

Battista FRANCO (Venice c.1510 - Venice 1561)

Mucius Scaevola Before Lars Porsenna

Pen and brown ink.

Laid down on a Mariette mount, inscribed *HIERONIMUS* / *CARPENSIS* in a cartouche at the bottom.

Numbered *948* in the lower left margin and stamped *299* at the lower left corner of the Mariette mount.

277 x 349 mm. (10 7/8 x 13 3/4 in. [sheet]

380 x 486 mm. (15 x 19 1/8 in.) [including Mariette mount]

Between 1545 and 1551 Battista Franco produced a number of designs for majolica for his patron Guidobaldo II Della Rovere, Duke of Urbino, which were translated into majolica plates at the ceramics manufactory at nearby Castel Durante (today called Urbania). As Giorgio Vasari, who knew the artist well, writes in his biography of Franco, '*in truth, in making beautiful designs Battista had no peer and could be called an able man. Which recognizing, the Duke thought that his designs would succeed very well if carried into execution by those who were fashioning vases of clay [ie. earthenware] so excellent at Castel Durante, for which they had availed themselves much of the prints of Raffaello da Urbino and other able masters; and he caused Battista to drawinnumerable designs, which, when put into execution in that sort of clay, the most kindly of all that there are in Italy, produced a rare result. Wherefore vases were made in such numbers and of as many kinds…and the pictures that were painted on them would not have been better if they had been executed in oils by the most excellent masters.*' Around thirty drawings for majolica by Franco are known today, and examples are in the collections of the Kunstbibliothek in Berlin, the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, the Uffizi in Florence, the Teyler Museum in Haarlem, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, the Louvre in Paris, the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, and elsewhere.

The composition of the present sheet is close to that of a 16th century Venetian majolica dish, of the same dimensions as the drawing, in the collection of the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum in Braunschweig, Germany. As the Franco scholar Anne Varick Lauder has suggested, the drawing is probably the artist's design for the plate, which is datable to c.1550. The differences between the drawing and the majolica plate are minimal, largely confined to the number of onlookers in the former and the presence

of a landscape background in the latter. At the same time, the drawing does not take into account the circular form and concave shape of the dish. As Lauder notes of the present sheet, '*This is a freehand drawing, sketched in pencil and pen in Franco's refined and delicate style. It constitutes a preliminary phase in the design process, prior to any treatment of volume, depth and circular format. Franco arranged the main elements of the narrative in a clear composition, reminiscent of the friezes and reliefs of ancient sarcophagi, and perhaps deliberately simplified so that the majolica painter could copy or trace the final version without difficulty...Unlike the drawing, the majolica places the scene within a rocky landscape, with several soldiers having been repositioned or simply removed. However, the two protagonists are essentially identical to those in the drawing.*'

Two further drawings of this subject by Franco are known, both of which appear to postdate the present sheet. A highly finished pen and wash drawing in the Louvre, of considerably smaller dimensions than either the present sheet or the majolica plate, is very close to them and may be a later refinement of the composition, perhaps intended to prepare an easel painting. Also in the Louvre is another drawing by Franco of the same subject, of vertical format, which shows a somewhat different composition but is still indebted to the present sheet in some respects.

This fine sheet has a long and illustrious provenance, which can be traced back to the early 18th century. Although it does not bear his numbering, this drawing in all likelihood belonged to the French financier Pierre Crozat (1665-1740), whose collection of drawings numbered 19,201 sheets. Crozat travelled to Italy in 1714, acquiring large numbers of drawings in Bologna, Perugia, Rome, Urbino, Verona and Venice. The drawing is next documented in the famous collection of the renowned Parisian connoisseur and collector Pierre-Jean Mariette (1694-1774), who acquired a number of important drawings from the estate sale of Crozat's collection in 1741, which he catalogued. Mariette placed the drawing is one of his distinctive blue mounts, with a cartouche bearing its traditional attribution to the Ferrarese painter Girolamo da Carpi (1501-1556), in which it has remained to this day. Mariette's enormous collection of over nine thousand drawings – more than half of them by Italian artists – was dispersed at auction in Paris over a period of forty-two days in two and a half months, between November 1775 and January 1776. The present sheet was one of two drawings attributed to Girolamo da Carpi sold as one lot, for 9 *livres* 10 *sols*, on the 9th of January 1776. In the margin of the 18th century French draughtsman Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's illustrated and annotated copy of Mariette sale catalogue, now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the artist appears to have made a rapid thumbnail sketch of the present sheet when it came up during the sale.

In the early years of the 19th century, this drawing entered the collection of the Viennese banker Count Moritz von Fries (1777-1826), who assembled a very fine collection of around 100,000 prints and drawings. However, financial difficulties forced him to sell much of his collection from 1820 onwards. While von Fries's extensive collection of prints was sold in a series of five auctions in Amsterdam and Vienna in 1824 and 1828, the drawings were given to one of his creditors, a certain W. Mellish of London, and were soon dispersed. The present sheet is next recorded in the collection of the scholar, connoisseur and curator Sir John Charles Robinson (1824-1913), a leading figure in the Victorian art world who served as the superintendent of the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London between 1852 and 1867 before being appointed Surveyor of the Queen's Pictures in 1880.

In 1860 Robinson sold his collection of drawings to the Scottish landowner John Malcolm, 14th Laird of Poltalloch (1805-1893), who continued to assemble a very fine collection of Old Master drawings, largely based on the advice of Robinson. While the majority of Malcolm's collection of mainly Italian drawings and prints was inherited by his son John Wingfield Malcolm, 1st Baron Malcolm of Poltalloch

(1833-1902), and was sold by him, for the sum of £25,000, to the British Museum in 1895, the present sheet was among a number of drawings earlier given by the elder Malcolm to his daughter Isabella Louisa Malcolm (1842-1924) and son-in-law Alfred Erskine Gathorne-Hardy (1845-1918). The drawing thence passed by descent within the Gathorne-Hardy family until it was sold at auction in London in 1976. It was only at that time that the correct attribution of the drawing to Battista Franco was made by the scholar Philip Pouncey, whose opinion has since been universally accepted.

