



Stefano della Bella

(Florence 1610-1664)

Study for "The Violinist accompanying a Child dancing in his Mother's Arms"

Pen and brown ink, red chalk, and graphite

Dimensions : 2 ⁷/₈" x 5 ¹/₂" (75 x 140 mm) – Framed : 6 ⁵/₈" x 9 ¹/₄" (16.8 x 23.5 cm)

Provenance:

- Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), his mark lower right (L. 2364)
- Paul Sandby (1725–1809), his mark upper right (L. 2112)
- Owner with the mark "CU" unidentified (L. 643), his mark affixed lower left

Period Louis XIII frame in carved and gilded wood with foliage decoration in the corners

Our drawing, whose upper corners had been cut off and crudely repaired, underwent a recent restoration during which the missing parts were reintegrated.

Price on request

This exquisitely delicate pen-and-ink drawing is most likely a preparatory study for an engraving by Stefano della Bella, taken from the series of eight engravings called "Various Figures and Landscapes" (*Diverse figure e paesi*) and published by Israël Henriet in Paris in 1649. Although our drawing is in the same direction as the engraving, the great delicacy of the pen strokes and the physiognomy of the female figure on the left are entirely characteristic of Stefano della Bella's drawings.

This study has a distinguished provenance, having been part of the collections of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), the greatest English collector of drawings of his time, and of landscape painter Paul Sandby (1725-1809).

1. Stefano della Bella, draftsman and engraver in the service of the Medici

Stefano della Bella (born in 1610 in Florence), also known as Étienne de la Belle at the French court, was an Italian draughtsman and etcher of the Florentine school, working in the Mannerist and Baroque styles. He worked tirelessly, creating thousands of drawings and prints. Like a photojournalist eager to capture the major events of his time, Della Bella immortalized the sumptuous theatrical performances of the Florentine aristocracy, but also the daily life in Rome and Paris, and the realities of the battlefield during the Thirty Years' War.

Born into a family of painters, sculptors, and goldsmiths, he was the son of the sculptor Francesco di Girolamo Della Bella. He trained under Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1609-1664) and the medalist and engraver Gasparo Mola (1571-1640). He worked briefly under Orazio Vanni and Cesare Dandini (1596-1657), then turned to drawing and engraving under Remigio Cantagallina (1582-1656). The latter was also the instructor of Jacques Callot (1592-1635), which is why Della Bella's early prints closely resemble his. At the age of seventeen, he presented the young Giancarlo de' Medici with an engraving depicting a banquet at the Pitti Palace, and received thereafter several official commissions from the Medici family, who supported him throughout his life. In 1632 or 1633, he received the direct patronage of Lorenzo de' Medici (brother of Cosimo II de' Medici and uncle of Giancarlo de' Medici).

Arriving in Rome in 1633, he resided at the Villa Medici and produced "vedute" and drawings of antiquities, but he also studied his contemporaries, particularly the *Bamboccianti* painters. He drew public events in a series of sketchbooks, as well as the festivities of the Medici court he attended, which were then transformed into prints. Despite this, he frequently returned to Florence to work on commissions from his clients.

In 1639, he went to Paris, where he stayed until 1650. There he frequented courtiers, theater artists, and literary men; his style evolved under the influence of the prints of Rembrandt (1606-1669) and other Dutch engravers, which were widely distributed in Paris. In 1641, Cardinal Richelieu sent him to Arras to make drawings for engravings representing the siege and capture of the city by the Royal army, and in 1644, Cardinal Mazarin commissioned him to produce four series of educational playing cards for the young Louis XIV.

Mazarin's death probably precipitated his return to Florence, where he received a pension and the position of drawing master to the prince from Grand Duke Ferdinand II de' Medici. He

produced frontispieces, illustrations of celebrations, and views that extolled the splendors of the Medici dynasty. He traveled to Rome several times, where he engraved several views of ancient ruins while continuing to send his plates and sheets to his Parisian publishers.

2. Description of the drawing and related artworks

The familiar scene depicted here is particularly charming: a child dances, arms outstretched, spinning around to the sound of a violin played by a man shown in three-quarter profile, standing in the center of our drawing. The mother kneels in front of her child and reaches out her arms to hold him as he spins.

