SPHINX FINE ART



**Gianantonio Guardi (Vienna 1699 - Venice 1760)**

**The Flight into Egypt**

oil on canvas
75 x 60.5 cm (29½ x 23¾ in)

This masterly canvas, recently attributed to Gianantonio Guardi by Dr. Mitchell Merling, depicts Mary and the infant Jesus on a donkey, accompanied by Joseph, as they escape at night to Egypt from the child's birthplace, Bethlehem in Judea.

Dusk is approaching. The Holy Family in the foreground make their way towards the viewer in the last of the evening light, leaving behind them the humble dwellings of Bethlehem. The youthful Mary, seated side-saddle on a donkey and clad in a blue cloak, gazes down upon the pink-fleshed infant cradled in her arms, a faint golden glow encircling their heads. The elderly Joseph, wearing an expression of consternation, also regards the child as he makes his way by foot beside them, carrying the family's belongings on his staff. In spite of her trying circumstances, the Virgin is graceful and composed in her bearing. The last of the sun's rays glance off the trunk of a slim, lofty tree behind Mary, and flicker gold in the delicately described foliage. The glinting golds of the tree are complemented by the rich golden hues of Joseph's thick cloak. In the sky, a creamy, radiant cloud, painted with thick highlights, stands out against the burgeoning darkness. Turbulent brush strokes in the clouded sky, worked quickly onto the rough canvas, suggest an impending storm, creating an atmosphere of foreboding - appropriate for the dark events to come. Bowing its head, the donkey picks its way along the bumpy track, bearing a lantern to guide the family through the night.

The events preceding the flight to Egypt are recounted in the gospels. After Jesus' birth, the Magi, or three Wise Men, came from the East to Jerusalem, asking: 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the East and have come to worship him.'[1] King Herod of Judea was troubled when he heard this, and gathered all the chief priests together to ask them where it was foretold that the Messiah would be born. On discovering that Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem, he called the Magi to him, telling them to find the child in Bethlehem and then to report to him, so that he might also go and worship the child. The Magi were overjoyed to see that the star that they had followed from the East stopped above the place where the child was: 'On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh.'[2] After being warned in a dream, the Magi did not return to Herod, but returned to their country by another route.

The story of the flight into Egypt is told in the gospel of Matthew. After the departure of the Magi, Joseph was also warned about the evil intentions of King Herod: 'An angel of the lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, "Get up", he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod.'[3] In this way the child was spared his life: Herod, on realising that he had been deceived by the Magi, was furious, and ordered all male children of two years and younger to be killed in the vicinity of Bethlehem. It was only following Herod's death that Joseph and his family were instructed by the angel to return to Israel, where they settled in Nazareth.[4]

Guardi, historically eclipsed by his more famous brother Francesco (1712-1793), has been in the latter part of the twentieth century re-established as a master of the Rococo in his own right. With its rich colour harmonies and swift, animated brushwork, *The Flight into Egypt* is a prime example of Guardi's painterly virtuosity. Figures and landscape unite in complementary harmonies of blues, yellow ochres and earth hues, against which the vivid red of the Virgin's sleeve prominently stands out.

The faces and drapery around the Virgin and Child are conjured with quick and summary brushstrokes. Like his brother-in-law Giambattista Tiepolo (1696-1770), Guardi believed that finished paintings should not have an over-studied appearance, belying the preparation that lay behind them.[5] *The Flight into Egypt*, with its poetic evocation of landscape and its supreme painterly qualities, is an important example of Guardi's mature Rococo style. Moreover, its brilliant colour harmonies evoke the traditional primacy of colore in Venetian painting.

While the holy familys present a picture of ordinary humanity, heightened by the prosaic qualities of the donkey, rough path and the modest dwellings of Bethlehem, the more flamboyant treatment of Mary and Joseph lends them a simultaneous air of nobility. The high status of St. Joseph, cast in the Counter-Reformation as the father of the Terrestrial Trinity, is illustrated by *The Death of Joseph*, one of the two only known signed paintings by Guardi.

The Guardi family originated in the province of the Trentino, and belonged to the Imperial nobility, having been given a patent by Emperor Ferdinand III in 1643. Members of the Guardi family held ecclesiastical and military positions in the region, and patronised their painter relations.[6]

Guardi is presumed to have become the head of the studio of his father, Domenico Guardi (1678-1716), in Venice, at the age of seventeen. However, it is thought that he did not train with his father, a painter of the late Baroque. Shortly after his father's death, the artist is documented in Vienna in 1719, his subject matter and style showing Austrian influences at this time.[7] (His sister Cecilia married Tiepolo in the same year.)

