

# SEBASTIANO CONCA

(Gaeta 1680 - Naples 1764)

## *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*

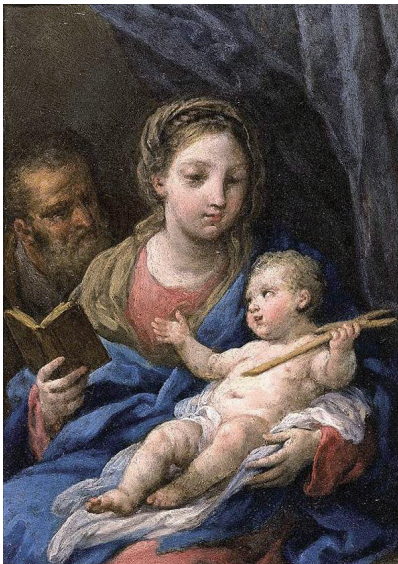
oil on canvas  
75 x 62 cm (29½ x 24¾ in)  
in a very rare silver plated Roman 18th-century frame

**Provenance:** Formerly Barone Alessi, Catania;  
Private Collection, Germany.

SEBASTIANO CONCA PAINTED NUMEROUS PICTURES of the Virgin and Child, varying the usual pyramidal format. In *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* he arranges the three central figures of the Virgin, the infant Jesus and a young John the Baptist, with Joseph in the shadowy background. Our attention is drawn to the gaze and relationship between the two children, Jesus and John.

The young John presents his cousin with a cutting from the vine. Though it is John who gives the vine to Jesus, Christ appears both to accept the vine, and in turn presents it back to John. The vine is the root and source of wine, which in turn is symbolic of the blood shed by Christ. This acceptance by the infant Jesus may represent an acknowledgment and reference to His destiny, 'I am the true vine' (John 15:1). The vine is also a symbol of God's relationship with his people and it is therefore appropriate that the infant Christ and the young John the Baptist share and hold the vine together. The book held by the Virgin is the book of the Wisdom, and marks the Virgin as 'Mater Serpentinae,' the Mother of Wisdom. Conca repeated the motif of 'Mater Serpentinae' in a small copper version of the Holy Family (fig. 1).

Other examples of Conca's Virgin with Child include *Virgin Enthroned, with Child, SS John and Carlo Borromeo and Angels* (1738) and *Madonna with Sleeping Child* in the Hermitage (fig. 1). Whereas in *Madonna with Sleeping Child* the Virgin is the central focus of the painting, her head turned directly towards us, her face lit by a soft glow, in *The Holy Family with the Infant*



Sebastiano Conca,  
*The Holy Family*,  
Private Collection  
(Figure 1)



Sebastiano Conca,  
*Madonna with Sleeping Child*,  
1710s,  
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg  
(Figure 2)

*Saint John the Baptist*, it is the Christ Child and St. John who draw us in instead. The importance of the Virgin and her status as Queen of Heaven is, however, emphasised by her brilliant blue cloak with its heavy folds, which is so prominent in *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*.

Conca studied under Francesco Solimena (1657-1747) (see inventory). His move to Rome in 1706 led to Conca being patronised by Cardinal Ottoboni (1667-1740), and an introduction to Pope Clement XI (1649-1721) resulted in Conca being commissioned to paint *Jeremiah* in 1718 for the church of San Giovanni Laterano in Rome. Whilst in Rome he also worked on the *Coronation of Santa Cecilia* in conjunction with Carlo Maratta (1625-1713) for the Church of S. Cecilia in Trastevere.

He was elected in 1718 to the Accademia di San Luca, and was its director from 1729 to 1731 and from 1739 to 1741. Among Conca's pupils were Pompeo Batoni (1708-1787) and Agostino Masucci (1690-1768).

Conca received widespread acclaim and his patrons included the royal house of Savoy in Turin, the Duke of Parma and Charles III (1716-1788). In 1739, he published a guide to painting called *Ammonimenti* ('Admonishments'), which provided moral and technical advice. His studio was prodigious and he painted frescoes for the Church of Santa Chiara (1752-1754), five canvases for the Chapel in Caserta Palace, as well as many others including works for the Benedictines of Aversa (1761), a *History of Saint Francis of Paola* for the Sanctuary of S. Maria di Pozzano of Castellammare di Stabia (1762-1763).

We are grateful to Professor Giancarlo Sestieri who attributed the present work to Conca in 2006.



