

GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO

(1696-1770)

Two figures seen da sotto in su

Pen and brown ink, brown wash on paper laid down to cardboard

21,5 x 15,5 cm

Unidentified watermark

Provenance:

Ben Wolf, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania;

By descent in the family;

University of Michigan, William Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan;

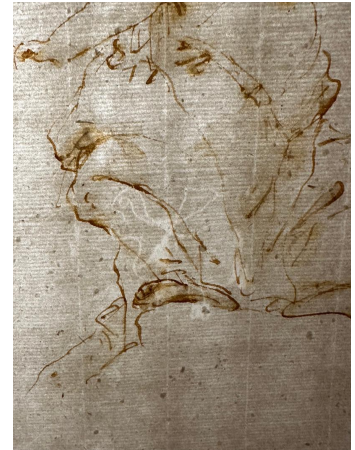
Private collection.



This characteristic sheet by the 18th Century Venetian master, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, depicts Two figures seen da sotto in su. It was probably part of an album of drawings such as the album entitled *Sole Figure per Soffitti* (now dismantled). In that album each sheet typically had a seated figure, legs dangling, his face half hidden and was often preparatory for a ceiling composition, used in both paintings and frescoes. Three albums of Giambattista's figure studies were broken up by the London dealers Parsons after 1918, one at least bearing this title. Around one hundred and eighty of these studies of figures seen da sotto in su are now known, and it can be presumed that they were contained in two of the three albums, the third being made up of another series of figure drawings known as *Sole Figure Vestite*. The studies can rarely be connected with painted works and were most probably done for their own sake. George Knox suggested that all these figure types were drawn around 1758-60 and most certainly served as a visual archive to which Tiepolo could refer for his painted commissions. Tiepolo was clearly fascinated by the challenge of depicting these foreshortened figures, which are so often admired in his paintings and drawings.

Giambattista Tiepolo was a prolific draughtsman, and he was not a casual one. Towards the end of his career, following the example of Sebastian and Marco Ricci, and others, he mounted his drawings in a series of albums. The practice of mounting drawings thus was continued by his son Domenico. Although we shall never know how many albums have been lost, a remarkable number of them have survived into the twentieth century. The demands of the market have led to some being broken up in our generation.

Giambattista, in his wash drawing above all, achieved a new abstraction of illusionism, apparently effortless. George Knox noted in the catalogue of the exhibition *Tiepolo, a Bicentenary Exhibition 1770-1970*¹ that all Tiepolo drawings build on the same base: paper. Various watermarks are found. With only a few exceptions they seem to be Italian. The most common sort is a fine, white antique-laid paper. Its chain and laid lines are very closely set, the chain lines only 2,5 to 3 centimeters and the laid lines usually numbering more than 10 per centimeter. The artist seems always to have used a quill pen. His touch is light and fluid. Over the pen lines would be laid washes.



In most of Giambattista's mature and characteristic wash drawings the wash is not continuously modulated from light to dark but is applied in two discrete values, one medium and one dark. Bistre is of low saturation. Giambattista's technique is obviously the best adapted to his rapid working methods. He seems always to have used a single ink in his washes, light and dark, although because of the color-modulating effect of bistre they appear varied and lively. Both paper and color of the bistre ink of our drawing correspond to those used by the artist.

The *sotto in su* perspective of the present sheet suggests that it would have been intended for a ceiling. Tiepolo drew these figures in foreshortening around 1758-1760. Other examples of Sole figure per soffitti are in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (inv. 2238), the Albertina, Vienna (inv. 24519 - inv. 24525) and the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven (inv. 1941.283-294).

The present sheet fits well with other Tiepolo's drawings: *A seated woman seen from below*, pen and brown ink, brown wash, 16,3 x 18,5 cm, provenance: probably given by the artist or his son Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727-1804) to Somaschi convent at Santa Maria della Salute, Venice, where the former's son Giuseppe Maria Tiepolo lived ; after the suppression of the convent to 1810 to Count Leopoldo Cicognara (1767-1834), Venice. Antonio Canova (1757-1822), Venice; by his descent to his half-brother, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Sartori Canova (1775-1858), Venice. Francesco Pesaro (1740-1799), Venice; sold by him to in 1842 to Edward Cheney (1803-1884), Badger Hall, Shropshire; by descent to his brother-in-law Colonel Alfred Capel-Cure (1826-1896), Blake Hall, Essex; Sotheby's, London, 29 April 1885, part of lot 1024 (bought in); Christie's, London, 14 July 1914, part of lot 49. with E. Parsons, London. Henry Scipio Reitlinger (1882-1950), London (L. 2274a). with M. Knoedler & Co., New York, 1945. Christie's New York, 28 January 2022, lot 11.

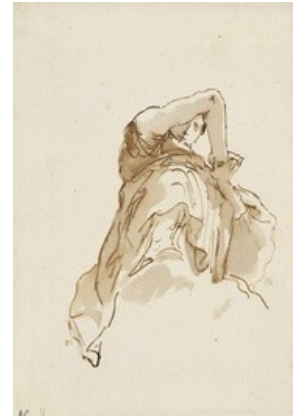


This kind of figure like ours, floating in the sky and without specific attributes, is recurrent in Tiepolo's drawn oeuvre. The artist would effortlessly sketch them on paper and then employ them to fill his expansive fresco ceiling decorations. Drawings of this type can in general be traced back to an

¹George Knox, *Tiepolo, a Bicentenary Exhibition 1770-1970*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 14 March - 3 May 1970

album entitled *Sole figure per soffitti*, which surfaced in 1914 at a Christie's sale after a distinguished provenance and before it was dismembered.

