

# GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO

(Venice 1697 - Madrid 1770)

## *Death of Seneca*

pen and brown ink and grey wash over black chalk  
42.8 x 28.2 cm (16 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$  in)

**Provenance:** sale, London, Christie's, 5 July, 1983, lot 128;  
Private Collection.

**C**HARGED WITH CONSPIRACY BY EMPEROR NERO, Seneca chose to commit suicide rather than face the humiliation of execution. This narrative tale was a popular subject in Italy in the 1700s and reflected the revival of interest in Stoicism. Stoic philosophers, like Seneca, argued for the control of the emotions, and his suicide embodied this repression of feeling. Having slit his own wrists and taken poison, Seneca slips into unconsciousness and is helped into a warm bath of water by some compassionate friends in order to hasten his death.

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's dashing, fluid manner of drawing has its origins in the work of Luca Giordano (1634-1705), whose influence is readily apparent in this early drawing dating from the 1720s. Soon after this, Tiepolo began to seek inspiration from the works of artists from his native Venice, particularly Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (1682-1754), but here the theatrical poses, intense characterisation and narrative clarity, as well as the use of broad, relatively evenly applied washes, all indicate the importance of the earlier influence of Giordano.

The rapidity of execution that Tiepolo used, which was also derived from Giordano, enabled him to produce a very substantial number of drawings during the course of his career, but early drawings of this type are, in fact, rather rare. The most comparable studies to the present work include *The Decapitation of a Bishop* (Civici Musei di Storia e Arte, Trieste), and *Roman Sacrifice* (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University). The latter may be linked with Tiepolo's *Ca' Dolfin* decorations of 1728.

Also known as 'Giambattista', Tiepolo was one of the most brilliant and sought after Italian painters of the eighteenth century, and embodies the ultimate achievement of the Venetian tradition of decorative painting in the Grand Manner. He also painted numerous large-scale oil paintings and a wide repertory of oil sketches, and he was an accomplished draughtsman as well as a successful and original etcher. He had trained in Venice and been brought up to admire the achievements of the great Venetian Renaissance masters, above all Tintoretto (1519-1594) and Veronese (1528-1588). Thus Tiepolo was not

inhibited by the more restrained classical tradition of ancient Rome and the legacy of the Renaissance, Baroque and neoclassical artists active there, from Raphael (1483-1520) and Michelangelo (1475-1564) to Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669). Yet through his interest in prints he was well aware of the inventive imagery of a wide range of seventeenth-century Baroque artists active outside Venice, including the Genoese artist Castiglione (1609-1664), Salvator Rosa (1615-1673), Stefano della Bella (1610-1664), and Rembrandt (1606-1669), all of whom exercised a strong influence on the range of his visual vocabulary. *Death of Seneca* exemplifies how Tiepolo, through rhetorical gesture and facial expression, created a theatrical sense of composition and design, and an imaginative appreciation of the physical context in which his work would be seen. Tiepolo became extremely successful at projecting narrative and telling a story with dramatic effect, whether of religious or secular subject matter. Above all, he could enrich and embellish historical and mythological themes by transforming them into poetic fiction. Invariably, in his response to both the natural world and the artistic tradition he inherited, he displayed a sense of fantasy and humour, and an exhilarating feeling of joy that had been conspicuous by its absence from so much art of the preceding Baroque era.

His early oil paintings, influenced by Piazzetta, Federico Bencovich (1677-1753), and Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734) (see inventory) are notable for their expressive vigour, contorted figures, angular movement, dark and often murky tonality, dramatic lighting and crowded compositions; for example the *Sacrifice of Isaac* (Ospedaletto, Venice) and the *Madonna of Mount Carmel* (1721-22, Pinacoteca di Brera Milan). A decisive turning point, and the beginning of Tiepolo's career as a decorator, came with a commission from the Patriarch Dionisio-Dolfin (1663-1734) for his palace at Udine. Here he worked with the *quadratura* specialist Girolamo Mengozzi-Colonna (1688-1766). The resulting frescoes, of c.1726, are notable for their brilliant colouring and the juxtaposition of elegant figures in sixteenth-century dress within a sunny pastoral landscape.

When the present drawing was sold in 1983, the attribution was confirmed by Professor George Knox, after first-hand inspection.

