

JACOPO VIGNALI

(Pratovecchio 1592 - Florence 1664)

The Archangel Michael

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

Provenance:

Bonhams, 9 July 2002, lot 65.

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 accordingly 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 work was 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 (fig.1). 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 it 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, capturing him 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 (1578-1650) 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 their use of 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 including the Medici family. He took inspiration from a variety of fellow Italian artists as his career progressed, including Orazio Gentileschi (1562-1639), Filippo Napoletano (c.1587-1629), Rutilio Manetti (1571-1639), Guercino (1591-1666), Francesco Curradi (1570-1661) and Giovanni Lanfranco (1582-1647). The early 1630s were a particularly productive



Jacopo Vignali, *Liberation of Souls from Purgatory*, 1642, S.S. Michele e Gaetano, Florence (Figure 1)

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* (fig. 1). 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 among them was Carlo Dolci (1616-1687), 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

