

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Alessandro MAGNASCO (Genoa 1667 - Genoa 1749)

A Laundress at the Edge of a River

Brush and brown ink and two shades of brown wash, extensively heightened with white, on paper washed a light brown.

235 x 172 mm. (9 1/4 x 6 3/4 in.)

Among the most overtly pictorial of Alessandro Magnasco's drawings, the present sheet displays an especially bold use of white heightening to achieve brilliant highlights, particularly evident in the figure of the woman and the clothes she is washing, as well as the waterfall in the background. Among stylistically and technically comparable drawings are three related studies for altarpieces, all in American museum collections; a Flight into Egypt in the Cleveland Museum of Art, a Nativity in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. All three of these drawings for altarpieces, as well as a fourth depicting The Visitation formerly in a private collection in New York, are of similar shape and dimensions, and have been dated to c.1735. Like the present sheet, they display an extensive use of white heightening on brown paper, allowing the artist to achieve bold light effects.

The same fluid passages of white heightening are also found in two related drawings by Magnasco of Christ Crowned with Thorns, in a private collection, and Christ Carrying the Cross, in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Other stylistically similar drawings by Magnasco include two studies of a Seated Man and a Seated Woman in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan and a large drawing of A Concert in a Tavern Among Ruins, in the same technique as the present sheet, which was sold at auction in London in 2014. Two studies of washerwomen by Magnasco, though not as freely drawn or expressive as the present sheet, are in the Uffizi, while a sheet of studies of five washerwomen is in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Although the present sheet is not directly related to any known work by the artist, the pose of the figure is particularly close to the laundress in the centre of a collaborative painting by Magnasco and Antonio

Francesco Peruzzini, formerly in the Italic Brass collection in Venice, in which Magnasco painted the figures, while Peruzzini was responsible for the landscape itself. Similar washerwomen appear in a number of other collaborative landscape paintings with figures by Magnasco; examples are in the collections of the City of York Art Gallery, the Muzeum Narodowe in Warsaw and the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio.

Artist description:

Although born in Genoa, Alessandro Magnasco left the city at a young age and received his artistic training in Milan, where his style soon departed from the more colourful Genoese manner exemplified by the work of his father, the painter Stefano Magnasco. According to the Genoese art historian and biographer Carlo Giuseppe Ratti, the younger Magnasco, who was known by the nickname 'Il Lissandrino', made his early reputation as a portrait painter. He also spent much of his early career as a specialist in figure painting, charged with the depiction of staffage in the paintings of other artists, notably the landscape painters Antonio Francesco Peruzzini and Carlo Antonio Tavella, as well as the architectural painter Clemente Spera. Magnasco's own genre paintings – 'Ceremonies of the church, schools of maids and youths, chapters of friars, military exercises, artists' shops, Jewish synagogues...painted with humour and delight', in the words of the 18th century art historian Luigi Lanzi – also proved very popular. Together with Peruzzini, Magnasco worked at the Florentine court of the Grand Duke Ferdinando de' Medici between 1703 and 1709.

It was only in the 1720s, when he was in his fifties, that Magnasco began to produce his own independent landscape paintings. Painted in a distinctive manner characterized by rapid brushstrokes and dissolved, almost liquefied forms, these works were invariably crowded with figures, particularly monks, hermits and beggars. That Magnasco was drawn towards such figure types is indicative of the particular influence on him of the 17th century Dutch and Flemish genre paintings that he would have seen in the Medici collections in Florence, as well as the prints of the early 17th century Medici court artist Jacques Callot. He continued to enjoy aristocratic patronage on his return to Milan, counting among his clientele members of the Borromeo and Visconti families. In 1735 Magnasco settled in his native Genoa for good, although he never really abandoned the sombre colours and interest in dramatic light effects characteristic of the Lombard tradition. Lanzi notes that his work was, in fact, more appreciated in Lombardy than in his native Genoa: 'His bold touch, though joined to a noble conception and to correct drawing, did not attract in Genoa, because it is far removed from the finish and union of tints which these masters followed; hence Magnasco worked little in his native country, and left no scholar there.' Although he is known to have painted a number of large religious works, the only surviving examples are a Supper at Emmaus for the Genoese monastery of San Francesco in Albaro and a remarkable Sacrilegious Robbery, painted in 1731 for the church of Santa Maria Assunta di Campomoro in the town of Siziano, and today in the Palazzo Arcivescovile in Milan. Despite the success he achieved in his lifetime, Magnasco's work was largely forgotten quite soon after his death. His oeuvre was only rediscovered by scholars in the first quarter of the 20th century, when the artist became something of a cult figure.

Reflecting the course of his career as a figurista, only a few compositional drawings by Magnasco are known today. Most of his extant drawings are, like the present sheet, studies of individual figures or small groups of figures. These fluid and expressive sheets often have the appearance of autonomous works of art, and many may have been produced as such, although in other instances they seem to have been intended to be inserted into larger painted compositions. Indeed, such figure drawings seem to have served as a kind of compendium of motifs, to be used and reused in his paintings if required. As a draughtsman, Magnasco displayed a preference for the use of the brush instead of the pen as well as, occasionally, washed or prepared paper. One of the largest groups of drawings by the artist is today in the collection of the Uffizi in Florence.