

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



Jacopo Vignali (Pratovecchio 1592 - Florence 1664)

The Archangel Michael

oil on canvas
115.1 x 87.6 cm (45¼ x 34½ in)

Jacopo Vignali's painting of *The Archangel Michael* brilliantly evokes the strength and authority of his subject, the field commander of the Army of God, as well as emphasising his beauty and youth. Vignali's naturalistic style, dramatic use of *chiaroscuro* and elegance in balancing colour and design is true to the Florentine baroque tradition.

The archangel wears a lustrous blue tunic evoking Roman armour and thus great heroism, with tasselled shoulders and a neckline embroidered in gold. An ornate plumed helmet adorns his head. The costume presents the perfect opportunity for Vignali to showcase his talent in depicting rich materials and a variety of textures and tones. Michael holds two of his attributes, the scales used to judge men's souls, and the red banner, a reminder of his secondary role, popularised in late medieval imagery, as a knight and slayer of dragons.

The majority of Vignali's *oeuvres* were devoted to images of saints designed for ecclesiastical commissions, and the Archangel Michael figures prominently. In the church of S.S. Michele e Gaetano, Florence, a painting by Vignali of the archangel freeing souls from purgatory reveals him in his role as liberator, judging the good from the bad, and leading them before the tribunal of God. Although a

complex composition featuring several figures, the representation of Michael is remarkably similar to the present painting. He, like the angels accompanying him, is sensually depicted as a young man with abundantly curly hair, full lips, bright eyes and a pure complexion. He wears a blue tunic embroidered in gold and carries a banner. The interplay of light and shadow is prominent in both paintings and in the version in the church of S.S. Michele e Gaetano is heightened by the thunderous clouds overhead and the fiery furnace from which desperate men are being saved. The present painting offers a more personal and psychological portrayal of Michael, showing him caught in an unsuspecting moment from a close vantage point. As he locks gaze with the viewer, one detects a softer human side to the archangel and in his disarming expression there is a note of vulnerability that contradicts his fearsome power.

Vignali was a precocious artist and at an early age entered the studio of Matteo Rosselli in Florence. In 1616, he was admitted to the Accademia del Disegno in Florence and became an academician in 1622. In the 1620s his works developed a new boldness in employing colour, lighting and expression, moving away from the influence of Rosselli. As well as being an easel painter, Vignali also contributed to fresco cycles and ceiling decorations for patrons such as the Medici family. He took inspiration from a variety of fellow Italian artists as his career progressed, including Orazio Gentileschi, Filippo Napoletano, Rutilio Manetti, Guercino, Francesco Curradi and Giovanni Lanfranco. The early 1630s were a particularly productive period for Vignali and in 1632 he painted his first commission for the church of S.S. Michele e Gaetano, painting the ceiling frescoes, two lunettes and a lateral composition for the Bonsi Chapel. In the 1640s, his works took on a greater monumentality, evidenced by works such as [Liberation from Souls of Purgatory](#). Later in the decade, his compositions became increasingly dark and meditative, often depicting scenes of death or martyrdom. Vignali had several pupils, the most successful being Carlo Dolci, who adopted and enhanced the ardent religiosity of his master's works to great effect.

We are grateful to Professor Mina Gregori, who confirmed the attribution to Vignali at the time of the 2002 sale, and dated the painting to c.1620.

Provenance:

Bonhams, 9 July 2002, lot 65.

Artist description:

Jacopo Vignali was an Italian painter. At an early age he entered the studio of Matteo Rosselli in Florence, and his first works, *Virgin and Saints* (1616; Florence, S Brigida, Santuario della Madonna del Sasso) and the ceiling painting *Love of the Fatherland* (1616; Florence, Casa Buonarroti), were influenced by Rosselli and Ludovico Cigoli. In 1616 he enrolled at the Accademia del Disegno in Florence, becoming an academician in 1622. In the 1620s he moved away from Rosselli's influence and developed a style distinguished by dramatic light effects, rich colour and painterly technique and by the expression of deep emotion. The decade opened with the *Investiture of St Benedict* (1620; Florence, Semin. Maggiore), one of a series of works painted in honour of St Benedict for the Confraternità di S Benedetto Bianco, to which Vignali had belonged since 1614. Having learnt the technique of fresco painting from Rosselli, he also began to work in that medium and was involved in the decoration of the Casa Buonarroti throughout the decade, the ceiling fresco *Jacob's Dream* dating from 1621. In 1622–3 he also contributed to important fresco cycles for the Medici at the Casino Mediceo di San Marco in Florence, and at the Villa del Poggio Imperiale just outside the city.

Of Vignali's easel paintings of the 1620s, *St Cecilia* (early 1620s; Dublin, National Gallery) reveals the influence of Orazio Gentileschi, while the figures in the lyrical genre scene *May Day Offering* (Rome, Palazzo Corsini) are indebted to the elegant groups found in the work of Jacques Callot and Filippo Napoletano. Vignali's interest in dramatic light effects culminated in *Christ Showing his Wounds to St Bernard* (1623; Florence, SS Simone e Giuda) and *St Peter Caring for St Agatha* (Florence, Depositi Gallery), both close to the art of Rutilio Manetti. After visiting Rome in 1625, in the late 1620s he became influenced by the austere art of Domenico Passignano and Francesco Curradi, as shown by the deeply emotional *Agony in the Garden* (1626; Castellina, S Lucia). This was followed by the more richly coloured *Circumcision* (1627; San Casciano, Chiesa della Misericordia) and the altarpiece, the *Mystical Communion of the Blessed Clara* (1629; Florence, S Spirito), inspired by Giovanni

Lanfranco's treatment of saintly ecstasy.

The early 1630s were a particularly productive period for Vignali, and several works, such as the *Virgin and Saints* (1631; Badia di Ripoli, Abbazia), may be associated with the plagues of 1630–33. In 1632 he decorated the Bonsi Chapel in SS Michele e Gaetano, Florence, where he painted the ceiling frescoes. In 1636 Cardinal Carlo de' Medici commissioned a cabinet painting on a chivalrous theme, *Ruggiero Found by Leone and Melissa* (Florence, Pitti), and in the early 1640s the Arazzeria Medicea commissioned cartoons (untraced) for the four tapestries (Florence, Palazzo Medici–Riccardi) of the *Seasons*. The new monumentality of the latter works is also evident in two lateral canvases, *St Mary Magdalene* and *St Margaret* (Florence, SS Annunziata, Accolti Chapel), and in the *Liberation of Souls from Purgatory* (1642; Florence, SS Michele e Gaetano), where the painterly freedom of Guercino is united with the soft sfumato and blue background of Francesco Furini. A similar monumentality also characterizes paintings of this period for private patrons, such as *David and Abigail* (Camigliano, Villa Torrigiani Colonna).

Later in the 1640s an increasingly dark and meditative tone distinguishes Vignali's works, as in the *Death of St Anthony Abbot* (Montughi, rectory of S Martino). His mature masterpiece is the *Martyrdom of St Lucy* (1649; Florence, SS Annunziata), which reveals the influence of Salvator Rosa and Felice Ficherelli. Towards the end of his life his work declined, although the late *Virgin with SS Anthony of Padua and St Liborius* (Florence, S Jacopo Sopr' Arno) retains distinction. His most famous pupil was Carlo Dolci, who was deeply affected by the intense religiosity of such works as the *Agony in the Garden*.