SPHINX FINE ART



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (Venice 1697 - Madrid 1770)

Death of Seneca

pen and brown ink and grey wash over black chalk
42.8 x 28.2 cm (16⅞ x 11⅛ in)

Charged with conspiracy by Emperor Nero, Seneca chose to commit suicide rather than face the humiliation of execution. This narrative of the Roman Empire was a popular subject in Italy in the 1700s and reflected the revival of interest in Stoicism. Stoic philosophers like Seneca, argued for the control of the emotions, and his suicide embodied this repression of feeling. Having slit his own wrists and taken poison, Seneca slips into unconsciousness and is helped into a warm bath of water by some compassionate friends to hasten his death. The work demonstrates why, as an expression of artistic imagination, it has been said that Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's 'graphic work can be compared only with that of Rembrandt.'[1]

The subject of Seneca's death was one which Tiepolo was to return to on several occasions. In addition to the themes of dignity, bravery and reason, Seneca is described by Tacitus as aged and thin, and Tiepolo clearly relishes the visual impact of this skeletal figure close to death. The present drawing is an early example of Tiepolo's draughtsmanship, dating to the 1720s, and there is an oil painting of the

same subject dating from that decade (Private Collection). Although the two works are compositionally very different, the focus is very much on the arresting figure of Seneca. In both works he is almost helpless, as death overcomes him and he has to be supported by a companion. In each case, Tiepolo opts to depict the philosopher with a bare torso, which allows the viewer to contemplate his frailty. His gaunt body, which exposes his bones and sinews, is a dramatic sight and it emphasises the contrast between Seneca's physical weakness and his considerable mental strength.

Clearly Tiepolo was fascinated by the pictorial potential of the narrative, in which he could depict someone so close to death. Another slightly later drawing in Chicago shows Seneca starting to slide from his chair, his arms akimbo. It is a slightly more dramatic and theatrical pose, perhaps designed to convey with more clarity the agony of death. However, Tiepolo defines less clearly Seneca's physical weakness, and with its heightened sense of drama, the Chicago work does not capture the same spirit of stoicism which Seneca represents.

As Adriano Mariuz has said of Tiepolo's graphic work, 'The subjects frequently recur, but the interpretation differs every time'.[2] In his depiction of Seneca, Tiepolo appears to have taken inspiration from Guido Reni's (1575-1642) sculpture of that figure. A bronze bust, Reni's only known sculpture, was widely reproduced in plaster and according to the seventeenth-century art historian Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616-1693), was used in many art academies.[3] Despite Tiepolo's inventiveness and freedom of technique, he did follow traditional studio practice and make drawings after sculptures.

As discussed, the present work dates from the 1720s, when Tiepolo's draughstmanship was still under the influence of Luca Giordano (1604 - 1705). These early drawings, which have the dashing fluid manner of Giordano, are relatively rare, despite the fact that Tiepolo was a prolific draughtsman. Comparable examples include *The Decapitation of a Bishop,* (Civici Musei di Storia e Arte, Trieste) and *A Sacrifice*. These three drawings feature a rapidity of execution which powerfully heightens the drama of death. Tiepolo uses the grave expressions of the onlookers to accentuate the emotion of his scenes. The expressive power of these drawings is all the more remarkable given the narrow compositions he restricts himself to.

Also known as 'Giambattista', Tiepolo was one of the most brilliant and sought after Italian painters of the eighteenth century, and represents the ultimate achievement of the Venetian tradition of decorative painting in the Grand Manner. He also painted numerous large-scale oil paintings, a wide repertory of oil sketches, and was an accomplished draughtsman as well as a successful and original etcher. He had been trained in Venice and brought up to admire the achievements of the great Venetian Renaissance masters, above all Tintoretto and Veronese. *Death of Seneca* exemplifies how Tiepolo, through rhetorical gesture and facial expression, created a theatrical sense of composition and design, and an imaginative appreciation of the physical context in which his work would be seen. Tiepolo became extremely successful at projecting narrative and telling a story with dramatic effect, whether of religious or secular subject matter.

