

# SEBASTIANO RICCI

(Belluno 1659 - Venice 1734)

## *The Sermon on the Mount*

oil on canvas  
42 x 59.5 cm (16½ x 23½ in)

**Provenance:** Private Collection, Scotland, before 1976 and after 1983;  
with Simon Dickinson Ltd., London (according to a label on the reverse)

**Literature:** J. Daniels, *L'opera completa di Sebastiano Ricci*, Milan 1976, p. 128, fig. 436 (incorrectly illustrated under the number 436/3);  
J. Byam Shaw, *The Italian Drawing of the Frits Lugt Collection*, Paris 1983, vol. I, p. 269 (cat. no. 261, ill. fig. 66);  
Annalisa Scarpa, *Sebastiano Ricci*, Milan 2006, p. 317, no. 495, ill. p. 631, no. 583

**U**NDER A MOONLIT SKY, THROUGH EVOCATIVE, hazy lighting and a fluid handling of the terracotta palette, Sebastiano Ricci atmospherically captures the moment when Christ delivers His sermon on a mountainside to His disciples and a crowd of followers. Swathed in a blue toga and seated cross-legged beneath a curving tree, the figure of Christ, with one hand clutching His chest and the other held up in mid-oration, clearly captivates His surrounding audience. Above Him an entwined pair of *putti* hovers, while the only figure standing holds his hands together in prayer. Reverently kneeling in front of Christ a figure, possibly a disciple, is lit by a shaft of light which catches the soft tone of his flesh and the terracotta and green fabric of his tunic. Two older, bearded men sit in the shadows alongside Christ. They, like the kneeling figure, listen to His words with apparent awe and admiration, evident in their concentrated expressions.

The composition of this scene is clearly one that Ricci experimented with since three preparatory drawings exist for the present work.<sup>1</sup> The first, in the Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice (ink and wash on paper, 210 x 295 mm; reproduced in A. Rizzi, *Sebastiano Ricci disegnatore*, exhibition catalogue, Udine, Sala Aiace del Comune, 26 October - 8 December 1975, cat. no. 65, and also in Daniels, *op. cit.*, fig. 4361); the second, in the Cabinet des Dessins, Musée du Louvre, Paris (inv. 5324), see figure 1, which repeats the Venice drawing in reverse and was probably worked up from a *contre-épreuve*; and the third, a freely-drawn sketch in the Fondation Lugt, Institut Néerlandais, Paris, which must be a preliminary drawing for the painting as it includes the two

<sup>1</sup> Ricci was a prolific draughtsman and two excellent collections of his drawings are now held in the Royal Collection, Windsor and the Accademia, Venice.

<sup>2</sup> Shaw, J. B., *The Italian Drawing of the Frits Lugt Collection*, Paris 1983, vol. I, erroneously reproduced as fig. 436 but referred to in the text as no. 4363.



Sebastiano Ricci, *Jesus Teaching the Apostles*,  
The Louvre, Paris (Figure 1)

*putti* in the upper centre (red chalk and light wash on paper, 161 x 237 mm; see J. Byam Shaw, under Literature, vol. I, pp. 269-270, cat. no. 261, reproduced vol. III, fig. 261, and also in Daniels, *op. cit.*, fig. 4362). Moreover, a painted replica also exists and was brought to Jeffrey Daniels' attention by Professor Giuliano Briganti, though it is considered to be of inferior quality and it does not include the two *putti*.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Sermon on the Mount* Ricci masterfully creates a strong sense of veneration and faith, which is evoked by the expressive faces and submissive, interactive poses of the figures as they listen in awe. The disciples and followers, while clustered around Christ, are given enough space and illumination for their individual stances and gestures to create an electric atmosphere. Furthermore, the positioning of the kneeling disciple, centrally and equally opposite the figure of Christ, forms a skilfully balanced and harmonious composition.



(Also illustrated pp. 354-355)



Sebastiano Ricci, *Childhood of Romulus and Remus*, c.1708, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; State Museum Fund from the Yusupov Palace Museum, Leningrad, 1920 (Figure 2)

Building an interactive, carefully fused figure group was evidently important to Ricci. The Hermitage's *Childhood of Romulus and Remus*, though completed twenty years or so earlier, shows how Ricci has focused on the group of figures to lead the narrative of the scene (fig. 2). The attentive, tender expressions and the gestural, though stylised, poses of the figures who huddle around the infants Romulus and Remus reveal a strong parallel to the present work. In both paintings the viewer



Sebastiano Ricci, *The Adoration of the Magi*, c.1726-1730, Royal Collection (Figure 3)

is made immediately aware of the subject but is also visually stimulated by the emotion and action surrounding the central story.

In both *The Sermon on the Mount* and *Childhood of Romulus and Remus*, Ricci displays his skill for depicting taut muscularity. On the far right hand side of the work, an elongated, almost El Greco-esque figure with a long beard is seen wearing a short blue tunic and red flowing toga. Despite his advancing years his muscular forearms and build show his evident corporal strength. Similarly, in the foreground of the *Childhood of Romulus and Remus* a seated male figure dressed in red and wearing a cloth diadem is awkwardly posed to cleverly reveal his robustness, particularly in his prominent neck and arms.

