

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



18th Century SICILIAN SCHOOL

Designs for a Trompe l'Oeil Wall Decoration for a Sicilian Villa

Watercolour, pen and grey ink and grey wash, with framing lines in brown ink.

Inscribed with a scale labeled *Scala di Palmi dieci Siciliani*, in brown ink over pencil, at the upper left.

471 x 287 mm. (18 1/2 x 11 1/4 in.)

This exceptionally fine and complete design presents a comprehensive decorative programme for the interior of a Sicilian aristocratic villa. The drawing comprises six different and separate elements. The upper third of the sheet depicts a ceiling design incorporating Pompeian grotesque ornament, an oval cartouche bearing a crowned coat of arms held by a winged figure and a perspective sketch of a courtyard, while the rest of the sheet is comprised of three designs for the decoration of a wall. Of these mural designs, one shows what appears to be the front of the villa with a formal avenue seen through the columns of a loggia, while another depicts a trompe l'oeil window onto the rear of the villa, which is dominated by an imposing single-flight external staircase, while an open doorway to the right leads into a dark space. In several places in the landscapes strolling figures are depicted.

The decorative vocabulary evident throughout the present sheet - Pompeian grotesques, embedded figure portraits and trompe l'oeil architectural elements - is characteristic of the style of interior decoration in Sicily during the late 18th century, when the ornate elements of Baroque, Rococo and

Neoclassical tastes were often combined. The heraldic cartouche with its crowned and quartered coat of arms would suggest a specific aristocratic patron. The double depiction of the villa within the painted panels, showing both the entrance and garden facades, suggests that the building shown is the very one for which these decorative schemes were intended.

The scale and inscription '*Scala di Palmi dieci Siciliani*' at the upper left corner of the sheet indicates that this drawing was a working design for rooms of determinable dimensions, rather than a purely imaginative exercise. It also firmly places the draughtsman within a Sicilian professional tradition.

The *palmu siciliano* was a local unit of length used in Sicily which differed from the Roman or Neapolitan palmo, with a scale of ten Sicilian *palmi* equating to roughly 2.58 metres.

Tentative attributions to the 18th century Sicilian architect Andrea Giganti and the painter Elia Interguglielmi have been suggested for this drawing. The architect and Jesuit priest Andrea Giganti (1737-1787) was active for most of his career in and around Palermo. He was employed in the household of the Sicilian aristocrat Ercole Branciforte, 4th Prince of Scordia, and worked on several of the homes of the Scordia family, notably the Palazzo Branciforte di Scordia in Palermo. He also designed the Villa Galletti Inguaggiato at Bagheria in 1774 and the Villa Tasca at Mezzomonreale in 1780. In the later part of his career Giganti adopted French idioms with increasing liveliness and invention, reflecting the Palermitan shift toward a more Neoclassical style. (During the Settecento, many nobles of the area around Palermo embraced the ideas of the French philosophers and the wider Neoclassicism, which reached Sicily through Rome and Naples. Many visited Paris, sometimes accompanied by local Sicilian architects.) Giganti's drawings, several of which are preserved in the Galleria Regionale della Sicilia in Palermo, have been described as possessing a '*nervousness and a graphic clarity, through which it seems to be linked in some way to Piranesi.*'

The Neoclassical painter Elia Interguglielmi (1746-1835) was born in Naples and settled in Palermo in the late 1760s. Although his earliest commissions were for churches, he also worked as a fresco painter, creating elegant decorative schemes, often incorporating illusionistic perspectives, feigned loggias and countryside views in several Sicilian palaces and villas, such as the Villa Valguarnera in Bagheria and the Palazzo Gravina di Comitini in Palermo. Between 1796 and 1797 Interguglielmi decorated the interior of the Villa Trabia in Bagheria, where he depicted dancing figures, fantastical animals, mythological creatures and playful cherubs. The project was carried out under the leadership of the architect Teodoro Gigante, the nephew of Andrea Gigante, who had bequeathed a large portion of his own drawings to Interguglielmi.

This watercolour drawing formerly belonged to the noted English curator, scholar and architectural historian John Frederick Harris OBE (1931-2022). Harris served as the curator of the collection of architectural drawings at the Royal Institute of British Architects between 1956 and 1986, adding extensively to the collection to make it one of the finest in the world. He published numerous books, catalogues and articles on architectural and garden drawings, as well as organizing several exhibitions devoted to the subject in both England and America.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Stephen Ongpin Fine Art, *Master Drawings*, 2013, no.16.