

Ottavio LEONI (Rome c.1578 - Rome 1630)

Portrait of a Young Girl

Black chalk, heightened with touches of white chalk, on faded blue-green paper.

187 x 138 mm. (7 3/8 x 5 3/8 in.)

Ottavio Leoni's drawings present a fascinating record of Roman society in the first three decades of the 17th century, and among his patrons were members of such prominent Roman families as the Aldobrandini, Altemps, Borghese, Cesi, Colonna, Ludovisi, Medici and Montalto. As one scholar has noted, 'The artist recorded on his sheets the features of the personalities of his city: influential cardinals and aristocrats, attractive ladies, children, artists, and literary figures. Leoni's work is a unique description of the human topography of Rome, thousands of sheets recording, in accurate detail and with extraordinary psychological acumen, the characters that inhabited papal Rome.'

In his will of 1630, drawn up shortly before his death, Leoni left all his drawings to his stepson and pupil, Ippolito, who he hoped would find them useful in his own work. Ippolito, however, seems to have sold the drawings almost immediately to Cardinal Scipione Borghese, one of the leading collectors in Rome and a longtime patron of Leoni's. At the cardinal's death in 1633 his collection was inherited by his cousin Marcantonio Borghese, Prince of Sulmona. The group of portrait drawings by Leoni is first mentioned by Baglione in 1642 and 1649 as being in the Borghese collection. This large group is probably identical with an album of some four hundred portrait drawings by Leoni that were later in the collection of a M. d'Aubigny before being sold and dispersed at auction in Paris in 1747, when they were noted by the collector Pierre-Jean Mariette.

The present sheet once belonged to the English collector Henry S. Reitlinger (1882-1950), who assembled a fine collection of drawings, paintings and prints, much of which was left to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge after his death. In 1922 Reitlinger published Old Master Drawings: A Handbook for Amateurs and Collectors, one of the first guides to the collecting of drawings, which was illustrated with examples from the author's own extensive collection of Italian, French, German, Netherlandish and English drawings. Reitlinger owned at least two other portrait drawings of women by Leoni, one of which is today in the Fitzwilliam Museum..