

GIOVANNI ANTONIO PELLEGRINI

(Venice 1675 - Venice 1741)

Young Hannibal Swears Enmity to Rome

oil on canvas
71 x 94 cm (27⁷/₈ x 37 in)

Provenance: Ruggero Sonino, Venice;
Anonymous sale, London, Christie's, April 24, 1981, Lot 98.

Exhibited: London, Matthiesen Fine Art Ltd., *The Settecento 1700-1800*, 1987, no. 10, pl. 5.

Literature: R. Pallucchini, 'Novita ed appunti per Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini', in *Pantheon*, vol. XVIII, 1960, pp. 247-248, reproduced; G. Knox, *Antonio Pellegrini*, Oxford 1995, p. 239, cat. no. P. 169.

THE SCENE DEPICTED HERE IN ALL ITS GLORIOUS drama is of the great Carthaginian general and tactician, Hannibal, swearing eternal enmity to Rome, his bitterest foe. In a manner reminiscent of caravagesque painters, the figures that make up this scene of dramatic action are illuminated by a shaft of ethereal light beaming down on them. The main figure, Hannibal's father Hamilcar, is decked out in a brilliant crimson cloak and a bejewelled headpiece as worn by the Phoenicians. A pyramidal composition which includes another soldier with his back to the viewer and the frightened Hannibal, whose hand his father firmly clasps, highlights further the intense and concentrated expression on the old general's face. Hannibal is depicted with long hair in the conventional style and wears a pale blue cloak which he gathers about himself with his spare hand. Hannibal's upraised profile is a recurring theme in Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini's painting appearing in, for instance, *Angelica and Medor* (Narford Hall, Norfolk, England) and *The Happy Return* (Alte Pinakothek Depot, Munich). R. Pallucchini dates this work to c. 1731, and another version of this subject and its pendant, the *Sacrifice of Polyxena*, form over doors in the Antechamber of the Würzburg Residenz, Germany, dated 1722.

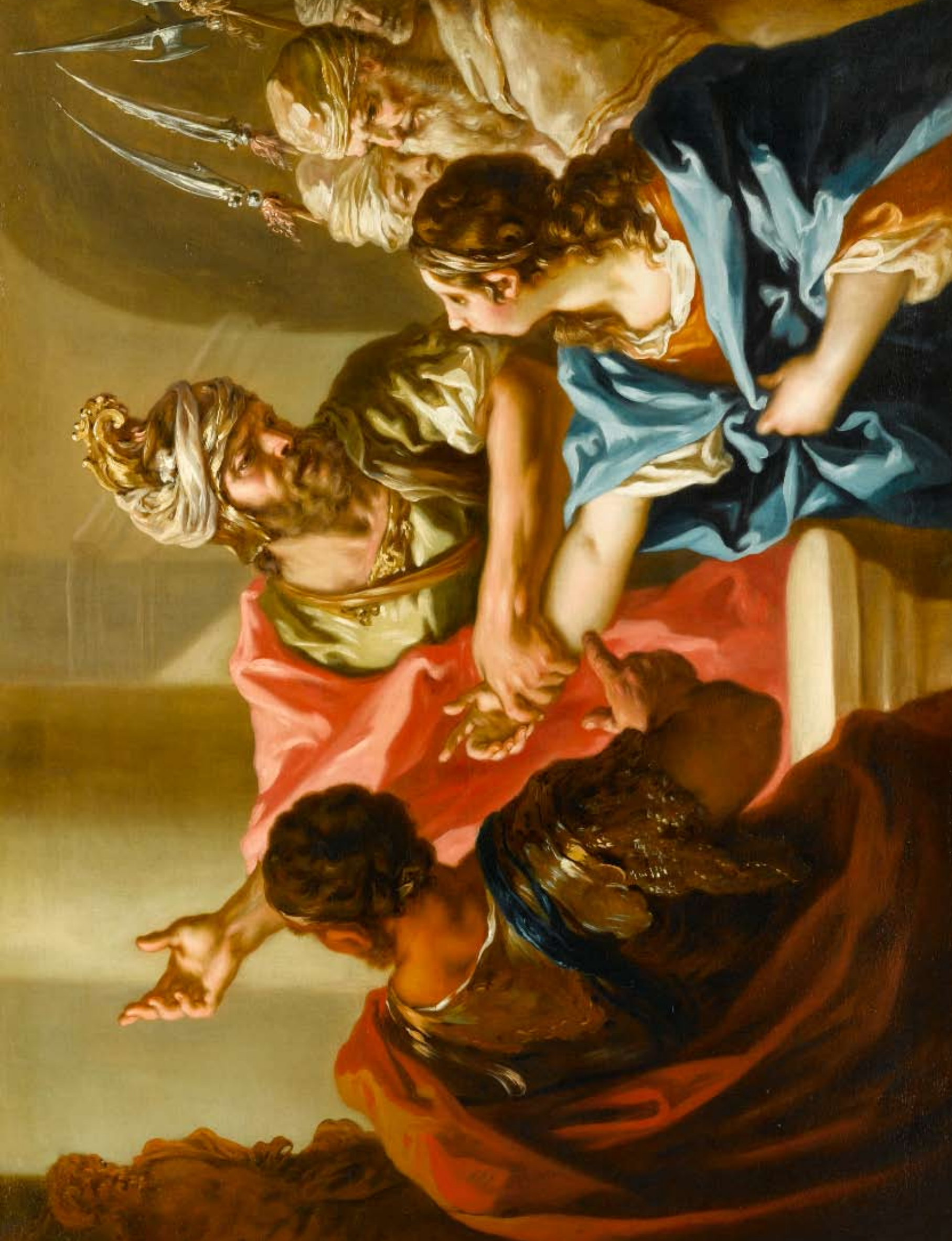
A further example of dramatic composition that exploits antique subject matter is illustrated in Pellegrini's *Achilles Discovered with the Daughters of Lycomedes* (fig. 1). The viewer is instantly struck by the turbaned figure with his back turned. In *Young Hannibal Swears Enmity to Rome*, that posture is adopted by a heavily armed soldier. Similarly, where the frightened maiden points her sword within piercing distance of the man's face, Pellegrini's arrangement of his figures' arms in *Young Hannibal Swears Enmity to Rome* creates the same frantic sense of movement and drama. His ability to pictorially outline his figures' clothes is one of his great skills. In both works, the careful modelling of the folds of drapery to outline the bodies beneath achieves an undeniable realism in spite of the fictitious subject matter (at least in *Achilles Discovered with the Daughters of Lycomedes*).

