

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



Sebastiano Ricci (Belluno 1659 - Venice 1734)

The Sermon on the Mount

oil on canvas
42 x 59.5 cm (16½ x 23½ in)

"And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain; and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying"
-Matthew 5:1-2

Under a moonlit sky, through evocative, hazy lighting and a fluid handling of the rich Venetian palette, Sebastiano Ricci atmospherically captures the moment when Christ delivers His sermon on a mountainside to His disciples and a crowd of followers. Swathed in a blue toga and seated cross-legged beneath a curving tree, the figure of Christ, with one hand clutching His chest and the other held up in mid-oration, clearly captivates His surrounding audience. Above Him, an entwined pair of putti hover, while the only figure standing holds his hands together in prayer. Reverently kneeling in front of Christ a disciple is lit by a shaft of light which catches the soft tone of his flesh and the terracotta and green fabric of his tunic. Two older, bearded men sit in the shadows alongside Christ. They, like the kneeling figure, listen to His words with apparent awe and admiration, evident in their concentrated expressions.

There are currently three known preparatory drawings for *The Sermon on the Mount*. The Louvre's [Jesus Teaching the Apostles](#), explores the arrangement of the five foreground figures. The figures' positioning is very close to the finished oil, as Ricci perfects the pyramidal composition. The fact that the appearance of the figures is very different in the two works, especially that of the kneeling disciple, demonstrates how Ricci's concern was with composition in the Louvre's drawing. A second work in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice, includes more of the background figures, and Ricci uses washes to explore the theatrical contrasts of light and shade that is evident in the finished oil. ¹ A preliminary sketch in the Frits Lugt Collection in Paris (inv. no. 7228), is executed in a rapid style, typical of Ricci's draughtsmanship. ² In Jeffery Daniel's opinion, it was probably intended to examine the effect of the two putti on the composition, as it is the only drawing in which they are present. ³ Moreover there is a second painted version of the work, which differs only in the absence of the putti. ⁴ Daniels judged this to be an inferior copy, although he worked purely from a photograph. Annalisa Scarpa disagrees, and believes

this second work to also be from Ricci's hand.

In *The Sermon on the Mount* Ricci masterfully creates a strong sense of veneration and faith, which is evoked by the expressive faces and submissive, interactive poses of the figures as they listen in awe. The disciples and followers, while clustered around Christ, are given enough space and illumination for each figure to act as individualised study of intense reverence. However, despite the clear veneration of Christ, He is placed on the same level as the other figures, so that there is no sense of hierarchy within the work. Furthermore, the positioning of the kneeling disciple, centrally and equally opposite the figure of Christ, forms a skilfully balanced and harmonious composition. Indeed Scarpa has remarked that the painting demonstrates Ricci's spectacular understanding of how to create balanced space, which helps extrapolate a moment of delicate intimacy from the biblical scene.⁵ Ricci's brilliant understanding of composition in relatively small scale works is evident in another of his mature works, [*Christ on the Mount of Olives*](#). In that work Ricci has created a less crowded work, in order to increase the focus upon Christ, as he contemplates his impending fate. Both works are remarkable for Ricci's ability to manipulate the eye through composition, around shallow, theatrical scenes.

Daniels has dated the present work to c. 1725, during Ricci's mature period when he had returned to Venice, having spent time working in France and England. By this stage he had achieved international renown and he painted another version of the same subject during this period, as part of a set of seven monumental works, depicting the life of Christ, in which he painted the figures and his nephew Marco

Ricci (1676-1730) contributed the backgrounds. Six of these works are today part of the Royal collection, but [*Christ Delivering the Sermon on the Mount*](#), has been lost and is known only through a print. Although the two depictions of the subject are very different, the works do share many of the same qualities, such as the beautifully rendered drapery, which appears almost sculptural, and the emphasis on the individualisation of the figures. However, perhaps the quality which is most evident in both works is Ricci's ability to subtly unify his works through glance and gesture. In neither work is Christ's status obvious through His appearance, rather it is the way that the other figures focus their own attention onto Him that results in the viewer doing likewise.

Many of the disciples in *The Sermon on the Mount*, are typical of Ricci's style, in regards to the physicality of their appearance. Even the elder figures have a taut muscularity to them, such as the figure on the extreme right whose forearm appears to bulge. This was a favoured physical type of Ricci's, seen in another work of his mature period, [*The Liberation of St. Peter*](#). In that work, St. Peter, rather than showing any signs of frailty after his incarceration, appears almost monumental in size. Like several figures in *The Sermon on the Mount*, his broad build, and prominent neck and arms stand in contrast to his advancing years, giving him a statuesque quality.

