SPHINX FINE ART



Sebastiano Conca (Gaeta 1680 - Naples 1764)

The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist

oil on canvas

75 x 62 cm (29½ x 24⅜ in)

in a very rare silver plated Roman 18th-century frame

Sebastiano Conca painted numerous pictures of the Virgin and Child, varying the usual pyramidal format. In *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* he composes the three central figures of the Virgin, the infant Jesus and a young John the Baptist, with Joseph in the shadowy background. Our attention is drawn to the gaze and relationship between the two children, Jesus and John. The young John presents the Infant Child with a cutting from the vine. Though it is John who gives the vine to Jesus, the Infant Child appears both to accept the vine, and in turn appears to present it back to John. The vine is the root and source of wine, which in turn is symbolic of the blood shed by Christ. This acceptance by the Infant Child may represent an acknowledgment and reference to his destiny, 'I am the true vine' John 15:1. The vine is also a symbol of God's relationship with his people and therefore it is appropriate that the Infant Child and the young John the Baptist share and hold the vine together. The book held by the Virgin is the book of the Wisdom, and marks the Virgin as 'Mater Serpientiae,' the Mother of Wisdom. Conca repeated the motif of 'Mater Serpientiae' in a small copper version of the Holy Family.

Other examples of Conca's Virgin with Child include *Virgin Enthroned, with Child, SS John and Carlo Borromeo and Angels* (1738) and *Madonna with Sleeping Child* in the Hermitage. Whereas in *Madonna with Sleeping Child* the Virgin is the central focus of the painting, her head turned directly towards us, engaging with the viewer, her face lit by a soft glow; in the present work, *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, it is the Christ Child and St. John that draw us in instead. The importance of the Virgin and her status as Queen of Heaven is however emphasised by her brilliant blue cloak with its heavy folds, which is so prominent in *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist.*

Conca studied under Francesco Solimena. His move to Rome in 1706 led to Conca being patronised by the Cardinal Ottoboni, and an introduction to Pope Clement XI resulted in Conca being commissioned to paint *Jeremiah* in 1718 for the church of San Giovanni Laterano in Rome. Whilst in Rome he also worked on the Coronation of Santa Cecilia in conujnction with Carlo Maratta for the Church of S. Cecilia in Trastevere.

He was elected in 1718 to the Accademia di San Luca, and was its director from 1729 to 1731 and from 1739 to 1741. Among Conca's pupils were Pompeo Battoni, Andrea Casali, Placido Campoli, Corrado Giaquinto, Gaetano Lapis, Salvatore Monosilio, Literio Paladini, Drancesco Preziao, Rosalba Maria Salvioni, Gasparo Serenari, and Agostino Masucci.

Conca received widespread acclaim and his patrons included the royal house of Savoy in Turin, the Duke of Parma and Charles III. In 1739 he published a guide to painting called *Ammonimenti* (Admonishments), which provided moralistic and technical advice. His studio was prodigious and he painted frescoes for the Church of Santa Chiara (1752-1754), five canvases for the Chapel in Caserta Palace, as well as many others including works for the Benedictines of Aversa (1761), a *History of Saint Francis of Paola* for the Sanctuary of S. Maria di Pozzano of Castellammare di Stabia (1762-1763).

We are grateful to Professor Giancarlo Sestieri who attributed the present work to Conca in 2006.

Provenance:

Formerly Barone Alessi, Catania;
Private Collection, Germany

Artist description:

He was the son of Erasmo Conca and Caterina de Iorio and the eldest of ten children. According to Francesco Maria Niccolò Gabburri, when very young he was a pupil of Luca Giordano, but the only teacher who can be assigned to him with certainty is Francesco Solimena. Conca probably entered his studio in Naples c. 1693 and in 1703 assisted him in painting decorative frescoes for the abbey of Montecassino. In 1706 (de Dominici) or perhaps 1707 (Pio) Conca moved to Rome. He remained there for 45 years but never lost touch with Gaeta, to which he often returned. In Rome, inspired by the art of Michelangelo, Raphael and the Carracci, he moved away from Solimena and developed a greater classicism, indebted to Carlo Maratti. Works dating from his first ten years in Rome include the Adoration of the Magi (1707; Tours, Musee Beaux-Arts), the *Allegory of Painting, the Allegory of Music* (both Rome, Galleria Spada) and a *St Bartholomew* (untraced).

