

MICHELE ROCCA

(Parma c.1666 - Venice, after 1751)

David and Bathsheba

oil on canvas, in a painted oval
47.5 x 37.7 cm (18½ x 15¼ in)

Provenance: with Colnaghi, London;
with Agnews, London;
Lord and Lady Illiffe of Basildon Park.

THE WARM, PASTEL PALETTE, RICH PAINTERLY effects, graceful sense of movement and the coquettish display of the women in *David and Bathsheba* are typical of Michele Rocca's work and indicate that his painting, although grounded in the Baroque tradition, resonated more with the emerging French Rococo movement. The size of the composition and its decorative appeal are also characteristic of Rocca's small-scale cabinet pictures of mythological and biblical scenes that gave him his reputation as a *petit maître* in eighteenth-century Rome.

The scene illustrates a biblical passage from the second book of Samuel in which 'David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon' (11:2). In the upper right of the composition, King David can be seen spying on Bathsheba from his balcony. The nude Bathsheba, clutching provocatively at a piece of blue drapery, is unaware of his covetous gaze or the events soon to befall her. Two attendants flutter around, one holding a string of pearls to adorn her mistress while the other bathes her feet. Bathsheba, with pale soft skin, a voluptuous figure and fair hair, is the picture of feminine allure. According to the biblical narrative Bathsheba's beauty compelled David to summon her to him, and after learning she was the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, David ordered him to be killed so he was free to marry her. Their first child died in infancy as retribution for their sins; their second child, however, was Solomon who became the third king of Israel. The setting for such a consequential scene of seduction is appropriately romantic, featuring classical columns, ornaments and lavish drapery.

The sensuality of *David and Bathsheba* is typical of Rocca's work, whether the subject is biblical or pagan. This is evident in his painting, *Offering to Jupiter*, in which naked women and *putti* frolic on a hillside near a statue of Jupiter seated on a plinth (fig. 1). The sky is of the same rich blue hue as the present painting and is dotted with puffy white clouds. The poses and gestures of the figures are elegant and languorous and the softly modelled pale pink flesh of the women in repose is equally as suggestive as that of Bathsheba.

According to Nicola Pio's *Vite* of 1724, Rocca left his native city of Parma to travel to Rome in 1682 and study under Ciro Ferri (?1634-1689).¹ He then returned to Parma where he absorbed the influence of Correggio (?1489-1534). By 1695, he had returned to Rome and he began painting altarpieces. He was elected to the Congregazione dei Virtuosi al Pantheon in 1710 and in the same year painted his best known paintings, *Toilet of Venus* and *The Finding of Moses*, both small-scale fashionably elegant works that are indicative of the

Rococo style. Despite the Rococo influence, Rocca's cosmopolitan style owed much to his Roman colleagues and he particularly emulated Sebastiano Conca (1680-1764) (see cat. no. 34 and Inventory), which makes their work often difficult to distinguish between. Benedetto Luti (1666-1724) (see Inventory) also provided inspiration for Rocca and may have introduced him to French painters working in Rome. In 1727 Rocca was given an official post at the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome. One of his last known pictures, *Bathsheba in the Bath*, dates to 1729 and is in the Schloss Wilhelmshohe Kassel, Germany.

We are grateful to Professor Giancarlo Sestieri for confirming the attribution of this painting.



Michele Rocca, *Offering to Jupiter*,
Government Art Collection, U.K. (Figure 1)

¹ N. Pio: *Vite* (1724); ed. C. Enggass and R. Enggass (1977), p. 153.

