

Giovanni Domenico TIEPOLO (Venice 1727 - Venice 1804)

Saint Peter Healing the Paralytic of Lydda

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, with framing lines in brown ink, over an extensive underdrawing in black chalk.
Signed Dom.o Tiepolo f. at the lower left and inscribed nella citta di Lida visano il Paralitico / S. Piero at the lower right.
Further inscribed Guerison par Pierre du paralytique Enée a Lyda in pencil on the verso.
485 x 381 mm. (19 1/8 x 15 in.) [sheet]

Previously unknown to scholars and only recently discovered in a French private collection, this large and powerful drawing of Saint Peter Healing the Paralytic of Lydda is a new and striking addition to Domenico Tiepolo's 'Large Biblical Series'.

The subject is taken from the Acts of the Apostles, and depicts Saint Peter healing Aeneas, who had been paralyzed for eight years, in the town of Lydda (now known as Lod) in Palestine: 'And it came to pass, as Peter passed throughout all quarters, he came down also to the saints which dwelt at Lydda. And there he found a certain man named Aeneas, which had kept his bed eight years, and was sick of the palsy. And Peter said unto him, Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: arise, and make thy bed. And he arose immediately. And all that dwelt at Lydda and Saron saw him, and turned to the Lord.' (9: 32-35)

Saint Peter plays a crucial role in many of the drawings of the 'Large Biblical Series'. Furthermore, just over ten percent of the drawings of the series are devoted to the Acts of Saint Peter, the first vicar of the new church of Christianity. Some thirty-five drawings, including the present sheet, are devoted to episodes from the life and ministry of the saint. As Adelheid Gealt notes, 'As founder of the Church, first Pope, and lead disciple, Peter has generally received special attention from artists. Domenico, however, went far beyond tradition with his interest in this saint, using his characteristics to offer new insights into the Gospel accounts. His development of Peter's story is one of Domenico's most original contributions to this epic...Peter's own ministry is interpreted far beyond the scope of a single text or

picture cycle. Selecting stories from various commentaries beyond those found in The Golden Legend, Domenico has presented a visual exegesis on Peter's official role in the development of the early Church and as the first Pope.'

While most, but not all, of the three hundred and twenty known drawings from the 'Large Biblical Series' are signed by the artist, they are unnumbered and untitled. A few drawings, however, have long inscriptions, notably those - like the present sheet – which depict the Acts of Saint Peter. These inscriptions are always in Italian, and it has been suggested that, throughout the development of the 'Large Biblical Series', Domenico referred to a recent translation of the New Testament into vernacular Italian, probably that published in Turin in 1769 by Antonio Martini.

As he did with a handful of Biblical episodes that inspired him, Domenico created a second version of this subject as part of the 'Large Biblical Series'; a drawing which is today in a private collection in New York. That drawing, although set in a similar room with brick walls, is completely different in composition. In both drawings Saint Peter stands, surrounded by astonished onlookers, before the paralytic Aeneas. In the New York drawing, however, the saint stands at the right, gesturing to the cripple rising from his bed at the left. With visibly withered legs, the man struggles to stand upright, while a prominent sign on the wall in the centre of the composition describes the scene depicted in bold letters, noting that Aeneas had been bedridden for eight years: 'NELLA CITTA DI / LIDA / RISANO S PIETRO UN / PARALTICO, CHE ERA OTTO / ANNI CHE NON SI ERA / LEVATO DI LETTO.'

The present sheet appears to depict a slightly later point in the story of the same miracle, with the cripple now kneeling before the saint in prayer. As Gealt has described the composition of this drawing, 'In this version, which takes place in a similar room, Domenico has changed the vantage point. Peter stands at the left...The room is much taller and now features a chimney as well as an oval window, suggesting the door seen in [the New York drawing] is now behind us. Domenico still took care to inscribe the drawing with its subject (something he rarely did in his series) but the inscription is far less dramatic, and notes only that Peter met a paralytic in Lydda. This version which arguably makes up a sequel to [the New York drawing], places a different emphasis [on] the process of healing. Here Peter points heavenward, reminding us that Peter had invoked his cure in the name of Jesus Christ. Aeneas, the palsied man, has already left his bed which looks neatly made (as per Peter's instructions), and, his legs fully restored, kneels before Peter in prayerful gratitude. The room is crowded with people suggesting that 'all of Lydda and Saron' who converted to Christianity as a result of this miracle, were present in the room to see it. Indeed, converts evident at the far right have adopted various attitudes of prayer. The presence of onlookers, including the man with the dark coat and hat seen from the back, places further emphasis on the phenomenon of witnessing.'

The subject of Saint Peter healing Aeneas at Lydda is quite rare in Italian art, and it is characteristic of Domenico's creativity as a draughtsman that he saw fit to treat it twice, and in very different and inventive ways. It should be noted, however, that the repetition of a particular Biblical episode, with differing compositions, occurs in several of the drawings from the 'Large Biblical Series', notably in scenes from the Passion of Christ or the Stations of the Cross.

In his pioneering book on the drawings of Domenico Tiepolo, published in 1962, James Byam Shaw opined that, 'it is with the pen and brush, in the second half of his career, that Domenico develops his most characteristic style. It is then that his compositions – in the large Biblical series particularly – become much more pictorial than his father's, for all the freedom and looseness of his pen work; and it is his peculiar use of the wash, brown or grey or both combined, which contributes most to this effect. These were album-drawings, finished to a margin-line, such as his father seldom produced...Such drawings were intended no doubt for the collector's portfolio, but many others he kept for his own use.' And, as the Tiepolo scholar George Knox has written, 'Compared with his father, a brilliant court-painter of European renown, Domenico is obviously a far more modest figure, a local artist, a man of his own time and place, a Venetian Daumier perhaps...Above all things he was a religious artist, perhaps the most deeply religious painter of the eighteenth century, with a passionate concern...to create a new and vital contemporary religious idiom.'

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
Dispersed on the Venetian art market in the first half of the 19th century
Victor Luzarche, Tours, until 1868
Camille Rogier, Paris
Roger Cormier, Tours
His sale, Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, 30 April 1921, lot 61 ('Saint Pierre opérant une guérison miraculeuse. Plume et lavis de bistre. Signé à gauche, en bas. Haut,. 46 cent.; larg., 36 cent.')
Bought at the sale by a private collector, and thence by descent to a private collection, France.

Literature:

Adelheid M. Gealt and George Knox, Domenico Tiepolo: A New Testament, Bloomington, 2006, p.574, no.243 (not illustrated).

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.’