The vivid cloaks of the three protagonists in *Young Hannibal Swears*



Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini, *Achilles Discovered with the Daughters of Lycomedes*, The Spencer Museum of Art, Kansas (Figure 1)

Enmity to Rome, lend the scene a theatrical undertone. There is a great deal of space around them with virtually nothing to detract from the supreme drama of the moment rendered. The three elderly men in the background behind the young Hannibal's shoulder serve to highlight the contrast between the extreme youth of Hamilcar's son as well as lending gravity to the scene by virtue of their age. The foreboding face of the nearest elder is matched by the seriousness of Hamilcar's. The perspective accomplished by painting the three in an arched recess and having the third elder straining to see from his distant vantage point, focuses all the more on Hamilcar, the central figure of the scene. Further stylistic comparatives with the present work can be identified in another history painting by Pellegrini, *Mucius Scaevola before Porsenna* (fig. 2). Scaevola appears very similar in dress to the soldier who





Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini, *Mucius Scaevola before Porsenna*, 1706-1708, Museo del Settecento Veneziano, Ca' Rezzonico, Venice (Figure 2)

turns away from the viewer in *Young Hannibal Swears Enmity to Rome*. In this mature work, Pellegrini blends the neo fifteenth-century style of Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734) (see Inventory) with the *chiaroscuro* effects of Luca Giordano (1634-1705).

The subject matter of this work, *Young Hannibal Swears Enmity to Rome*, concerns the period of bitter fighting between Rome and Carthage during a series of wars from the middle of the third century to the mid-second century BC. Known as The Punic Wars, they ended with a decisive vanquishing of Carthage that allowed Rome to emerge as the pre-eminent Mediterranean imperial power. One of the key players in the history of the Punic Wars was General Hannibal of Phoenician Carthage. Hannibal was the son of an equally prominent Carthaginian commander and tactician during the First Punic War, Hamilcar Barca. Pellegrini captures the moment in which the young Hannibal was compelled by his father to swear eternal enmity to Rome. According to the ancient historians Polybius and Livy, Hannibal said much later that when he came upon his father preparing for battle and begged to go with him, Hamilcar agreed but only on the condition that he swear for as long as he lived never to cede to Rome. There is another account of Hannibal's father taking his young son up to a sacrificial chamber and setting him over a fire until he made the eternal promise. From the death of his father in 229 BC until his own, Hannibal's life was one of constant struggle against the Roman Republic. Hannibal came within a whisker of erasing the emerging Roman Empire from the history books in the course of the Second Punic War (218-202 BC).

The genre in which Pellegrini excelled, as exemplified by *Young Hannibal Swears Enmity to Rome*, was history painting. A Renaissance treatise by Alberti used the word *istoria* in 1435 to describe a narrative picture with many figures. The phrase was more frequently associated with classical subject matter and largely because of the sheer number of figures in their compositions, works of this type were seen as the most demanding and exalted types of painting. Typically, this style of artistry dictated that the characters should be as near

life size as possible and ought to be studied from an individual model. One only has to look at the detailed expressions on the faces of the characters in the present picture to see this clearly. History painting coincided with the rise of naturalism which had begun in Northern Europe but during the sixteenth century it began to be felt in Rome. Overall, history painting in the earlier eighteenth century was transformed by Rococo taste into the prettiness relayed by the peripatetic Venetians, Pellegrini and the Ricci and Tiepolo families as well as François Lemoyne (1688-1737) and his pupil François Boucher (1703-1770). In England a keen advocate of history painting was Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) (see cat. no. 71). In his *Discourses*, delivered to members of the Royal Academy, he continually propounded the study of Old Masters of the Roman and Bolognese schools and of the use of subjects from Greek and Roman history.

