

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Giuseppe ZAIS (Forno di Canale 1709 - Treviso 1781)

Capriccio Landscape with Fishermen and Seated Peasants, a Church at the Right

Pen and brown ink and grey wash, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk, with double framing lines in brown ink.

Signed and inscribed Zais Inv: et Del: in the lower left margin.

Further inscribed Hyllan IV. / Zais - geboren in Cremona on the verso.

307 x 412 mm. (12 1/8 x 16 1/4 in.) [sheet]

Watermark: A crest and three crescents above IMPERIAL, with a crown above.

This pair of large landscape capricci were almost certainly intended as finished works of art, to be sold to collectors. Giuseppe Zais seems to have produced many such autonomous works for the market, which often reflect the inspiration of the painted compositions of the artist's slightly younger contemporary, Francesco Guardi. As has been noted, 'Of the group of drawings by Zais in this Guardi vein... in which one can observe the same taste for the vestiges of an imaginary antiquity and which present the same format and spatial layout... These sheets are united by a clear, darting pen stroke and by watercolour brushstrokes that achieve effects of both transparency and atmospheric luminosity, as well as dense shading and chiaroscuro contrasts... the artist expresses himself with such unconventional and free workmanship and such a freshness of touch that he can compete in quality with Francesco Guardi...'

Among stylistically comparable signed and finished landscape drawings by Zais are three sheets in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and two signed drawings in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

These two large landscape drawings belonged to 20th century Italian antique dealer and collector Giuseppe Rossi (1914-1989), who built a fine collection of 18th century decorative arts. Born into a family of cabinet makers in Turin, he worked for the family firm both before and after military service

during the Second World War. After the war he began to focus on dealing and collecting, and from the late 1940s onwards was based in the palazzo of the Marchese Carrassi del Villar, on the Piazza San Carlo in Turin. This fine pair of drawings by Zais were inherited by Rossi's younger sister Maria Luisa (1917-2017), who worked with him from 1944, and, when his declining health led him to give up the gallery, embarked on a new career as a conservator.

Artist description:

Born in the small mountain town of Forno di Canale (now called Canale d'Agordo), near Belluno, Giuseppe Zais became one of the leading landscape painters of the second half of the Settecento in Venice. Few details of his long career, which lasted almost fifty years, are known, however. He only rarely appears in documents of the period, although his name is listed in the records of the Fraglia, the Venetian guild of painters, between 1748 and 1768. He studied the work of his fellow Bellunese artist Marco Ricci, from whose prints he adopted many of his characteristic landscape settings, and in the 1730s came under the particular influence of the Tuscan artist Francesco Zuccarelli, who was a few years older. Like Zuccarelli, Zais made a speciality of pastoral landscapes and was much inspired by 17th century Dutch paintings, while he also painted a number of battle scenes. He remained somewhat in the shadow of Zuccarelli in Venice, however, and was almost completely unknown in England, where the elder artist established a successful reputation. Nevertheless, such is the close stylistic and thematic relationship between the works of the two artists that in later years Zais's paintings were often confused with those of his more famous compatriot, with the result that a number of paintings by Zais entered English collections as the work of Zuccarelli. Although the collector and connoisseur Joseph Smith, the British Consul in Venice who was an important patron of Canaletto, is known to have commissioned several works from Zais, none of these can be identified today.

Zais came into his own as a landscape painter and draughtsman in Venice following Zuccarelli's departure for London in 1752. As the 19th century artist and museum director Frederic William Burton wrote of him, 'Zais profited so well by [Zuccarelli's] tuition that he is considered to have surpassed his master in certain qualities of their art. He attracted the attention of the English Consul, Joseph Smith, a passionate collector of works of art and rare books, and was by him brought largely into notice among wealthy amateurs...In the compositions of this painter the landscape always plays an important part, and is treated with much grace and elegance. The figures, well grouped, frequently illustrate some biblical, historical, or mythological event; otherwise they represent battles, fêtes-champêtres, or a fanciful rustic life.' Zais's manner did not change much throughout his career, and it remains difficult to establish a firm chronology for his paintings or drawings.

Giuseppe Zais's most significant works as a decorative painter were a series of frescoes on the walls of the Villa Pisani at Strà, in the Veneto, executed between 1760 and 1765. He produced a number of etchings, and provided illustrations for an edition of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, published in 1772. It was not until 1774, when he was already in his sixties, that Zais was accepted into the Accademia Veneziana as a landscape painter. Sadly, however, his career seems to have ended not long afterwards. As the 18th century art historian Luigi Lanzi wrote in his *Storia pittorica dell' Italia: dal risorgimento delle belle arti fin presso al fine del XVIII secolo*, first published between 1795 and 1796, Zais 'failed to sustain either his own dignity or that of his art, and giving himself up to carelessness and dissipation, he died a common mendicant in the hospital of Trevigi.'

Although most of Giuseppe Zais's extant landscape drawings are executed in pen and ink and wash, a handful of watercolours are also known. A significant number of drawings by the artist are today in the collection of the Museo Correr in Venice, while other fine examples are in the Szépművészeti Múzeum in Budapest, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice and the Albertina in Vienna.