Another version of *The Sermon on the Mount*, now untraced, was painted by Ricci and his nephew Marco Ricci (1676-1730) at around



Sebastiano Ricci, *Abraham and the Angels*, c.1694, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Museum of the Academy of Arts, Petrograd, 1922 (Figure 4)

the same time as the present work. The lost version formed part of a series of seven pictures of New Testament subjects which include, *The Adoration of the Magi*, *Christ and the Woman who Believed*, *Christ and the Woman of Samaria*, *The Magdalene Anointing Christ's Feet* (all in the Royal Collection), *The Pool of Bethesda* and *The Woman Taken in Adultery* (Ministry of Works, presently at Osterley House) and all apart from *The Adoration of the Magi* illustrate scenes from Christ's ministry (fig. 3).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This series was later acquired by George III (1738-1820) in 1762 from Consul Joseph Smith (c.1682-1720). The origin of the commission for this series of paintings is unknown. The size of the undertaking (the dimensions in each case are extremely large and there are fundamental changes in format) has caused the series to be associated with an unrecorded commission for the Royal House of Savoy in Turin, for whom Ricci worked during the 1720s.

Ricci was one of the most celebrated Venetian artists in Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and was a main protagonist in the evolution of the Rococo style which reached its zenith with the work of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) (see inventory). Born in Belluno in the Veneto, he moved to Venice at the age of twelve where he was apprenticed to the Milanese painter Federico Cervelli (c.1625-1700), from whom he early acquired a free style of painting.<sup>4</sup> He also responded to the brilliant colour and airy space of Luca Giordano (1634-1705), who had painted three altarpieces for S Maria della Salute, Venice.

*Abraham and the Angels*, now in The Hermitage, painted c.1694, shows some of the influence from Ricci's early tutelage (fig. 4). However, Ricci had clearly developed his own style by the 1690's and, as with the atmospheric lighting and imbedded emotion in the present work, *Abraham and the Angels* is filled with energetic gestures, large flowing folds of drapery and impressive light contrasts, whilst remaining a balanced composition. Abraham who, frightened by the appearance of the angels, has fallen to his knees in reverence reminds the viewer of the adoring disciple in *The Sermon on the Mount* who kneels in veneration and wonder in front of Christ as he listens fixedly to His preaching.

However it was the rediscovery of the Venetian Mannerist master, Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) by Ricci that left the greatest impression on the artist and who continued to have a considerable influence on later Rococo artists, particularly Tiepolo. Veronese and, subsequently, Ricci sought to create striking compositions where the interaction, poses and expressions of the figures significantly contributed to the overall aestheticism of the work.



Paolo Veronese, *The Adoration of the Magi*, c.1570s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Crozat Collection, Paris, 1772 (Figure 5)



Sebastiano Ricci, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Detail)

Furthermore, Ricci appropriated his predecessor's preference for dazzling light and colour harmonies and careful handling of perspective. If one compares Ricci's *Adoration of the Magi*, see figure 3, to Veronese's 1570s interpretation, see figure 5, clear parallels can be seen between the two artists. In particular the structural composition of the works, both set amidst grandiose classical architecture and from a low viewpoint, show the Holy Family dominating the left-hand side of the painting while the Magi and their entourage fill the remaining space.<sup>5</sup>

Ricci was a renowned womaniser and had a chequered personal life, spending some time in prison after trying to poison a Venetian woman he had made pregnant. Following his release he left Venice for Bologna in 1681 and entered the studio of Giovanni Gioseffo dal Sole (1654-1719). After being recommended by Carlo Cignani (1628-1719), in 1687-8 Ricci completed fresco decoration portraying scenes from the *Life of Pope Paul III* for the Duchess of Parma's apartments in the Palazzo Farnese in Piacenza. Patronised by the Duke of Parma (1630-1694), Ricci lived comfortably in the Farnese Palace in Rome where he received several noble commissions. In 1694 he travelled to Lombardy and worked in Milan but in 1696 he returned to Venice and married a Dutchwoman. An itinerant artist, reputedly moving to escape amatory escapades, he travelled to England in the winter of 1711-12 where he completed four monumental canvases (c.1713-14) for Burlington House (now the Royal Academy) for Richard Boyle, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Burlington (1694-1752), as well as receiving other commissions including the decoration of the chapel in the Chelsea Hospital (c.1715-16). He returned to Venice, via Paris, in 1716 where his international reputation afforded him a grand apartment. His status as a celebrated artist throughout Europe brought many important commissions in his later years, including designing the cartoons for the mosaic decoration on the façade of the basilica of San Marco in Venice.

Jeffrey Daniels fully accepts the work as autograph in his *L'opera completa* (see Literature above) and dates the painting to Ricci's mature period, c.1725.

<sup>4</sup> See for example *Birth of St. John* (before 1706, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna).

<sup>5</sup> Ricci's *Adoration of the Magi* is based, in reverse, on another of Veronese's versions of the *Adoration of the Magi* (National Gallery, London) which was painted for the church of San Silvestro, Venice, in 1573.