

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Stefano DELLA BELLA (Florence 1610 - Florence 1664)

An Elaborate Vase Decorated with Nymphs, Snakes, a Swan and a Musical Score

Pen and brown ink and brown wash.

Extensively inscribed on the musical scores at the centre and at the lower left.

195 x 130 mm. (7 5/8 x 5 1/8 in.)

This remarkable drawing by Stefano della Bella does not relate to any known print by the artist, and may have been intended as a design for the frontispiece of a musical or theatrical book or manuscript, or perhaps as an autonomous work in its own right. The drawing may nevertheless be associated with a number of the many ornament prints that were commissioned from Stefano della Bella by Parisian publishers. The motif of the seated nymphs finds parallels in some examples from a set of decorative etchings by della Bella, the *Raccolta di varii capriccii et nove inventioni di cartelle et ornamenti*, published in Paris in 1646, while the nymphs and the form of the vase itself are akin to those found in a suite of six etchings of several different designs for vases, published as *Raccolta di vasi diversi* in c.1646.

The nymphs in the present sheet are particularly close to those flanking one of the vases in one of the *Raccolta di vasi diversi* etchings, as well as a preparatory drawing for the etching in the Louvre. As Phyllis Dearborn Massar has noted of the *Raccolta di vasi diversi* etchings, 'Fantastic vases, often based on antique bronzes, were perennially favorite subjects with printmakers. Stefano outfantasied all of them, both in the vases themselves and their exuberant contents.'

The words of the sheet music which forms the central motif of this drawing seems to be a sonnet of sorts. Although the text is fragmentary, it can be read as 'in mi fortuna / parlami al Core piaga d'Amore li ridarò / cieca importuna tu dici nò nò cieca impor- / tuna tu dici cosi(?) nò nò', while the text continues at the bottom of the sheet with the words 'si pur felice'. A very rough translation of this text would be: 'My fortune, speak to my heart, sore with love, I will give them back, blind persistence you say no, no, blind persistence you only say no, no...be happy in any case.'

An alternative attribution to the Bolognese theatre designer, printmaker and musician Carlo Antonio Buffagnotti (1660-c.1715 or later), who was known as a decorator of printed music, has recently been suggested.

Provenance:

Bernard Quaritch Ltd., London, in 1996 (as Carlo Antonio Buffagnotti)
Acquired from them by the Cattaneo collection
Hill-Stone Inc., New York
Galerie Paul Prouté, Paris, in 2004
Monica Streiff, Switzerland.

Artist description:

A gifted draughtsman and designer, Stefano della Bella was born into a family of artists. Apprenticed to a goldsmith, he later entered the workshop of the painter Giovanni Battista Vanni, and also received training in etching from Remigio Cantagallina. He came to be particularly influenced by the work of Jacques Callot, although it is unlikely that the two artists ever actually met. Della Bella's first prints date to around 1627, and he eventually succeeded Callot as Medici court designer and printmaker, his commissions including etchings of public festivals, tournaments and banquets hosted by the Medici in Florence. Under the patronage of the Medici, Della Bella was sent in 1633 to Rome, where he made drawings after antique and Renaissance masters, landscapes and scenes of everyday life.

In 1639 he accompanied the Medici ambassador to the Parisian court of Louis XIII, and remained in France for ten years. Della Bella established a flourishing career in Paris, publishing numerous prints and obtaining significant commissions from Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, as well as other members of the court and the aristocracy. Indeed, the majority of his prints date from this fertile Parisian period, and include scenes of life at the French court. After his return to Florence in 1650, Della Bella continued to enjoy Medici patronage. Over the next few years he produced drawings of the gardens of the Medici villa at Pratolino, the port of Livorno and the Villa Medici in Rome, and also became the drawing master to the future Duke, Cosimo III. He was also active as a designer of costumes for the various pageants, masquerades and ballets of the Medici court. After suffering a stroke in 1661, Della Bella appears to have worked very little before his death three years later.

Only a handful of paintings by Della Bella survive to this day, and it is as a graphic artist that he is best known. A hugely talented and prolific printmaker and draughtsman, he produced works of considerable energy and inventiveness, with an oeuvre numbering over a thousand etchings, and many times more drawings and studies. Significant groups of drawings by Della Bella are today in several public collections, with around six hundred sheets in both the Uffizi and the Louvre, and approximately 150 drawings apiece in the Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica in Rome and the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.