Salvator Rosa
(Arenella 1615 - 1673 Rome)

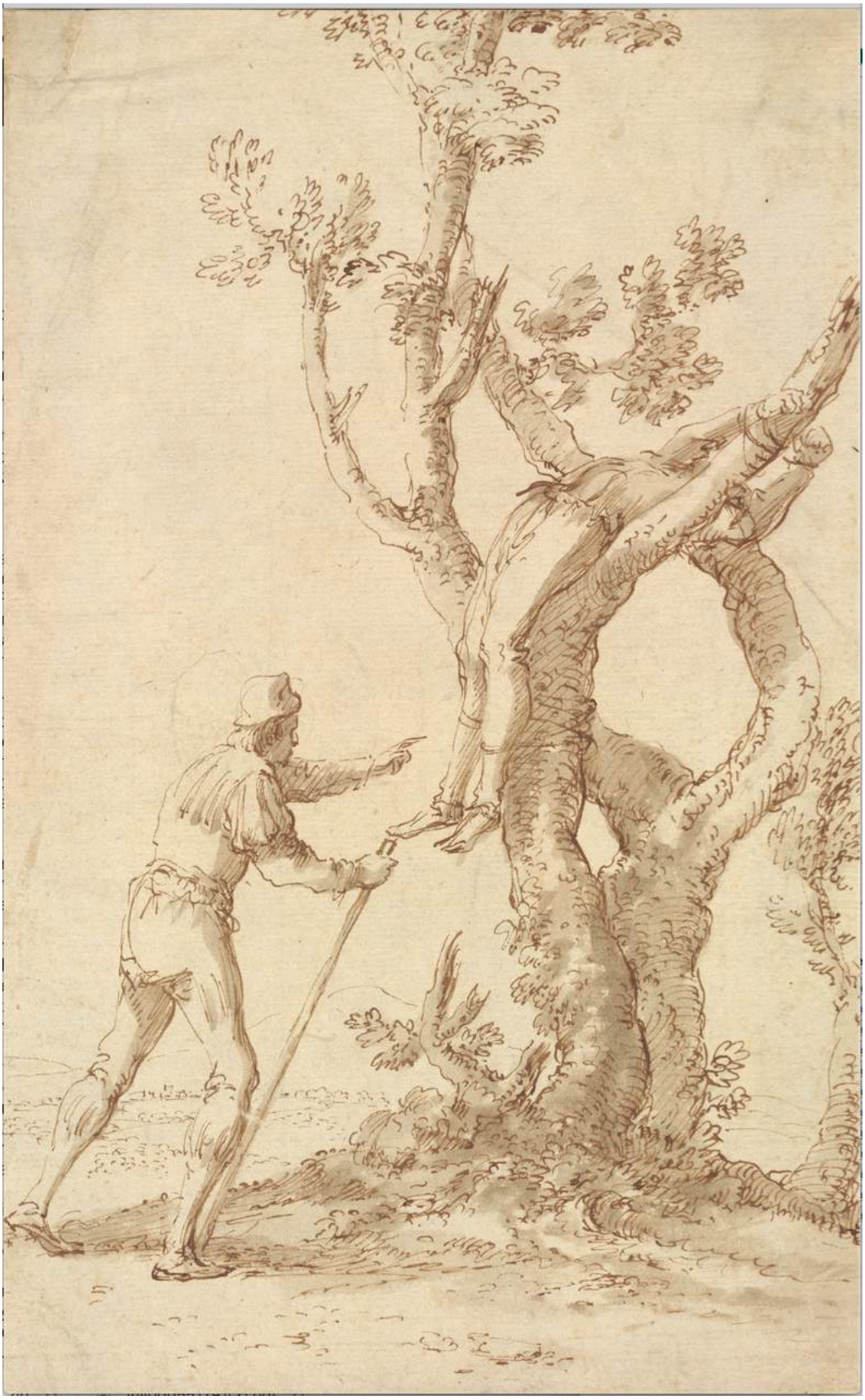
A Figure Tied to a Tree Discovered by a Man Walking

Pen and brown ink and wash. With inscription in graphite 'S.Roosa' (verso).
Watermark: a sun within a circle (closest to Heawood 3896, Florence 1646/7).

