

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Giulio ROMANO (Rome c.1499 - Mantua 1546)

Saint Blaise, Seated and Enthroned by an Angel

Pen and brown ink and brown wash on buff paper.

Inscribed *Julle Romain* at the lower centre.

206 x 137 mm. (8 1/8 x 5 3/8 in.)

A relatively recent addition to the corpus of drawings by Giulio Romano, the present sheet depicts the fourth century Armenian bishop Saint Blaise (known in Italy as San Biagio), who was persecuted and tortured - by having his skin flayed with iron combs – for not renouncing Christianity, under the orders of the Roman governor of Cappadocia. The saint was eventually beheaded, along with two boys, who are shown in this drawing, one holding the iron comb. From the means of his torture Blaise became the patron saint of wool-combers and of the wool trade, and commissions for paintings of images of the saint, or of episodes from his life, for churches in Italy often came from a local guild of woolworkers.

This fine drawing has been studied at length by the late Janet Cox-Rearick. As she wrote, '*In this drawing Giulio Romano depicted the late third or early fourth century martyr, San Biagio (St. Blaise), an Armenian bishop who was persecuted by Emperor Diocletian. He is accompanied by two lightly draped children, one of whom supports his book while the other holds a large currycomb. This instrument was the object of the saint's torture – his flesh was scored with iron combs – before his martyrdom by beheading. An angel flies above, holding a martyr's crown over the saint's head.*' As the same scholar further states, '*The idea of a monumental, enthroned bishop saint with children, recalls*

the enthroned popes such as Pope Sylvester with an Allegory of Fortitude that Giulio painted in 1524 in the Sala di Costantino (Vatican). In 1534 Giulio repeated the concept in San Zeno with two Angels, part of the grandiose fresco cycle of the Life of the Virgin in the choir of Verona Cathedral. The saint in the present drawing is remarkably close in type to San Zeno and the conceit of the bishop saint, holding his crosier, accompanied by two boys, is the same in both works.'

Of the present sheet, Cox-Rearick has noted that '*Giulio first sketched the group in pen, then added light areas of wash throughout, completing the modeling only in the imposing, sculpturesque figure of the saint, whose draperies and head are richly shaded in a darker wash; he also added some darker wash to the boy with the currycomb, but left the other boy and the angel less finished. The drawing is typical of the modelli that Giulio made in Mantua in the 1530s, an invention that would then have been enlarged in a cartoon by the master or one of his assistants.'*

No painting or fresco by Giulio Romano that can be related to this drawing of Saint Blaise survives. However, as Cox-Rearick has pointed out, '*Giulio made two other drawings in these years [i.e. the 1530s] depicting San Biagio. One is a workshop variation on the composition of the present sheet (Musée Condé, Chantilly); the other, tighter and more convoluted in its draughtsmanship, is an autograph modello showing a dramatic scene of the saint's martyrdom (Windsor Castle, Royal Library). These three drawings strongly suggest that in the mid-to-late 1530s Giulio was commissioned to design a fresco or other work depicting San Biagio. Such a project must have included an image of the saint enthroned, as he appears in the present drawing and in the Chantilly workshop version. But what church or what patron might have commissioned Giulio to depict this particular saint? One candidate is the church of SS. Nazaro and Celso in Verona, a city where Giulio worked in the mid-1530s; the church has a chapel of San Biagio, it is decorated with frescoes of his life, and it houses the relic of his body. Another possibility is the church of San Biagio in Mantua. This was commissioned by Giulio's patron, Duke Federico Gonzaga, who had torn down a ruined medieval church of San Biagio near Palazzo Te, and in 1534 asked Giulio to design a replacement. The new church was destroyed in 1595, but a document of 1576 records that there was a painting over the high altar. The present drawing, San Biagio Enthroned with two Boys by Giulio Romano, the presumptive author of the altarpiece, might well have been preparatory to this Gonzaga altarpiece.'* It has also been tentatively suggested that the present sheet, as well as the related drawing of the same subject at Windsor Castle, may have been a design for a three-dimensional object, such as a small bronze sculpture.

The present sheet bears the collector's mark of the 20th century Lyonnais civil engineer and amateur Charles Joseph Guillemain (1893-1975). Relatively little is known of the extent of his collection, which included works by both Italian and French artists.

Exhibitions

New York, Pandora Old Masters, *Italian Old Master Drawings*, 2001, no.3.

Literature:

Janet Cox-Rearick, 'Presentazione: Atti del Convegno "I Disegni di Giulio Romano (1499-1546)". Miscellanea giulesca', *Quaderni di Palazzo Te*, 2000, pp.10 and 12-17, fig.1 and illustrated on the cover; New York, Pandora Old Masters, *An Exhibition of Italian Old Master Drawings*, exhibition catalogue, 2001, unpaginated, no.3 (entry by Janet Cox-Rearick).

Artist description:

One of the few significant artists of the 16th century to have actually been born in Rome, Giulio Romano was Raphael's favourite and best pupil, assisting him on the fresco decoration of the Stanza dell'Incendio and the Loggia of Leo X in the Vatican. He rose to a position of some importance in Raphael's studio, and often collaborated with him on easel pictures. After Raphael's death in 1520 Giulio, together with Gianfrancesco Penni, inherited the master's workshop and unfinished projects, notably the fresco decoration of the Sala di Costantino in the Vatican. He also received several architectural commissions, such as the Villa Madama and the Villa Lante in Rome. In 1524, at the invitation of Federico II Gonzaga, Giulio left Rome for Mantua. He was to remain there for the rest of his career, becoming painter, designer and architect to the Gonzaga court and thoroughly dominating the artistic life of the city. His two most important projects in Mantua were the construction and extensive decoration of the Palazzo Te, executed in two phases between 1526 and 1534, and the decoration of a new suite of rooms, known as the Appartamento di Troia, in the Palazzo Ducale, completed in 1538. Giulio continued to work at the Ducal court after the death of Federico Gonzaga in 1540. For Cardinal Ercole Gonzaga, for example, he was engaged on the reconstruction and renovation of the cathedral in Mantua.

Giulio Romano's drawings have long been admired by collectors and connoisseurs. The 18th century English collector Jonathan Richardson Senior, in his *An Essay on the Theory of Painting*, published in 1725, noted that 'There is a Spirit, and Fire, a Freedom, and Delicacy in the Drawings of Giulio Romano, Polydoro, Parmeggiano, Battista Franco, &c. which are not to be seen in their Paintings.'