

Giovanni Battista TIEPOLO (Venice 1696 - Madrid 1770)

The Crucifixion

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, over an underdrawing in black chalk.

Inscribed Tiepolo in black chalk at the lower right.

439 x 312 mm. (17 1/4 x 12 1/4 in.)

An important addition to the artist's corpus of drawings, this large sheet is a rare youthful work by Giambattista Tiepolo, by whom relatively few drawings survive from the beginning of his independent career; that is, between 1715, when he painted his earliest known work, and 1731, when he undertook his first commission outside the Veneto. Furthermore, the fact that this dramatic composition of the Crucifixion was left unfinished provides a fascinating insight into Tiepolo's working method as a draughtsman. The artist first drew the outlines of the composition in black chalk before adding layers of brown wash, in both light and dark tones, moving gradually from the top of the sheet towards the bottom, while several areas of the white paper have been left untouched by wash so as to provide highlights.

A closely related drawing of the same composition, with several significant differences, is in the collection of the Harvard University Art Museums in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Of similar dimensions, the Harvard drawing is quickly sketched and is likely to have preceded the present sheet in the preparatory process. While Terisio Pignatti and a number of other early scholars have regarded the Harvard drawing as a study for Tiepolo's large horizontal canvas of The Crucifixion in the church of San Martino in Burano, painted around 1723, the relationship between the two is largely thematic, and any direct connection is difficult to establish. George Knox preferred to date the Harvard drawing somewhat later than the Burano canvas, around 1726, while Bernard Aikema further pointed out of the same

drawing that ‘The pronounced chiaroscuro, relatively low viewpoint, and truncation of the figures in the foreground – which accounts for the dramatic close-up effect – are reminiscent of the series of pictures Giambattista painted for the Palazzo Dolfin, Venice5, between 1726 and 1729.’

Relatively little is still known of Tiepolo’s draughtsmanship between 1715 and 1725, largely due to the paucity of drawings from this important formative period. Indeed, only around two or three dozen early drawings by the artist are known today, only a few of which may be connected with paintings or print designs of the period. The present sheet can be compared in style, technique and scale with a number of similarly highly finished drawings of dramatic religious subjects by Tiepolo dating from the late 1720s and early 1730s, in which chiaroscuro qualities and figural style reveal the particular influence of Giambattista Piazzetta on the young artist. These include a pair of drawings - a Martyrdom of Saints Nazarus and Celsus and The Beheading of a Male and Female Saint - in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and a Saint Jerome Visited by Angels in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. As Andrew Robison has written of the last of these, ‘By the end of the 1720s [Tiepolo] began to elaborate multiple areas of wash in clearly different intensities which make the works read from a distance…These were not just classic chiaroscuro drawings because, within the bounds of Tiepolo’s spontaneity, these are even more deliberate and finished in their multiple tonalities…this is really a complete painting, a brunaille on paper.’ Another comparable early drawing of this type is a Martyrdom of a Saint that was once part of an album of ninety-six pen and wash drawings by Giambattista Tiepolo belonging to Prince Alexis Orlov (or Orloff) which was broken up and sold at auction in Paris in 1920.

Given their large scale and degree of finish, this homogenous group of drawings from the early part of Tiepolo’s career must have been intended as finished works of art, to be sold to collectors. As the Tiepolo scholar George Knox has noted of one of these drawings, the Martyrdom of a Saint formerly in the Orlov album, in terms equally applicable to the present sheet, ‘[it] is an extremely elaborate drawing that seems intended to show what the young Tiepolo felt himself to be capable of in the way of an ambitious composition with many figures…It is to be expected that this inventiveness should be given full rein in the drawings rather than in the paintings, which at this time tend to a highly restrained and concentrated programme.’

Artist description:

The leading painter in Venice for much of his career, Giambattista Tiepolo was also undoubtedly one of the finest Italian draughtsmen of the 18th century. That his drawings were greatly admired in his lifetime is confirmed by contemporary accounts; indeed, as early as 1732 the writer Vincenzo da Canal remarked that ‘engravers and copyists are eager to copy his works, to glean his inventions and extraordinary ideas; his drawings are already so highly esteemed that books of them are sent to the most distant countries’. From the late 1730’s until his departure for Spain in 1762, Tiepolo enjoyed his most productive period as a draughtsman, creating a large number of vibrant pen and wash studies that are among the archetypal drawings of the Venetian Settecento. As one recent scholar has commented, ‘From the start of his career [Tiepolo] had enjoyed drawing as an additional means of expression, with equally original results. He did not draw simply to make an immediate note of his ideas, nor to make an initial sketch for a painting or to study details; he drew to give the freest, most complete expression to his genius. His drawings can be considered as an autonomous artistic genre; they constitute an enormous part of his work, giving expression to a quite extraordinary excursion of the imagination; in this respect, Tiepolo’s graphic work can be compared only with that of Rembrandt.’

Tiepolo’s drawings include compositional studies for paintings and prints, drawings of heads, figure studies for large-scale decorations, landscapes and caricatures, as well as several series of drawings on such themes as the Holy Family. Many of these drawings were bound into albums by theme or subject, and retained by the artist in his studio as a stock of motifs and ideas for use in his own work, or that of his sons and assistants.