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Giovanni Battista Tiepolo
Caricature of a man in profile

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GIOVANNI BATTISTA TIEPOLO
(Venice 1696 – 1770 Madrid)

CARICATURE OF A MAN IN PROFILE, ca. 1755–1760

Pen and brown ink and brown wash

8.5 x 7.8 cm (3 3/8 x 3 1/8 in.)

Provenance

Private collection, Belgium.



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We are grateful to Dr Bernard Aikema for having confirmed the attribution of the present drawing to Giambattista Tiepolo on the basis of photographs.

This small sheet belongs to the substantial group of caricature drawings that occupies a distinctive place within Giambattista Tiepolo's graphic production. More than two hundred related studies are known, dispersed among museum collections and private holdings. Generally executed on sheets of modest dimensions, they condense the human figure to a remarkably economical vocabulary of contour lines traced in ink and volumes quickly shadowed in wash. Their subjects are rarely identifiable individuals. Rather, as Nadine M. Orenstein has observed, Tiepolo represented 'generalized types that must have been immediately recognizable to contemporaries', distinguishing them through physique, stance, costume and social bearing rather than through the attributes of formal portraiture.¹

The present drawing is an especially concentrated example of this practice, where the man's physiognomy is grasped through a sequence of carefully judged distortions. The sitter is seen in strict profile to the left. His receding forehead, prominent nose, compressed mouth and projecting chin are established with only a few movements of the pen. The wash is handled with freedom, accumulating over the hair, cheek, chin and shoulder while allowing the unworked paper to articulate the illuminated passages of the face and clothing. The contour around the man's profile proceeds with assurance, while the features are punctuated by isolated concentrations of darker ink. Aldo Rizzi described the execution of the caricatures as *fulminea*, *abbreviata*, *incisiva*, even 'quasi onomatopeica': instantaneous, abbreviated and incisive, as though the graphic mark itself mimicked the character it describes.²

Such economy lies at the centre of what Rizzi identified as the particular force of Tiepolo's caricatures.³ He traced the artist's interest in the genre at least to the fourth decade of the century and regarded it as an enduring strand of Giambattista's graphic imagination, subsequently inherited and considerably developed by his son Giandomenico. Rizzi characterised the *dramatis personae* of these sheets as "over-dressed noblemen, haughty bureaucrats, dancing Pulcinelli, corpulent friars, surly misers and gout-ridden aristocrats".⁴

The man in the present sheet belongs precisely to this world. His identity remains unstated and was probably beside the point. Tiepolo instead concentrates upon those outward signs through which character could be immediately apprehended: the exaggerated profile, the set of the mouth, the arrangement of the hair and the disposition of the shoulders.

Rizzi further understood Tiepolo's caricatures as an area of unusual freedom within an oeuvre otherwise dominated by large-scale religious, historical and decorative commissions. He described them as a salutary release from the conventions of official art, permitting the painter to escape temporarily from the obligatory structures of literary epic and institutional

¹ See Nadine M. Orenstein, in Constance C. McPhee and Nadine M. Orenstein, *Infinite Jest: Caricature and Satire from Leonardo to Levine*, exh. cat., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

² Aldo Rizzi, *Giambattista Tiepolo. Disegni dai Civici Musei di Storia ed Arte di Trieste*, exh. cat., Trieste, Civico Museo Sartorio, 18 December 1988–2 April 1989, 3rd ed., Milan, Electa, 1990, p. 35.

³ Rizzi, 1990, p. 35.

⁴ Rizzi, 1990, p. 35.

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religious imagery. Luca Carlevarijs's repertory of early eighteenth-century Venetian *macchiette*, with its naturalistic and anti-Baroque orientation, may have offered one stimulus for this aspect of Tiepolo's work.

Comparable methods are found in the group preserved in the Castello Sforzesco, Milan (see, for example, figs. 1-2). Antonio Morassi associated the group with the period of Tiepolo's decorations at the Villa Valmarana, Vicenza, in 1757, while recognising that the artist's humorous vein had appeared considerably earlier.⁵ Further comparisons are provided by the profile studies in the Princeton University Art Museum (figs. 3-4) and by the *Head of a Man in Profile to the Left* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 5). The latter, usually dated circa 1740-45, demonstrates that this mode of abbreviated physiognomic observation was already established before the proposed dating of the Milan series. A sequence of related heads formerly in the Sartorio collection in Trieste, published by Giorgio Vigni as nos. 51-58 in his 1972 catalogue, provides another important point of reference for Tiepolo's sustained exploration of the head as an autonomous vehicle for caricatural invention.⁶

Scholars finally saw in these drawings an aspect of Tiepolo's art that pointed beyond his own generation. Their compressed expressive language appeared to him to anticipate, in different ways, the biting satire of Goya, the humour of Rowlandson and the politically charged exaggerations of Daumier. Such comparisons identify the modernity that Rizzi perceived in Tiepolo's ability to extract social and psychological meaning from a few apparently casual marks. The present sheet belongs to this particularly inventive current within Giambattista's art. A handful of lines and washes establish bearing and temperament, turning a small profile of an unknown man into one of the social types through which the artist observed, and occasionally mocked, the human world around him.

⁵ Antonio Morassi, 'Giambattista Tiepolo, Painter of "Macchiette"', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 101, no. 676, July 1959, pp. 227-32.

⁶ Giorgio Vigni, *Disegni del Tiepolo*, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged, Trieste, La Editoriale Libreria, 1972, nos. 51-58.

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Fig. 1. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Caricature of a Man Seated with his Legs Crossed*, ca. 1755–60. Pen and black and bistre ink, grey wash and black chalk, on paper, laid down, 157 × 180 mm. Civiche Raccolte Grafiche e Fotografiche, Gabinetto dei Disegni, Castello Sforzesco, Milan.



Fig. 2. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Caricature of a Gentleman Wearing a Wig, Seated in Profile to the Right*, ca. 1755–60. Pen and black ink and grey wash, on paper, laid down, 165 × 140 mm. Civiche Raccolte Grafiche e Fotografiche, Gabinetto dei Disegni, Castello Sforzesco, Milan.

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Fig. 3. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Head of an Old Man in Profile Wearing Exotic Headdress*, 1740s–1750s. Pen and brown ink and brush and brown wash over traces of black chalk, on beige paper; 25.1 × 19.9 cm. Princeton University Art Museum.

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Fig. 4. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Head of a Man in Left Profile with Tousled Hair*. Pen and brown ink and brown wash over black chalk, 25 × 19.7 cm. Princeton University Art Museum.

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Fig. 5 Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Head of a Man in Profile to the Left*, circa 1740–45. Pen and brown ink and brown wash over graphite, 25 × 20 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,

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