as well as works for Santa Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi. Indeed, together with Santi di Tito, Passignano was awarded most of the important commissions in Tuscany during the 1590s, and apart from his work in Florence produced altarpieces for churches in Lucca, Pistoia, Pisa and Rome. Among the secular works he completed towards the end of the decade were numerous frescoes for the Medici villa at Artimino and two large history subjects painted on slate, depicting scenes from the life of Cosimo I de' Medici, for the Salone dei Cinquecento in the Palazzo Vecchio, where they were paired with paintings by Jacopo Ligozzi. Vault frescoes in the chancel of the Cathedral of San Zeno at Pistoia were painted in the first years of the 17th century.

Firmly established by the turn of the century as one of the leading painters in Florence, Passignano was summoned to Rome in 1602 to paint a large altarpiece of The Crucifixion of Saint Peter for the Basilica of St. Peter's, for which he was awarded the honour of cavaliere di Cristo. He remained in the city for thirteen years, receiving commissions from such important patrons as Popes Clement VIII and Paul V and Cardinals Scipione Borghese, Maffeo Barberini, Pompeo Arrigoni and Pietro Aldobrandini, and working in the major churches of Santa Maria in Vallicella (known as the Chiesa Nuova), Sant'Andrea della Valle, San Giovanni dei Fiorentini and Santa Maria Maggiore. He provided decorations for number of villas, notably those of Cardinals Scipione Borghese in Rome and Pompeio Arrigoni in Frascati, and also sent at least one altarpiece to a church in Naples. His successful career continued after his return to Florence in 1616, with numerous projects for churches and palaces, including work for the Medici at the Palazzo Pitti and a painting for the Casa Buonarotti. Although Passignano again worked for some time in Rome in the mid 1620s, following the election of his former Roman patron Maffeo Barberini as Pope Urban VIII, he spent his last decade living and working in Florence, painting relatively few works but remaining closely associated with the Accademia del Disegno. Among his pupils were Fabrizio Boschi, Cesare Dandini, Anastasio Fontebuoni, Francesco Furini, Pietro Sorri, Alessandro Tiarini and Ottavio Vannini.

Although the 17th century Florentine biographer Filippo Baldinucci praised Passignano as a draughtsman - writing that 'I disegni del Passignano sono maravigliosi per la nobilità della maniera, e per una loro propria morbidezza e pastosità' - his drawings have remained comparatively less studied than those of other Florentine artists of the period, such as Ludovico Cigoli or Andrea Boscoli. Nevertheless, as the scholar Annamaria Petrioli Tofani has observed, 'An able as well as prolific draftsman, Passignano left numerous drawings of the most varied types…from rapid sketches of specific groupings or dynamic arrangements of a few figures to complete compositional elaborations to carefully completed bozzetti for approval by a patron. His drawings utilize all the instruments or materials available at the time: pen, chalk, wash, pastel and oil colors, and the blue paper favored by the Venetians as well as the white paper typical of the Florentine tradition. Because of his willingness to tackle graphic expression in all the range of its possibilities…Passignano's creativity achieved its best results in drawing.' Like most of his contemporaries, Passignano prepared his paintings with compositional sketches in pen and ink and followed these with single figure studies in chalk, drawn from a posed model. Indeed, his early training with Macchietti, Naldini and Zuccaro inspired a particular

devotion to the practice of life drawing, and a number of academic studies of male nudes by Passignano, mainly in red chalk, survive today in the Uffizi in Florence, the Istituto Centrale per la Grafica in Rome, the Louvre in Paris, and elsewhere.