

Stefano DELLA BELLA (Florence 1610 - Florence 1664)

Study of a Moor with Arms Outstretched

Black chalk, with grey and pink washes.
179 x 129 mm. (7 x 5 1/8 in.)

Drawings such as this were probably intended as costume designs for the various pageants, masquerades and ballets of the Medici court, and especially the performances of the Accademia degli Immobili. Founded in 1648 under the patronage of Cardinal Gian Carlo de' Medici, the Accademia was made up of prominent Florentine citizens and noblemen who staged one or two musical plays each year. In the late 1650's and early 1660's Della Bella was often called upon to supply costume designs for these productions. It is interesting to note that, in each of the productions of the Accademia, a part was written for the Moorish servant of Cardinal de' Medici. Indeed, among a large group of full-length costume studies by della Bella in the British Museum - from the same period and in the same technique as the drawing here exhibited - is a study of a costumed moor, quite possibly the same model. A pendant drawing to the present sheet - a study of the same costumed moor, facing to the left - shared the same provenance until 1995.

Five similar bust-length studies of female moors wearing elaborate headdresses, also drawn with pale washes of colour, are in the Royal collection at Windsor Castle. Other examples, drawn in pen and ink, are in the Instituto Nazionale per la Grafica in Rome.

Provenance:

Charles Rogers, London (Lugt 625)
By descent to his brother-in-law William Cotton, Letherhead, Surrey
His son, William Cotton the Younger
Rogers sale, London, Th. Philipe, 15-23 April 1799, part of lot 57 ('Two- heads of moors - very fine, pen and Indian ink, with a tinge of colour')

Henry Scipio Reitlinger, London (Lugt 2274a), his mark on the old backing sheet
His sale, London, Sotheby's, 9 December 1953, lot 28, one of a pair (bt. Calmann for £42)
Hans Calmann, London
Anonymous sale, New York, Christie's, 12 January 1995, part of lot 34
P. & D. Colnaghi, London, in 1995
John Winter, London.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Colnaghi, Master Drawings, 1995, no.20.

Literature:

Anthony Blunt, The Drawings of G.B. Castiglione & Stefano della Bella in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle, London, 1954, p.95, under no.31.

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.