

Stefano DELLA BELLA (Florence 1610 - Florence 1664)

A Sheet of Studies of Soldiers, Cavaliers and a Horse

Pen and brown ink, over an underdrawing in black chalk.

The verso with two studies of weights and pulleys in pen and brown ink, and a further study of a pulley faintly drawn in black chalk.

Numbered 2(?), 14, 15 and 18, with other illegible inscriptions, in brown ink, above certain figures.

134 x 191 mm. (5 1/4 x 7 1/2 in.)

Watermark: Fragment of a coat of arms.

The two soldiers at the upper left of this sheet of studies, one priming his rifle and another firing from the edge of a cliff, are repeated in a small drawing by Stefano della Bella in the collection of the Princeton University Art Museum in New Jersey. The standing soldier in the centre of the composition, as well as the seated cavalier to his right, reappear in another small pen sketch formerly included in an album of drawings by Della Bella assembled by the late 18th century calligrapher Thomas Tomkins and dispersed at auction in 1975. A figure of a drummer, very close to that seen at the top left of the present sheet, appears in reverse in the left background of a drawing of A Standard Bearer in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.

Similar studies of soldiers are found in a number of Della Bella's series of small etchings of military subjects executed in the 1640s, such as the Receuil de diverses pièces très nécessaires à la fortification of c.1638-1643 and the Varii capricci militari of c.1641, as well as the Dessins de quelques conduits de troupes of c.1641-1647. The studies of horsemen in this drawing may also be loosely related to some of the series of nineteen prints entitled Diverses exercises de cavalerie, executed c.1642-1645. Finally, very similar figures of musketeers appear in two etchings from the series La milice moderne, published in 1646.

Exhibitions

London, Arcade Gallery, Stefano della Bella: Exhibition of 60 of his Drawings, 1946, no.16 (priced at 20

gns.); Milan, Il Gabinetto delle Stampe, Turin, L'Arte Antica and Rome, Antiquaria Romana, Disegni di Stefano della Bella, 1976-1977, no.40; New York, Bob P. Haboldt & Co., Netherlandish and Italianate Old Master Drawings, 1989-1990, no.6.

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.