Lot No. 59

Apollonio di Giovanni

(Florence circa 1415/17–1465)
The Battle of Pharsalus,
tempera with gold on panel, a cassone panel, 40.5 x 157.2 cm, framed

Provenance:
Collection of Eugène Piot (1812–1890), Paris;
his sale, Hotel Drouot, Paris, 21-24 May 1890, lot 553;
where purchased by Émile Gavet (1830–1904), Paris;
Collection Edward Julius Berwind (1848–1936), Newport, Rhode Island, New York;
his sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 9 November 1939, lot 37;
purchased by Acquavella Galleries, New York;
Private European collection;
thence by descent to the present owner

Literature:
Catalogue des objects d'art de la Renaissance. Tableaux composant la collection du feu M. Eugène Piot, Hotel Drouot 21-24 May 1890, lot 553 (as Florentine School, first half of the 15th century);
Valuable objects of art of the Gothic, Renaissance, Eighteenth Century from the Collection Formerly by the late Edward J. Berwind, New York, Parke-Bernet Galleries 1939, no. 27 (as Manner of the Anghiari Master);
P. Schubring, Cassoni Truhen und Truhenbilder der italienischen Frührenaissance, Leipzig 1915, cat. no. 113 (as the Anghiari Master);
R. Van Marle, The development of the Italian School of Painting, The Hague 1928, pp. 558, 597 (as the Anghiari Master);

The present painting on panel was originally the front part of a lavishly decorated chest, a cassone, which was a popular form of decorative furniture in Renaissance Italy. Chests, where personal belongings could be stored, were often produced in pairs and adorned with paintings and pastiglia ornament. As an item that was usually carried in dowry by a bride at the time of her marriage, cassoni acquired a role in displaying the social status, wealth and sophistication of intermarrying families and these chests were widespread in Northern and Central Italy, particularly in Tuscany, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. They were usually created by specialists who produced them and other related types of painting such as deschi da parto and spalliere.

The painter of the present panel, Apollonio di Giovanni, was arguably the most well-documented and celebrated exponent of this type of working practice in mid-Quattrocento Florence. He was active between the late 1430s and 1460s and written documentation describes Apollonio di Giovanni as the head, together with Marco del Buono, of a successful workshop specialising in the production of painted chests. He was in contact with contemporary currents of humanistic thought, which might explain a preference for certain iconographic themes (see W. Stechow, Marco del Buono and Apollonio di Giovanni, Cassone Painters in: Bulletin of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, vol. I, June 1944, pp. 5-21 and E. Callmann, Apollonio di Giovanni, Oxford 1974).
The attribution to Apollonio di Giovanni for the present work was first suggested by Ellen Callmann (see E. Callmann, Roman Virtue and Renaissance Marriage, in: The Register of the Spencer Museum of Art, vol. VI, n. 8-9, 1991-1992, pp. 35-36, note 17). In fact, several stylistic aspects of the work point towards this painter and the present work shows a strong relation to other cassoni paintings attributed to Apollonio, such as the Battle between the Athenians and the Persians (Xerxes's invasion of the Greece) in the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio and the two panels with Scenes from the Aeneid at the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Chronologically, this work can also be placed in the mid-fifteenth century, at the height of the artist's maturity.

Previously this work was discussed, but not illustrated, by Paul Schubring (1915, see literature) as a work by the so-called Anghiari Master. Raimond van Marle (1928, see literature) also attributed it the Anghiari Master, following the previous attribution by Paul Schubring.

The present work was originally part of Eugène Piot's celebrated collection in Paris together with a pendant described as Julius Caesar during the siege of a fortified city (see Catalogue des objects d'art de la Renaissance. Tableaux composant la collection du feu M. Eugène Piot, Hotel Drouot, 21-24 May 1890, lot 554); both were subsequently purchased by Emile Gavet in 1890. This panel depicting the Battle of Pharsalus then entered the Bernwind collection and was sold in 1939 (see provenance). Its pendant, of the same size, meanwhile reappeared on the art market in 2008 (Sotheby's, New York, 24 January 2008, lot 33).

The painted decoration on these types of chests often depicted historical events, in particular battles derived from mythology, classical literature and medieval novellas, as well as literary allegories and religious themes.

The subject matter of the important present example is derived from classical literature and the Battle of Pharsalus, here depicted, is in adherence to Plutarch's writings suggesting that this work was destined for a figure of high social and intellectual standing, capable of interpreting the iconography.