The Liberation of St. Peter and the present work are also comparable in Ricci's treatment of the background. In each case he uses an indistinct, but atmospheric background. The skies are filled with brooding storm clouds which reinforces the drama of the two works, but does not distract from the figural elements of the paintings. In both cases the skies also provide a broad wash of colour which helps to unify and harmonise the works.

Ricci was one of the most celebrated Venetian artists in Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and was a main protagonist in the evolution of the Rococo style which reached its zenith with the work of [*Giovanni Battista Tiepolo*](#). Born in Belluno in the Veneto, he moved to Venice at the age of twelve where he was apprenticed to the Milanese painter Federico Cervelli (c.1625-1700), from whom he early acquired a free style of painting.⁶ He also responded to the brilliant colour and airy space of Luca Giordano (1634-1705), who had painted three altarpieces for S Maria della Salute, Venice.

[*Abraham and the Angels*](#), painted c.1694, shows some of the influence from Ricci's early tutelage. However, Ricci had clearly developed his own style by the 1690's and, as with the atmospheric lighting and imbedded emotion in the present work, *Abraham and the Angels* is filled with energetic gestures, large flowing folds of drapery and impressive light contrasts, whilst remaining a balanced composition. Abraham who, frightened by the appearance of the angels, has fallen to his knees in reverence reminds the viewer of the adoring disciple in *The Sermon on the Mount* who kneels in veneration and wonder in

front of Christ as he listens fixedly to His preaching.

However it was the rediscovery of the Venetian Mannerist master, Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) by Ricci that left the greatest impression on the artist and who continued to have a considerable influence on later Rococo artists, particularly Tiepolo. Veronese, and subsequently Ricci, sought to create striking compositions where the interaction, poses and expressions of the figures significantly contributed to the overall aestheticism of the work. Furthermore, Ricci appropriated his predecessor's preference for dazzling light and colour harmonies and careful handling of perspective.

Ricci was a renowned womaniser and had a chequered personal life, spending some time in prison after trying to poison a Venetian woman he had made pregnant. Following his release he left Venice for Bologna in 1681 and entered the studio of Giovanni Gioseffo dal Sole (1654-1719). After being recommended by Carlo Cignani (1628-1719), in 1687-8 Ricci completed fresco decoration portraying scenes from the *Life of Pope Paul III* for the Duchess of Parma's apartments in the Palazzo Farnese in Piacenza. Patronised by the Duke of Parma (1630-1694), Ricci lived comfortably in the Farnese Palace in Rome where he received several noble commissions. In 1694 he travelled to Lombardy and worked in Milan but in 1696 he returned to Venice and married a Dutchwoman. An itinerant artist, reputedly moving to escape amatory escapades, he travelled to England in the winter of 1711-12 where he completed four monumental canvases (c.1713-14) for Burlington House (now the Royal Academy) for Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington (1694-1752), as well as receiving other commissions including the decoration of the chapel in the Chelsea Hospital (c.1715-16). He returned to Venice, via Paris, in 1716 where his international reputation afforded him a grand apartment. His status as a celebrated artist throughout Europe brought many important commissions in his later years, including designing the cartoons for the mosaic decoration on the façade of the basilica of San Marco in Venice. Although he died in Venice in 1734, his work continued to be enormously influential. As Francesco Valcanover has said, 'His pictorial fluency, elegant in its drawing and festive in its colour, provided a stimulus for all the painters of the next generation', and these are qualities very much in evidence in *The Sermon on the Mount*.

¹ Reproduced in Daniels, J., *L'Opera Completa di Sebastiano Ricci*, (Rizzoli Editore, Milan, 1976), p. 128, fig. 4361.

² Reproduced Ibid., fig. 4362.

³ Ibid., p. 128.

⁴ Scarpa, A., *Sebastiano Ricci: Catalogue Raisonné* (Automobilia, Milan, 2006), p. 317, no. 495, ill. p. 631, no. 582.

⁵ Ibid., p. 317.

⁶ See for example *Birth of St. John* (before 1706, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna).

Provenance:

Private Collection, Scotland, before 1976 and after 1983;
with Simon Dickinson Ltd., London (according to a label on the reverse)

Exhibitions

Works by Sebastiano Ricci from British Collections: A Loan Exhibition in aid of the Udine Art Restoration Fund, P & D Colnaghi & Co., 1 February - 8 March 1978.