Another example, *Study of a woman folding her hands, seen from below*, pen and brown ink, brown wash, 20,6 x 14,1 cm, provenance: Count Bernardino Algarotti-Corniani, Venice. Edward Cheney (1803–1884), Badger Hall, Shropshire, and by descent to his brother-in-law Colonel Alfred Capel-Cure (1826-1896), Blake Hall, Essex; Sotheby's, London, 29 April 1885, probably part of lot 1024. with Messrs. B.T. Batsford, London; Christie's, London, 14 July 1914, part of lot 49 (£120 to Parsons). Franz Wilhelm Koenigs (1881-1941), Haarlem, presumably acquired circa 1900-1920; thence by descent to the present owners. Christie's London 6 July 2021, lot 19.



Swiftly yet masterfully executed representations of figures in steep foreshortening, such as the Christie's one, were most likely first ideas for characters that Tiepolo could use in the many frescoed ceilings he created. This drawing once belonged to Edward Cheney, who owned nine volumes of drawings from Tiepolo's studio.

An analogous treatment of drapery is likewise found in the *Figure holding a platter seen from below*, with inscription « 22 » (verso), pen and brown ink, brown wash, 18,2 x 16 cm, provenance: probably Edward Cheney (1803-1884), Badger Hall, Shropshire, and London. with E. Parsons and Sons, London, 1926. Dan Fellows Platt (1873-1937), Englewood, New Jersey (L. 750a). Christie's New York, 28 January 2021, lot 20. According to a handwritten note by Dan Fellows Platt on the verso of the Christie's sheet, this drawing once belonged to the London dealers E. Parsons and Sons, which between the end of the 19th Century and the first decades of the 20th, acquired at auction several albums of drawings by Tiepolo which had belonged to Edward Cheney.



These two drawings show the same nervousness in the line and foreshortening of the feet of the figures seen *da sotto in su*.

Stylistically comparable and contemporary drawings by the artist, include two drawings of the Princeton University, the Art Museum: *A seated woman seen from below*, pen and brown ink, brown wash, 15,7 x 14,1 cm, object number 48-835, bequest Mr. Dan Fellows Platt; and *A Cloaked Figure on a Cloud*, pen, brown and dark brown ink and brown wash, 25,4 x 18,9 cm, inscription



lower left: « 5 » in pen and gray ink, watermark: fragmentary, illegible with C C (?), Bequest of Dan Fellows Platt, Class of 1895, object number x1948-848.

Dan Fellows Platt bought many of the Tiepolo *Figure per soffitti* directly from Parsons between 1922 and 1926 and left a large number to the Princeton University Art Museum.

Last example, *A reclining figure, seen from below*, pen and brown ink and wash, 12,2 x 15 cm, Sotheby's New York, 25 January 2023, lot 212.



Giovanni Battista is unquestionably the most eminent artist of the 18th century Venetian painting. His reputation as a great decorative painter earned him commissions in the palaces of Venice and its neighbouring, even as far as Würzburg in the service of Prince Bishop Charles Philippe de Greiffenclau and Madrid in the service of Charles III of Spain.

In 1761, Charles III commissioned him for a ceiling fresco of *The Apotheosis of Spain* for the royal palace in Madrid. The painter, who left with his sons Lorenzo and Giandomenico on March 31, 1762, arrived in Madrid and settled in Plaza San Martín. However he suffered from the jealousy and the bitter opposition of the rising champion of Neoclassicism Raphaël Mengs. He will remain there until his death. Giambattista accepted the commission and the trip reluctantly, it took the intervention of Spanish diplomacy, especially in Venice, to convince him. The king, satisfied with Tiepolo's fresco, commissioned two more ceiling frescoes: *The Apotheosis of Aeneas* in the Hall of the Halberdiers and the *Apotheosis of the Spanish Monarchy* in the Queen's Antechamber, completed in 1766. Taken by the important missions extended over time by bureaucratic protocol and by the centralization of decisions in the person of the king, Tiepolo carried out few private commissions during his Madrid period: among the rare works painted in Madrid, *Venus and Vulcan*, a painting for which our study of hand is probably preparatory.

The leading painter in Venice for much of his career, Giambattista Tiepolo was also undoubtedly one of the finest Italian draughtsmen of the 18th century. That his drawings were greatly admired in his lifetime is confirmed by contemporary accounts; indeed, as early as 1732 the writer Vincenzo da Canal remarked that « *engravers and copyists are eager to copy his works, to glean his inventions and extraordinary ideas; his drawings are already so highly esteemed that books of them are sent to the most distant countries* ». From the late 1730's until his departure for Spain in 1762, Tiepolo enjoyed his most productive period as a draughtsman, creating a large number of vibrant pen and wash studies that are among the archetypal drawings of the Venetian *Settecento*.

Particularly prolific, Tiepolo is the author of a graphic corpus of more than 2000 sheets. His drawings were greatly admired during his lifetime. Many of these were bound in albums by theme or subject, and kept by the artist in his studio as a repository of patterns and ideas for use in his own work, or that of his sons and assistants.

Our drawing shows Tiepolo's virtuosity and exquisite control.

