

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Sigismondo CAULA (Modena 1637 - Modena 1724)

Saint John the Baptist in the Desert

Brush, red chalk and red wash, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk, extensively heightened with white on buff paper, within a drawn fictive mount with framing lines in pencil and brown ink.

Inscribed (signed?) C. in brown ink in the lower left margin.

277 x 191 mm. (10 7/8 x 7 1/2 in.) [sheet]

As Nicholas Turner has noted of the artist's draughtsmanship in general, and of the present sheet in particular, 'Caula was a master of chiaroscuro, and his drawings are strikingly painterly in handling, with broad, flowing washes, as seen here in the darks in the rock against which St John the Baptist stands. His drawings are sometimes executed on a buff-coloured paper, sometimes on a warm brownish-tinted ground, evenly brushed in like the preparation of a canvas or panel. This particular sheet may well have been made for its own sake, as an object of contemplation, rather than as a study for a painting. Such a conclusion is suggested partly by the finish of the drawing and partly by the ruled border and monogram, evidently applied by the artist, which would seem superfluous in a working study... Another memorable

trait of Caula's work as a draughtsman is his penchant for ample passages of creamy white heightening, usually applied to the paper with the brush in white bodycolour (or gouache)... this heightening is seen in the torso of the Baptist, which seems to glow with divine radiance... The exaggerated drama of the illumination of the figure is echoed in the unusual compositional conception.

St John seems to tower over the empty space of the wilderness, a gaunt and lanky figure, his only companion the youth, at bottom left, who sidles up from the murky hillside below to point, perhaps a little ironically, at this bleak, wind-blown figure. This youth is conceivably the young Christ who, by tradition, sometimes accompanies the Baptist in images of the saint in the wilderness. Whatever his identity, the

wasted, hollow-cheeked St John seems oblivious to his company and stares upwards into the heavens, mesmerized by divine contemplation.'

Among stylistically comparable drawings by Caula is a study of a man kneeling before a crucifix, in the British Museum, and a study of a seated male figure wrapped in a cloak, in the Frits Lugt collection at the Fondation Custodia in Paris.

Exhibitions

Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, European Master Drawings from Portuguese Collections, 2000, no.59 [The exhibition later travelled to Lisbon, Centro Cultural de Belém, in 2000, and Porto, Museo Nacional Soares dos Reis, in 2001]; Madrid, Museo del Prado, Dibujos de Maestros Europeos en las Colecciones Portuguesas, 2002, no.37.

Literature:

Nicholas Turner, European Master Drawings from Portuguese Collections, exhibition catalogue, Cambridge, 2000, pp.134-135, no.58; Nicholas Turner, Dibujos de Maestros Europeos en las Colecciones Portuguesas, exhibition catalogue, Madrid, 2002, pp.94-95, no.37.

Artist description:

Born in Modena and trained there by the French artist Jean Boulanger, with whom he worked on the fresco decoration of the Ducal palace at Sassuolo, Sigismondo Caula spent three years in Venice between 1667 and 1670. There he was influenced by contemporary Venetian painting, and in particular the works of Antonio Molinari and Johann Carl Loth, as well as the earlier works of Paolo Veronese and Jacopo Tintoretto. It may also have been as a result of his exposure to Venetian draughtsmanship of the period that Caula developed a preference for working on tinted paper in his own drawings. After his return to Modena, Caula earned several important ecclesiastical commissions, painting frescoes for the Duomo in Modena and working in several other churches in the city, and was also often employed by the d'Este family. Among his most significant paintings was a very large Saint Charles Borromeo Administering the Eucharist to Victims of the Plague, painted in 1685 for the church of San Carlo in Modena and today in the Galleria Estense there. His last known commission was received in 1708, for the ceiling decoration of the church of San Agostino.

Caula's relatively small corpus of drawings is characterized by a highly pictorial technique and bold contrasts of light and shade. A number of drawings by the artist are in the Galleria Estense in Modena, while other examples are in the British Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Orléans, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and elsewhere.