Literature:

Jeffery Daniels, *L'Opera Completa di Sebastiano Ricci*, (Rizzoli Editore, Milan, 1976), p. 128, no. 436 (incorrectly illustrated under number 4363);

Works by Sebastiano Ricci from British Collections: A Loan Exhibition in aid of the Udine Art Restoration Fund, exh. cat. (P & D Colnaghi & Co., 1 February - 8 March 1978), no. 23, illustrated plate XIII;

James Byam Shaw, *The Italian Drawings of the Frits Lugt Collection*, (Institut Néerlandais, Paris, 1983), vol. 1, p. 269, ill. fig. 66;

Annalisa Scarpa, *Sebastiano Ricci: Catalogue Raisonné* (Automobilia, Milan, 2006), p. 317, ill. p. 631,

Artist description:

Sebastiano Ricci was a successful decorator active at the end of the Baroque era, who developed the achievement of Veronese into a spirited Rococo style. He was also responsive to a wide variety of 17th-century influences, including Annibale Carracci, Pietro da Cortona and Gaulli. He often collaborated with his nephew Marco (1676–1730), who became a specialist in decorative landscape painting. Sebastiano, after early training in Venice under the little known Federico Cervelli and in Bologna under Giovanni Gioseffo dal Sole (1654–1719), received his first major commission in 1685: the decoration of two cupolas in the nave and choir of the oratory of the Madonna del Serraglio in S. Secondo Parmense. He moved to Rome in 1691 and the following year was invited to paint a large fresco of the *Battle of Lepanto* for the Palazzo Colonna. He was in Milan in 1694–6 but by 1696 he was back in Venice and found regular employment in the region, most notably the decoration of the nave ceiling in S. Marziale with illusionistic frescoes of the *Legends of S. Martial*. He was also called to Florence to work for the Grand Duke Ferdinand de'Medici: a *Crucifixion* for S. Francesco de'Macci, commissioned in 1704 and a ceiling fresco of *Venus and Adonis*, with further scenes from Ovid on the walls, for the Palazzo Pitti c.1707–8. Both in Milan and Florence he appears to have collaborated with Anton Peruzzini (1646/7–1724), an artist specializing in landscape.

In 1711 Sebastiano, with his brother Marco, went to England. They both received patronage from Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington. Sebastiano was engaged to paint four large canvases (c.1713–14) for the staircase at Burlington House, London (now the Royal Academy), *Diana and her Nymphs Bathing* harks back to Veronese but there are also reminders of Pellegrini in the treatment of the freely sketched foreground nymph. The *Triumph of Galatea* echoes the spirit of Giordano while the *Meeting of Bacchus and Ariadne* is inspired by Annibale Carracci's ceiling decoration of the Palazzo Farnese, Rome. Two further paintings now at Chatsworth, Derbyshire, one signed and dated 1713, may also have been commissioned by Lord Burlington, whose daughter married the 2nd Duke of Devonshire's grandson. The *Flight into Egypt* evokes the spirit of Jacopo Bassano; The *Presentation in the Temple* recalls Veronese. The two Riccis left England in 1716, having failed to secure the commission to decorate the dome of S. Paul's, a task assigned to the English artist Sir James Thornhill.

For the remainder of his life Sebastiano, whose international reputation was now assured, lived in style at Venice. However he accepted a commission to decorate the ballroom of the Palazzo Gabrielli (now Taverna), in Rome, with a sumptuous cycle of paintings on the *Loves of the Gods* (1717). And he continued to receive patronage from England. He collaborated with Marco to produce two paintings from a large series of imaginary monuments dedicated to recent English heroes, a project conceived by the Irish playwright and opera producer Owen MacSwinnny: the *Allegorical Tomb of the 1st Duke of Devonshire* (Birmingham, Barber Institute) and the *Allegorical Tomb of Sir Cloudesley Shovell* (Washington, National Gallery). The two artists also joined forces to produce a series of seven scenes from the Life of Christ (1724–30; London, Royal Collection) for the Venetian palazzo of the consul Joseph Smith.

Collections

Ricci is represented in the following collections: Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Hermitage, St Petersburg; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Liechtenstein Museum, Vienna; Louvre, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; National Gallery, London; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; The Royal Collection, London; Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, Italy; Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, British Columbia; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin; Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Venice; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Columbia Museum of Art, South Carolina; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan; Dulwich Picture Gallery, London; Gallerie di Palazzo Leoni Montanari, Vicenza, Italy; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes, France; Musée Fesch, Ajaccio, France; Museo Correr, Venice; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina; National Brukenthal Museum, Romania; National Gallery of Armenia, Yerevan; National Gallery of Victoria, Australia; Pinacoteca Civica di Vicenza, Italy; San Diego Museum of Art,

California; Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid, amongst others.