27.1 x 10.7 cm (10 5/8 x 4 ¼ in.)

Provenance:

Dutch private collection, probably bought at auction, Paul Brandt, sale, Amsterdam, date unknown (bears pencil inscription on accompanying paper folder: 'S. Rosa/ Brandt btz 22 f100,-/ N^{o}449').



Salvator Rosa was born in a small village above Naples but moved into the city as a young child. His father died and his mother remarried leaving the children in the care of their grandfather, a painter, who entered Salvator and his brother Domenico for the free school run by the Piarist order; the rather enlightened education which he received in their care was hugely important to his future life. Rosa's sister married Francesco Fracanzano, an artist described by Rosa's earliest biographer Giovanni Battista Passeri as his teacher. Filippo Baldinucci, another contemporary source of information, adds that Rosa also studied with Aniello Falcone and then with Jusepe de Ribera, whilst his 18th century biographer Bernardo de'Dominici agreed that Rosa worked with both masters but put the order in reverse. In Falcone's popular and successful studio, Rosa worked alongside Andrea de Lione and Micco Spadaro, copying Falcone's battle paintings and attending his life drawing classes. As a group, they are also said to have painted out of doors, in the countryside around Naples, making sketches of the landscape and picturesque figures they encountered.[1]

Competition for work in Naples was harsh and it appears to have been as a result of Giovanni Lanfranco's encouragement that Rosa moved to Rome in 1635. He joined the household of Cardinal Francesco Maria Brancaccio, a well-connected Neapolitan who was literary and intellectual in his tastes. Rosa's own poetic and theatrical talents became part of his lure to patrons and supporters; his friends and fellow artists delighted in his inventive, witty and often outrageous conversation. Underpinning his character, however, there was also a disillusionment and darkness, partly connected to the uncertainty and violence in Neapolitan society and politics, but also indicative of his, at times, misanthropic character and a harkening for the wildness of nature as relief from the decadence and oppression of the cities. In 1639, in Rome again after a brief sojourn at Viterbo (where Brancaccio had been made bishop), Rosa made a series of landscape paintings peopled with ruffians and travellers and in part inspired by the work of the *Bamboccianti* painters, the rambunctious group of Dutch artists who lived nearby. His theatrical interest becoming more ambitious, Rosa performed in the Carnival against a rival troupe from the circle of Bernini, provoking them with his vitriolic attacks. In the following year, he left for Florence possibly as a result of increasing hostility towards him in Rome.

Under the protection of Giovan Carlo de' Medici, Rosa was able to enter the sophisticated and highly cultured world of the Medici court and his patronage and treatment of Rosa as a new discovery made a cause célèbre of the Neapolitan artist. In 1640, Rosa met Lucrezia Paolini, at that time married but soon to become Rosa's companion and a frequent model. Rosa's connections with the court fluctuated; often disgusted by the endemic sycophancy and

[1] G. B. Passeri, *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti che hanno lavorato in Roma,* 1772; F. Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua,* 6 vols, Florence 1681-1728 and B. De Dominici, *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti Napoletani,* Naples 1742-43. For an extensive biographical essay, see H. Langdon, 'The Art and Life of Salvator Rosa', in *Salvator Rosa,* exh. cat., Dulwich Picture Gallery, London and Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, 2010, pp. 11-44.

deceit, Rosa made his own world in his house which, much frequented by scholars, writers and musicians became known as the Accademia dei Percossi. His greatest friend was the fellow painter-poet Lorenzo Lippi. Rosa's own reputation as a satiric poet grew alongside his fame as a painter. Seemingly eager to escape Florence and the decadence of the court, Rosa spent time in Venice, in Bologna and in particular, in Pisa and in the Tuscan countryside, staying in the villas of friends. These precious interludes fed into his landscape painting.