Over his long career he worked throughout Europe, becoming one of the most sought after artists of the period. A contemporary describes Tiepolo as 'the most famous Venetian painter, the most renowned...well-known in Europe, and the most honoured in his own country'.[4] Although he is best remembered for his grandiose oil paintings it is in his graphic work that we see 'the freest, most complete expression of his genius'.[5]

When the present drawing was sold in 1983, the attribution was confirmed by Professor George Knox, after having seen it in the original.

[1] Mariuz, A., 'Giambattista Tiepolo' in *The Glory of Venice: Art in the Eighteenth Century,* exh. cat. (Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1994), p.182
[2] Ibid.
[3] Kurz, O., 'A Sculpture by Guido Reni', in *The Burlington Magazine,* vol. LXXXI, no. 474, September 1942, pp. 222-226.
[4] Pietro Gradenigo, Annali, quoted in Livan, L., ed. *Notizie tratte dai Notatori e dai Annali del N. H. Pietro Gradenigo* (Venice, 1942) pp. 191-2.

[5] Mariuz, p.182.

Provenance:

Anonymous sale, London, Christie's, 5th July 1983, lot 128;
acquired by Jeffrey E. Horvitz in 1984.

Artist description:

Giambattista (Giovanni Battista) was the most brilliant and sought after Italian painter of the 18th century, and represents the ultimate achievement of the Venetian tradition of decorative painting in the Grand Manner. He also painted numerous large-scale oil paintings, a wide repertory of oil sketches, and was an accomplished draughtsman and a successful and original etcher (Capricci and Scherzi di fantasia). He had been trained in Venice in the workshop of Gregorio Lazzarini and brought up to admire the achievements of the great Venetian Renaissance masters, above all Tintoretto and Veronese. Thus he was not inhibited by the more restrained classical tradition of ancient Rome and the legacy of the Renaissance, Baroque, and Neoclassical artists active there, from Raphael and Michelangelo to Pietro da Cortona and Mengs. Yet through his interest in prints he was well aware of the inventive imagery of a wide range of 17th-century Baroque artists active outside Venice, including the Genoese Castiglione, Salvator Rosa, Stefano della Bella, and Rembrandt, all of whom exercised a strong influence on the range of his visual vocabulary. Through rhetorical gesture and facial expression, a theatrical sense of composition and design, and an imaginative appreciation of the physical context in which his work would be seen, Tiepolo became extremely successful at projecting narrative and telling a story with dramatic effect, whether of religious or secular subject matter. Above all he could enrich and embellish historical and mythological themes by transforming them into poetic fiction, in a manner comparable to an opera by Gluck or Handel. Invariably, in his response both to the natural world and the artistic tradition he inherited, he displayed a sense of fantasy and humour and an exhilarating feeling of joy that had been conspicuous by its absence from so much art of the preceding Baroque era.

His early oil paintings influenced by Piazzetta, Federico Bencovich (1677–1753), and Sebastiano Ricci are notable for their expressive vigour, contorted figures, angular movement, dark and often murky tonality, dramatic lighting, and crowded compositions—for example the *Sacrifice of Isaac* (Venice, Ospedaletto) and the *Madonna of Mount Carmel* (1721–2; Milan, Brera). A decisive turning point, and the beginning of Tiepolo's career as a decorator, came with the commission from the Patriarch Dionisio-Dolfin (1663–1734) to decorate the stairwell and piano nobile of his palace at Udine. Working for the first time with Girolamo Mengozzi-Colonna, the quadratura specialist, he painted an illusionistic ceiling of *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* and filled the walls with scenes from the lives of the ancient patriarchs enclosed by trompe l'œil frames and surrounded by feigned statues in grisaille. Then in the Sala del Tribunale he painted *The Judgement of Solomon*. The frescoes, dating from c.1726, are notable for their brilliant colouring and the juxtaposition of elegant figures in 16th-century dress within a sunny pastoral landscape.

