

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**16th Century North Italian School**

**The Head of a Woman with an Elaborate Hairstyle in Profile**

Black chalk.

A small sketch of the head and shoulders of a woman drawn in black chalk on the verso.

293 x 197 mm. (11 1/2 x 7 7/8 in.)

Watermark: Crossbow (similar to Briquet 728; Ferrara 1586, Briquet 729; Reggio Emilia 1588 and Briquet 737; Ferrara 1598).

This refined drawing depicts the profile of a woman facing left, her hair elaborately arranged and adorned with pearls, ribbons and a jewelled headdress. Executed with delicate precision in soft black chalk, the sheet combines firm contour lines with subtle internal modelling. The sitter's delicate coiffure places the sheet within a long Renaissance tradition of elegant and idealised female head studies. These works reflect a fascination not only with female beauty, but also with the decorative potential of hair and costume design. Within this tradition, the present sheet shares affinities with certain French draughtsmen of the School of Fontainebleau, to which the drawing has been attributed in the past. Yet the watermark of a crossbow, which is found on papers produced in Modena and Ferrara around 1580, would suggest a North Italian origin for the sheet.

Paintings and drawings of ideal heads, or teste divine as Vasari called them, were particularly popular

in Florentine art and found its greatest exponent in Michelangelo. As Paul Joannides has noted, '*In different forms the ideal head was, for some two decades, an important and highly influential means of expression for Michelangelo. Although he did not invent the genre, he exploited it more fully and with greater imagination than any of his forerunners, and it was predominantly his example that affected later artists.*' Such drawings were usually drawn in either black or red chalk or pen and ink as well as, occasionally, metalpoint, and were typically studies of women adorned with fantastic and elaborate *all'antica* hairstyles, often seen in strict profile. This tradition continued well into the 16th century in Florence, as exemplified by, for instance, the pen and ink heads of women by Jacopo Ligozzi and similar studies in chalk by Francesco Salviati.

Many of these drawings remain anonymous, however, such as a comparable metalpoint study of a *Head of a Woman with an Elaborate Headdress* in the Boijmans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, which has been dated to between 1490 and 1540. Another analogous drawing, an elaborate portrait of the Infanta Catherina of Spain attributed to a Northern Italian artist working around 1590, appeared at auction in 1996. Such drawings can sometimes be more complex in their headdress designs, like it is the case with certain studies by Antonio Campi and his circle; a black chalk half-length double portrait of Beatrice d'Este and Massimiliano Sforza by Campi, now in the British Museum, illustrates the intricate potential of these designs.