The next two decades were mostly spent in Rome. Rosa made concerted efforts to win access to papal patronage and to align his work with that of the classical painters. He painted on a grand scale and chose erudite and philosophical subjects, full of antiquarian detail: *Democritus in Meditation, Diogenes throwing away his Bowl*. He won the commission to produce a huge and subsequently greatly admired battle scene which was presented to King Louis XIV and received the patronage of the Austrian emperor and Queen Christina of Sweden. Rosa's satirical writing again bought trouble and encouraged vicious attacks in return; his manner of living bought him to the attention of the Inquisition. Reacting to threats, he sent Lucrezia and their son Rosalvo to Naples, where tragically the plague took hold and Rosalvo, Rosa's brother Domenico and his sister all died. That year, 1656, is also the time he published the significant series of etchings known as the *Figurine,* dedicated to another of his longtime friends and patrons Carlo de' Rossi. With the revived interest in landscape painting, a taste led by Poussin and Claude and favoured by the nephews of the recently elected Chigi Pope, Alexander VII, Rosa developed a new vein: spectacular, grand, sublime. An unsuccessful series of religious paintings followed as well as further controversy over his satiric painting *La Fortuna.* Despite its apparent intent to criticise the Chigi establishment, it was Marco Chigi, brother of the Pope who saved Rosa from the threat of imprisonment. In the early 1660s Rosa made two grand and rhetorical pictures on the theme of Pythagoras, on the suggestion of Queen Christina but disagreement ensued over the seemingly exorbitant price Rosa asked. Along with fluctuations in his success and the repeated episodes of controversy, this was a recurring issue in his career as Rosa struggled for financial and critical glory and refused or decried commissions for the small-scale paintings which he deemed trivial, but which were always in high demand. In his last years, frustration and pessimism at his perceived lack of success became torturous and as illness made painting slow, his writings became more melancholic and vindictive. His last work, however, was a commissioned altarpiece for a Roman church. Although the commission came from a Florentine cardinal, Rosa triumphed in this final signal of acceptance from the establishment. Attended by an insistent priest, Rosa on his deathbed, succumbed to the Church's pressure and at the last moment married Lucrezia and received communion.

As Michael Mahoney has kindly confirmed, this must be an early drawing, particularly Riberesque and exceptional for being a fully realised composition from a period when most of Rosa's surviving work is sketchy and fragmentary.[2] Bearing in mind, the uncertain and dangerous society in which he lived and Rosa's habit of wandering in the countryside around Naples to sketch with his companion artists, the subject is particularly poignant and could almost stand as a work of reportage or perhaps the depiction of a local proverb. A man, simply dressed or robbed of outer garments, has been bound outstretched along the branches of a half- dead tree. His face is hidden so we cannot tell whether he is alive or dead. The passer-by holds out an arm to point at the figure, a victim of banditry or punishment. No other evidence is given as to the nature of the event, the man hangs suspended in an otherwise unperturbed landscape, a sunlit plain with a town in the middle distance and hills in the distance. The passer-by out walking with a stick appears simply to have chanced upon the macabre event. The theme of figures bound to trees is one seen in Ribera's drawings also, particularly in the numerous studies for the martyrdom of San Bartolommeo,[3] though Ribera's scenes are on occasion more grotesque and more fantastical than the almost lyrical tone of this work, and constitute scenes of torture and execution.[4] In Rosa's later compositions, the motif also reappears but as a classical or Christian theme such as in the etching of *The Crucifixion of Polycrates*, the large print of c. 1662, a scene from *Oedipus Rex*, in which the baby Oedipus is found by a shepherd tied to a tree with his feet pinned together (Fig. 1), the painting of *St. William of Maleval* (of around 1645) in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Fig. 2) and the drawing and related etching of *St. Albert, the Companion of St. William* (Fig. 3).[5] A drawing on wood, in quill and brown ink and white, entitled *A Landscape with a Seated Man* of *circa* 1659-61, is in the Uffizi and has a similarly enigmatic atmosphere (Fig. 4).[6]

[2] Email correspondence, 13 May 2011.

