

Luigi SABATELLI (Florence 1772 - Milan 1850)

Rinaldo and Armida on a Chariot Drawn by Dragons

Pen and brown ink, over traces of an underdrawing in pencil, on buff paper, with framing lines in brown ink.

Signed Luigi Sabatelli fece at the lower left.

424 x 699 mm. (16 1/4 x 27 1/2 in.) [image]

480 x 754 mm. (18 7/8 x 29 3/4 in.) [sheet]

ACQUIRED BY THE YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, NEW HAVEN, CT.

In his posthumously published autobiography, Luigi Sabatelli recalled of his youthful period in Rome in the 1790s that he became well known for his finished drawings in pen and ink. The sale of these scenes from Greek, Roman and Florentine history, as well as episodes from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and the Old Testament, earned him some one hundred zecchini over four years. His highly finished pen drawings, and the engravings derived from them, were greatly admired by his contemporaries, and many of these independent drawings were sold to collectors. Sabatelli's bold and inventive draughtsmanship reveals the influence of Michelangelo, as well as the Anglo-Swiss artist Johann Heinrich Fuseli. A talented printmaker in his own right, Sabatelli also provided finished drawings for other engravers. Among his engraved designs are the series of Pensieri diversi, published in Rome in 1795, and The Plague of Florence, inspired by Boccaccio's Decameron and published in 1801.

A superb example of the vigour of Luigi Sabatelli's pen draughtsmanship, and what has been aptly described as the artist's 'virtuoso calligraphy', this very large drawing may be dated to the artist's years in Rome, between 1789 and 1794, and in particular towards the end of that period. The subject is taken from Canto XIV of the 16th century epic poem Gerusalemme Liberata by Torquato Tasso, and depicts the abduction of the Christian knight Rinaldo by the sorceress Armida. Rinaldo, having fallen asleep under Armida's magic spell, and bound with a chain of roses, lilies and woodbines, is taken in her chariot to her palace on the Island of the Fortunate. It is interesting to note that Sabatelli has here shown the chariot drawn by dragons, in keeping with Tasso's original text, instead of the horses found in almost all depictions of this theme in Italian art. Indeed, the striking and original conception of the creatures is typical of the inventiveness and imagination common to much of Sabatelli's work. Despite the popularity of Tasso's epic poem among artists, the theme of the abduction of Rinaldo by Armida in

her chariot is rare in Italian art, and Sabatelli may have taken inspiration for the composition of this drawing from Guercino's ceiling fresco of the same subject, painted in c.1621, in the Palazzo Costaguti in Rome.

At least two other large and highly finished pen and ink drawings by Luigi Sabatelli take their subjects from Tasso's Gerusalemme Liberata. A drawing of Armida Abandoned is in a private collection, while a more obscure subject from the poem, Ismen Populating the Forest of Saron with Demons, is depicted in a drawing now in the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. (A further pen and ink drawing from Tasso, The Infernal Council from Canto IV, is mentioned in Sabatelli's autobiography.) As David Franklin has noted, 'The purpose of the Tasso drawings has not yet been established, but since Sabatelli was an accomplished printmaker and the studies are so finished and complete, it is possible they were intended as designs for a new (but unrealized) large-format edition of the text. Perhaps more likely, they were created as works in their own right, maybe even meant playfully to imitate the permanence of engravings, to judge by the tight, even hatching. The complete lack of wash and the bold, virtuoso handling would strongly support the interpretation that these drawings were always intended as demonstration sketches of a type the artist sometimes sold to private collectors.'

