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EST. 1817

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Baldassare Peruzzi (Ancaiano, nr. Siena 1481 –
1536 Rome)

The Nativity

Oil on panel

39 ½ x 30 ½ in. (99.3 x 77.5 cm.)

Painted *circa* 1515



Provenance

Casa Vai, Prato.

The Sebright Collection, Beechwood (as 'Giovanni Francesco Penni'), his sale, Christie's, The Sebright Heirlooms, 2 July 1937, lot 117.

The Trustees of the will of Sir Egbert Cecil Saunders Sebright, 10th Bt. Christie's, 18 January 1946, lot 72, (45 gns. to Scharf), by whom sold to, Philip Pouncey, UK.

Private Collection, Europe.

Exhibited

Manchester City Art Gallery, *Between Renaissance and Baroque: European Art 1520-1600*, 10 March-6 April 1965, p. 59, no. 185.

On loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, *From Raphael to Carracci, The Art of Papal Rome*, D. Franklin, 29 May-7 September 2009, pp. 114-115, no. 15.

Fondazione Roma Museo- Palazzo Sciarra, *Il Rinascimento a Roma: Nel Segno di Michelangelo e Raffaello, (The Renaissance in Rome: A Token to Michelangelo and Raphael)* 25 October 2011- 17 March 2012, illustrated p.174, p. 280, no. 38.

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Literature

- J. Pope-Hennessy, 'A Painting by Baldassare Peruzzi', *The Burlington Magazine*, LXXXVIII, 1946, pp. 237-241, frontispiece and illustrated.
- F. Zeri, 'Intorno a Gerolamo Siciolante', *Bollettino d'Arte*, XXXVI, 1951, p. 145.
- S. J. Freedberg, *Painting of the High Renaissance in Rome and Florence*, 1961, vol. I, pp. 150-151, illustrated vol. II, pl. 212.
- P. Pouncey and J. A. Gere, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum: Raphael and his Circle*, 1962, p. 135.
- B. Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance, Central and North Italian Schools*, 1968, vol. I. p. 334, vol. III, pl. 1837.
- C. L. Frommel, *Baldassare Peruzzi als Maler und Zeichner*, Vienna, 1968, pp. 79-80, no. 40, pl. XXV.
- M. V. Brugnoli, 'Baldassare Peruzzi nella chiesa di S. Maria della Pace e nella "Uccelliera" di Giulio II', in *Bollettino d'Arte* 58, 1973, pp. 115-116.
- P. De Castris, *Polidoro da Caravaggio*, Naples, 2001, p. 215, fig. 262.

Once attributed to Giovanni Francesco Penni (*circa* 1488-1528), one of Raphael's closest followers, the attribution of this *Nativity* to the Sienese artist Baldassare Peruzzi was established by Philip Pouncey (1910-1990), a former owner of the painting and a great scholar of Italian drawings. The attribution has been accepted by all subsequent scholars. The painting – a rare work on panel by Peruzzi and little known – is a distinctive and original example of Roman art of the High Renaissance period, produced shortly after the completion of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling and while Raphael was active in the Vatican Stanze. The relief-like composition with the figures very much massed in the foreground reveals Peruzzi's awareness of ancient art found in Rome and its potential as a source and inspiration for modern painting, made more obvious by the inclusion of a ruined building that is distinctly reminiscent of the Colosseum – an allusion to the fall of the ancient order with the birth of Christ. The *Nativity* also takes place in a nocturnal setting, an artistic trope of this period, with the protagonists bathed in moonlight and the annunciatory angel appearing in a nimbus, accentuated by the moonlit cloud formations. The manner in which the artist combines dark tonalities with strong side lighting in order to focus on events in the foreground was a device adopted by later artists such as Parmigianino and Rosso Fiorentino, and places Peruzzi at the foreground of innovation in Roman painting around the mid-1510s.

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Essentially a transitional figure between the early Renaissance and the High Renaissance in Italy, Peruzzi had important and wealthy patrons such as the Sieneese banker Agostino Chigi, Cardinal Raffaele Riario and at least two Popes, Julius II and later Paul III. Best known as an accomplished architect and theatre designer, the enigmatic Peruzzi was also a painter and draughtsman, whose designs were distinctive for their grace and detail. Although Raphael and Bramante are now better known today, Peruzzi was highly esteemed by his contemporaries, and he was honoured with burial in a tomb adjacent to Raphael's in Rome's mighty Pantheon.

This *Nativity* was produced when Raphael was the dominant painter Rome, despite Michelangelo's attempts to promote the Venetian artist Sebastiano del Piombo; and the rather world-weary and anxious figure of Joseph in the *Nativity* is a reworking of a spectator in Raphael's *Saint Paul Preaching at Athens* tapestry cartoon (fig. 1). The sculptural solidity of the figures in our painting and the crisp, metallic draperies, with the clinging *all'antica* folds are reminiscent of Raphael's work in Rome at this time. As well as the influence of Raphael and Michelangelo, the softness and sensuality of the Virgin's face in the *Nativity*, as well as the richness of lighting, can be viewed as a response to the art of Sebastiano del Piombo and his Venetian contemporaries; while the angel bursting into the sky seems to anticipate an intensity seen in Ferrarese art, with artists such as Garofalo. Additionally, Giorgione, with his enigmatic landscapes, must surely have provided some inspiration for the landscape in this painting.

The present panel may have had as a companion piece a *Coronation of the Virgin* by Peruzzi also formerly in the Sebright collection, now location unknown, and it has even been suggested that they may once have been joined as a diptych. The comparatively small size of the work may be due to its intention for a private altar, within the house of a Patrician.

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Detail of Raphael's, *Saint Paul Preaching at Athens* (Acts 17: 16-34), cartoon for a tapestry, *circa* 1515, on loan from Her Majesty the Queen to the V&A, London.