Pellegrini (fig. 3), together with Ricci and Jacopo Amigoni (c.1685-1752), was one of the finest Venetian history painters of his day. Credited with seamlessly melding the Renaissance style promoted by Paulo Veronese (1528-1588) with the Baroque of Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669) and Giordano, Pellegrini enjoyed great popularity amongst the European aristocracy. He travelled widely around Europe executing elegant commissions to decorate the palatial residences of the wealthy upper classes.

Having trained under P. Pagani (1661-1716) in Venice, Pellegrini was invited to England in 1708 by the British ambassador to Venice, Charles Montagu. Whilst there he decorated the stairwell of Montagu's London home in Arlington Street, which has since been destroyed. The following year, Pellegrini, along with Marco Ricci (1676-1730) who had also been invited over to England by the ambassador, painted the set designs for Alessandro Scarlatti's opera, *Pirro e Demetrio* and for Giovanni Bononcini's *Camilla*. That same year he received a commission from Charles, the 3rd Earl of Carlisle to paint the cupola, staircases and entrance hall of Vanburgh's magnificent Castle Howard in North Yorkshire which was largely destroyed by fire in 1941. Employing the fashionable genre of mythological and allegorical paintings, Pellegrini created



Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini, *Self-Portrait*, 1717, National Portrait Gallery, London (Figure 3)

a dramatic version of the *Fall of Phaethon* for the cupola and used the walls for allegorical settings. Following his success at Castle Howard, Pellegrini was also called upon to decorate another of Charles Montagu's residences, Kimbolton Castle. He adorned the walls with *The Triumph of a Roman Emperor* and a rendition of *Minerva* on the ceiling. *Minerva* includes a portrait of the patron upheld by *putti*. Again, the light and radiant colours are indebted to Veronese; the scene of musicians playing a fanfare, painted in a triangular area, is brilliantly accomplished, both as an independent work and as part of the whole. Both of these frescoes represent his most important surviving British achievement with a spaciousness of design and a radiance of colour that anticipates Giambattista Tiepolo (1695-1770).

Other large-scale projects undertaken whilst in England include a series of mythological canvases originally intended for Burlington House, London, which hang now in Narford Hall, Norfolk. Pellegrini worked with his fellow countryman Sebastiano Ricci on this commission and together they produced *Diana and her Nymphs Bathing* (fig. 4).

Pellegrini was particularly successful in England and through his acquaintance with Sir Godfrey Kneller he assisted in the foundation of Kneller's Academy in London in 1711 and also became a director. Pellegrini even submitted designs for the dome of the new St. Paul's Cathedral and his design is said to have been Sir Christopher Wren's (1632-1723) preferred choice. In the end Pellegrini was pipped to the post by the English painter Sir James Thornhill (1675-1734) who received the commission instead. This anecdote in itself goes some way to demonstrate the great esteem in which



Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini and Sebastiano Ricci, *Diana and her Nymphs Bathing*, 1713-1715, Narford Hall, Norfolk, (Detail from the side wall of the main staircase) (Figure 4)

Pellegrini was held. His rivals for the St. Paul's commission included some of the greatest European artists of the day: Juan-Baptiste Catenaro, Pierre Berchet and Louis Laguerre (1663-1721) were among his competitors. According to the writer and antiquarian George Vertue, Sebastiano Ricci on finding out that the commission had been awarded to Thornhill, 'left England once and for all when he found it was resolved that Mr. Thornhill should paint the Cupolo of St. Paul's.'

Pellegrini left England in 1713. Subsequently he was employed by Johann Wilhelm, Elector of the Palatinate in Düsseldorf for whom he painted *The Fall of the Giants* and *The Fall of Phaethon* to adorn the stairwell of the Elector's Schloss Bensberg. He also completed a series of allegorical canvases to celebrate the Elector's rule. These are commonly regarded as the apex of his achievement as a history painter. Pellegrini worked all over Europe, in Antwerp, The Hague, Würzburg, Dresden, Mannheim and Vienna. Following this extensive travelling, Pellegrini finally settled in Venice for the remaining years of his life.

In Venice, Pellegrini executed commissions in and around the city and it is believed that he painted *Bacchus and Ariadne* here, which although simpler in composition than *Young Hannibal Swears Enmity to Rome*, uses a similar



Giovanni Pellegrini, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, The Metropolitan Museum, New York (Figure 5)

horizontal device (fig. 5).

In 1735, he was paid for the delivery of an altarpiece, St. Catherine, for the Santo in Padua, which is now in the library of the Santo. Pellegrini had an important collection of Dutch art, which, after his death, was acquired by the English consul Vivian Smith. His work was widely influential and played an important role in the formative years of Tiepolo (see cat. no. 113) and Giovanni Antonio Guardi (see cat. no. 28).



Giovanni Pellegrini, *Young Hannibal Swears Enmity to Rome* (Detail)