This impressive drawing of Rinaldo and Armida on a Chariot drawn by Dragons has, indeed, much in common with a series of large and highly finished pen drawings commissioned from the artist by Tommaso Puccini. An erudite connoisseur, Puccini seems to have had a particular penchant for dramatic and visionary scenes from literature, and encouraged Sabatelli to treat such themes in his work. Several very large pen drawings made by Sabatelli for Puccini are today in the collection of the Uffizi, including Philopoemen Kills Machanidas, signed and dated 1793, and two versions of Athenodorus and the Ghost. Among other comparable drawings of similar size and technique by Sabatelli are The Madness of Orlando in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which, like the present sheet, was once in the Capponi collection in Florence, and several works in private collections, including two large pen and ink drawings of Dido Abandoned and Dante Conversing with Farinata degli Uberti.

The present sheet was one of fourteen large pen and ink drawings by Luigi Sabatelli recorded in the collection of the 19th century Florentine historian and patriot Marchese Gino Capponi (1792-1876), the son of the artist's first patron, Marchese Pier Roberto Capponi (1752-1839). The younger Capponi must have inherited some of these drawings from his father, although some presumably later works bear the artist's dedications to Gino Capponi himself.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Colnaghi, Master Drawings, 1998, no.37; Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, and Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century, 2000, no.400.

Literature:

Luigi Sabatelli, Cenni biografici sul cav. Prof. Luigi Sabatelli scritti da lui medesimo e raccolti dal figlio Gaetano, pittore, Milan, 1900, p.34 ('Disegni a penna…Armida che trasporta Rinaldo sul carro di Amore (Tasso); largo 0,70, alto 0,43.'); Edgar Peters Bowron and Joseph J. Rishel, ed.,Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century, exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia and Houston, 2000, pp.553-554, no.400 (entry by Stefano Susinno), where dated c.1794; Ann Percy and Mimi Cazort, Italian Master Drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 2004, unpaginated, under no.62; David Franklin, 'Two New Drawings by Sabatelli Father and Son', Master Drawings, Autumn 2009, p.347.

Artist description:

From almost the very beginning of his career, Luigi Sabatelli enjoyed the patronage and support of a number of important figures. The first of these was the Marchese Pier Roberto Capponi, whose financial backing allowed the young artist to study at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence and to continue his training in Rome and Venice, between 1789 and 1797. Another significant patron was the Pisan collector Tommaso Puccini, a future director of the Uffizi, who commissioned a series of highly finished drawings of literary subjects from the artist. In Rome in the early 1790s Sabatelli studied with the painter Domenico Corvi, and was also a frequent participant in the informal drawing study sessions hosted by Felice Giani at his studio, known as the Accademia dei Pensieri. He met and exchanged ideas with several of the Italian and foreign artists working in the city, notably Vincenzo Camuccini, Giuseppe Bossi and François-Xavier Fabre. Returning to Florence in 1797, Sabatelli began working as a fresco painter, decorating several churches and the palazzi of the Gerini, Bardi, Spinelli, Tempi, Bartolommei and Guicciardini families. He also produced portrait drawings in pen and ink of members of his own family and those of several noble Florentine families, as well as many of the significant figures in the cultural life of Florence at the onset of the 19th century.

In 1808 Sabatelli was appointed a professor of painting at the Accademia di Brera in Milan, where he lived and worked for the remainder of his long career. Although he executed many decorative projects in Milan and throughout Lombardy, he continued to work occasionally in his native Florence, notably between 1820 and 1825, when he painted the frescoes in the Sala dell'Iliade in the Palazzo Pitti. These show the influence of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, who was in Florence around this time and with whom Sabatelli became friendly. (The influence of Ingres is similarly evident in the Italian artist's portrait drawings of this period.) Sabatelli worked in the church of San Filippo Neri in 1830 and undertook the decoration of the Tribuna di Galileo in the Palazzo della Specola, completed in 1841. He also illustrated a History of Florence, written by Prince Louis Napoleon Bonaparte and printed in 1833. A talented printmaker in his own right, Sabatelli also provided finished drawings for other engravers. Among his engraved designs are the series of Pensieri diversi, published in Rome in 1795, and The Plague of Florence, inspired by Boccaccio's Decameron and published in 1801.