

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

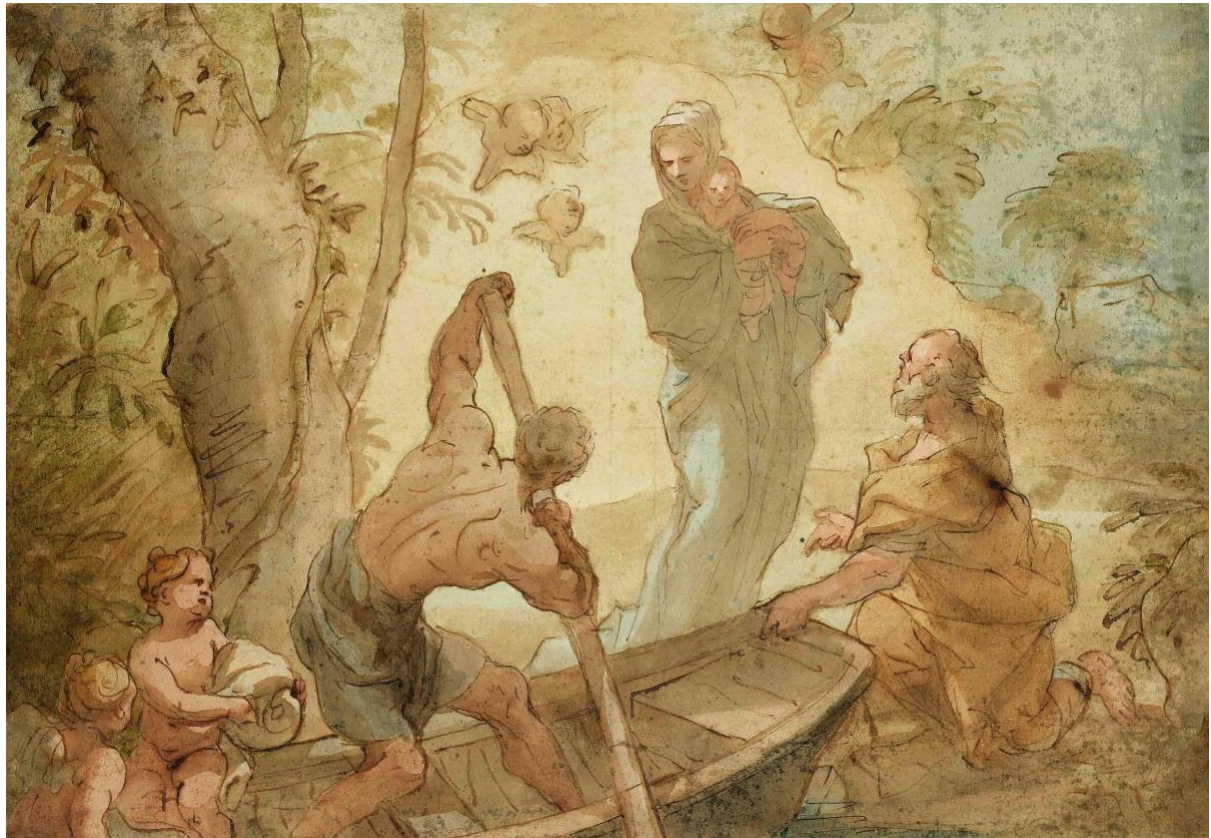
Domenico Piola
(Genoa 1627 – 1703)

The Flight into Egypt

Pen and brown ink and watercolour over traces of black chalk
Bears numbering in brown ink on verso: *no. 54*
29 x 41.6 cm. (11 ½ x 16 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Giancarlo Baroni (1926 – 2007), Switzerland:
His posthumous sale, Sotheby's New York, 29 January 2013, lot 92.



Domenico Piola, Genoa's leading artist during the second half of the 17th century, was a talented and inventive draughtsman. Indeed, his passion for drawing was such that his 18th-century biographer, Carlo Giuseppe Ratti, was able to write that Piola would spend 'the whole evening drawing at a small table, setting down ideas on paper...Hence he made so many drawings that...his heirs preserved more than four thousand of them.'¹

Whilst Piola's graphic works are not rare, the present luminous sheet, depicting *The Flight into Egypt*, is quite exceptional within the artist's oeuvre not only on account of its quality but also due its use of watercolour, a rare medium in 17th-century Italy. Overall, and beyond Piola, it is a significant example of Seicento Genoese drawing.

As Piola's studio was destroyed in the French bombardment of Genoa in 1684, along with most of its contents, the artist's extant work invariably dates to the latter part of his career. This is likely the case also with the present sheet, which, with its vigorous, flowing line and form, is emblematic of the apex of the Genoese Baroque at the close of the 17th century. Depicting a subject of predilection for Piola, the drawing cannot be connected to any known fresco or painting, though the dynamic figural grouping compares closely to that in another *Flight into Egypt* (fig. 1), in a private collection.



Fig. 1, Domenico Piola, *The Flight into Egypt*, pen and brown ink and wash, 26.5 x 39.6 cm, Private Collection

The use of watercolour, in conjunction with the closely cropped composition, gives the drawing a particular energy and vibrancy that elevates it above much of the rest of Piola's graphic oeuvre, though this is not to downplay the merits of his more conventional sheets, executed in brown ink alone. Beyond the present work, the only other watercolour sheet by Piola to have been on the art market in recent times is a beautiful depiction of *The Nativity* (fig. 2), offered at Sotheby's in 1990. Here, and to great effect, Piola uses a more restrained palette of just red and blue for the watercolour, seen in the drapery of Joseph and the Virgin. These two tones brilliantly stand out against the monochromatic brown wash.

Piola's use of watercolour, uncommon in the Italian peninsula at this time, may derive from his fellow Genoese artist Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, himself a brilliant draftsman. Castiglione pioneered the development of mixing media in his oil sketches and the use of

¹ G.C. Ratti, *Delle vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti genovesi...*, Genoa 1787, p. 48.

watercolour with other media was a natural extension of this experimentation (fig. 3). Like Piola, he generally combined his watercolours with brown ink and wash.



Fig. 2, Domenico Piola, *The Nativity*, pen and brown ink and watercolour, 40.3 x 26.8 cm, Private Collection

Fig. 3, Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, *A herdsman and his family*, brown wash, watercolour and bodycolour, 423 x 26.5 cm, Private Collection

Working almost exclusively in his native city, Piola was the most sought-after fresco-painter in Genoa in his time. Collaborating occasionally with Valerio Castello and his son-in-law Gregorio de Ferrari, Piola was, at the height of his reputation in the 1670s and 1680s, the undisputed leader of the Genoese School. As the head of a large and busy studio, the 'Casa Piola', which included his three sons Paolo Gerolamo, Giovanni Battista and Anton Maria, Piola's influence remained predominant in his hometown well into the 18th century.