

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Domenico PIOLA (Genoa 1627 - Genoa 1703)

Study for a Ceiling Fresco with the Fall of the Rebel Angels

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

296 x 398 mm. (11 5/8 x 15 5/8 in.)

A significant number of compositional drawings for ceilings by Domenico Piola are known, most of which are related to his work as a fresco painter. This drawing may be a first idea for part of Piola's cupola fresco of *The Coronation of the Virgin and the Fall of the Rebel Angels* in the dome of the small Genoese church of San Luca. Piola began working in the church in 1681 and was eventually tasked by the Spinola family, which owned the church, with frescoing almost the whole of the interior. As Raffaella Besta has noted of the San Luca commission, for which several preparatory drawings are known, '*The abundant surviving drawings document a complex preparatory process and demonstrate that Domenico acted as designer and director, as he did in the other major projects of the Casa Piola. Such systematic and detailed studies helped guide his numerous collaborators.*' Aided by his son Paolo Gerolamo Piola and a large team of assistants, including the quadraturista Anton Maria Haffner, Piola completed the project in 1695. The San Luca frescoes may be regarded as the most complex and accomplished of Piola's surviving fresco cycles.

According to the 19th century art historian Federigo Alizeri, Piola received the commission to decorate the cupola in 1690 and was paid the sum of 15,000 lire to do so. As the late Mary Newcome Schleier has described the composition of the cupola fresco, '*The band of figures surrounding the Coronation [of the Virgin] bends around to join with an area in the cupola that is less densely populated, less noticed by scholars, but which involves the drama of [Saint] Michael vanquishing the demons... A foreshortened putto riding the lantern edge directs attention to Michael, just as the rays of light from Paradise beam down from the lantern onto the Coronation figures. Two angels on clouds on the right of Michael and an elegant group of angels and putti on the left add to the brilliance of the flying forms... The movement of Michael and the pairs of demons that fall against the cupola rim in two places reflect the turbulent figures [in frescoes by Giacinto Brandi and Giovanni Battista Gaulli in Rome].*'

Among comparable drawings by Piola is a very similar oval design for a ceiling, depicting Athena, Justice and other allegorical figures, that was sold at auction in London in 1983. Also similar is a

quatrefoil drawing of *The Triumph of the Church*, formerly in the Brooke collection, which appeared at auction in Paris in 2004 alongside a somewhat comparable *Study for a Vault Decoration with the Immaculate Conception, God the Father and Prophets*, now in the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas. Another analogous work is a drawing for a quatrefoil ceiling composition of *The Angel Appearing to Saint Joseph* sold at auction in 1971, as well as a preparatory drawing by Piola, in the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa, for his ceiling fresco of *Apollo and the Muses* in the Palazzo Fieschi-Negrone in Genoa.

Artist description:

Working almost exclusively in his native Genoa, Domenico Piola can be counted among the most important and influential artists active in Liguria in the second half of the 17th century. He was the leading member of a local artistic dynasty, and one of the most sought-after decorative fresco painters in the city. (C. G. Ratti, in his biography of the artist, notes that there were so many houses in Genoa decorated by Piola that it would be too tiring to list them all - 'son tanti di stancare qualunque penna'.)

Working on the large-scale fresco decoration of numerous churches, palaces and villas, Piola occasionally collaborated with Valerio Castello (in the churches of Santa Maria della Passione and Santa Marta), and later often worked with his son-in-law, Gregorio de Ferrari. The 1670's and 1680's mark the peak of Piola's activity as a frescante in Genoa, culminating in such works as the extensive decoration of the church of San Luca and the allegorical ceiling frescoes of Autumn and Winter in the Palazzo Rosso, painted between 1687 and 1688.

The French bombardment of Genoa in May 1684, however, led to the destruction of much of Piola's work in various churches and palaces in the city, as well as the contents of his home and studio, and relatively few paintings and drawings from the first part of his career survive today. At the height of his reputation, Piola was the undisputed leader of the Genoese school, supervising a large and busy studio, known as the 'Casa Piola', which included his three sons Paolo Gerolamo, Giovanni Battista and Anton Maria Piola. He left a significant body of work and, with the Casa Piola active into the 1760's, his influence remained predominant in his native city for many years after his death.

Domenico Piola remains one of the most prolific Genoese draughtsmen of the 17th century, despite the fact that many of his drawings were destroyed in a fire in his studio caused by the naval bombardment of the city in 1684. (As such, it may be assumed that much of the artist's surviving drawings should be dated to the last two decades of his career.) Piola's facility as a draughtsman was aptly described by his biographer Ratti, who notes that the artist 'used to spend the whole evening drawing at the small table, setting down ideas on paper in pen with light shading in bistre...the facility of this method of drawing came no less easily to him than that of painting. Hence he made so many drawings that besides the largest number destroyed by a fire in his house and apart from those in the possession of foreigners and other painters in the city, his heirs preserved more than four thousand of them. And the wonder is that in such a copious number, one never encounters in any one example an invention similar to others already executed by him.' A large and representative group of drawings by Piola and his circle, from the collection of the Genoese diplomat Jacopo Durazzo, is today in the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, while another important group is in the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa.