Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Gaetano GANDOLFI (San Matteo della Decima 1734 - Bologna 1802)

The Heads of a Young Man and a Bearded Old Man in Profile

Pen and brown ink.

151 x 185 mm. (5 7/8 x 7 1/4 in.)

This fine sheet may be included among a number of elaborate pen and ink drawings of studies of heads - of young women, boys, old men and children, and often with several heads on one sheet – that are among Gaetano Gandolfi's most appealing works. As James Byam Shaw has noted, 'these groups of heads, closely juxtaposed, evidently had a great vogue in Bologna and elsewhere in North Italy', and had earlier been seen in the drawings of such artists as Donato Creti. The present sheet may in particular have been intended as a representation of youth and old age.

Characterized by the Gandolfi scholar Donatella Biago Maino as works 'of inventive verve and confidence of handling', these beautiful and highly finished drawings of heads by Gandolfi, some of which are signed, were probably made as autonomous works of art for sale to collectors. At the same time, however, the precise nature of the artist's penwork made them particularly suitable for reproduction as prints, and indeed several of Gandolfi's drawings of this sort were engraved in the 1780s by his pupil Luigi Tadolini, and published with the title Raccolta di teste pittoriche inventate e disegnate a penna dal Sig. G. Gandolfi accademico clementino ed incise in rame da Luigi Tadolini. It may be noted that Gaetano was already producing finished capricci drawings by the 1770s - to judge from a drawing of four heads, dated 1777, in the collection of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan - and he continued to do so until at least the late 1790s. Gaetano's son Mauro Gandolfi (1764-1834) also produced several drawings of this type.

Biago Maino has suggested of these capricci drawings that they may have their origins in 18th century scientific studies of physiognomy as a means of comprehending emotional states. As she writes, 'The classification of the expression of emotions through facial expression continued to be the subject of intense debate in the 1770s, when Gaetano produced one of his first securely dated capricci… Gandolfi's character studies do not, of course, make any claims to offer new interpretative categories – or indeed to be anything other than elegant refined variations on a theme – but they were conceived along the general lines of these tendencies, and to satisfy a taste and fashion that were to some extent produced by these debates.'

Drawings of capricci heads by Gaetano Gandolfi are in the collections of the Uffizi in Florence, the British Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice, the Albertina in Vienna, and elsewhere.

Artist description:

Aside from trips to Venice in 1760 and Paris and London in 1788, Gaetano Gandolfi seems to have worked almost exclusively in his native Bologna, where he established a prosperous career. As a student at the Accademia Clementina he won two medals for sculpture and four medals for his drawings. A brief period of study in Venice in 1760 was of great importance, and is reflected in the vigorous brushwork and rich colours of his paintings. Gandolfi received numerous commissions for altarpieces for churches throughout Emilia and elsewhere, and also worked extensively as a fresco painter. One of his first important decorative projects was a ceiling fresco of the Four Elements, painted for the Palazzo Odorici in Bologna in collaboration with the quadraturista Serafino Barozzi. This was followed by work in several other Bolognese palaces, including the Palazzo Guidotti, the Palazzo Centurione and the Palazzo Montanari. In 1776 Gandolfi painted a massive canvas of The Marriage at Cana for the refectory of the Lateran convent of San Salvatore, now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna. Another prominent commission was for the decoration of the cupola of the church of Santa Maria della Vita, painted between 1776 and 1779 with frescoes of The Virgin in Glory and The Sacrifice of Manoah. In the later years of his career Gandolfi also produced easel pictures of historical and mythological subjects, while a six-month stay in London and Paris in 1787 added a Neoclassical tinge to his oeuvre. Throughout his life he remained actively involved in the affairs of the Accademia Clementina, where he taught a class in life drawing. He was a gifted draughtsman, and his drawings were highly prized by contemporary collectors.