

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Pietro GONZAGA (Longarone 1751 - St. Petersburg 1831)

Stage Design: An Architectural Capriccio with Classical Buildings Around an Obelisk

Pen and brown ink and brown wash.

210 x 341 mm. (8 1/4 x 13 1/2 in.)

As one scholar has noted, 'Like Piranesi, Gonzaga built a few actual structures but had more success creating grand architectural proposals as drawings; in Gonzaga's case they were frequently converted into etchings by others.' Gonzaga's drawings of stage designs are characterized by an interest in complex perspective and a bold use of pen and ink washes, here used to bathe the scene in bright sunlight. Among stylistically comparable set designs by Gonzaga are two drawings of classical buildings, one, like the present sheet, formerly in the collection of Nicola Benois in Milan and the other at one time in the Kaufman collection in London. Also similar are two stage designs, one dated 1814, that appeared on the art market in 2000 and 2006, and another stage design by Gonzaga that was sold at auction twice in the 1980s.

The present sheet belonged to the Russian artist, art critic and scenographer Alexandre Benois (1870-1960) and later passed to his son, the stage and costume designer Nicola Benois (1901-1988).

Exhibitions

New York, Flavia Ormond Fine Arts at Adelson Galleries, *Italian Old Master Drawings 1500-1850*, 1997, no.14; Stanford, Stanford University, Cantor Center for Visual Arts, *Classic Taste: Drawings and Decorative Arts from the Collection of Horace Brock*, March-May 2000; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, *Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection*, 2009, no.145.

Literature:

London, Flavia Ormond Fine Arts Ltd., *Italian Old Master Drawings 1500-1850*, exhibition catalogue, 1997, unpaginated, no.14; Horace Wood Brock, Martin P. Levy and Clifford S. Ackley, *Splendor and Elegance: European Decorative Arts and Drawings from the Horace Wood Brock Collection*, exhibition catalogue, Boston, 2009, p.159, no.145, illustrated p.141.

Artist description:

Born in a town near Belluno, north of Venice, Pietro di Gottardo Gonzaga moved to Treviso in 1767 to study with Carlo Galli Bibbiena, one of the last members of a famous dynasty of scenographers. Two

years later he was in Venice, where he trained with Antonio Visentini and Giuseppe Moretti, before completing his apprenticeship in Milan, between 1772 and 1778, with the Galliari family of stage designers. As an independent artist, Gonzaga produced numerous designs for stage sets for theatres throughout Italy, notably La Scala in Milan and La Fenice in Venice, as well as in Mantua, Parma, and Rome, and became one of the leading artists in this field. Indeed, as one modern scholar has opined, 'the real initiators of neo-classical stage-design, free from all echoes of Baroque or Rococo, were Giacomo Quarenghi, Pietro Gonzaga and Paolo Landriani.'

While Gonzaga also painted landscapes and architectural perspectives, it was as a stage designer that he came to the attention of Prince Nicolai Yusupov, the Russian ambassador, who in 1792 brought the artist to the court of Catherine the Great in St. Petersburg. Gonzaga enjoyed a highly successful career in Russia, working in St. Petersburg and Moscow as chief scenographer for the State theatres as well as decorating several palaces with landscape and architectural paintings and creating designs for temporary ceremonial structures. He also collaborated with Giacomo Quarenghi on the design of the theatre at the Hermitage. Gonzaga worked occasionally as an architect, and was named court architect in 1827. It was also in Russia that Gonzaga published two treatises on scenographic matters; *La musique des yeux et l'optique théâtrale* in 1800, and the more autobiographical *Information à mon chef ou éclaircissement convenable du décorateur théâtral* in 1807. Gonzaga was largely responsible for launching a new school of Russian stage design, and a large number of his drawings are today in museum collections in Russia.