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EST. 1817

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Pompeo Batoni (Lucca 1708–1787 Rome)

Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness

Signed with initials and dated on the stone plinth
(bottom centre): 'P · B · 1752'

Oil on canvas

37 ⁵/₈ x 29 ¹/₈ in. (95.5 x 74 cm.)



Provenance

Almost certainly commissioned by Prince Domenico Orsini, Duke of Gravina, later Cardinal Domenico Amedeo Orsini d'Aragona (1719–1789);

Private collection, Germany, Rhineland, at least since 1939 (depicted on a black-and-white postcard from the 1930s with the notation “durch P.L.H. Söntges in Köln erworben”) until 2020.

Literature

Peter Björn Kerber, “La precisione del momento: testo e contesto nella pittura di storia di Batoni,” in Liliana Barroero and Fernando Mazzocca (eds.), *Pompeo Batoni, 1708–1787, L'Europa delle Corti e il Grand Tour*, exh. cat. Palazzo Ducale, Lucca, 2008, p. 85, no. 98

Edgar Peters Bowron, *Pompeo Batoni: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, New Haven and London, 2016, vol. 1, p. 84, citing Kerber.

Alessandro Agresti, *Domenico Orsini e le arti Roma alle soglie della Rivoluzione*, Rome, 2019, pp. 139–40.

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Praised as 'Italy's last Old Master', Pompeo Batoni was the dominant painter in Rome in the middle years of the 18th century. His contemporaries recognized his pre-eminence, a position which Batoni maintained for a period of nearly fifty intense and highly prolific years. By 1759, Johann Winckelmann celebrated one of his portraits as 'eins der ersten in der Welt' (one of the first in the world); and Benjamin West when commemorating his visit to Rome in 1760 complained that 'the Italian artists of that day thought of nothing, looked at nothing, but the work of Pompeo Battoni.' Batoni began his career in Lucca, working as a decorator and engraver of precious metals in the workshop of his father, an eminent goldsmith in his native town. Before he turned twenty, Batoni left for Rome, where he studied classical antiquity and produced copies after the Antique. He was distinguished for his history paintings that anticipated the Neoclassicism of the later eighteenth century; and for his portraits, famously of young British aristocrats on the Grand Tour. His paintings are notable especially for their freshness of colouring, strikingly natural tone, visual intensity paired with an elegance, and exquisite precision which Leopoldo Cicognara, the great antiquarian, called Batoni's 'laboriosa finitezza olandese' – a remarkable and almost "un-Italian" quality, maybe a result of Batoni's early training in his father's goldsmith workshop.

All those qualities are superbly exemplified in the present *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*. Recently come to light from a private German collection, this fine canvas follows the traditional iconography of the subject in which the saint is depicted alone in a woodland setting, seated on a fur-trimmed red cloak, cradling a lamb and a slender reed cross with a pennant inscribed 'Ecce Agnus Dei.' The anatomical definition of the saint's musculature and the precision of handling, recall Batoni's greatest representation of the subject, painted a decade earlier and highly celebrated at the time, the lost Dresden *Saint John the Baptist* (fig. 1; Bowron 2016, vol. 1, pp. 61–64, no. 50), in which the treatment of the lamb and the facial features of St John are executed in a very similar manner. This picture was conceived as a pendant to the *Penitent Magdalen* (fig. 2) that has been described as Batoni's single most important picture until its destruction in 1945 and most actively responsible for his fame outside Italy in the 18th century (Bowron, 2016, p. 62). Copied numerous times, including by the Meissen porcelain manufactories, the *Penitent Magdalen* was the most popular painting in the Dresden galleries in the 19th century.

Peter Kerber firmly believes the present picture to be a pendant to the oval *Penitent Magdalen* sold at Sotheby's, New York, 24 January 2008, lot 73 for \$825,000, now in a private collection, New York (fig. 3). Both pictures may well be identified with several payments from Cardinal Domenico Amedeo Orsini

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d'Aragona (1719–1789) in late 1752 for an oval *Saint John the Baptist in the Desert*, and in early 1754 for an oval *Penitent Magdalene* (Kerber 2008, p. 85, n. 98, citing Archivio Capitolino, Rome, Fondo Orsini, II serie, busta 1470, fol. 147, 22 November 1752: 'un quadro ovato rapp.te S. Gio:Batta nel deserto'; fol. 150, late November 1752: 'un quadro rapp.te S. Gio:Batta nel deserto dipinto in tela di 4 p.mi ovata,' with a receipt signed by Batoni, 28 November 1752, for 'un San Gio: Battista nel Deserto dipinto in tela di quattro palmi ovata'; busta 1471, fol. 21, 17 February 1754: 'un quadro in ovato grande rapp.te S.a M.a Maddalena penitente,' with receipt signed by Batoni, 18 February 1754, for 'una Maddalena in tondo di mezza figura'; see also Agresti 2019, pp. 139–141, who records a gilded frame for the oval Saint John in December 1752 as well as a third painting depicting Saint Joseph, that was commissioned from Batoni in 1753 and remains untraced). Cardinal Orsini's patronage of Batoni continued in the 1750s with a painting of Pope Benedict XIV Presenting the Encyclical *Ex Omnibus* to the Comte de Choiseul, 1757 (Minneapolis Institute of Art), commissioned by Cardinal Orsini toward the end of the pontificate of Benedict XIV Lambertini (reigned 1740–1758) as a present for the Pope, and with a portrait of the cardinal's daughter, the most celebrated of Batoni's female Italian sitters, *Princess Giacinta Orsini Boncompagni Ludovisi, Duchess of Arce (1741–1759)*, c.1757–58 (Private collection; Bowron 2016, vol. 1, pp. 240–43, cat. no. 199, and pp. 250–53, cat. no. 206; Agresti 2019, pp. 141–147, and pp. 147–150).

The painting has been examined in the original by Edgar Peters Bowron in 2020, who notes the nearly identical treatment and shape of the letters and numerals in the signature to those in a number of signed and dated paintings by Batoni of 1752 (see, for example, Bowron 2016, vol. 1, cat. nos. 144, 155, 156, 158, 162). We thank Peter Kerber for his assistance with the provenance of this picture.

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Fig. 2: Pompeo Batoni, *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, oil on canvas, formerly Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, destroyed in 1945



Fig. 3: Pompeo Batoni, *Penitent Magdalene*, oil on canvas, formerly Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden, destroyed in 1945

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Fig. 1: Pompeo Batoni, *The Penitent Magdalene*, oil on canvas, a painted oval, 97.5 x 75.8 cm., sold at Sotheby's, New York, 24 January 2008, lot 73 for \$825,000