

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



French follower of Michelangelo  
(first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century)

## *Leda and the Swan*

oil on panel

49.5 x 68 cm.; 19 1/2 x 26 3/4 in.

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### Provenance

Principality of Moldavia and Wallachia in the 19th century, according to the coat of arms on the seal on the reverse of the painting;

Anonymous sale, Paris, Artcurial, 16 June 2020, lot 204;

Private Collection, Paris.

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Est. 1760



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LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

This high-quality painting on panel depicts Leda's seduction by the God Zeus, who has taken the form of a Swan. The composition follows that of a now lost original painting by the great Michelangelo (1475 – 1564) which is known to us primarily by way of a contemporary copy in the National Gallery, London (fig. 1), and from an engraving in reverse by Cornelis Bos (fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> The original is thought to have been destroyed by Queen Anne of Austria (1601 – 1666), whose notorious Catholic piety prompted her to deem the painting as overly lascivious.<sup>2</sup>

The history of Michelangelo's original painting is complex. It was executed in 1529 – 1530 for Alfonso l'Este, Duke of Ferrara. However, Vasari recounts that Michelangelo fell out with the ducal representative, resulting in the work never being delivered to its patron.<sup>3</sup> The accounts of Michelangelo's biographers, letters dating from 1530 – 1536, and a *ricordo* of 1540 all claim that the painting was instead taken to Lyon by Michelangelo's assistant, Antonio Mini.<sup>3</sup> Mini is also purported to have taken Michelangelo's preparatory cartoon for the painting on the same trip.<sup>4</sup> Having arrived in Lyon, he had three copies made before heading further north towards Paris, where he intended to sell the original painting to King François I.<sup>5</sup> The evidence suggests that this work did successfully enter the royal collection. Firstly, Vasari states that it was acquired by the King for his palace at Fontainebleau.<sup>6</sup> His account is supported by financial records: Rosso Fiorentino (1495 – 1540) - who had been entrusted with the decoration of this very palace - was asked to make a frame for Michelangelo's panel, and was subsequently paid in 1536 for his role in transferring a *Leda* painting from the king's treasurer's house to the château at Fontainebleau.<sup>7</sup> It is thought that Rosso himself also made a copy after the original cartoon: this could be the aforementioned painting now owned by the National Gallery, though this work currently bears no secure attribution.<sup>8</sup>

The colourful history of Michelangelo's painting and its travels across the Continent resulted in the widespread dissemination of this popular *Leda* composition and its motifs. Scholars have long debated the origins of various copies, attempting to identify works as either after the painting or after the cartoon on the basis of which details are included. It is generally accepted that compositions which depict Leda's attribute of the prolepsis (the egg and the

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

two Dioscuri) and the elaborate drapery that surrounds her were after Michelangelo's original painting.<sup>9</sup> The present work does indeed include these details: a large egg sits prominently in the lower left corner, while one of the Dioscuri brothers can be seen hatching just above. The works that do not include such details are believed to be after the cartoon.<sup>10</sup>

