SPHINX FINE ART

Tomasso Maria Conca (Rome 1735 - Rome 1822)

The Rest on the Flight into Egypt

signed with the artist's abbreviated first names in black chalk on the fallen stone 'TÙM. / MAP / V.D.' (lower right)
black chalk, within black chalk framing lines
45.9 x 51.8 cm (18⅛ x 20⅜ in)

The present drawing depicts a moment in the Holy Family's escape from the infanticide of King Herod. The figures have obviously been resting and are now preparing to set off again. Joseph hails a boatman whilst gathering their belongings and Mary picks up her son. Details, such as the sphinx, hieroglyphs and distant obelisk, create a setting which is overtly Egyptian, whilst the Grecian style signature reflects a general interest in the ancient world on the part of Tommaso Maria Conca. This interest is confirmed by another treatment of the same subject by the artist, which is in the collection of the Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, Rome, although here the family are amongst Roman, rather than Egyptian relics.[1]

The Rest on the Flight into Egypt, although one of the few works that Conca attempted with a biblical subject matter, is characteristic of his work in its concision and balance of composition, a prominent feature of his other drawings such as *The Finding of Moses*. In the present work the Virgin and Child are bathed and highlighted by a soft light. The inward movement of both Joseph and the boatman helps direct our attention to mother and child. Similarly, in *The Finding of Moses*, the figures, which are arranged in a frieze-like manner, create a sense of movement which leads to, in this case, Bithiah, daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt, who receives the infant Moses in her arms. The narrative, although slightly more complicated, is immediately discernable. The baby has clearly been lifted from the basket that lies on the ground, and the attention given to the child by the surrounding figures confirms his importance. In both works, the figures have a similar sculptural solidity; their movements and contours are firm and definite, with heavy drapery, defined by deep, shadowed folds. In *The Finding of Moses*, again the setting is conveyed with Egyptian architectural detail.

Conca was the pupil of both his father Giovanni Conca (b. c.1690), as well as his more famous uncle Sebastiano Conca (1728-1779). By 1770, Conca was in Rome and working in the orbit of Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), and possibly on the decoration of the Coffee House in Villa Albani. Conca went on to become one of the better known decorators of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. His early works reflect a degree of research which gained him a prominent position as a late Rococo artist and exponent of nascent neo-Classicism. In 1775, having been commissioned by Prince Marcantonio Borghese, he started working at the Villa Borghese, notably in the Sala Egizia which is concerned with the evocation of ancient Egypt. In 1786 he decorated the Sala delle Muse at the Museo Pio-Clementino in the Vatican Palace, and the dome of the cathedral of Città di Castello. These important fresco cycles established Conca as one of the most outstanding figures in the sphere of Roman neo-Classicism. His work was usually of mythological subjects, treated in the tradition of the Carracci, whose influence is evident in the head of the boatman in *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*. In 1770 Conca was elected to the Accademia di San Lucca, and in 1793 he became principe. His son Giacomo was also a painter, and executed his designs for the Egyptian Room in the Palazzo Lignani-Marchesani.

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[1] See S. Rudolph (ed.), *La pittura del 1700 a Roma*, Milan 1983, no. 199.

Provenance:

with Crispian Riley-Smith, London;
acquired in 2001 by Jeffrey E. Horvitz.

Literature:

Louis Gauffier: Le Repos en Égypt, exhibition catalogue, Musées de Poitiers, 2015, p.38, fig. 12.

Artist description:

Tommaso Maria Conca was born in Gaeta, in central Italy, in 1734. Early on, he moved to Rome, where he studied with his older cousin Sebastiano Conca after 1748. Tommaso, following in the footsteps of Sebastiano, represents a fusion of certain Napolitan and Roman trends and is an exemplar of the Roman late Baroque style.

After experimenting with the many conflicting artistic currents swirling around Rome at the time of his arrival, Tommaso settled firmly into the camp of the classicists, chief among whom was Anton Raphael Mengs. Although Conca did not study with Mengs, he was strongly influenced by the older artist and may have collaborated with him, soon after his arrival in Rome, on the decoration of the coffeehouse of the Villa Albani. Cultivated and personable, Conca's wide interests included poetry, archaeology, and the sciences. He was elected to the Accademia Clementina in Bologna in 1765 and to the Accademia di San Luca in Rome in 1770, serving as *principe* of the latter organization from 1792 to 1795.

It is chiefly as a decorative painter that he is known. His first major project was for the casino of the Villa Borghese in 1775-78, which he embellished with decorative frescoes, both mythological and biblical, as well as carrying out the grisaille decoration. Fortunately, he was noticed by Pope Pius VI, who was looking for artists to decorate his ambitious new Vatican sculpture museum, the Museo Pio-Clementino. In 1795 Conca won the major commission for the project, which was to decorate the vault of its Sala delle Muse.

Conca then moved to Città di Castello, where between 1795 and 1797 he frescoed the dome and transept of its cathedral with complex Christian allegories. In 1812 he helped to decorate an apartment for Napoleon Bonaparte in the Palazzo del Quirinale in Rome. Traditional in method and conservative in outlook, he was awarded a knighthood around 1790. He was active in the Accademia di San Luca and the Accademia Napoletana in Rome and devoted considerable energy to educating young artists and supervising the *pensionati* (students studying there).

He flourished in Rome for some fifty years, dying there in 1822.