

ANTONIO DOMENICO GABBIANI

(Florence 1652 - Florence 1726)

The Rape of the Sabine Women

bears inscription in pen and brown ink: 'P. Berretini'
pen and brown ink and wash over black chalk
24.1 x 33.7 cm (9½ x 13½ in)

Provenance: Sale, London, Sotheby's, 13 December 1973, lot 29 (as *Ciro Ferri*);
Herbert List (bears his collector's dry stamp twice, not in Lugt);
Flavia Ormond, London; acquired in 2000.

Literature: C. Monbeig Goguel, *Dessins Toscans XVIe-XVIIe Siècles 1620-1800*, vol. II, Paris 2005, p. 260, cat. no. 340.

THE RAPE OF THE SABINE WOMEN WAS A THEME popular from the Renaissance onwards as a story which championed the centrality of marriage for the continuity of families and cultures. The legend, narrated by both Livy and Plutarch, became an important foundation myth in the Roman psyche. The rape is said to have occurred shortly after Romulus founded Rome when his men found themselves without wives. The Romans attempted, ultimately unsuccessfully, to negotiate with the neighbouring Sabines but when they refused to allow their women to marry Romans, a plan was hatched to abduct the unsuspecting Sabine women. Inviting whole Sabine families to a festival venerating Neptune, Romulus ordered his men, at a signal, to seize the women and fend off their men folk¹.

The scene captured here by Antonio Domenico Gabbiani shows a mass of writhing bodies and Roman soldiers lifting them up. It is perhaps worth noting that the reference to rape in this context comes from the Latin *rapere* which means 'to seize'. Livy is very clear on the matter stating that Romulus offered the Sabine women free choice and promised them civic and property rights: 'They would live in honourable wedlock, and share all their property and civil rights, and - dearest of all to human nature - would be the mothers of free men.'²

The old attribution inscribed on this drawing is a testament to the pervasive influence that the works of Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669) exerted on Gabbiani, after he first saw them in Rome. Although his debt to Cortona's celebrated painting of the same subject, now in the Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome, is obvious here, Gabbiani has imbued the composition with his own rhythm and energy (fig. 1). The arms of the women in Cortona's work owe much to the influence of Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), particularly his *Apollo and Daphne*. Gabbiani absorbs this too and the influences of the two are readily apparent.

¹ Livy, *The History of Rome* 1.9.

² Livy, *The History of Rome* 1.9.

³ Anna Lo Bianco, et al., *Pietro da Cortona*, exhibition catalogue, Rome, Palazzo Venezia, 1997-98, no. 36.

Carlo Maratti (1625-1713) and Pietro da Cortona were both strong influences on Gabbiani, who studied in Florence and Venice, and travelled extensively around Europe. He is chiefly known for his magnificent frescoes for the *palazzi* of the Italian aristocracy including the Strozzi-Ridolfi (1694), Corsini (1695), and Medici-Riccardi (1690-97) among many others. A large number of preparatory drawings survive for these decorative schemes and can be seen in the Uffizi, Florence.

Gabbiani received a number of commissions from the Medici family including requests to depict religious subjects. His *Christ Giving Communion to St. Peter of Alcantara in the Presence of St. Teresa of Avila* (1714, Schleissheim, Neues Schloss), which shows the influence of Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734), was possibly commissioned by Cosimo III for his daughter Anna Maria Luisa de' Medici. Other religious commissions include those for the *Assumption of the Virgin* and the *Virgin and Child with the Symbols of the Passion* (both 1720-22, Florence, Uffizi). These paintings, and many of his later works, reflect both the paintings of Ricci and the classicism of Maratti.



Pietro da Cortona, *Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1629, Pinacoteca Capitolina, Rome (Figure 1)

