

## MATTIA PRETI

(Taverna 1613 - 1699 Valletta)

*Nude of a young woman sitting on a rock*

Black and red chalk, stump

34.6 x 24.2 cm

Bears an inscription on the mount: *Il Cavalier Calabrese*

### Provenance:

- Sale, Christie's, London, June 12, 1988, lot 98 (as *circle of Mattia Preti*)
- Sale, Christie's, Paris, March 27, 2019, lot 18
- Private collection, France

### Bibliography:

- *Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, Mattia Preti tra Roma, Napoli e Malta*, 1999, ill. p. 218 (introduction by R. Muzii).

### Related work:

- Mattia Preti, *Olindo and Sofronia Freed by Clorinda*, circa 1685, oil on canvas, 320 x 350 cm, Jerace Collection, Naples.

A drawing for the large canvas by Preti depicting *Olindo and Sofronia Freed by Clorinda*, this highly sensual figure study serves as a preparatory work for the nude figure of Sofronia, shown in a dramatic posture tied to the column of a pyre, seen *da sotto in su*. John Spike suggests a date around 1685, towards the end of Preti's career.

The scene painted by Preti illustrates an episode from Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (II, 16-53): Sofronia is condemned to the stake after being accused of stealing an icon of the Virgin that the King of Jerusalem, Aladino, had removed from a Christian temple to be placed in a mosque. To save his beloved, Olindo also falsely confesses to the crime. Moved by their devotion, the warrior maiden Clorinda, wearing a feathered helmet and mounted on a splendid horse, intervenes to free the young lovers, promising the king her aid in battle. Even in his later years, around 1685, Preti remained captivated by this dramatic episode from *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Earlier in his career, around 1650, he had painted a first version of the subject for Cardinal Giovanni Battista Pallotta.

This drawing is an exceptional piece within Preti's corpus and demonstrates strong influences from Guercino, Reni, and especially Domenichino. The rich texture of the black chalk combined with red chalk—a rare technique in the artist's oeuvre—can be compared to works such as *Old Man Seated, Holding a Book, Talking to a Young Man* (black and red chalk, 20.2 x 28.3 cm, Collections: Dezallier d'Argenville, Antoine-Joseph - Saint-Morys; INV 6343, Louvre Museum) and *A Saint Bishop* (red chalk, black chalk heightened with white on beige paper, 27 x 21 cm, Inv. P.II.927, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). These works highlight the imprint of Reni on Preti's style, while the Caravaggesque naturalism in this figure study remains pronounced.

With her long, loose, wavy hair, arms falling along her body, and ankle chains, dressed only in a drape, the figure in this study is strikingly realistic. The only notable difference from the painting is the base: here, she sits on a rock, while in the final composition, she is bound to the stake. The bold use of black chalk, combined with red chalk, demonstrates Preti's pursuit of smoothness in rendering the flesh. Through his distinctive graphic technique—red chalk hatching heightened with black chalk to create deep shadows—Preti achieves an intensely carnal depiction of Sofronia's nude body.

Preti's career spanned approximately sixty years and included significant periods in Rome (1643-1653), Naples (1653-1660), and Malta (1661-1699). While his early works were deeply influenced by Caravaggio and Ribera, his later style reflects the dominant influence of Lanfranco, Domenichino, and Reni.

Originally from Taverna in Calabria (then part of the Kingdom of Naples), Preti likely trained in Naples under the Caravaggesque painter Battistello Caracciolo, a leading figure of the Neapolitan school in the early 17th century. Around 1630, he probably joined his brother, the painter Gregorio Preti, in Rome. There, in the artistic capital of Europe, he mastered Caravaggio's naturalism while studying the works of Guido Reni, Domenichino, Guercino, Peter Paul Rubens, and Giovanni Lanfranco.

Returning to Naples in 1653, Preti encountered the dominant influence of Luca Giordano. Following the great plague of 1656, he was commissioned to paint frescoes between 1657 and 1659 for the votive arcades of Naples' city gates. Today, only the fresco at the Porta San Gennaro remains. In 1659, he was invited to Malta by Grand Master Martin de Redin. By the end of his life, he was recognized throughout Europe as a leading Italian painter and, in Malta, as the most significant artist of the island.

Preti was fortunate to enjoy a long career and produce a vast body of work. His paintings, characterized by the exuberant style of the late Baroque, are housed in major museums, including important collections in Naples, Valletta, and his hometown of Taverna, Calabria.