

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Gregorio DE FERRARI (Porto Maurizio 1647 - Genoa 1726)

The Madonna of Loreto Appearing to Saints Augustine and Paul

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

320 x 213 mm. (12 5/8 x 8 3/8 in.) [image]

325 x 236 mm. (12 3/4 x 9 1/4 in.) [sheet]

This dynamic drawing, which can be dated to the early years of the 18th century, remains unconnected to any surviving painting by Gregorio de Ferrari. However, its composition is very close to that of a recently rediscovered altarpiece by De Ferrari of The Virgin and Child with Saints, in the parish church at Pieve di Teco, north of Imperia. Painted for the high altar of the church of the Augustinians in the town, the large painting was only discovered, rolled up in a storeroom in the chiesa parrocchiale, in 2015, and has since been cleaned and restored. Although the subject of the altarpiece is not the same as that of this drawing, and it includes more figures, the main elements of the canvas, notably the poses of the Virgin and Child and the saints below, closely match the present sheet.

Mary Newcome Schleier has suggested that the composition of this drawing may also have provided the inspiration for a late painting of The Madonna of Lepanto, which is a collaborative work by Gregorio and Lorenzo de Ferrari, in a private collection. The pose of the Madonna in the present sheet is repeated in a drawing of The Virgin and Child with Saint Anthony and a Holy Martyr in the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa.

The subject of the present sheet is the Miracle of the Santa Casa of Loreto. The Santa Casa (or Holy House) was the house in Nazareth where the Virgin Mary lived, and where she received the Angel of the Annunciation, and was a place of pilgrimage from the earliest days of Christianity. According to legend, when Nazareth was threatened by Saracen armies in 1291, the entire house was miraculously raised from its foundations and transported by angels to the town of Tersatto in Dalmatia. Three years later, with Tersatto under threat from the Moorish advances into Albania, the house was again carried by angels across the Adriatic Sea, and eventually was deposited in the Marchigian town of Loreto, south of Ancona. The Santa Casa at Loreto remains an important place of pilgrimage for Catholics today. The typical iconography of the subject in Italian art called for the Virgin and Child to be depicted seated on the roof of the Santa Casa as it is supported by angels. In this drawing, however, as Newcome Schleier has pointed out, the artist instead 'chose to stress the vertical movement from the two saints to the Virgin with the result that the house supported by angels is in the distance.' De Ferrari's decision to place the Santa Casa in the background allowed him to create a strong vertical rhythm within the composition, from the saints below gazing upwards at the Virgin and Child at the apex of what Newcome Schleier has aptly described as 'a spiral column of figures'.

Exhibitions

New York, William H. Schab Gallery, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum, and Indianapolis, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Woodner Collection II: Old Master Drawings from the XV to the XVIII century, 1973, no.61; Paris, Emmanuel Moatti, Dessins anciens, 1992, no.29.

Literature:

Mary Newcome, 'Notes on Gregorio de Ferrari and the Genoese Baroque', Pantheon, 1979, p.149, no.27; Gerhard Gruitrooy, Gregorio de Ferrari (1647-1726) mit einem kritischen Werkverzeichnis, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Freien Universität, Berlin, 1987, pp.466-467, no.66 (where dated after 1700), not illustrated; Mario di Giampaolo, ed., Disegno italiano antico: Artisti e opere dal Quattrocento al Settecento, Milan, 1994, illustrated p.129; Mary Newcome Schleier, Gregorio de Ferrari, Turin, 1998, p.118, under no.93, pp.179-180, no.D85.

Artist description:

The work of Gregorio de Ferrari, and in particular his large-scale fresco decorations, occupies an important position as one of the high points of the Genoese Baroque tradition. Abandoning his law studies, he trained as an artist in the studio of Domenico Fiasella in Genoa between 1664 and 1668 before going to Parma, where his exposure to the work of Correggio was to have a profound and lifelong influence on his style. Returning to Genoa around 1673, he began a long and prolific series of collaborations with Domenico Piola, then the leading painter in Genoa, whose daughter he married in 1674. The two artists worked together on a number of decorative projects in Genoa and its outskirts, notably in the Palazzo Rosso and the churches of San Siro and San Giovanni Battista in Sampierdarena. (Both painters were particularly busy with large-scale interior decorations in numerous palaces in Genoa following the bombardment of the city by French naval forces in May 1684.) Much of De Ferrari's career was taken up with fresco decorations for various churches and palaces in Genoa and elsewhere in the region, although he also produced a number of easel pictures, as well as designs for silver objects and sculpture.

As has been noted of the artist, 'Whether in a drawing, fresco or canvas, De Ferrari's style is unmistakable – free flowing, exploratory, and such an anticipation of the rococo that one critic deemed him "a grander Fragonard", though that Frenchman would not be born until 1732, six years after the death of the Genoese master.' Among De Ferrari's most significant works in Genoa are frescoes in the Villa Balbi allo Zerbino, the Palazzo Brignole and the Palazzo Rosso, as well as the vast Assumption of the Virgin on the nave vault of the Dominican church of Santi Giacomo e Filippo, completed around

1690 and destroyed during the Second World War. His reputation as one of the finest fresco painters of the Seicento also spread outside Liguria, and in 1685 he was commissioned by Vittorio Amedeo of Savoy to fresco several rooms in the Palazzo Reale in Turin, while in 1692 he is recorded as working for the French nobleman Jacques de Noailles in Marseille, although nothing of his work there survives. Around 1700 he painted a monumental altarpiece of The Death of Saint Scholastica for the church of Santo Stefano that is regarded as one of his finest religious pictures. De Ferrari's last public commission was the decoration of the cupola of the Genoese church of Santa Croce e San Camillo, a project eventually completed by his son Lorenzo de Ferrari.

Gregorio de Ferrari is relatively rare as a draughtsman, and the largest surviving group of his drawings is today in the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe in the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa. As Jonathan Bober has recently noted of the artist, 'On the one hand, Gregorio was the most idiosyncratic and palpably willful draftsman of the era. On the other, of all Genoese, including even the extraordinarily prolific Domenico Piola, he appears to have been the most complete. A relatively small number of his drawings survives – perhaps one hundred, most in the collection of the Palazzo Rosso. That they represent every possible mode, stage, technique, and function only proves there has been tremendous attrition.' A typical feature of De Ferrari's draughtsmanship, at least in the first part of his career, is a preference for prepared coloured paper, as well as a liberal use of white heightening. Unlike many of his Genoese contemporaries, he does not seem to have produced many drawings as independent works of art, while at the same time only a handful of the surviving drawings by the artist can be specifically connected with any of his known works.