

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Francesco Vanni (Siena 1563 - Siena 1610)**

## **The Ecstasy of Saint Catherine of Siena**

Red chalk.

153 x 119 mm. (6 x 4 5/8 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART, NORTHAMPTON, MASSACHUSETTS.

Francesco Vanni treated the subject of Saint Catherine of Siena in a number of paintings and drawings, notably in a series of frescoes painted for the Oratorio di Santa Caterina in Siena in 1600. Perhaps his most significant and original interpretation of the iconography of Saint Catherine, however, are his designs for a series of prints of the life of the saint, engraved by the Flemish printmaker Pieter de Jode and published in Siena in 1597. The series comprised twelve engravings - a frontispiece and eleven plates - depicting a total of thirty-three scenes from the life of the saint. Vanni was responsible for the design of each of the plates, which combine three different episodes from the saint's life in one composition, as well as the accompanying text. Published with a dedication to Christina of Lorraine, Grand Duchess of Tuscany, by the Sienese printer Matteo Florimi, Vanni and de Jode's engraved Life of Saint Catherine proved very popular. The series was reprinted in thirty-four plates engraved by Cornelis Galle I and published by Phillips Galle in Antwerp in 1603, with each episode being broken up into independent compositions and with therefore different dimensions and backgrounds.

This drawing is a preparatory study for part of one of these large engravings, depicting Saint Catherine of Siena Receiving the Stigmata and Healing a Possessed Woman. A study for the print is in the Smithsonian Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame, and the present sheet may be added to the small corpus of preparatory studies in red chalk by Vanni for the print series, which have been described as 'fine examples of the attractive and original spontaneity with which this delicate and lyrical artist graced his work.' These drawings, all in reverse to the printed compositions, can be quite precisely dated to between 1595 (when Pieter de Jode first arrived in Italy) and 1596 or early 1597, bearing in mind that the series was published in October 1597. Of the handful of surviving drawings by Vanni for the engravings, the most significant are eight finished studies in red chalk for the complete compositions,

each stylistically comparable with the drawing here exhibited. Six of these full-size compositional drawings, one of which is unfinished, are in the Albertina in Vienna and two more are in the collection of the Dukes of Devonshire at Chatsworth.

That the Sienese artist was well served by de Jode in the translation of his designs into engravings has been noted by one scholar: 'Vanni could hardly have found a better interpreter for his drawings...[Pieter de Jode] captured the formal element in the drawings; the interplay of light and shade which, because always so rigorously coordinated, tend to transform particular elements by highlighting them, thereby achieving those eloquent light effects which are such an attractive feature of the prints....the subtle variations of shading in the dark areas affords some glimpse of the chiaroscuro and tonal contrasts which Vanni contrived to convey pictorially by means of those vivid lighting effects that endow the whole with a sense of poetry.'

Apart from being, arguably, Vanni's most inspired and inventive interpretations of the legend of the local Sienese saint to whom he was devoted, the engraved series of The Life of Saint Catherine of Siena, published at the height of the artist's career, served to enhance his reputation well beyond the city. As Michael Jaffé has noted, 'Being a handsome example of collaboration between the Sienese draughtsman in his best years and the Antwerp-trained engraver, it became...a disseminator of knowledge of Vanni's style, albeit through the stiffer and drier schemata of the prints.'

### **Provenance:**

(Comte?) René de Menthon, Paris, in November 1929  
Thence by descent to a private collection, France  
Anonymous sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 12 April 2008, lot 9.

### **Exhibitions**

New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, Francesco Vanni: Art in Late Renaissance Siena, 2013-2014, no.34.

### **Literature:**

John Marciari and Suzanne Boorsch, Francesco Vanni: Art in Late Renaissance Siena, exhibition catalogue, New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, 2013-2014, pp.125-127, fig.34.

### **Artist description:**

The leading painter in Siena at the end of the 16th century, Francesco Vanni began his training with his stepfather Arcangelo Salimbeni before entering the studio of Giovanni de' Vecchi in Rome around 1581. Perhaps the most significant influence on the artist, however, was the work of Federico Barocci.

For most of his career Vanni worked in and around Siena, where one of his earliest independent commissions was a Baptism of Constantine for the church of Sant'Agostino, painted in 1586. Later paintings followed for San Domenico, Santa Caterina, San Francesco and several other Sienese churches, including a Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine painted in 1601 for the Chiesa del Rifugio. Vanni also worked in Pistoia, Cortona, Pisa and Rome, where he painted two scenes from the life of Saint Cecilia for the church of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere and a large altarpiece of The Fall of Simon Magus for St. Peter's, completed in 1603. Together with his half-brother Ventura Salimbeni, Francesco Vanni came to dominate the artistic scene in Siena at the turn of the century.

Vanni was a gifted and prolific draughtsman, whose drawings were highly regarded by Sienese artists of the late 16th and 17th centuries, in much the same way that Domenico Beccafumi's drawings had a profound influence on artists of the previous generation. Vanni's drawings were also in great demand among such contemporary collectors as Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici, who wrote in 1573 to his agent

in Siena, charged with acquiring drawings by local artists, that 'of those by Vanni I would take up to a hundred, so as to be able to form a special book [album] of them all.' Several hundred drawings by Vanni survive today, with large groups in the Uffizi, the Louvre, the Kupferstichkabinet in Berlin and the Biblioteca Comunale in Siena.