Exhibitions

London, P. & D. Colnaghi, and Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, *Loan Exhibition of Drawings by Old Masters from the Collection of Mr. Geoffrey Gathorne-Hardy*, 1971–1972, no.57; New York, W. M. Brady and Co. and Thomas Williams Fine Art at W. M. Brady and Co., *Old Master Drawings*, 2000, no.6; Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, *L'Oeil et la Passion: Dessins italiens de la Renaissance dans les collections privées françaises*, 2011, no.39; Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes, *Une collection particulière. Les dessins de la collection Christian et Isabelle Adrien*, 2012, no.5.

Literature:

J. C. Robinson, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Drawings by the Old Masters, forming the Collection of John Malcolm of Poltalloch, Esq.*, London, 1869, p.115, no.299 (as Girolamo da Carpi); A. E. Gathorne-Hardy, *Descriptive Catalogue of Drawings by the Old Masters in the Possession of the Hon. A. E. Gathorne-Hardy, 77 Cadogan Square, London*, 1902, p.17, no.26 (as Girolamo da Carpi); New York, W. M. Brady & Co., Inc., and London, Thomas Williams Fine Art Ltd., *Old Master Drawings*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2000, unpaginated, no.6 (entry by Anne Varick Lauder); Elisabetta Saccomani, 'Battista Franco alla corte di Urbino: Dai perduti affreschi del Duomo ai modelli per le maioliche istoriate', in Valter Curzi, ed., *Pittura veneta nelle marche*, Milan, 2000, p.233, note 107; Anne Varick Lauder, *Battista Franco: His Life and Work with Catalogue Raisonné*, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2004, Vol.II, p.490, no.272 DA, Vol.III, p.1046, no.37A, Vol.IV, fig.481; New York, Sotheby's, *Old Master Drawings*, 25 January 2006, p.69, under lot 42; Anne Varick Lauder, *Musée du Louvre: Département des arts graphiques. Inventaire général des dessins italiens VIII: Battista Franco*, Paris, 2009, p.138, pp.210-211, under no.43, and p.240, under no.70; Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, *L'Oeil et la Passion: Dessins italiens de la Renaissance dans les collections privées françaises*, exhibition catalogue, 2011, pp.140-141, no.39 (entry by Patrick Ramade); Pierre Rosenberg et al, *Dessins de la collection Christian et Isabelle Adrien*, exhibition catalogue, Rennes, 2012, pp.38-41, no.5 (entry by Anne Varick Lauder); Bernadette Py, *Les dessins italiens de Pierre Crozat (1665-1740). L'oeil de Mariette*, online publication [https://mini-site.louvre.fr/trimestriel/2015/Catalogue_Crozat/index.html], n.d. [2015?], p.241, under no.378; Pierre Rosenberg, *Les dessins de la collection Mariette: Écoles italienne et espagnole*, Paris, 2019, Vol.II, p.529, no.I859.

Artist description:

A painter, draughtsman and engraver, Battista Franco was born and raised in Venice (throughout his career he signed his paintings 'Baptista Veneziano'), where he was probably a pupil of his father Jacopo, a painter. Battista spent the first years of his independent career in Rome, where he arrived at the age of twenty. In April 1536 he worked with Raffaello da Montelupo on the decoration of the Ponte Sant'Angelo for the entry of Charles V into Rome, and later that month settled in Florence, where he was engaged on the ephemeral decorations for the wedding of the Grand Duke Cosimo I de' Medici and Eleanora of Toledo in 1539. Franco was back in Rome by 1542, when he painted a fresco of The Capture of Saint John the Baptist for the Oratorio di San Giovanni Decollato; a work that, like much of his youthful oeuvre as a painter, shows the distinct influence of Michelangelo.

In 1545 Franco was summoned by Duke Guidobaldo II da Montefeltro to Urbino. He worked there for about six years, painting frescoes in the tribune and apse of the Duomo which were later destroyed in the collapse of the cathedral in the 18th century. While in Urbino he also executed numerous designs for the majolica factory at nearby Casteldurante and trained the young Federico Barocci. The last ten years of Franco's career, from around 1552 onwards, were spent in his native Venice. Among his most

significant works in the city are an altarpiece of The Baptism of Christ for the Barbaro chapel in the church of San Francesco della Vigna, as well as the ceiling decoration of the Sala dell'Estate in the Fondaco dei Tedeschi. He also worked at the Biblioteca Marciana, the Palazzo Ducale and the Libreria Vecchia. One of his final projects was the fresco decoration of the Grimani chapel in San Francesco della Vigna, left unfinished at his death and eventually completed by Federico Zuccaro. After Franco's death, the contents of his studio passed to his illegitimate son, the printmaker and publisher Giacomo Franco.

Battista Franco is better known, and has usually been more highly regarded, as a draughtsman than as a painter, and modern scholars such as A. E. Popham have praised 'Franco's extraordinary skill as a draughtsman, with his rather scratchy but effective line, and his combination of Michelangelesque and Raphaelesque forms'. He was one of the most prolific of Cinquecento draughtsmen, and some five hundred drawings by him survive, of which the largest and most significant extant group, numbering just over a hundred sheets, is in the Louvre. The artist also produced a corpus of around 125 prints, which brought him much commercial success.