Tiepolo's first important church decoration was at S. Maria del Rosario (Gesuati, Venice), where in 1739 he painted scenes from the life of S. Dominic. At about the same time he painted for S. Alvise, Venice, a large triptych with scenes from the *Passion of Christ, The Way to Calvary, Christ Crowned with Thorns*, and *The Flagellation*. This intense and dramatic altarpiece recalls the work of Tintoretto at the Scuola Grande di S. Rocco, Venice.

During the 1740s Tiepolo continued to paint religious works for churches. However, his two most spectacular achievements at this time were the brilliantly coloured frescoes at the Villa Cordellina at Montecchio Maggiore (*The Family of Darius before Alexander* and *The Magnaminity of Scipio*, 1743) and the frescoes of the *Meeting of Anthony and Cleopatra* and the *Banquet of Cleopatra* at the Palazzo Labia, Venice, dating from c.1744. Here, working again with Mengozzi-Colonna, Tiepolo fills the entire space of the principal salone, so that the sense of illusion is complete and Anthony and Cleopatra appear to be stepping into the room to encounter the viewer.

The success of these projects prompted the invitation Tiepolo received to go to Würzburg, in Germany, in December 1750, to fresco the ceiling and walls of the Kaisersaal of the Residenz for the Prince-

Bishop Karl Philipp von Greiffenklau. Tiepolo also painted two altarpieces for the chapel. He was then retained to decorate the stairwell of the palace, work he completed in 1753: it depicts the Apotheosis of von Greiffenklau, with personifications of the four Continents along the borders below. In their virtuosity and daring, and the successful exploitation of the physical setting and multiple viewpoints provided by Balthasar Neumann's architecture, the Würzburg frescoes are arguably Tiepolo's greatest achievement.

On his return to Venice he continued to receive major commissions and in 1756 became president of the Venetian Academy. At the Villa Valmarana, near Vicenza, Tiepolo in 1757 frescoed four rooms with scenes from Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, and Tasso. In 1760 he was commissioned to paint the ballroom in the Villa Pisani at Stra on the Brenta. Then in 1762 he left Italy once again, never to return, to paint three ceilings at the Palacio Real, Madrid, for King Charles III of Spain. This was followed in 1767 by the royal commission to paint seven altarpieces for the Franciscan church of S. Pascual at Aranjuez. These meditative introspective works were completed in 1769 and were then brought to Aranjuez after the artist's death in March 1770.

Collections

Tiepolo is represented in the following collections: Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany; Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco; Hermitage, St Petersburg; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Kunsthistorisches, Vienna; Louvre, Paris; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minnesota; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; National Gallery, London; Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, California; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Städel Museum, Frankfurt, Germany; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut; Akademie der Bildenden Künst, Vienna; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, Austin; Bob Jones University Museum & Gallery, Greenville, South Carolina; Bowes Museum, County Durham, UK; Ca' Rezzonico - Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Venice; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu, New Zealand; Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio; Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Currier Gallery of Art, New Hampshire; Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Massachusetts; Dulwich Picture Gallery, London; E.G. Bührle Collection, Zurich; Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, Finland; Frick Collection, New York City; Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice; Gallerie di Palazzo Leoni Montanari, Vicenza, Italy; Harvard University Art Museums, Massachusetts; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas; Museo Correr, Venice; Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan, Italy; Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam; National Gallery of Victoria, Australia; National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo; Palazzo Ducale, Venice; Palazzo Ruspoli, Rome; Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City; Pinacoteca Civica di Vicenza, Italy; Pinacoteca dell'Accademia dei Concordi, Rovigo, Italy; Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia, Italy; Querini Stampalia Foundation Museum, Venice; Ringling Museum of Art, Florida; Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri; San Diego Museum of Art, California; Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen; Studio Esseci, Italy; Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid, amongst others.