

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



Antonio Domenico Gabbiani (Florence 1652 - Florence 1726)

The Rape of the Sabine Women

bears inscription in pen and brown ink: 'P . Berretini'
pen and brown ink and wash over black chalk
24.1 x 33.7 cm (9½ x 13 5/16 in)

The rape of the Sabine women was a theme popular from the Renaissance onwards as a story which championed the centrality of marriage for the continuity of families and cultures. The legend, narrated by both Livy and Plutarch, became an important foundation myth in the Roman psyche. The rape is said to have occurred shortly after Romulus founded Rome when his men found themselves without wives. The Romans attempted, ultimately unsuccessfully, to negotiate with the neighbouring Sabines but when they refused to allow their women to marry Romans, a plan was hatched to abduct the unsuspecting Sabine women. Inviting whole Sabine families to a festival venerating Neptune, Romulus ordered his men, at a signal, to seize the women and fend off their men folk¹.

The scene captured here by Antonio Gabbiani shows a mass of writhing bodies and Roman soldiers lifting them up. It is perhaps worth noting that the reference to rape in this context comes from the Latin *rapio* which means 'to seize'. Livy is very clear on the matter stating that Romulus offered the Sabine

women free choice and promised them civic and property rights: 'They would live in honourable wedlock, and share all their property and civil rights, and - dearest of all to human nature - would be the mothers of free men.'²

The old attribution inscribed on this drawing is a testament to the pervasive influence that Pietro da Cortona's works exerted on Gabbiani, after he first saw them in Rome. Although his debt to Cortona's [celebrated painting of the same subject](#), now in the Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome³, is obvious here,

Gabbiani has imbued the composition with his own rhythm and energy. The arms of the women in Cortona's work owe much to the influence of Bernini, particularly his *Apollo and Daphne*. Gabbiani takes this on too and the influences of the two are readily apparent.

Carlo Maratti and Pietro da Cortona were both strong influences on Gabbiani, who studied in Florence,

Venice, and travelled extensively around Europe. He is chiefly known for his magnificent frescoes for the *palazzi* of the Italian aristocracy including the Strozzi-Ridolfi (1694), Corsini (1695), and Medici-Riccardi (1690-97) among many others. A large number of preparatory drawings survive for these decorative schemes and can be seen in the Uffizi, Florence.

Gabbiani received a number of commissions from the Medici family including requests to depict religious subjects. His *Christ Giving Communion to St. Peter of Alcantara in the Presence of St. Teresa of Avila* (1714, Schleissheim, Neues Schloss), which shows the influence of Sebastiano Ricci, was possibly commissioned by Cosimo III for his daughter Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici. Other religious commissions include those for the *Assumption of the Virgin* and the *Virgin and Child with the Symbols of the Passion* (1720-22, Florence, Uffizi). These paintings, and many of his later oeuvres, reflect both the work of Sebastiano Ricci and the classicism of Maratti.

¹ Livy, *The History of Rome* 1.9.

² Livy, *The History of Rome* 1.9.

³ Anna Lo Bianco, *et al.*, *Pietro da Cortona*, exhibition catalogue, Rome, Palazzo Venezia, 1997-98, no. 36.

Provenance:

Sale, London, Sotheby's, 13 December 1973, lot 29 (as Ciro Ferri);
Herbert List (bears his collector's dry stamp twice, not in Lugt);
Flavia Ormond Fine Arts, London;
from whom acquired in 2000 by Jeffrey E. Horvitz.

Literature:

C. Monbeig Goguel, *Dessins Toscans XVIIe-XVIIIe Siècles 1620-1800*, vol. II, Paris 2005, p. 260,
under cat. no. 340

Artist description:

Gabbiani first trained with the Medici court portrait painter Giusto Suttermans and then with the painter Vincenzo Dandini. On 20 May 1673 he arrived in Rome, where he studied for three years under Ciro Ferri and Ercole Ferrata at the Accademia Fiorentina. He responded in particular to the paintings of Pietro da Cortona and Carlo Maratti who were both to be important influences on him. Though not precocious, Gabbiani became one of the most noted painters from the Accademia. After a period in Venice (1678-9) with the portrait painter Sebastiano Bombelli, he was in Florence in 1680. By 1684, the year in which he executed an *Annunciation* (destroyed) for the Palazzo Pitti, he was an independent painter.

