

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



Domenico Piola (Genoa 1627 - Genoa 1703)

Bathsheba Attended by Two Women

pen and brown ink and wash, over traces of black chalk; squared in black chalk
28.2 x 42.1 cm (11 x 16½ in)

'And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from 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.'

- II Samuel 11:2

Married originally to Uriah the Hittite, the story of Bathsheba's seduction by King David is told in II Samuel. While walking on the roof of his house, the King caught sight of her bathing and sent messengers to bring her to him. He then seduced her and made her pregnant. In an attempt to conceal his sin David summoned Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, back from the army that he was away commanding in the hope that he would re-consummate his marriage to Bathsheba and assume the child already conceived to be his own. Uriah, however, elected to stay with his men rather than return home to his wife. After repeated efforts to convince Uriah to lie with Bathsheba, the king gave orders to his general Joab that Uriah be abandoned in the midst of a fierce battle and left to die at the hands of the enemy. Ironically, David had ordered Uriah himself to bear the message that ultimately led to his death. With Uriah dead, David made the now widowed Bathsheba his wife.

In his characteristically detailed style, Domenico Piola has captured the moment at which Bathsheba is completing her toilet with the assistance of her two handmaids. He has faithfully transposed the well-known biblical scene into a contemporary Italian palazzo. Bathsheba, correspondingly, is portrayed as a high-born Italian woman reclining back on a plump, tasselled cushion. The accoutrements of her toilet, the perfume bottle and jewellery, lie casually on an ornate Baroque table decorated with gargoyles. Dominating the left foreground of the composition is an opulently carved urn filled with flowers. In faint outline, a building can be seen in the distance which, in many other renditions of the same subject matter, represents the roof from where David spied her. Often he is pictured, but in this drawing he is absent. It is possible that if this were a preparatory sketch for further work, David would be added in later. Indeed a painting of this subject with many of the same elements, but differing in composition, is in a private collection in Genoa.¹

Piola, a prolific draughtsman, designed many prints and frontispieces for books. He was also an outstanding painter and the leading artist in Genoa in the second half of the seventeenth century, designing and executing ceiling frescoes for an astonishing number of Genoese churches and palaces. He derived his mature style in part from Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1609-1664), whose influence is very much in evidence from the undulating figures and diagonal composition of this present drawing. Piola also responded to the echoes of Parmigianino's (1503-1540) style that he found in the works of Valerio Castello (1624-1659).

¹ Sanguineti, D., *Domenico Piola e i pittori della sua 'casa'*, Soncino 2004, vol. II, pp. 318, 408, no. I.94, reproduced pl. XLVIII.

Provenance:

J.A. Gere;
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Artist description:

Piola was an Italian painter, draughtsman, printmaker and designer. He was the leading artist in Genoa in the second half of the 17th century, providing ceiling frescoes for many Genoese churches and palaces and producing paintings for private collectors. He was also a prolific draughtsman, whose many designs for thesis pages and book illustrations promoted his work throughout Europe. The enormous and multifarious productivity of his studio, his numerous collaborations with other artists and the fact that most of his most ambitious projects have been destroyed have discouraged any systematic study of his work.

After his initial training with Pellegro at the age of seven, Domenico studied under Pellegro's teacher, Giovanni Domenico Cappellino (1580–1651), for four years. These periods of training may have contributed to the monumentality of his compositions and draughtsmanship, but his early copies after Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione and his working relationship with Valerio Castello in the late 1640s and early 1650s encouraged the development of a more Baroque style. His early work is highly eclectic; his *Martyrdom and Ascension of St James* (1647; Genoa, S Giacomo della Marina) follows Castello in its debt to the elongated figures of Lombard painters such as Cerano and Giulio Cesare Procaccini.

The elements of Castiglione's work that Piola absorbed led to the undulating figures, streamlined twisting draperies and diagonal composition of his drawing *The Communion of Clare of Montefalco* (London, British Museum), and his paintings in the Oratory of St John the Baptist at Spotorno: the *Assumption* (1664) and the *Nativity* (1669); a large lunette, *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (c. 1661; Genoa, S Siro), and an altarpiece, *St Thomas Aquinas before the Cross* (c. 1666; Genoa, SS Annunziata). These works, with the fresco of *St Francis Xavier Meeting the King of Bungo* (1666–7) in SS Gerolamo e Francesco Saverio, Genoa, show that Piola's style was fully mature by 1670. Piola responded to the echoes of Parmigianino's style that he found in the work of Castello. The influence of Parmese art was strengthened after the return of Gregorio de' Ferrari from Parma (c. 1672). Ferrari brought with him the charming qualities of Correggio's style and encouraged Piola's own predilection for diagonal movement, bright colours and strongly foreshortened figures. In 1674 Ferrari married Piola's daughter, Margherita, consolidating the existing business collaboration between the families. The work undertaken by the Casa Piola did not change but, with Ferrari's help, was considerably augmented. In the 1670s and 1680s the two artists collaborated on many fresco projects.

A new decorative richness is apparent in Domenico's secular and sacred vault fresco, the *Glory of S Gaetano* (1674; Genoa, S Siro), and in his fresco *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1679; Genoa, Palazzo Centurione). This is also visible in his altarpiece of the *Assumption* (1676; Chiavari Cathedral) and his painting of the Annunciation for SS Annunziata in Genoa (1679). In 1684 Piola began to fresco the choir of S Leonardo and two rooms in the Villa Gropallo at Zerbino; all work was interrupted in this year after

a French bombardment destroyed much of Genoa, including Domenico's house and studio.

In 1684–5 Domenico made a trip with his family to Milan, Piacenza, Bologna and Asti. At Piacenza, perhaps assisted by his student Giovanni Battista Draghi (1657–1712) and by Giovanni Battista Merano, he painted decorations in the Casa Baldini and in S Maria in Torricella (frescoes destroyed). At Asti, with his sons Antonio Maria and Paolo Gerolamo, he frescoed scenes from the *Life of the Virgin* (destroyed) in the presbytery of the cathedral. In Genoa in 1688 he and Gregorio de' Ferrari began to decorate rooms in the Palazzo Rosso on the theme of the four seasons, Piola executing *Autumn* and *Winter* and Ferrari the more lyrical *Spring* and *Summer*. Preparatory drawings for *Winter* survive (Genoa, Palazzo Rosso; London, British Museum).

Collections

Piola is represented in the following collections: Museo dell'Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti, Genoa; Palazzo Bianco, Genoa; Palazzo Rosso Gallery, Genoa; Palazzo Rosso Gallery, Genoa; Drawings from the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan; The Royal Collection, London; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, amongst others.