

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Giovanni Benedetto CASTIGLIONE (Genoa 1609 - Mantua 1664)

The Three Marys at the Tomb

Oil on paper, laid down on canvas.

539 x 377 mm. (21 1/4 x 14 7/8 in.)

Although this fine oil sketch on paper is unconnected with any extant painting or fresco by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, it is a fine example of the emotional intensity characteristic of the artist's late works, as well as his abiding interest in dramatic light effects. This oil sketch has been dated by the Castiglione scholar Ann Percy to c.1655, when the artist was mainly active in Mantua.

As Anthony Blunt has noted of Castiglione's late works of this Mantuan period, 'there is a greater freedom than even in the late Roman works. In the paintings the tight handling and hot local colour of the earlier period gives place to a style which shows clearly the influence of the art which Castiglione had come to know in the north of Italy. The general change is in the direction of Venetian colouring and handling...In the oil sketches a similar freedom is now to be observed, and Castiglione attains his greatest fluency in the use of the brush as a means of drawing.'

Among stylistically comparable late works by Castiglione is a small oil painting on canvas of Christ on the Cross in the Galleria di Palazzo Bianco in Genoa, and a variant of the same subject which was in a private collection in Genoa in 1971. Also similar in scale, medium, technique and handling is a Virgin

and Child in Glory with an Angel, today in the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas.

Exhibitions

New York and Rome, Marcello Aldega and Margot Gordon, *Old Master Drawings*, 1992, no.35; Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, *The Baroque Genius of Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione*, 2012, unnumbered [no catalogue] (where dated 1654-1655).

Literature:

New York, Margot Gordon and Rome, Marcello Aldega, *Old Master Drawings*, exhibition catalogue, 1992, pp.78-79, no.35.

Artist description:

Sometimes known as 'il Grechetto', the Genoese artist Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione received his training in the studio of Giovanni Battista Paggi and, following Paggi's death in 1627, with Giovanni Andrea de' Ferrari. He may also have studied with Anthony Van Dyck, who was in Genoa between 1621 and 1627, and the animal painter Sinibaldo Scorza, whose work seems to have had the most influence on the young artist. Like Scorza, he developed a particular penchant for animal paintings, landscapes, pastoral scenes and Old Testament subjects. He was also highly regarded as a portrait painter, although only a very few examples have been identified today. Castiglione's earliest signed and dated painting was executed in 1633 in Rome, but he first established his reputation in his native city. For much of his career, he was regarded as one of the finest painters in Genoa, producing altarpieces and canvases for churches and palaces all over the city, and his fame eventually spread throughout Italy. In the later part of his career Castiglione began to produce paintings and drawings that were intensely religious in feeling.

Apart from working extensively in Genoa, Castiglione travelled widely and was active in Venice, Parma, Naples and Rome, where he worked for several years in the 1630s and again between about 1647 and 1651. From 1651 onwards he worked mostly in Mantua, where he was employed by the Gonzaga court, and where he died in 1664. As Jonathan Bober has summed up the artist's career, 'Castiglione was, beyond the quintessential Genoese artist, a genius of the highest order. He was not responsible for any of the basic languages of the Italian baroque, or even any of the major currents in the art of his native city. But by restless nature, genuine intellect, and seemingly boundless imagination, he attended to more styles, and synthesized them more thoroughly, than any other artist of the school, if not the entire seventeenth century.' Despite not having many pupils or followers of note, apart from his brother Salvatore and son Francesco, as well as the Neapolitan painter Andrea de Leone, Castiglione's influence on later Genoese painting was profound and long lasting. As another scholar has written, 'Grechetto's art is at the very core of the "decorative trend" of Genoese Baroque painting. Without him there would never have existed Gregorio de Ferrari, Domenico Piola, even Gaulli.'

Castiglione has always been better known for his extraordinary graphic output than his paintings. He was a prolific and spirited draughtsman, working mainly in pen and wash, and made numerous drawings not just as studies for painted compositions but as works of art in their own right. He was also a gifted printmaker, and may well be credited with the invention of the monotype process. As noted by James Byam Shaw, '[Castiglione] was something of a wild character, and there is wild grandeur in his style of painting, drawing, and etching.' The largest surviving group of drawings and oil sketches by Castiglione, amounting to more than two hundred sheets, is today in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle.