

IPPOLITO BORGHESE

Sigillo, 1568 – Napoles, around 1627

*Knight in Battle*

c. 1598

Pen, brush, ink and watercolor on brown paper.

265 x 193 mm

Watermark: similar to Briquet 12224 (Naples 1525; motive: bird inserted in double circle).



The drawing was located in Germany in the 1960s, with a dubious reference to the Genoese artist Giulio Benso (1592-1668), and accepted with reservations by the next owner of the sheet in Paris. The calligraphic strokes of the drawing are, in effect, a style that recalls Genoese graphic culture, although the *Knight in Battle* cannot absolutely be associated with the otherwise well-known drawing production by Benso.

The figures of the two soldiers, respectively, one lying on his back on the ground and the other one knocked over by the steed on the right edge of the scene, outlined with the brush in a sure and synthetic gesture, immediately direct our attention towards the South of Italy, reminding us in the blurred watercolour technique of a certain Mannerism of the shapes of Belisario Corenzio. The drawing technique of the master of Greek origin, dominant in Naples from the last decade of the 16th Century until the middle of the following century, remains only, however, a background motive and here it concerns finding an alternative personality from southern Italy of late-mannerist training.

To guide us towards the attribution we propose here is the vivid memory of a splendid oil painting on wood, such as *Saint George and the Dragon* of the sacristy of the Cathedral of Ischia (Fig. 1) which was discovered to be signed on the back "HB" and dated "1598" during a restoration. It concerns, as has been well documented, the first sure work of the native Umbrian painter Ippolito Borghese, who came to Naples at the beginning of the nineties of the 16th Century, as well as providing a magnificent witness to his "ability to blend the 'gentle manner' of the Flemish with the Roman culture of Cesari [Il Cavalier d'Arpino], the Siennese Vanni and Salimbeni, in the light of the new 'devoted realism' of Scipione Pulzone (Leone de Castris 1991, p. 307)".



Fig. 1. Ippolito Borghese, *Saint George and the Dragon*. Ischia, Cathedral, Sacristy, signed and dated 1598.

Of the master we do not yet have any graphic testimony, as is true, moreover, for many of the protagonists of the history of art of southern Italy from the 16th to the 17th century. Regarding the *Madonna del Rosario e santi* from the Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe of the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, from the book of drawings of the biographer Bernardo De Dominicis, with reference to Marco Pino da Siena; Giovanni Previtali proposed the name of Borghese, followed by Flavia Ferrante, and it was recognized as a preparatory study for the homonymous altarpiece of the Santuario dell'Assunta in Santa Maria in Vico, considered certain work by Dirck Hendricks, in Naples known as Teodoro d'Errico (1585, see Leone de Castris 1991, pp. 60, 68, fig. Nn, 315, note 5). This erroneous attribution of the drawing of Capodimonte is indicative of Borghese's cultural tangency compared to the well-known Flemish colleague, to whom, equally significantly, was originally attributed the painting of the Cathedral of Ischia.

The painting and the drawing lack the correspondence in theme, the second one depicting a pure battle scene, plausibly of a Christian knight against the Moors. The warrior has a plumed helmet, inspired by the one traditionally associated with St. George; neither is he identifiable as Saint James, generally portrayed on a horse with a bare head and distinct from the cross of the Knightly Order painted on his armour or, at most, embellished by the hat decorated with the shell that takes his name.

A greater compositional impetus prevails in the graphic evidence, justified by the rage of the battle, and nevertheless it is undeniable the comparison between the protagonist of the drawing and the saint of the board of Ischia, to the point of assuming that one of the two works represented the first idea of the other.

Numerous are, in fact, the similarities to be found in the two heads of the *condottieri*, quite similar in features, as is also the case with the physiognomy of the horses; in the poses of the forelegs of the steeds; in the airiness of shaping and circling of the painted drapery, as seen in the feathers of the helmet and the drawn

hair; in the typology of the garb ready to reveal their thighs; in the nervous and mobile graphic trace of the figures represented in a contained Mannerist style; in the most vigorous *michaelangelism* of the fallen horseman, similar to the muscular back of the dragon brought down by the holy warrior. Additionally, we note the same stylistic verve, evoking the mobility of the pictorial repertoire of Teodoro d'Errico and Francesco Curia, in conjunction with the references to the world of Belisario Corenzio, previously mentioned, seems to be well adapted to the juvenile style of Ippolito Borghese.

Prior to the famous masterpiece, as well as the best-known cornerstone of the master's style, the *Assunzione della Vergine* of the Monte di Pietà (signed and dated 1603), work now framed, more than in the Baroque style, in the naturalist and devoted register of so-called reformed Florentines, Santi di Tito and Domenico Cresti il Passignano, whose works also came to Naples.

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