

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



Michele Rocca (Parma c. 1666 - Venice? 1751)

David and Bathsheba

oil on canvas, in a painted oval
47.5 x 37.7 cm (18½ x 15¼ in)

The warm, pastel palette, rich painterly effects, graceful sense of movement and the coquettish display of the women in *David and Bathsheba* are typical of Michele Rocca's work and indicate that his painting, although grounded in the Baroque tradition, resonated more with the emerging French Rococo movement. The size of the composition and its decorative appeal are also characteristic of Rocca's small-scale cabinet pictures of mythological and biblical scenes that gave him his reputation as a petit maître in eighteenth-century Rome.

The scene illustrates a biblical passage from the second book of Samuel in which 'David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon' (11:2). In the upper right of the composition, King David can be seen spying on Bathsheba from his balcony. The nude Bathsheba, clutching provocatively at a piece of blue drapery, is unaware of his covetous gaze or the events soon to befall her. Two attendants flutter around, one holding a string of pearls to adorn her mistress while the other bathes her feet. Bathsheba, with pale soft skin, a voluptuous figure and fair hair, is the picture of feminine allure. Bathsheba's beauty compelled David to summon her to him, and after learning she was the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, David ordered him to be killed so he was free to marry her. Their first child died in infancy as retribution for their sins; their second child, however, was Solomon who became the third king of Israel. The setting for such a consequential scene of seduction is appropriately romantic, featuring classical columns, ornaments and lavish drapery.

The sensuality of *David and Bathsheba* is typical of Rocca's work, whether the subject is biblical or pagan. This is evident in his painting, [*Offering to Jupiter*](#), in which naked women and putti frolic on a hillside near a statue of Jupiter seated on a plinth. The sky is of the same rich blue hue as the present painting and is dotted with puffy white clouds. The poses and gestures of the figures are elegant and languorous and the softly modelled pale pink flesh of the women in repose is equally as suggestive as that of Bathsheba.

According to Nicola Pio's *Vite* of 1724, Rocca left his native city of Parma to travel to Rome in 1682 and study under Ciro Ferri.¹ He then returned to Parma where he absorbed the influence of Correggio. By 1695, he was back in Rome, painting altarpieces. He was elected to the Congregazione dei Virtuosi al Pantheon in 1710 and in the same year painted his best known paintings, *Toilet of Venus* and *The Finding of Moses*, both small-scale fashionably elegant works that are indicative of the Rococo style. Despite the Rococo influence, Rocca's cosmopolitan style owed much to his Roman colleagues and he particularly emulated Sebastiano Conca, which makes their work often difficult to distinguish between. Benedetto Luti also provided inspiration for Rocca and may have introduced him to French painters working in Rome. In 1727 Rocca was given an official post at the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome. One of his last known pictures, *Bathsheba in the Bath*, dates to 1729 and is in the Schloss Wilhelmshöhe Kassel, Germany.

We are grateful to Professor Giancarlo Sestieri for confirming the attribution of this painting.

¹ N. Pio: *Vite* (1724); ed. C. Enggass and R. Enggass (1977), p. 153

Provenance:

with Colnaghi, London.
with Agnew's, London.
Lord and Lady Illiffe of Basildon Park

Artist description:

Michele Rocca's date of birth was provided by Pio, who also wrote that in 1682 Rocca journeyed to Rome, where he was a pupil of Ciro Ferri, returning for further study to Parma, where he concentrated on pictures by Correggio. He was documented as being in Parma in 1687 but had returned to Rome by 1695, when he executed the altar of *St Francis Receiving the Stigmata* for San Paolino alla Regola (*in situ*). In 1698 he received payment for an altarpiece of the Penitent Magdalene for S Maria Maddalena, Rome (*in situ*). In 1710 Rocca was elected to the Congregazione dei Virtuosi al Pantheon, and in approximately the same year he executed two of his best-known paintings: the *Toilet of Venus* (Providence, Museum of Art) and the *Finding of Moses* (University of Chicago, Smart Museum of Art). These are among the finest of the small-scale, semi-precious cabinet pictures of mythological and hagiographical subjects that dominate Rocca's oeuvre and gained for him the reputation of being a *petit maître* in early 18th-century Rome. Their decorative rarity, luminous pigmentation and rich painterly effects betray the fundamentally sensual nature of Rocca's style and clearly suggest that his artistic vision was in some ways more closely aligned with the emerging French Rococo than with the neo-Baroque style of his contemporary Roman colleagues.

The major elements of Rocca's somewhat eclectic and cosmopolitan style were nonetheless drawn from the artistic environment of Rome. He was deeply influenced by Sebastiano Conca, for whose work his has often been mistaken. His *Clemency of Scipio* (c. 1720; Rome, Private Collection) relies heavily on Conca's *Antony and Cleopatra*, while the shared dimensions of the two paintings (870×1350 mm) have suggested to some that they were executed as pendants. Rocca also distilled features from the work of Benedetto Luti, which is most apparent in his versions of *Angelica* and *Medoro* (earliest c. 1720; untraced) where both the composition and male figure were derived from Luti's painting of the same title (c. 1715; untraced; pencil study, Florence, Uffizi). Luti may have introduced Rocca to French painters working in Rome, and Rocca's rapid assimilation, in part through Luti, of the languorous eroticism and fashionable intent of the French style is evident in the *Angelica and Medoro* paintings

and, for example, in the *Apollo and Thetis* (late 1720s; Brussels, Private Collection).

In 1727 Rocca held an official post at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, of which he had been a member since 1719. In the same year his *Santa Cecilia* (before 1727) was engraved by Pieter Tanjé. One of his last known pictures is *Bathsheba in the Bath*, signed and dated 1729 (Kassel, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe). After this point Rocca's career is undocumented. He may have settled in Venice between approximately 1727 and 1730. He is mentioned in a document of 1751, but no works of this Venetian period are known.

Collections

Works by Rocca are represented in the following collections: J Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Louvre, Paris; Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo; Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, amongst others.