The last-named work was commissioned for his own collection by Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, who was

also the patron of Francesco Trevisani; Conca's spontaneous and lyrical style attracted intellectuals like Ottoboni, whose taste was influenced by the Society of Arcadia. Through Ottoboni, Conca won the favour of the Roman Curia. Cardinal Tommaso Maria Ferrari (1647–1716) commissioned altarpieces of the *Vision of St Dominic* (1714) and *Scenes from the Life of St Dominic* (1715) for the church of S Clemente, Rome. Pope Clement XI assigned to him a fresco of the *Miracle of St Clement*, one of a series of frescoes of the saint's life above the nave arcade in the same church, and an oval medallion of *Jeremiah* (1718) in S Giovanni Laterano, Rome. This led to a commission for the decoration of the Palazzo de Carolis, Rome, where he worked with the foremost artists of the time. In 1719 he made a pilgrimage to Montecassino.

For the Piedmontese royal house of Savoy, through the offices of Filippo Juvarra, who had been architect and scenographer to Cardinal Ottoboni, Conca executed paintings for the royal hunting lodge, the Venaria Reale (1721–4), for the church of the Superga (1726) and for the Palazzo Reale, Turin. Between 1721 and 1724 he frescoed the vault of S Cecilia in Trastevere, Rome, with the *Coronation of St Cecilia*. This important commission was procured for him by Cardinal Francesco Acquaviva d'Aragona (1665–1725), the Spanish ambassador, who sent the cartoons to Queen Elizabeth of Spain, and the modello to her uncle, Francis, Duke of Parma. In this large composition Conca toned down the magniloquent exuberance of the Baroque and created a lighter and more balanced composition that is fully Rococo in spirit.

In 1725 the Duke of Parma, impressed with Conca's talent, gave him a studio in the Palazzo Farnese, Rome, and there Conca established his Accademia del Nudo which, since c. 1710, had attracted many followers, from as far afield as France, Germany and Spain. Among the most outstanding of the pupils who attended the academy were Pompeo Girolamo Batoni, Corrado Giaquinto and Anton Raphael Mengs. Several printmakers also worked within the academy, including the Swiss Johann Jakob I Frey and the better-known Giuseppe Vasi (later Piranesi's teacher). Through their engravings these artists helped to publicize and spread Conca's style. Through the offices of Cardinal Marco Cornelio Bentivoglio d'Aragona (1668–1732) Conca won the patronage of the Bourbon family, for whom in 1727 he designed a firework display.

The 1730s marked the climax of Conca's long and brilliantly successful career. His output was prodigious, and his altarpieces were sent to Palermo, Messina, Macerata, Turin, Pisa, Spoleto and Gaeta. He also produced many easel paintings (e.g. *Aeneas Descending to the Underworld*, Florence, Uffizi), which were sought after by private collectors, such as Cardinal Tommaso Ruffo (1663–1753), and by foreign travellers passing through Italy, who carried them to France, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Germany and Austria. These are lyrical Rococo works, distinguished by their spontaneous brushwork and liquid colours. From 1729 to 1732 Conca was Principe of the Accademia di S Luca (a post that he also held from 1739 to 1742). In 1731 he contributed financially to the decoration of a chapel in the church of SS Martina e Luca, which was in the possession of the Accademia. He also wrote a theoretical work for the Accademia, the *Ammonimenti* (1738–9; see 1981 exh. cat., pp. 396–8), which contained moral and artistic precepts for young men intending to become painters. In 1731–2 he made a successful journey to Tuscany. In Florence, in 1731, he painted a portrait of the *Infante Don Carlos* (untraced) for the Bourbon family and also an overwhelmingly grandiose fresco, the *Pool of Bethesda*, in the church of the Ospedale della Scala, Siena. This develops the Rococo style of the *Coronation of St Cecilia*, and the softness and transparency of the colour suggest both the influence of Solimena and of Giuseppe Bartolomeo Chiari and Benedetto Luti.