[3] See M. Mena Marquez, in *Jusepe de Ribera,* exh. cat., Naples 1992, p. 349, fig. 2.35; and pp. 356-7, figs. 2.48 and 2.49.

[4] See *op. cit.,* 1992, p. 354, fig. 2.44 and *Jusepe de Ribera,* exh. cat., Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum, 1982, pp. 86-87, figs. 105-108.

[5] See L. Salerno, *Salvator Rosa,* Italy 1963, figs. 53c and 98 and 99, and see *Salvator Rosa tra mito e magia,* exh. cat., Naples 2008, cat. 14.

[6] See H. Guratzsch, *Salvator Rosa, Genie der Zeichnung,* Leipzig 1999, p. 132, fig. 4.

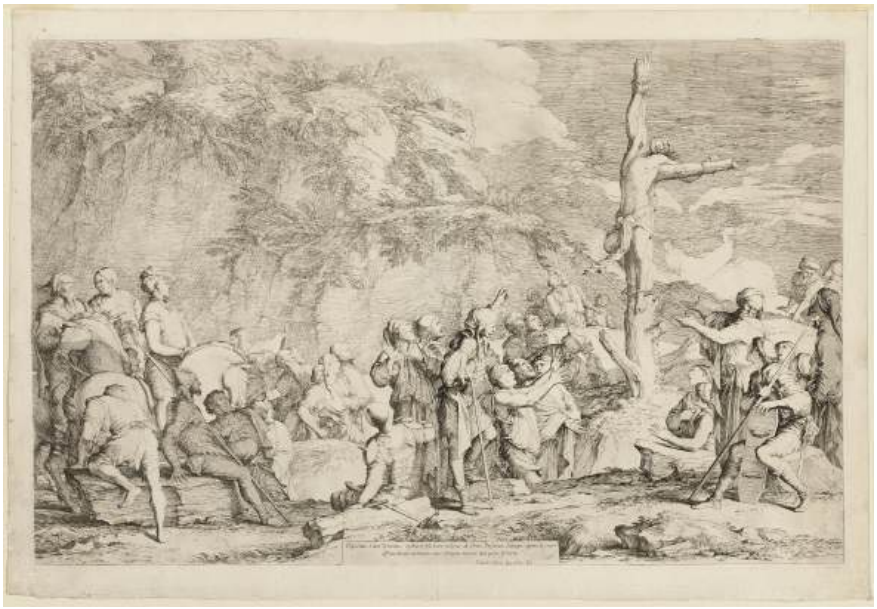


Fig. 1. Salvator Rosa, *The Crucifixion of Polycrates*, c. 1662, etching, with dry point, in black on ivory laid paper. Chicago, The Art Institute.

