

Giovanni Domenico TIEPOLO (Venice 1727 - Venice 1804)

Hercules and Antaeus

Pen and brown ink and brown and grey wash, over an underdrawing in black chalk.
Signed Dom. Tiepolo f at the lower right and numbered 77 at the upper left.
203 x 162 mm. (8 x 6 3/8 in.)

This splendid sheet may be added to a series of drawings of Hercules and Antaeus by Domenico Tiepolo that have been dated to the latter part of the artist's career. The largest single group of drawings of this subject, numbering thirty-eight sheets, were once in a small album formerly in the Henri Bordes collection and purchased by Colnaghi's from Paul Prouté in 1936. The album was broken up and the drawings dispersed among public and private collections between 1936 and 1941, and examples are today in the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, MA, and elsewhere.

The present sheet is, however, unlikely to have been part of the Bordes group, since none of the drawings included in the album were numbered. A handful of drawings from the Hercules and Antaeus series were known, however, before the appearance of the Bordes album. One example, numbered 94, entered the collection of the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin in 1902 and another was in the Michel-Lévy collection and was sold in Paris in 1919; a third example appeared on the art market in Amsterdam in 1929. Four other studies of the same subject, also not from the Bordes collection, were included in an album of drawings by Domenico Tiepolo belonging to the Earls Beauchamp and sold at auction in London in 1965; one of these drawings was numbered 36.

James Byam Shaw has suggested that these Hercules and Antaeus drawings may have been related to the decoration of the Tiepolo villa at Zianigo, since many of the drawings depict the struggling figures of Hercules and Antaeus on the same sort of ledge that appears in other drawings by Domenico - mostly of animals - that are thought to have been intended for the Zianigo villa. As Byam Shaw notes, 'It seems possible, therefore, that the subject was at least conceived as a suitable one for the decoration of that villa, and that the series was drawn at a relatively late date in Domenico's career.'

This series of drawings of Hercules and Antaeus by Domenico does not relate to any painting or fresco by the artist, and may instead be counted among the many pen and wash drawings – all variations on a theme – that the artist produced in the second half of his career. Byam Shaw suggests that this particular series of drawings may have been inspired by a drawing or print after a sculptural group of Hercules and Antaeus, such as a small bronze by the Renaissance sculptor Antico, known in several casts.

Provenance:

Art market, Paris, in 1964
Walter Goetz, Paris and London
Thence by descent until 2006.

Artist description:

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo is assumed to have begun his career in the family studio by copying his father's drawings, although he also created his own drawings as designs for etchings, a practice which occupied much of his time in the 1740s and 1750s. His first independent drawings for paintings are those related to a series of fourteen paintings of the Stations of the Cross for the Venetian church of San Polo, completed when he was just twenty. Between 1750 and 1770, Domenico worked closely with his father as an assistant, notably in Würzburg, at the Villa Valmarana in Vicenza and the Villa Pisani at Strà, and in Madrid. From the late 1740s he also began to be entrusted with his own independent commissions, and the drawings for these display a manner somewhat different from that of his father, with a particular interest in lighthearted genre motifs.

Soon after Giambattista Tiepolo's sudden death in Madrid in 1770, Domenico returned to his native Venice, where he enjoyed much success as a decorative painter. He continued to expound the grand manner of history painting established by his father - the 'Tiepolo style', as it were – and by 1780 his reputation was such that he was named president of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice. Within a few years, however, he seems to have largely abandoned painting. In his sixties and living effectively in retirement at the Tiepolo family villa at Zianigo, on the Venetian mainland, he produced a large number of pen and wash drawings that are a testament to his inexhaustible gift for compositional invention.

For much of the last twenty years of his career, Domenico Tiepolo seems to have painted only occasionally, and instead worked primarily as a draughtsman, producing a large number of pen and wash drawings that may collectively be regarded as perhaps his finest artistic legacy. These drawings were, for the most part, executed as a series of several dozen or more themed drawings, many of which were numbered. Among these are several series of drawings of religious and mythological subjects, as well as a varied group of genre scenes, numbering around a hundred sheets, generally referred to as the so-called 'Scenes of Contemporary Life', and a celebrated series of 104 drawings entitled the Divertimenti per li regazzi, illustrating scenes from the life of Punchinello, a popular character from the Commedia dell'Arte.

Domenico's highly finished late drawings, almost all of which were signed, were undoubtedly intended as fully realized, autonomous works of art. While it is certainly possible that they were produced as works of art to be offered for sale to collectors, almost none of the drawings appear to have been dispersed in Domenico's lifetime. The fact, too, that many of the drawings are numbered, possibly by the artist himself, and that most remained together in groups for many years after his death, would also suggest that they were retained in his studio throughout his life, as indeed he also kept numerous albums of drawings by his father. It is most likely, therefore, that these late drawings by Domenico were done simply for his own pleasure. Nevertheless, they have consistently enjoyed immense popularity since the artist's death, and continue to entice collectors today. As Catherine Whistler has noted, 'Domenico's spirited and inventive independent sheets have long been appreciated, particularly by

French and American collectors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; his quirky sense of humor, acutely observant eye, and zestful approach to his subjects lend his drawings a peculiarly modern appeal.'

As Michael Levey has also noted of the artist, 'Domenico Tiepolo's drawings provide us with the more private side of him, but they also serve to represent his career at all stages. He drew continually: sometimes very closely in the manner of his father; at the opposite remove, in the late Punchinello drawings for example, his manner and matter could never be mistaken for anyone else's...The key to Domenico is in drawings: he began as a draughtsman and, one is tempted to say, all his paintings betray the draughtsman.'