

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



16th Century FLORENTINE SCHOOL

Design for a Ceiling or Wall Decoration: Mucius Scaevola Before Lars Porsena

Pen and brown ink.

Irregularly trimmed and made up along the right edge.

Inscribed *Pierino del Vaga* [crossed out] / *Marco da Faenza* and *Bern. Poccetti* in a modern hand in pencil on the verso.

161 x 141 mm. (6 3/8 x 5 1/2 in.)

A design for the elaborate decorative scheme of a wall or ceiling, the present sheet would appear to be the work of an artist in the circle of Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) in Florence. Vasari supervised a team of painters working on the extensive decoration of the various rooms of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, a massive project planned and designed by him and completed by the artist and his collaborators over a period of some seventeen years, from around 1555 until 1572.

The subject of the main scene depicted here is the story of the bravery of the ancient Roman hero Gaius Mucius Scaevola, taken from Livy's History of Rome. In 508 BC, during the war between the Romans and the Etruscans, the city of Rome was besieged by Lars Porsena, king of the powerful Etruscan city of Clusium. The Roman youth Gaius Mucius Cordius, with the approval of the Senate, volunteered to steal into the Etruscan camp to assassinate Porsena. After killing the king's scribe in error, Cordius was captured and led before Porsena. As Livy recounts, the Roman stood before the king and famously declared, "I am a Roman citizen," he cried; "men call me Gaius Mucius. I am your enemy, and as an enemy I would have slain you; I can die as resolutely as I could kill: both to do and to endure valiantly is the Roman way. Nor am I the only one to carry this resolution against you: behind me is a long line of men who are seeking the same honour. Gird yourself therefore, if you think it worth your while, for a struggle in which you must fight for your life from hour to hour with an armed foe always at your door. Such is the war we, the Roman youths, declare on you. Fear no serried ranks, no battle; it will be

between yourself alone and a single enemy at a time.”

The king, at once hot with resentment and aghast at his danger, angrily ordered the prisoner to be flung into the flames unless he should at once divulge the plot with which he so obscurely threatened him. Whereupon Mucius, exclaiming, “Look, that you may see how cheap they hold their bodies whose eyes are fixed upon renown!” thrust his hand into the fire that was kindled for the sacrifice. When he allowed his hand to burn as if his spirit were unconscious of sensation, the king was almost beside himself with wonder. He bounded from his seat and bade them remove the young man from the altar. “Do you go free,” he said, “who have dared to harm yourself more than me. I would invoke success upon your valour, were that valour exerted for my country; since that may not be, I release you from the penalties of war and dismiss you scathless and uninjured.”

Then Mucius, as if to requite his generosity, answered, “Since you hold bravery in honour, my gratitude shall afford you the information your threats could not extort: we are three hundred, the foremost youths of Rome, who have conspired to assail you in this fashion. I drew the first lot; the others, in whatever order it falls to them, will attack you, each at his own time, until Fortune shall have delivered you into our hands.”

Mucius Cordius returned to Rome and earned the cognomen ‘Scaevola’, meaning ‘left-handed’, for himself and his descendants. Lars Porsena, impressed by the courage and bravery displayed by the citizens of Rome, decided to offer peace terms to the city.

This drawing has belonged to a number of interesting collectors. Its first recorded owner was the 19th century Florentine nobleman Count Raffaello Ettore Lamponi Leopardi, whose collection of paintings and drawings was dispersed at auction in Milan in 1902. The present sheet was probably acquired at the Lamponi sale by the noted Florentine conservator, art dealer and collector Luigi Grassi (1858-1937), who sold it at auction in London in 1924 as a work by Perino del Vaga.

The next owner of the sheet was Walter Schrott (b.1878), an Austrian-born collector of Italian, French, Netherlandish and German prints and drawings who lived in South Tyrol. At the sale of part of Schrott’s collection of drawings in Leipzig in 1942 this drawing was acquired by the German architect and interior decorator Bernhard Himmelheber (1898-1966), whose collection comprised mainly Italian and German drawings dating from the 16th to the 19th centuries.