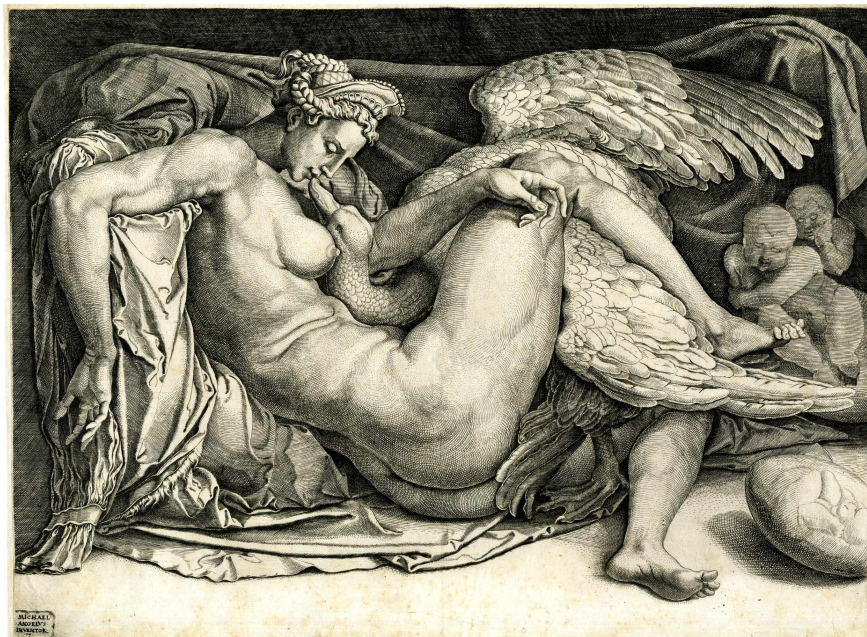
Professor Carlo Falciani believes this painting to be by an artist working '*oltralpe*', or 'beyond the Alps'. We are grateful to him for drawing attention to the 'French' quality of the work, particularly in the grass and in the delicate handling of the drapery. Falciani also points out the stylistic similarities between our painting and the version by Francesco Bacchiacca (1494 – 1557) at the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo (fig. 3), though it is notable that this composition does not include the egg or reference to Castor and Pollux. Falciani concludes that we are probably looking at the product of the hand of a French or Florentine artist, working in the circle of Rosso at Fontainebleau.

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



**Figure 1.** After Michelangelo, *Leda and the Swan*, after 1530. The National Gallery, London



**Figure 2.** Cornelis Bos, after Michelangelo, *Leda and the Swan*, 1530 – 56. The British Museum, London

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



**Figure 3.** Francesco Ubertini detto Bacciacca, after Michelangelo, *Leda and the Swan*.  
Accademia Carrara, Bergamo

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Two other, lesser-known mid-sixteenth century engravings were executed after the lost painting by Nicolas Béatrizet (1507 – 1565) and Étienne Delaune (1518 – 1595).

<sup>2</sup> J. Cox-Rearick, 'Cat. 17 (Tav. IX/3)', in *Venus and Love: Michelangelo and the new ideal of beauty*, exh. cat., (eds.) F. Falletti & J. Katz Nelson, Florence 2002, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup> J. Cox-Rearick, 'Cat. 17 (Tav. IX/3)', in *Venus and Love: Michelangelo and the new ideal of beauty*, exh. cat., (eds.) F. Falletti & J. Katz Nelson, Florence 2002, p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> The drawing at the Royal Academy of Arts (London), object no. 04/282, was previously believed to be Michelangelo's original cartoon, but this is now thought to be a copy made by another 16th-century artist. The whereabouts of Michelangelo's actual cartoon are currently unknown: while seventeenth-century Italian and French writers claimed that the cartoon and other drawings by Michelangelo relating to the *Leda* that Mini had with him were returned to Florence, an inventory of the French royal collection made in 1691 notes that a drawing 'by Michelangelo representing a Leda' was earmarked 'to be burned', thus implying that it saw the same fate as the related painting. See J. Cox-Rearick, 'Cat. 17 (Tav. IX/3)', in *Venus and Love: Michelangelo and the new ideal of beauty*, exh. cat., (eds.) F. Falletti & J. Katz Nelson, Florence 2002, p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> J. Cox-Rearick, 'Cat. 17 (Tav. IX/3)', in *Venus and Love: Michelangelo and the new ideal of beauty*, exh. cat., (eds.) F. Falletti & J. Katz Nelson, Florence 2002, p. 175.

<sup>6</sup> G. Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, (trans.) G. du C. de Vere, 10 vols., 1912 – 1915, vol. IX, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> J. Cox-Rearick, 'Cat. 17 (Tav. IX/3)', in *Venus and Love: Michelangelo and the new ideal of beauty*, exh. cat., (eds.) F. Falletti & J. Katz Nelson, Florence 2002, p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> NG1868, oil on canvas, 105.4 x 141 cm.

<sup>9</sup> F. Falletti and J. Katz Nelson, *Venus and Love: Michelangelo and the new idea of beauty*, exh. cat., Florence 2002, pp. 172 – 177.

<sup>10</sup> F. Falletti and J. Katz Nelson, *Venus and Love: Michelangelo and the new idea of beauty*, exh. cat., Florence 2002, pp. 172 – 177.