

Giovanni Domenico TIEPOLO (Venice 1727 - Venice 1804)

The Resurrection of Christ

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, with framing lines in brown ink, over an underdrawing in black chalk.
Signed Dom.o Tiepolo f. at the lower left centre.
473 x 368 mm. (18 5/8 x 14 1/2 in.)

Executed with an assurance of handling and a fluidity of tonal washes that is often quite breathtaking, the drawings of the 'Large Biblical Series' are among Domenico Tiepolo's masterpieces as a draughtsman. Set in elaborate interiors or landscapes, and often crowded with figures, these highly pictorial compositions were almost certainly intended as independent works of art. Using large sheets of handmade paper of the same size (approximately 460 x 350 mm.) as he used for his contemporaneous Punchinello series of drawings, but oriented vertically, the artist began each of the drawings of the 'Large Biblical Series' with a rough outline drawing in black chalk. He followed this with pen outlines, with the most important figures in the foreground executed first, and those in the background last. The washes were usually applied in several overlapping and complex layers, from light tones to dark, with areas of the bright white paper left in reserve, as highlights.

A superb example of Domenico's vigorous draughtsmanship, this large sheet, in the words of one recent scholar, 'is one of the most spectacular drawings from this enormous "New Testament" project...Christ's body, liberated from the sepulchre, soars heavenward, emanating rays of mystic light. He clutches a triumphal banner adorned with the Cross, while cherubs and angels witness and celebrate his victory. The astonished soldiers, guardians of the tomb, are thrown back felled by the overpowering burst of light...The drawings of both Giambattista and Domenico Tiepolo are celebrated for their highly expressive use of transparent ink washes laid down on brilliantly white paper...In the Resurrection, the transparency of the washes allows the black chalk underdrawing, particularly the aureole around the levitating Christ, to read as an essential part of the final image. Reserves of untouched blank paper reflect light, portraying the dazzling intensity of the illumination and powerfully modeling the figures.'

This large drawing of The Resurrection of Christ was also singled out by the late George Knox, in his survey of the entire 'Large Biblical Series', as 'notable for the extremely brilliant use of the white paper in the handling of light'. Here, the body of Christ and several of the figures below him are all bathed in a bright, radiant light; an effect created purely by the artist leaving parts of the surface of the white paper untouched by ink or wash. As Knox goes on to describe the scene, 'Using his shield to block Christ's blinding supernatural light, a soldier runs from the stunning apparition of Jesus soaring out of his tomb. His companions have fallen to the ground. One angel spreads incense and another rejoices as Jesus, accompanied by seraphim, glides upwards...Alluding to immortality, a majestic evergreen stands at the left.'

The Tiepolo scholar Adelheid Gealt, who has aptly described the present sheet as 'a masterpiece of light and movement', has further pointed out that the composition is highly original. As she notes of this drawing, unlike the traditional visual history of this subject, Christ is here portrayed looking upwards rather than down, so that Domenico's emphasis is on Christ's new status - corporal but more spiritual - as He ascends into Heaven.

The compositions of the drawings of the 'Large Biblical Series' display the artist's wide-ranging study of a variety of visual sources. Inspiration was derived from, among other sources, the Byzantine mosaics in the Basilica of San Marco in Venice and the extensive collection of 16th and 17th century prints kept in the Tiepolo studio, while Domenico also adapted motifs from the paintings and drawings of his father, and occasionally recycled images from his own work. Indeed, some aspects of the composition of the present sheet are found in an earlier drawing by Domenico of The Resurrection of Christ, of much smaller dimensions, which is today in a Swiss private collection5. As Knox noted of the artist, 'his most extensive and perhaps his most remarkable work as a draughtsman...The Large Biblical Series is a summation in more ways than one. For the first time, Domenico draws on the full resources of the Tiepolo studio, his own visual memory, his folios of drawings, and the vast accumulation of drawings by his father...Even so, by far the greater part of these compositions are entirely original inventions.'

The present sheet was one of fifty-nine drawings from the 'Large Biblical Series' selected for a remarkable exhibition devoted to the series, held at the Frick Collection in New York in 2006-2007; an event which provided a rare opportunity to see, displayed together, some of the finest drawings in the sequence. As Gealt has written, 'While each drawing is a masterpiece of composition and draftsmanship, its real value, as part of an unfolding narrative with rich visual connections to other drawings in the series, can only be appreciated when viewed in its original context.' The sheer scale of the 'Large Biblical Series', and the virtuosity and creativity evident in each of the over three hundred and twenty drawings, has led one scholar to describe the project as 'an exceptional resumé of all [Domenico Tiepolo's] artistic powers of invention.'

Provenance:

Among the contents of the artist's studio in Venice at the time of his death, and by descent to his wife, Margherita Moscheni, Venice
Sold on the Venetian art market in the first half of the 19th century
Presumably Victor Luzarche, Tours
Presumably Camille Rogier, Paris
Presumably Roger Cormier, Tours
Presumably his sale, Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, 30 April 1921
Anonymous sale, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 13 March 1995, lot 223
Thomas Williams, London, and W. M. Brady & Co., New York, in 1995
Private collection.

Exhibitions

New York, W. M. Brady & Co. Inc., and London, Thomas Williams (Fine Art) Ltd. at Daniel Katz Ltd., Old Master Drawings, Autumn 1995, no.38; Stanford University, Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Classic

Taste: Drawings and Decorative Arts from the Collection of Horace Brock, March-May, 2000; New York, The Frick Collection, Domenico Tiepolo (1727–1804): A New Testament, 2006-2007; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection, 2009, no.95.

Literature:

New York, W. M. Brady & Co., and London, Thomas Williams (Fine Art) Ltd., Old Master Drawings, 1995, pp.86-87, no.38; Christofer Conrad, Die grossformatigen religiösen Zeichnungen Giovanni Domenico Tiepolos, unpublished Ph,D dissertation, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg, 1996, no.184; Adelheid M. Gealt and George Knox, Domenico Tiepolo: A New Testament, Bloomington, 2006, pp.494-495 and pp.496-497, no.205, pl.205; Clifford S. Ackley, 'Master drawings from the collection of Horace Wood Brock', The Magazine Antiques, February 2009, pp.52 and 55, illustrated p.54, fig.5; Clifford S. Ackley, 'The Intuitive Eye: Drawings and Paintings from the Collection of Horace Wood Brock', in Horace Wood Brock, Martin P. Levy and Clifford S. Ackley, Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection, exhibition catalogue, Boston, 2009, pp.86-87 and p.155, no.95, illustrated pp.86 and 100.

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.'