From the age of thirty-one, Guardi had established a workshop which produced copies of sixteenth and seventeenth century Venetian masters, including Titian (1485/9-1576), Tintoretto (1518-1594), and Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734), for the Field Marshal of the Venetian armies, the German Graf Johann Matthias von der Schulenburg, as well as copies of portraits of the ruling families of Europe. The Marshal's patronage lasted until his death, in 1747. Guardi maintained close ties with Trentino however, executing important works there, such as the three lunettes, *The Sacrilegious Communion, The*

*Washing of the Disciples' Feet* and *The Vision of St. Francis* as well as a small altarpiece, the *Virgin and Child with Four Saints*, all commissioned by his uncle, the priest Pietro Antonio Guardi, for the family parish church of Vigo d'Anaunia in 1738 (all in situ). The workshop employed many assistants within the family, including Guardi's brother Francesco, as well as another brother, Nicolò (1715-1786), whose individual work has not been identified.[8]

As a result of this studio collaboration, there has been much dispute about the authorship of many works which have been connected to the Guardi studio. While in the past Guardi scholars were inclined to attribute the best of the Guardi works to Francesco, the reputation of Gianantonio has been re-instated in the latter half of the twentieth century, through documentary evidence linking him to important works. Gianantonio is most renowned for his remarkable series of paintings of c.1750 decorating the Organ Parapet, Church of the Angelo Raffaele, Venice, some of the most original works of that date.[9] With their flickering qualities of the brush and boldness in composition, the frescos rank as one of the greatest works of the Venetian Rococo, anticipating the manner of Francesco's style a long while after Gianantonio's death.

As well as the paintings executed for the church at Vigo d'Anaunia, other altarpieces which remain in the churches for which they were executed are now attributed to Gianantonio, as head of the studio (on the basis of records and scholarly opinion.) These include Guardi's most important and innovative altarpiece, the *Madonna of the Rosary* (The Pala di Belvedere) of c.1746, executed for the Belvedere parish church. Further documentation links Guardi to an altarpiece at Cerete Basso (1754), in the Bergamasque Alps (in situ) and to *The Vision of St. Giovanni di Matha* (1750), which remains in the parish church of Pasiano di Pordenone, near Udine. Since many of Guardi's works painted for the provincial aristocratic patrons inherited from his father remained in out of the way locations, the artist was consequently forgotten by official histories of Venetian art, in spite of the fact that he was made a founder member of the Venetian Academy.[10] This explains in part the reasons for the artist's neglected reputation in the two centuries following his death.

The Marshal's most significant commission to the Guardi is the series of forty-three small paintings based on engravings after Jean-Baptiste van Mour's (1671-1737) scenes of *Turkish Life*, probably to decorate one of his rooms A La Turque.[11] Four masterly scenes from the series by Guardi were discovered in the early 1970s. Supreme painterly examples such as *The Garden of the Serraglio* of c.1740-1745 (Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Madrid) however, are not copies after van Mour,[12] but is rather of Guardi's own invention, showing him to be in the words of the scholar Morassi: 'one of the most important innovators of the Venetian Settecento'[13].

[1] Matthew 2, verses 1-2.
[2] Matthew 2, verse 11.
[3] Matthew 2, verses 13-15.
[4] Matthew 2, verses 19-23.
[5] see Mitchell Merling, 'The Brothers Guardi', chapter IX of *The Glory of Venice Art in the Eighteenth Century*, Exhibition Catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 15 September to 14 December 1994, and National Gallery of Art, Washington, 29 January to 23 April 1995, p. 300.
[6] Merling, ibid., p. 452.
[7] Merling, op. cit., p. 452.
[8] Merling, ibid.
[9] See Merling, ibid, p. 293.
[10] See Merling, op cit, p. 294.
[11] Merling, op cit, p. 297.
[12] Merling, ibid.
[13] A. Morassi: 'Four Newly Discovered Turkish Scenes by Antonio Guardi', *Apollo*, xcix (April 1974), pp. 274-8.

**Artist description:**

Guardi was born in Vienna the son of Domenico Guardi (1678–1716), a minor Baroque painter from Trentino, and the elder brother of the more famous Francesco Guardi. He was trained by his father and after his death Giovanni Antonio took over the studio.

He may have received his artistic training in Vienna, where he is first recorded in 1719, but had established a workshop in Venice by 1730. Among his first important clients was the connoisseur and collector Johann Matthias von der Schulenburg, for whom Guardi produced copies after the work of other artists, as well as a series of Turkish-inspired interiors as easel pictures for private decoration. Antonio Guardi trained his younger brothers Nicolò and Francesco in his workshop, the latter working closely with him as a figure painter before establishing himself as a vedutista in the late 1750s.

Guardi was a founder member of the *Accademia Veneziana* in 1756, the elder Guardi produced several works for churches in Venice, notably in the Church of the Angelo San Raffaele, as well as decorative cycles for palaces and villas in the city and the surrounding terraferma.

**Collections**

Guardi is represented in the following collections: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; John Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Art Insitiue of Chicago, Chicago; Accademia Carrara, Bergamo; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Museo Correr, Venice; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, amongst others.