

Giovanni Battista DELLA ROVERE (Milan c.1561 - Milan c.1630)

The Blessing of a Cardinal

Pen and brown ink and grey wash, extensively heightened with white, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk, on blue paper.

Signed and dated fiaminghino BR 1618 lulio(?) on the verso.

Inscribed Juan Flamengo / XV siècle on the verso.

Further inscribed (in a modern hand) D. Calvaert / 1540-1619 on the verso.

231 x 326 mm. (9 1/8 x 12 7/8 in.)

This is a typical example of Giovanni Battista della Rovere's robust draughtsmanship. Like his brother, the artist favoured the use of blue paper, often with extensive areas of white heightening to intensify the tonal contrasts. Also like Giovanni Mauro, he often signed and dated his drawings on the verso, as can be seen on the present sheet, usually inscribing his initials JBR together with the year and month (and sometimes the exact date) that the sketch was made. Although unsigned drawings by the two brothers are not easy to attribute to one or the other, it has been noted that Giovanni Battista's drawings tend to 'differ from his brother's in their more ornamental contour and less volumetric drapery.'

Among stylistically comparable drawings by Giovanni Battista Della Rovere are a study of The Meeting of Saints Carlo Borromeo and Filippo Neri in the Albertina in Vienna and a drawing of Saint Ambrose Tries in Vain to Take the Body of Saint Dionysus to Milan (which, like the present sheet, is dated 1618), formerly in the Marquis de Lagoy and Flury-Hérard collections; that drawing is a study for a fresco in the small church of San Dionigi in Cassano d'Adda, near Milan. Also similar is a drawing of Moses in the Szépmüvészeti Múzeum in Budapest, which is a preparatory study for a fresco in Sant'Angelo in Milan, and a study of A Bishop Saint (Ambrose?) Exorcising the Devil in the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as a drawing of a Scene from the Life of Saint Carlo Borromeo formerly in the collection of John and Alice Steiner.

The present sheet bears the collector's mark of the Romanian physician and scientist Ioan (Jean) Cantacuzino (1863-1934), a member of the illustrious aristocratic Cantacuzino family who assembled a fine collection of drawings and prints of various schools. At his death, a group of works was donated by

his widow to the Toma Stelian Museum in Bucharest, which later became part of the National Museum of Art of Romania. Most of the rest of the collection was dispersed by the collector's heirs in two auctions in Paris in 1969.

Artist description:

Giovanni Battista della Rovere was, like his younger brother Giovanni Mauro (c.1575-1640), known as 'il Fiammenghino' ('the little Fleming') due to the fact that their father was born in Antwerp. Giovanni Battista worked in numerous churches and monasteries throughout Milan, Lombardy and Northern Italy, very often alongside his brother. Among his earliest independent works are a cycle of scenes from the life of Saint John the Baptist in the Duomo in Monza, completed in 1586. Between 1602 and 1604 Giovanni Battista and Giovanni Mauro collaborated on a fresco cycle of scenes from the life of Saint Carlo Borromeo for the Duomo in Milan, followed by further joint work in the Milanese church of San Maria presso San Celso, at the Sacro Monte at Orta and the Abbey of Chiaravalle. As Nancy Ward Neilson has written of the Della Rovere brothers, 'Gian Mauro and his elder brother Giovanni Battista were enormously productive throughout Lombardy for a period of approximately fifty years. Active as decorators, they executed large narrative commissions which, judging from their number, must have been done very rapidly. None of this material has been systematically gathered so that their chronology is not easy to establish.'

Such was the closeness of their association as artists that it is often difficult to differentiate between the work of the two brothers, both as painters and as draughtsmen. Giovanni Battista worked at San Calimero and Santa Maria della Passione in Milan, while later ecclesiastical commissions in Montemezzo, Como, Novara, Peglio and elsewhere in Lombardy resulted in a flourishing career. Among his last significant works were paintings in the church of Santa Maria della Grazia in Pavia, begun in 1629 and completed, after his death, by Giovanni Mauro in 1635.