His first important public commission, the *St Francis de Sales in Glory* (1685) for the church of SS Apostoli, Florence (in situ), shows the influence of Maratti in its grandiose composition and that of Dandini in the treatment of figures. In Prince Ferdinando de' Medici, Gabbiani found a particularly loyal patron, and he painted his portrait, *Ferdinando de' Medici and his Musicians* (c. 1685; Florence, Pitti).

One of the works executed for Ferdinando was possibly a portrait of his sister, which Chiarini has identified with the painting of *Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici* (c. 1685; Florence, Pitti). Further works from this period are the group portrait of *Three Musicians* (Florence, Pitti) at Ferdinando's court and a *Group of Courtiers* (1685-90; Florence, Uffizi).

After the marriage in 1689 of Ferdinando to Violante of Bavaria, Gabbiani continued to receive commissions. In December 1690 he returned from a five-month stay in Vienna, where he had gone to paint a portrait of the Habsburg Emperor Leopold I and his son Joseph, King of Bohemia, but had been unable to carry out the commission owing to illness. On his return to Florence, he painted frescoes at Poggio a Caiano (1691; destroyed) and in the Prince's apartments in the Palazzo Pitti (1692-3), as well as a decoration (destroyed) representing *Parnassus* for the Teatro della Pergola. Gabbiani

executed a number of fresco cycles of Classical and mythological subjects in Florentine palaces and villas, including the palazzi Strozzi–Ridolfi (1694), Gerini (1694–5), Corsini (1695), Medici–Riccardi (1690–97) and Orlandini del Beccuto (1697). A large number of preparatory drawings survive for these decorative schemes (Florence, Uffizi). While employed at the Palazzo Corsini he was approached to execute work in the Palazzo Ducale, Genoa, but was prevented from undertaking this commission by

Ferdinando. In 1698 he again worked at Poggio a Caiano, executing a fresco of the *Apotheosis of Cosimo il vecchio* for which he was paid 400 scudi. Several of the frescoes executed during this period (e.g. Palazzo Gerini) include beautifully realized landscape views reflecting his personal observation from journeys to Rome and Venice and anticipating the treatment of landscape by Marco Ricci and Sebastiano Ricci.

Possibly at Ferdinando's suggestion, Gabbiani travelled again to Venice in 1699 to study the works of the great Venetian colourists in an attempt to enliven his somewhat monochromatic palette. Between

1702 and 1718 he executed the fresco of the *Assumption of Mary Magdalene* in the cupola of S Frediano in Cestello, Florence (in situ). Ferdinando so admired his *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1704; Florence, Depositi Galeria) that it was put on public view in the Piazza del Duomo on the Feast of Corpus Domini. After Ferdinando's death in 1713 Gabbiani continued to receive important commissions from the Medici. The *Christ Giving Communion to St Peter of Alcantara in the Presence of St Teresa of Avila* (1714; Schleissheim, Neues Schloss), which shows the influence of Sebastiano Ricci, was possibly commissioned by Cosimo III for his daughter Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici. There were also religious commissions, such as those for the *Assumption of the Virgin* and the *Virgin and Child with the Symbols of the Passion* (both 1720–22; Florence, Uffizi). These and many of his later works reflect both the paintings of Sebastiano Ricci and the classicism of Maratti. At his death, Gabbiani left incomplete a fresco of the Feast of the Gods in the Palazzo Incontri, Florence. His funerary monument was erected in S Felice in Piazza, Florence. There are two *Self-portraits* by Gabbiani of 1685 and c. 1715 (both Florence, Uffizi), the latter produced for Cosimo's portrait gallery in the Uffizi.