The engraving by Stefano della Bella, which is part of the series of eight "Diverse Figures and Landscapes" published by Israël Henriet in Paris in 1649, is very similar to our drawing and provides a better understanding of the scene.



Stefano della Bella - *The Violinist accompanying a Child dancing in his Mother's Arms* - Metropolitan Museum - New York (1986.1180.635)

The violinist's costume, consisting of a long cape, soft boots that fall over his ankles, and a beret (which is embellished with a feather at the back in the print) is, except for this last detail, particularly faithful to the drawing. The child wears a feathered hat that does not appear in our drawing. Another female character is leaning against a tree. Her left arm alone survives in our drawing, as the upper part of her bust has been lost along with the upper left corner of our sheet.

The treatment of the body and face of the mother kneeling before her little prodigy is very typical of Stefano della Bella's style, as illustrated by this other drawing by the artist sold at Christie's in 2024.



Stefano della Bella – *Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist* – whereabouts unknown

It is likely that the artist completed the pen sketch of the main characters with a few strokes of red chalk, which quite accurately evoke the groves and different planes that follow one another in the print until the river in the background. A few graphite lines on the left constitute a first sketch of the two women, one of whom is holding a child in her arms, which is represented on the far right of the print.

It is interesting to note that Della Bella's use of red chalk, which is quite rare, seems to have been reserved for sketches made in a much looser style, radically different from the analytical precision of his pen studies. We illustrate this point by comparing another pen drawing (held at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam) with a red chalk sketch from the Louvre Museum.



Two studies by **Stefano della Bella**: on the left, a *Study of various Figures* (Rijksmuseum - RP-T-1949-526); on the right, a *Study for a Playing Card* (Musée du Louvre - 3358 DR8)

This comparison leads us to believe that the entire drawing is indeed by Stefano della Bella, even though we have not found any other examples by this artist combining these two techniques (but his body of graphic work is huge!).

3. Provenance and framing

Two stamps on the right-hand side of the sheet indicate that this drawing (which we purchased in England) has long belonged to English collections.

Sir Joshua Reynolds (Plympton 1723 - London 1792) can be considered the leader of the English school of painting during the 18th century. Specializing in portraiture, he was the co-founder and first president of the Royal Academy. His youth was marked by a long trip to Italy between 1749 and 1752, and his favorite masters throughout his life remained Michelangelo, Raphael, alongside other 16th-century Italian artists and Claude Gellée. He proved to be the most discerning painter and collector of his time. His eclecticism, constantly in search of the "grand style," was evident both in his lectures at the Royal Academy and in the choice of his collections, to which he devoted a significant portion of his income, although it is not known whether he had already purchased some drawings in Italy or whether these were acquired solely after his return to England. Most of his drawings were sold during auctions held on May 26, 1794, and again from March 5, 1798 onwards. The mark on the lower right of our drawing was affixed by his executors upon Reynolds' death. They marked the 1,163 best drawings (including our sheet) on the front, while the lower-quality drawings were stamped on the back.

Paul Sandby (Nottingham 1725–London 1809), a watercolorist and engraver, was also a member of the Royal Academy and a contemporary of Reynolds. Although he lived much longer than Reynolds, he sold part of his collection in 1785¹, and it cannot be ruled out that our drawing was part of his collection before entering Reynolds', even if the reverse seems more likely. His collections were dispersed after his death in 1811. The third stamp, although listed by Lugt, has remained anonymous but appears to be of more recent origin.



Stefano della Bella - *The Violinist accompanying a Child dancing in his Mother's Arms* (detail) – Metropolitan Museum – New York (1986.1180.635)

We chose to frame this drawing in a small Louis XIII period frame (1601-1643) that perfectly matches the proportions of the drawing and corresponds both in terms of period and place of execution, since it is likely that this drawing was made in Paris between 1639 and 1649 (the classical building in the background of the print seems to indicate that we are looking at one of the Royal residences, now disappeared, that were built along the banks of the Seine).

¹ The only surviving catalog from this sale is incomplete.



Stefano della Bella - Study for "*The Violinist accompanying a Child dancing in his Mother's Arms*"