

FRANCESCO CONTI  
(Florence 1681 - 1760)

A pupil of Pignoni's, Conti completed his training in Rome under Maratta and the Florentine Morandi, though nothing of this is to be seen in the works of his maturity. He worked there six years for Pope Clement XI, and then returned to Florence as Drawing-Master of the Grand-Ducal Galleries. Most of his surviving works are altarpieces dating from his subsequent career in Florence and Tuscany : the celebrated picture of SS. Lawrence, Ambrose, and Zenobius (1714) on the altar of the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in S. Lorenzo, which he painted overnight for the Marchese Riccardi; the miracle of St. Anthony in S. Piero Maggiore; the Crucifixion and the Trinity (c. 1709) in S. Jacopo sopr'Arno. He is also credited with some reliefs in the sacristy of S. Marco. One of the most distinctive painters of his time in Florence, he drew much of his inspiration from paintings of his Mannerist predecessors.

Judith with the head of Holofernes

Oil on canvas  
187.5 x 142 cm.

One of the many revelations of the exhibition Firenze restaura at the Fortezza da Basso in 1972 was the previously bituminous Adoration of the Magi by Francesco Conti, from the reserves of the Gallerie fiorentine at Montedomini (cf. exh.cat.cit. p.85 & detail figs. 115 & 116). Its un-Florentine verve and brio were such as to induce the cataloguers to describe Conti as "quasi una sorta di Tiepolo fiorentino". Comparison between the head of the Moorish Magi from that picture and the head of Judith in the present picture is sufficient to vindicate Mina Gregori's attribution of our painting to Francesco Conti.

Both works, but more especially our Judith, reveal Conti's fascination with certain aspects of the work of his Mannerist predecessors (a comparable Mannerist revival is also to be found in the works of the somewhat earlier Pietro Dandini): the acid colours, angular drapery, fantastic ornament, and even the mask-like face of Judith herself, which is reminiscent of Rosso Fiorentino.