

Donato CRETI (Cremona 1672 - Bologna 1749)

The Head of a Warrior in a Helmet

Black chalk.

Numbered 98 in brown ink at the upper left.

Inscribed fratta in red chalk and numbered 2 in red ink on the verso.

Also numbered or dated iij 37 in brown ink on the verso.

An erased inscription in brown ink on the verso.

215 x 166 mm. (8 1/2 x 6 1/2 in.)

Watermarks: Fragment of a circle with the letters C (or G?) A, together with a blank circle.

This fine drawing is a preparatory study for one of the major commissions of Donato Creti's late career; a lost canvas of Alexander the Great and his Physician Philip that was one of a pair of paintings commissioned from the artist in 1736 by the French general André Maurice, Duc de Noailles, the other being Alexander the Great Cutting the Gordian Knot. The two paintings, for which Creti was paid the sum of 1,800 lire, were completed by July 1738 and were dispatched from Bologna to Florence in October 1738 to be sent onward to Paris. However, although the artist is known to have been paid for the two works, they never seem to have been delivered to the Duc de Noailles, and their subsequent history is a mystery. While the latter work has survived and is today in an English private collection, the painting of Alexander the Great and his Physician Philip is lost, although its composition is known through a full-size, finished oil sketch by Creti recently sold at auction and today in a private collection in

Italy. Both Alexander paintings were preceded by a pair of small-scale bozzetti that were sent to the Duc de Noailles for his approval; these bozzetti – which each show evidence of workshop participation – are today in the collection of Goodwood House in West Sussex.

The present sheet is a study for the head of the soldier at the left of the composition of Alexander the Great and his Physician Philip; a figure identified as Alexander's bodyguard Lysimachus. That Creti was particularly concerned with the head of this figure is seen in the fact that the full-scale oil sketch in a private collection shows an obvious pentiment in the profile head of the soldier, in which the artist tried two different angles for the head, both of which differ from that seen in this drawing.

This drawing appears to be dated March 1737 ('iij 37'), in what seems to be Creti's hand, on the verso. Such a dating would fit in with the assumed chronology of the painting, which was completed by the summer of 1738. Two other preparatory drawings by Creti for the painting of Alexander the Great and his Physician Philip are in the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen and the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice.

Artist description:

At the age of fifteen, following an apprenticeship with Lorenzo Pasinelli, Donato Creti came to the attention of Count Alessandro Fava. The Bolognese count became the artist's protector and first patron, and the young Creti lived and worked in the Palazzo Fava for a number of years before becoming an independent master. In around 1700 he received a commission from the Counts of Novellara to decorate their family palace, and in 1708 he completed a large fresco of Alexander Cutting the Gordian Knot in the Palazzo Pepoli Campogrande in Bologna. Apart from fresco decorations, the early part of his career was taken up with secular commissions for easel pictures, such as the series of mythological subjects painted in monochrome for Marcantonio Collina Sbaraglia and now in the Collezioni Communale dell'Arte in Bologna. Together with other Bolognese and Venetian artists, Creti contributed to several of the well-known series of allegorical Tombs commissioned by Owen McSwiny in the 1720's and 1730's. Throughout the 1730's and 1740's, Creti produced several important altarpieces for churches in Emilia-Romagna and as far away as Palermo.

In his biography of the artist, Giampietro Zanotti writes that Creti's drawings were highly regarded by his contemporaries. (The painter Marcantonio Franceschini, for one, praised the artist as a 'grandissimo disegnatore'.) He learned to draw from the nude in the studio of Pasinelli, and in general preferred to use pen and ink wash for his studies, drawn with a rapid, calligraphic stroke, although he also produced head studies in chalk. Landscapes, figure studies and portraits make up the bulk of Creti's drawings, many of which, according to Zanotti, were given away as presents by the artist.