

SEBASTIANO CONCA

(Gaeta 1680-1764)

After studying for a decade with Solimena in Naples - from which he supplied three (destroyed) paintings to Montecassino - Sebastiano Conca came to Rome with his brother Giovanni in 1707. Contrary to the legend of his temporary return to the discipline of drawing on encountering "the true Roman tradition" of painting, he immediately participated in public exhibitions. In 1714 he obtained his first public commission - an altar-piece and two laterals in S. Clemente - from Cardinal Ferrari, and in 1718 painted one of the nave frescoes for Clement XI. Conca's first patron was, however, Cardinal Ottoboni, for whom he painted his first major picture - the Three Magi before Herod now at Dresden - and who installed him as his "virtuoso" in a palace in Piazza Navona. The gift of his modello for the nave fresco of S. Cecilia (1721-24) subsequently inspired the Duke of Parma to give him apartments in the Palazzo Farnese, where he also established a private academy which lasted into the 19th century. He was in addition an active President of the Academy of St. Luke (1729-32 and 1739-40). His large-scale masterpiece is the fresco of The Pool of Bethesda in the Ospedale of Siena, but his most personal gifts emerge in his exquisite and more Rococo quadri in piccolo.

Cleopatra offering Octavius inventories of her treasures

Oil on canvas

87 x 135 cm

This exquisite picture, with its relatively unusual subject, was one of a pair commissioned by Cardinal Francesco Acquaviva d'Aragona (1665-1724)- as with its pendant by Michele Rocca, showing the more familiar Clemency of Scipio, the subject was taken from Plutarch's Lives. The Life of Mark Anthony (in a scene borrowed by Shakespeare) describes Octavius's visit to Cleopatra in her "tomb or monument" after the death of Mark Anthony, and how - after pleading with Octavius to convince him of her desire to live - "At length, she gave him a breefe and memoriall of all the readie money and treasure she had" (North's translation) - only to be shown up by her treasurer Seleucus for keeping things back. It is noteworthy that Conca makes no attempt to show Cleopatra disfigures by grief and her fingernails, nor - as Mengs was to be the first to do in the painting of 1759-60 of Octavius and Cleopatra that was rejected by Henry Hoare (cf. Steffi Röttgen, "Mengs sulle orme di Poussin", *Antologia* 2 (1977), pp. 148-156) - did he attempt to introduce Egyptian details.

Conca's association with Rocca in this commission is an interesting pointer to one of the sources of the more Rococo manner of his cabinet pictures. The commissioner of the two pictures, Cardinal Acquaviva, who came from an old and powerful Neapolitan family (his father was 14th Duke of Atri), was a valuable patron of Conca, as he was of his fellow-countryman de Matteis. It was he who gave Conca the commission for the fresco in his titular church, S. Cecilia, which resulted in "the principal rococo ceiling in Rome". (A.M. Clark, art. cit. infra); according to Anthony Clark, it is to around the same period, the early 1720s, that the commission for our picture and its pendant should be dated.

Hist: Cardinal Francesco Acquaviva d'Aragona, Rome
Morandotti coll., Rome
Grossman coll., New York

Bibl: Leone Pascoli, Vita di Sebastiano Conca (ms. in Perugia Library)
c. 1736
Anthony M. Clark, "Sebastiano Conca and the Roman Rococo", Apollo,
May, 1967, p. 332 and fig. 9
Giancarlo Sestieri, "Contributo a Sebastiano Conca", Commentari, 1969
p. 325 and 1970, no. 162, p. 137

Exh: Il Settecento a Roma, Rome, 1959, no. 162
Heim Gallery, Summer 1978, no. 27
Sebastiano Conca 1680-1764), Gaeta 1981, no. 22.