Conca received an unceasing flow of commissions both in Italy and abroad. For Cardinal Anton Felice Chigi-Zondadari (1665–1737) he painted the *Meeting with Philip V* (c. 1730; Rome, Palazzo Corsini). Juvarra, while employed by King Philip V of Spain on the reconstruction of the Palacio de la Granja in Segovia, invited him to Spain to carry out the decoration together with other famous artists. Conca declined, but in 1735 he sent his monumental painting of *Alexander Sacrificing in Solomon's Temple* (La Granja de San Ildefonso, Palacio Real).

Between 1738 and 1740 he produced a series of canvases on allegorical subjects—the *Allegory of Liguria, Temperance, Justice, Fortitude and Prudence* — for the Palazzo Lomellini Doria in Genoa. In 1740 he signed and dated an altarpiece for SS Martina e Luca, Rome, of the *Assumption of the Virgin*

and St Sebastian. Conca painted numerous pictures of the Virgin and Child, varying the usual pyramidal scheme. Noteworthy among these are the *Virgin Enthroned, with Child, SS John and Carlo Borromeo and Angels* (1738; Ascoli Piceno) and the *Virgin* (1746; Spoleto). Together with Corrado Giaquinto he worked in the Ruffo Chapel in SS Lorenzo e Damaso in Rome, where (before 1743) he painted the *Virgin and Saints*. This was his last commission associated with Cardinal Ottoboni. In the 1740s Conca worked with his pupils for the Camilliani family and himself painted the vast frescoes (1744) of the chapel of S Camillo de Lellis in S Maria Maddalena, Rome. In 1747 he frescoed the ceiling of Cardinal Neri Corsini's library (Rome, Biblioteca Corsini) with the *Allegory of the Sciences* and in 1749 painted frescoes (destr.) at Montecassino.

When Benedict XIV became pope, commissions became scarcer, and this may have been one of the reasons why Conca went to Naples c. 1752. Another reason, perhaps, was that he suffered from the competition of the new generation of artists, and his style began to seem too mannered. In Naples Conca was entrusted with important decorative commissions. In this period, although the forms in his works are clearly defined, he still produced lavishly theatrical works. Between 1752 and 1754 he painted frescoes in S Chiara (destr. World War II), in which he employed dazzling effects of illusionism. He established himself in Gaeta, but shortly afterwards, in 1755, he returned again to Naples to complete the cycle in S Chiara and to execute the *Meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon* in the vestibule of the church. Through the mediation of Luigi Vanvitelli he was then appointed to paint five canvases for the Palatina Chapel at Caserta (1756, 1759; destr.). Conca was influenced by Vanvitelli's academic manner and reacted against the empty rhetoric of the Baroque. The artist's late work declined in quality and became rather repetitive (1981 exh. cat., pp. 74–86). Canvases of this period spread to Sicily and to various parts of the Bourbon kingdom. His last works were the paintings for the Benedictines of Aversa (1761) and the scenes from the Life of St Francis of Paola, commissioned between 1762 and 1763 by the Frati Minori of S Maria di Pozzano in Castellamare.

Sebastiano had a younger brother, Francesco (b 1698), who was also a painter, and who is known to have joined Sebastiano in Rome in 1713. A cousin, Giovanni Conca (b c. 1690) worked in Rome and Turin. His works include two scenes from the *Life of the Virgin* (Rome, S Maria della Scala) and the *Death of St Joseph* (1754; Rome, S Maria della Luce). Giovanni's son, Tommaso (1734–1822), was a more distinguished artist, best known for his decoration of the Villa Borghese, Rome, commissioned by Prince Marcantonio Borghese, which includes the *Sacrifice of Silenus* (1776) and the *Dance of the Satyrs* (1778), both in the Sala del Fauno Danzante.

Collections

Conca is represented in the following collections; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Dulwich Picture Gallery, London; Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington; Le Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, France; Manchester City Art Gallery, UK; Musée des Augustins, Toulouse, France; National Gallery of Armenia; Ringling Museum of Art, Florida; Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C., amongst others.