The Battle of Pharsalus was fought in 48 BC between Julius Caesar and Pompey, close to the River Enipeas in Thessaly, Greece. Caesar's victory was decisive for the end of the civil war and marked his final ascent to power transforming Rome from a Republic into an Empire. The scene in the present panel shows a wide view of the battlefield, with a fortified city and a castle in the background and illustrates the moment of combat itself, as well as the subsequent episodes relating to the flight and the death of Pompey. Julius Caesar's legions are identified by a banner with the imperial eagle, while attacking the opposing army. Faithfully following Plutarch's tale of the Life of Pompey, which also recounts the story of the flight of Pompey with his wife Cornelia by sea to Egypt, the artist also portrays two boats on the right hand side of the panel. One boat shows Pompey being killed by the Egyptian General Achillas (both identified by inscriptions in gold, chrysopraphs), following the orders of Pharaoh Ptolemy XIII. In the other vessel, Cornelia (also identified by a chrysograph inscription) is witnessing the death of her husband. On the far right of the panel, an armed group surrounds Julius Caesar (also identifiable because of an inscription) receiving the homage of Pompey's head resting on a raised tray.

The high-ranking commissioning of the chest is also reflected by Apollonio di Giovanni's excellent workmanship together the extensive use of gold leaf to embellish the decorative elements of clothes and weapons: belts, embroidered hems, crests, plumes, hilts, trappings and the tray bearing Pompey's head. All of which help to create a courtly atmosphere. The formal style of Apollonio di Giovanni's painting is characterised by a smooth, elegant and precious working method or ductus that places him among the best interpreters of early Florentine Renaissance style, which was still steeped in the formal refinements of Late Gothic painting.

Apollonio di Giovanni has here created a rich descriptive work with a use of decorative ornament and pattern, marked by an interest in the Late Gothic chivalric world. This world had long disappeared by the middle of the 15th century and it was regarded as bloody and cruel, however the era was already romanticised as a period that was fairy-tale like, as depicted in the work of Pisanello, for example.

The composition of the Battle of Pharsalus appears to have been inspired by the triptych of the Battle of San Romano painted by Paolo Uccello from around 1438 (Uffizi, Florence; Musée du Louvre, Paris; National Gallery, London). Apollonio di Giovanni seems to have taken the most meaningful stylistic and visual elements from this triptych, such as the fallen horses and the multitude of fighting lances. Van Marle acknowledges the influence of Paolo Uccello on the present master however he argues that Apollonio's technique is not dependent on Uccello but is a step in advance (see R. Van Marle, The development of the Italian School of Painting, The Hague, 1928, p. 562).

We are grateful to Alessandro Tomei for his help in cataloguing the present painting.

Note
Apollonio di Giovanni's work had been catalogued under a variety of different names, however after the discovery in 1902 of his bottega's book of commissions it was possible to identify a number of cassoni securely.

Wolfgang Stechow was able to identify the coats-of-arms on the cassone in the collection of the Allen Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio, as belonging to the Rucellai and the Vettori families. Since only one marriage occurred in the 15th century between these two aristocratic families (in 1463 between Caterina Rucellai and Piero Francesco di Paolo Vettori), Stechow was able to deduce that the cassone listed in Apollonio's order book (which lists the patrons but not the subject of the paintings on the chests) for these two families was that in Oberlin, and he was subsequently able to stylistically unite a number of other cassoni under Apollonio's name, which had previously been masquerading under various working monikers, such as the “Dido Master”, the “Virgil Master” and the “Master of the Javes Cassoni” (see W. Stechow, Marco del Buono and Apollonio di Giovanni, Cassone Painters in: Bulletin of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, vol. I, June 1944, pp. 5-21).

**Technical analysis**

A careful examination of the present painting (under visible light, IR reflectography, False Colour IR, and through pigment analysis carried out by Reflectance Spectroscopy) shows a few outline underdrawings and some small changes can be detected through IR.

The technique employed in the present painting is characterised by the frequent use of gold leaf or other metal leaves – accurately worked with incisions, dots and glazing with lakes - and the use of incisions along the borders of many of the figures. Using metal leaves in this way was a common practice for many cassoni painters, including Paolo Uccello.

Among the pigments employed, RS examination identified the presence of indigo, azurite, copper-based green, vermilion red, carmine type red lake, ochres, lead white and a lead-based yellow (probably lead-tin).

The technique employed has strong similarities with the painting practice of Apollonio di Giovanni and his workshop, as well as of some of the other masters of the period in Tuscany.

We are grateful to Gianluca Poldi for the technical examination.

Esperto: Mark MacDonnell