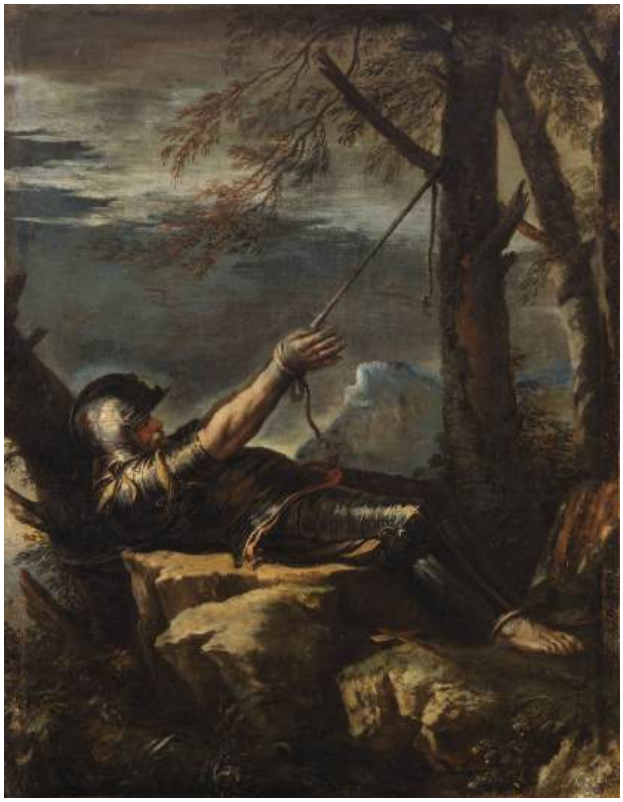


Fig. 2. Salvator Rosa, *St. William of Maleval,* c. 1645, oil on canvas. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

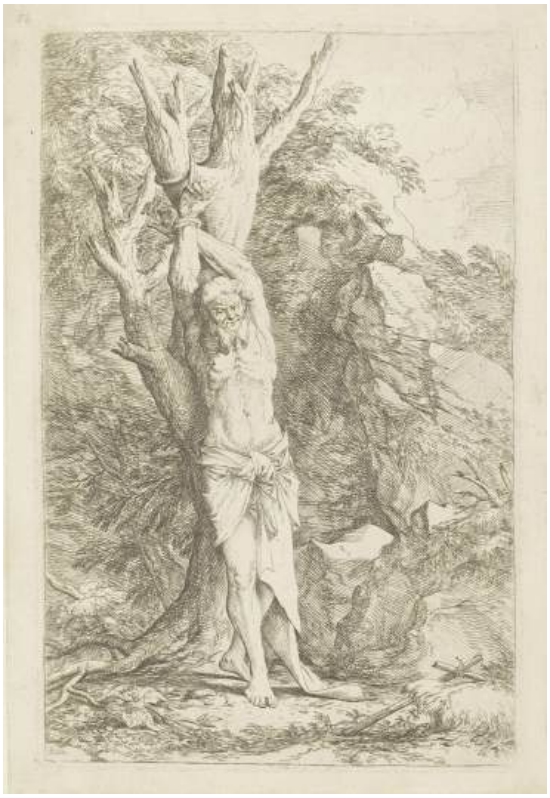


Fig. 3. Salvator Rosa, *St. Albert, the Companion of St. William,* 1661, oil on canvas. London, Victoria & Albert Museum.

Fig. 4. Salvator Rosa, *A Landscape with a Seated Man,* 1659-61, quill and brown ink and white on wood. Firenze, Uffizi.

The draughtsmanship in the present work is particularly elegant and the application of wash is delicate, conveying the dappled light on the tree trunk and playing in the leaves, while the absence of any shading on the trousers of the hanging figures adds starkness to the strange scene. As Michael Mahoney remarked, the majority of Rosa's surviving drawings of the 1630s and 40s are fragmentary sketches but the preoccupation during this period with pastoral scenes, figures in landscapes and especially with experimental drawings of trees is clear. Mahoney identifies three groups of such works, amongst which, the most comparable in handling are a fine, large study of a *Clump of Trees*, in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam (Fig. 5); a study of a *Man Lying on his Back on a Rock ... in a Wooded Landscape*, in the British Museum (Fig. 6) and the *Angel Gestures towards a Cross … with Four Men*, formerly in the Kurt Meissner collection, Zurich, which Mahoney speculates could possibly have been offered to a patron in order that he might select a composition to be worked up into a painting.[7]

We are thankful to Prof. Caterina Volpi for having confirmed the attribution of the present drawing to Salvator Rosa's early years, in line with Michael Mahoney's original expertise.

[7] See M. Mahoney, *The Drawings of Salvator Rosa,* New York and London 1977, vol. I, pp. 270, 281 and 276 and vol. II, figs. 21.4, 23.1 and 22.1.

