

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

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Niccolò Giolfino (Verona 1476-1555)

Mucius Scaevola thrusting his hand into the fire in the Piazza dei Signori, Verona

Inscribed on the reverse: 'A very unusual drawing purchased in its present state in Great Russell Street, 1792'.

Tempera on panel

10 1/2 x 12 1/2 in. (26.7 x 31.8 cm.)

Painted c.1510-15



Provenance

Great Russell Street, 1792 (according to inscription on reverse);
T. G. N. Batting;
Hallsborough Gallery, London;
Sotheby's, London, 14 February 1968, lot 33;
Where bought by Agnew's (1968);
Major Peter Harris and by descent to the previous owner.

Exhibited

London, Agnew's, 1977, no. 2.
London, Agnew's, 1979, no. 12.

Literature

M. Repetto, 'Nicola Giolfino', in *Maestri della pittura veronese*, Verona, 1974, p. 158.
M. Repetto Contaldo, 'Novità e precisazioni su Nicola Giolfino', in *Arte Veneta*, XXX, 1976, pp. 75-76, fig. 5.
P. Brugnoli, *Il Palazzo della Provincia già Dimora di Cangrande a Verona*, Villafontana, 2001, p. 83.
M. Vinco, *Cassoni. Pittura profana del Rinascimento a Verona*, Milan 2018, no. 128, pp. 384-85, illustrated.

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This highly original panel by Niccolò Giolfino depicts a scene from the legendary life of Gaius Mucius Scaevola, against the backdrop of the Piazza dei Signori, located behind Piazza delle Erbe, the ancient Roman forum in Verona where the artist lived his whole life (Fig.1). On the left is the Loggia del Consiglio with its colourfully painted facade; on the right the Palazzo del Capitano, and at the far end of the Piazza is the Palazzo del Governo. A glimpse of the Scaliger tombs, a group of Gothic funerary monuments celebrating the Scaliger family who ruled in Verona from the 13th to the late 14th century, can be seen in the right-hand background.

One of two long predella panels by Giolfino, in the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona, depicting respectively the *Trial* and the *Martyrdom of St. Barbara*, shows a view of the Piazza dei Signori in Verona which is almost identical to that of our picture (Fig. 2)¹. However, slight architectural differences between the two suggest that the present picture can be dated earlier. Most noticeable is a late fifteenth-century window on the second floor of the Palazzo del Governo which does not feature in the Verona panel².

The elongated figures wearing clothes with rather reduced embellishments are typical for Niccolò Giolfino's whimsical painting style and reveal the influence of Liberale da Verona, from whom he inherited his 'anticlassicism'. Vinco (*op. cit.* 2018) dates the present panel, which is preserved in its original dimensions, to around c.1510-15, and compares it with the *Sacrifice of Iphigenia* in the Fogg Museum of Art in Cambridge (Fig. 3) and with *The Sabine Women Try to Keep Their Husbands and Sons From the War* in the Palazzo Barberini, Rome, both of which can be dated to the same period within the artist's oeuvre.

The scene depicted in the present painting is a celebrated one in the history of Rome and was often used for the decoration of *casone* panels. According to Titus Livy (Ab Urbe II, 12-13) and Valerius Maximus (Fact. III, 3, 1), in 508 BC, during the war between Rome and Clusium, the Clusian King Lars Porsena laid siege to Rome. Gaius Mucius Cordus, with the approval of the Roman Senate, snuck into the Etruscan camp with the intent of murdering Porsena. As it was the soldiers' pay day, there were two similarly dressed men on a raised platform speaking to the troops, one of whom was the King. As a result, Mucius

¹ inv. nos. 937-1B1577 & 938-1B1577, measuring 12 x 36 in. each.

² For a detailed discussion of the picture in Verona see M. Repetto Contaldo, in *Museo di Castelvecchio. Catalogo generale dei dipinti e delle miniature delle collezioni civiche Veronesi*, Verona 2010, pp. 385- 386 no. 286; and Brugnoli 2001, pp. 80-85.

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misidentified his target and killed Porsena's scribe by mistake. After being captured, he famously declared to Porsena: 'I am Roman citizen, men call me Gaius Mucius. I came here as an enemy to kill my enemy, and I am as ready to die as I am to kill. We Romans act bravely and, when adversity strikes, we suffer bravely.' He bravely declared that he was the first of three hundred Roman youths to volunteer for the task of assassinating Porsena at the risk of losing their own lives.

'Watch', he is said to have demanded, 'so that you know how cheap the body is to men who have their eye on great glory'. Mucius thrust his right hand into the burning flames of a sacrificial fire and held it there, without showing any pain, thereby earning himself and his descendants the cognomen Scaevola, meaning 'left-handed'. Porsena was shocked at the youth's bravery and dismissed him from the Etruscan camp, free to return to Rome, saying "Go back, since you do more harm to yourself than me". At the same time, the King sent ambassadors to Rome to offer peace. Mucius was granted farming land on the right-hand bank of the Tiber, which later became known as the *Mucia Prata* (Mucian Meadows).



Fig. 1: Piazza dei Signori in Verona

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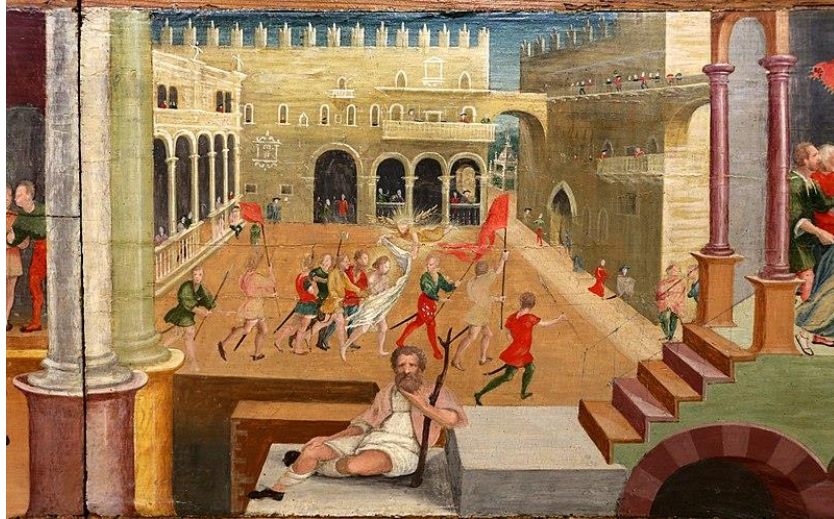


Fig. 2: Detail of Niccolò Giolfino, *The Trial of St Barbara*, Castelvecchio Museum, Verona



Fig. 3: Niccolò Giolfino, *The Sacrifice of Iphigenia*, Fogg Museum, Cambridge