COLNAGHI



Francesco Vanni

The Fall of Simon the Magician

FRANCESCO VANNI
(Siena 1563 – 1610)

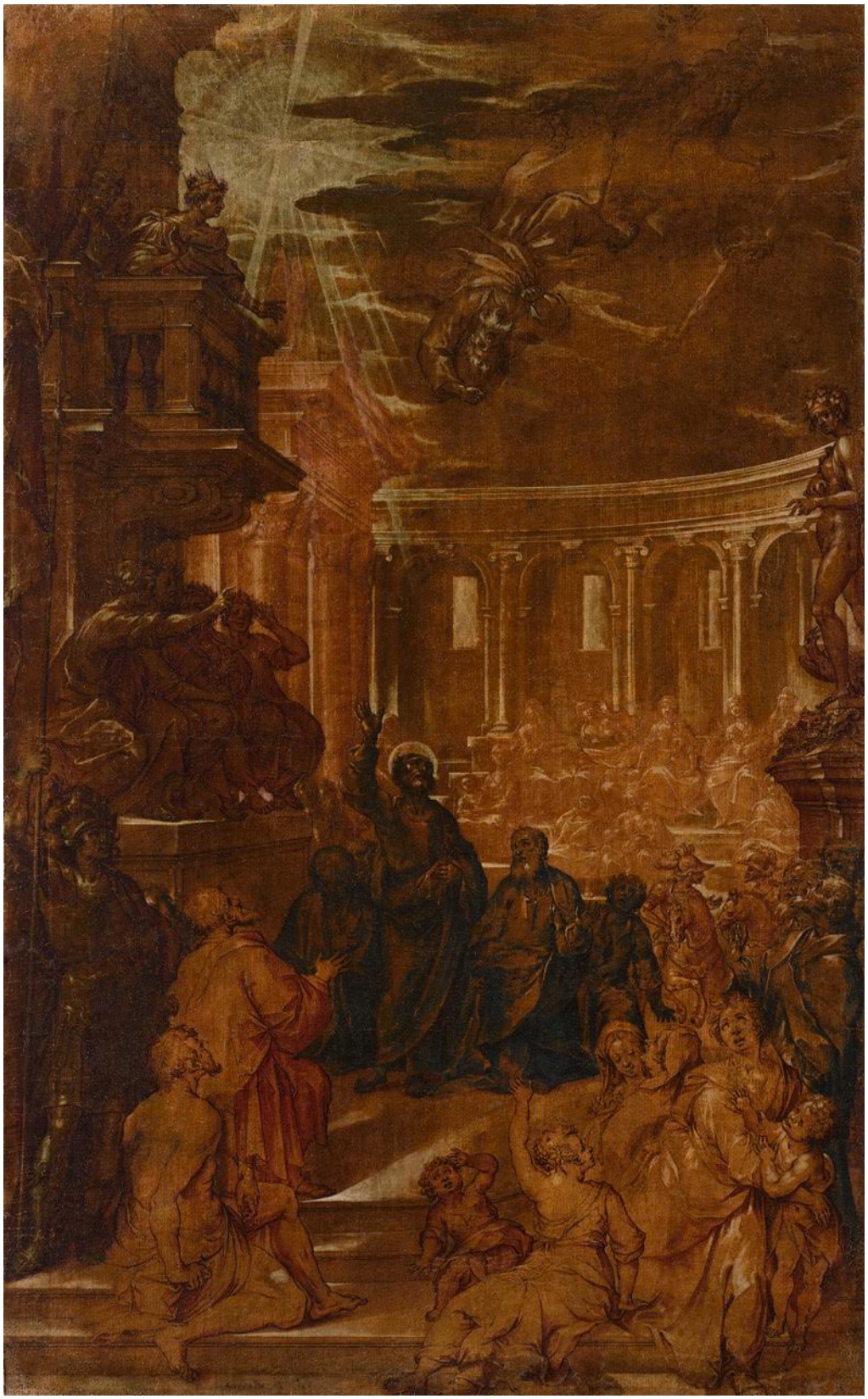
THE FALL OF SIMON THE MAGICIAN, 1603

Oil, pen and brown ink on black chalk, brown watercolour, pink watercolour, white gouache highlightson ochre prepared paper mounted on canvas
63 × 39.2 cm

Inscribed (lower left): *Lud. Carracci del.*

Provenance

Private collection, France.



Francesco Vanni entered the workshop of the Roman painter Giovanni de' Vecchi in 1579, after being introduced to the arts by his stepfather, Arcangelo Salimbeni. He may also have spent time in the studio of Bartolomeo Passarotti in Bologna. His work was chiefly shaped by Federico Barocci and the Carracci. Although he worked in several major centres - Pisa, Cortona and Rome - it was in his native Siena that he achieved his greatest prominence, to the point of dominating the city's artistic scene around the turn of the century. The Church was his principal patron, commissioning him to decorate a number of chapels and churches in Siena and the surrounding area, including Sant'Agostino, San Domenico and Santa Caterina. Gifted and prolific, Vanni inspired later generations of Sienese artists throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, just as Domenico Beccafumi had fascinated earlier ones. As early as 1673, his drawings were sought after by collectors. Cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici instructed his agents in Siena to assemble one hundred drawings by Vanni, with a view to publishing them as a book.

