

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Carlo Alberto BARATTA (Genoa 1754 - Genoa 1815)

The Presentation of the Virgin

Pen and brown ink and grey wash, extensively heightened with white gouache, over an underdrawing in black chalk, on paper washed blue-green.

Drawn within a fictive mount, with framing lines in black chalk and brown ink. Inscribed Carlo Baratta in the centre of the lower margin.

386 x 209 mm. (15 1/4 x 8 1/4 in.) [image]

416 x 272 mm. (16 3/8 x 10 3/4 in.) [sheet]

Carlo Alberto Baratta's drawings, as the late scholar Mary Newcome has written, 'are memorable for their whipping brushstroke and strong lighting effects...[his] beautiful drawings have overshadowed his paintings and been considered separate from them. In fact, his finished drawings have been considered complete in themselves.' She adds that almost none of the artist's drawings can be related to his paintings, and that the present sheet is therefore a very rare example of just such a preparatory study.

The composition of this large sheet, 'drawn seemingly effortlessly with the tip of the brush', in Newcome's words, is repeated in a highly finished oil sketch by Baratta today in a private chapel in the Villa Gropallo dello Zerbino in Genoa. Both works in turn may be regarded as preparatory studies, albeit with several significant differences, for the artist's much larger altarpiece of The Presentation of the Virgin in the presbytery of the parish church of Santa Maria Assunta in Camogli, a coastal town a few kilometres east of Genoa. The Camogli painting may be dated to the late 1780s or very early 1790s, which would seem appropriate for the present sheet as well.

Among stylistically comparable drawings by Baratta is a study of a priest kneeling before a seated pope, in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Orléans.

The present sheet was one of a large number of drawings by Baratta in the collection of the 19th century Genoese sculptor Santo Varni (1807-1885), as noted by Alizeri. Varni assembled an important collection of over four thousand drawings, mainly by artists from Genoa and Liguria, which was dispersed at two auctions in 1887. The collection included around a hundred drawings by Carlo Alberto Baratta and eighty by his son Francesco, and Varni is likely to have acquired the drawings directly from the Baratta family. Indeed, Santo Varni came to possess much of the studio collections of drawings held in the estates of several Genoese artists, including the Piola and de Ferrari families of painters.

Literature:

Mary Newcome Schleier, 'Several drawings and paintings by Baratta, the last gasp of the Genoese baroque', *Paragone*, September 2013, pp.58-59, pl.42a; Florence, *Romano Fine Art, A Selection of Master Drawings*, exhibition catalogue, 2020, unpaginated, under no.14.

Artist description:

One of the last exponents of the great Genoese Baroque tradition, Carlo Alberto Baratta was active as a fresco painter and stage designer, and was also a prolific and gifted draughtsman and engraver. Born into a wealthy Genoese family, he was initially self-taught as an artist but completed his studies at the Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti in Genoa. There he copied the prints and drawings of an earlier generation of Genoese artists, and by 1771 had won three prizes at the Scuola del Disegno. (Baratta also received training as a printmaker with the architect Emanuele Andrea Tagliafichi.) His early career was as a scenographer, working in collaboration with his brother Antonio, and together they created set designs for the Teatro di Sant'Agostino in Genoa, as well as for the private theatre of the Villa Brignole Sale at Voltri. The noble Genoese Brignole Sale family were among the artist's first important patrons.

Much of Baratta's finest work as a painter can be dated to the 1780s and 1790s. These include a fresco, now destroyed, of The Triumph of Columbus with Allegories of the Arts and Sciences, painted in 1785 for the ceiling of a room in the Palazzo Brignole Sale, now the Palazzo Rosso. Also lost is a ceiling fresco on the vault of a chapel in the now-destroyed Genoese church of Santa Maria della Pace, executed around 1796, which was much praised by the 19th century Genoese biographer and art historian Federico Alizeri. Other significant works by Baratta include a Presentation of the Virgin in Santa Maria Assunta in Camogli and an Education of the Virgin in the Capuchin monastery in Voltaggio, while he also completed some paintings begun by the artist Giovanni David in the Genoese church of Santa Maria del Carmine. Between 1804 and 1805 he decorated the choir of the Duomo at Chiavari, a work notable for its vibrant colour that is generally regarded as his masterpiece. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Baratta does not seem to have travelled outside Liguria, and spent his entire career in Genoa. His work represents the final flourish of the local Baroque tradition that was first established in the late 16th century. As the late scholar Mary Newcome Schleier has written, 'The slashing brushstrokes, high contrasts of light, and dramatic naturalism of Baratta...brought a sputtering close to the dark manner that had begun the whole Genoese baroque movement.'

The same writer has further noted that, 'Of the Genoese artists working in Liguria at the end of the 18th century, Carlo Alberto Baratta was the most prolific draftsman and perhaps the most versatile.' Baratta was particularly well known for his pen drawings, which are usually finished compositions on coloured paper that display a liberal application of white heightening. As Federigo Alizeri noted of the artist, 'The drawings of Baratta are mostly shaded with bistre and heightened with white on a blue background, with strong chiaroscuro effects and a determined touch that obviate any desire for the colours or diligence of paintings in oil.' Alizeri adds that several drawings by Baratta were in the collections of the Genoese collectors Santo Varni and the Marchese Durazzo; those of the latter are now in the print room of the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa. Other drawings by the artist are today in museums in Florence, London, New York, Weimar and Worms, as well as in several private collections.