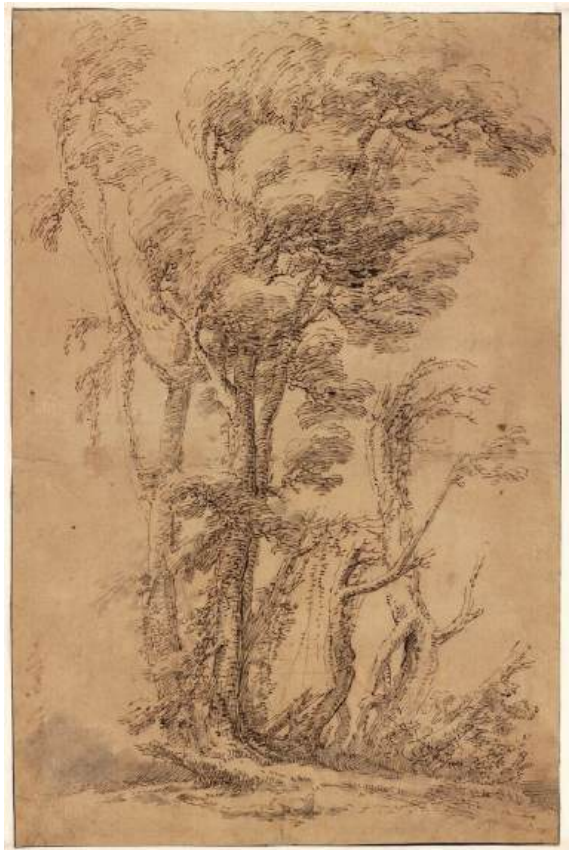


Fig. 5. Salvator Rosa, *Clump of Trees*, Pen and brown ink, grey wash. Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen

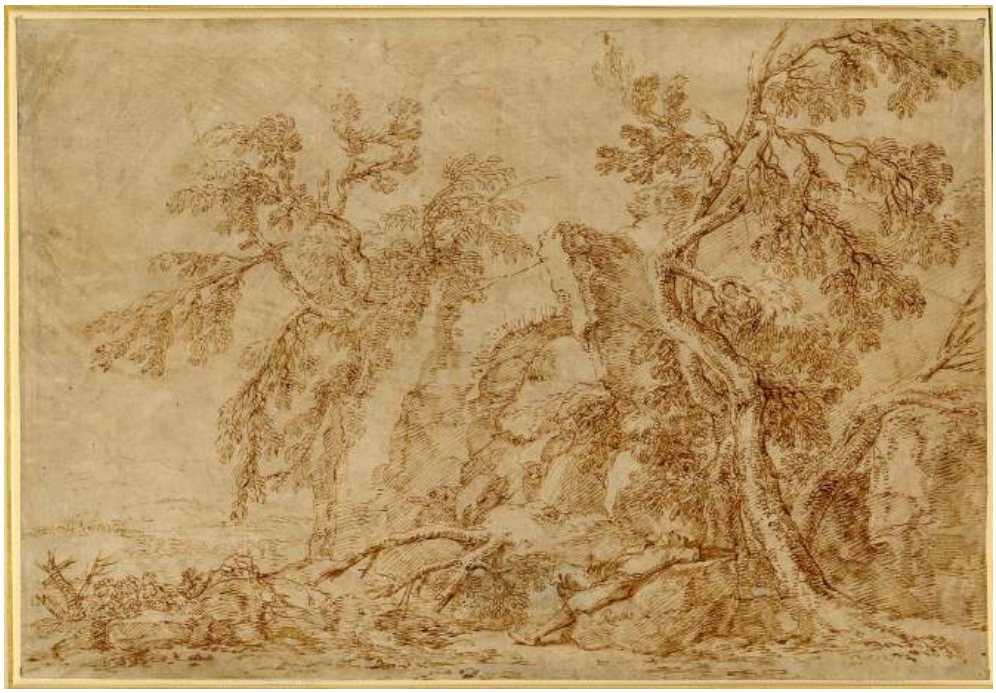


Fig. 6. Salvator Rosa, *Man Lying on his Back on a Rock ... in a Wooded Landscape*, Pen and brown ink on vellum. London, British Museum.