The episode of the fall of Simon the Magician was rarely depicted by painters. It is mentioned in the apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, and by Suetonius. The story relates how, under Nero, Simon used his powers as a magician to oppose Saint Peter. One day, in a theatre packed with spectators, he attempted to rise into the air; but a prayer from the saint was enough to send him crashing down - provoking the emperor's wrath, and leading him to deliver Saint Peter to martyrdom. The legend seems to have carried little authority until Cardinal Baronio, in the time of Clement VIII Aldobrandini, selected it among the six "mysteries of Saint Peter" intended to adorn the side aisles of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The commission for *The Fall of Simon the Magician* was given to Vanni in December 1602. The work was delivered in June 1603 and earned its author the title of Knight of Christ. Today it is largely forgotten: painted in oil on twenty-three large slate panels, it was dismantled in 1921, placed in storage, and replaced by a mosaic representing *The Apparition to Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque*, executed after a design by Carlo Muccioli.[1] A restoration carried out for the celebration of the fourth centenary of the death of Saint Philip Neri (1994) revealed a major masterpiece, with intact colours, colossal dimensions (7.23 × 4.27 m) and dramatic conception (Rome, Museo Petriano, fig. 1).[2] In 1748, a copy of Vanni's painting was commissioned from Pompeo Batoni to serve for the execution of the mosaic, as had been done for the other altars of Saint Peter's; this copy - ultimately painted by Trémolières - is now preserved in the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli.

[1] G. Incisa Della Rochetta, "Le Vicende di tre quadri d'altare", *Roma, rivista di studi e di vita romana*, X, 1932, 6, p. 250.

[2] *La Regola e la fama, San Filippo Neri e l'arte*, Rome, Museo Nazionale del Palazzo di Venezia, 1995 ; Antonio Pinelli, *La Basilica di San Pietro in Vaticano*, Panini, Modena, 2000, tome 1, no. 823, p. 823, tome 2, ill. 1514, p. 1067.

To fulfil this important commission, the Sienese artist settled in Rome in November 1602, accompanied by his pupil Alessio Scala. The preparation of the work, through studies and sketches, was intense - so much so that it may have begun even before Vanni moved to Rome. In these studies, the artist examines every detail: from the stage-like architecture of the theatre to figures analysed individually or in groups, and even to direct studies of facial types. Fifty-three preparatory drawings recorded by Marco Ciampolini testify to this commitment,[3] to which six more have recently been added by Milena Pagni.[4] After the preparatory drawings, Vanni generally produced - when planning his large altarpieces - a large-scale compositional sketch in watercolour, heightened with white gouache on ochre-prepared paper.[5]

Our work is entirely characteristic of this working method. It must belong to the final stage of the compositional process, after the drawings in the Municipal Library of Siena (E.I.15, c. 24r), the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin (KdZ 15253), and the chiaroscuro sketch in Darmstadt (Landesmuseum, 536), identified by Hermann Voss in the museum's storage and lost during the Second World War.[6] One important difference separates those three works from our sketch: in them, the figures of Peter and Paul stand and are close to one another. In our study - as in the final painting - Peter alone remains standing at the centre, while Paul is pushed to the left, kneeling. This change was certainly imposed by the patrons, in order to exalt fully the figure of Peter, to whose religious action Vanni's altarpiece and the others in the same cycle were dedicated.

Our sketch is thus the compositional study closest to the final execution, yet it differs from the painting in a number of details - evidence that the patrons asked Vanni for further alterations, though less substantial than the one involving the two apostles. For example, Nero's head, which in the early studies looks upward, is now turned towards Saint Peter. Other modifications can be seen in the capitals, the arrangement of the Vestals, the pose of the idol at the right of the composition, and in the rays of

[3] M. Ciampolini, *Pittori Senesi del Seicento*, Siena, 2010, pp. 936-939.

[4] M. Pagni, "Nuovi disegni di Francesco Vanni per la Caduta di Simon Mago", *A Tale of Two Cities : Rome and Siena in the Early Modern Period (1550-1750)*, Pisa, 2020, pp. 65-87.

[5] The Louvre alone has four oil sketches on paper: *Saint Hyacinthe Resurrecting a Drowned Child*, 377 x 253 mm, sketch for the painting of San Spirito in Siena; *The Risen Christ Adored by Two Saints*, 347 x 209 mm, sketch for the painting of San Benedetto in Fabriano; *Death of Saint Anthony*, 266 x 184 mm, sketch for painting at the Oratory of San Antonio Abbate in Siena and *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 287 x 213 mm, probably a sketch for a painting now in the Poldi-Pezzoli Museum in Milan (F. Viatte, *Dessins Toscans, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles*, tome I, 1560-1640, Paris, 1988, no. 526, 529, 541 and 542, pp. 256, 261, 266 and 267). Mention should also be made of those in the Chigi Saracini collection in Siena for the altarpiece of St. Benedict by Fabriano (inv. FAC 900) and for the *Pardon of Assisi* in the church of St. Francis in Pisa (inv. FAC 940).

[6] H. Voss, Die Malerei der Spätrenaissaince in Rom und Florenz, Berlin, italian edition, Rome, 1994, p. 321, note 9.

the sun. The size of the work (unusual for Vanni's sketches), the extreme attention to detail, and the precise proportional relationship (1:10) to the finished painting all suggest that our sketch was probably the model submitted for the patrons' approval, rather than a strictly practical working study for execution. The final product of an extended meditation on a rare subject, it also testifies to Vanni's extraordinary talent, already recognised by his contemporaries.

We thank Professor Ciampolini, who kindly confirmed the attribution of this drawing and provided valuable information for the preparation of this catalogue note.



Fig. 1. Francesco Vanni, *The Fall of Simon the Magician*, 1603. Oil on twenty-three slate panels, 7.23 × 4.27 m. Vatican City, Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro / formerly Museo Petriano; originally painted for an altar in the Basilica of Saint Peter.

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