

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART

PIETRO ANTONIO NOVELLI

Venice 1729-1804 Venice

A Seated Lion

Pen and brown ink and brown wash.
293 x 421 mm. (11 1/2 x 16 5/8 in.)

Provenance

Anonymous sale, Florence, Sotheby Parke Bernet Italia, 14 November 1978, lot 486
Anna Bozza, Venice
Cristiano Barozzi, Barozzi Antichità, Venice
Purchased from him in May 1990, for \$10,000, by Wallace Bradway, New Haven,
Connecticut
Thence by descent.

The outlines of Pietro Antonio Novelli's long career are known through his posthumously published memoirs, which appeared thirty years after his death. Trained in the studio of Giambattista Pittoni, he also came under the influence of Gaspare Diziani and Francesco Guardi, while his earliest paintings – a *Saint Joseph* in the Venetian church of Santa Fosca and a *Presentation in the Temple* in the church of San Francesco in Rovigo, both painted in 1759 – show the influence of Jacopo Amigoni. Among other early documented works are a set of illustrations for an edition of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, published in 1760, and several plates for the complete edition of Carlo Goldoni's *Commedie*, published in 1761 and 1788. In 1768 Novelli was accepted as a member of the Accademia in Venice, for whom he submitted an *Allegory of the Arts* as a reception piece.

Novelli painted frescoes in several Venetian palaces, including that of the Corniani-Tivan, Mangilli, Mocenigo and Sangiatoffetti families, and also painted altarpieces and decorative frescoes throughout Northern Italy; in Udine, Padua and Bologna, as well as in Venice. Indeed, 'Novelli was one of the most active participants in the great wave of decorative painting that swept Venice and the Veneto in the last thirty years of the Venetian republic.'¹ Among the artist's patrons was Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia, for whom in 1772 he painted a mythological composition as a pendant to a work by Pompeo Batoni. By 1779 Novelli had settled in Rome, where he spent most of the next twenty years, and where he came under the influence of Neoclassicism and such artists as Batoni and Anton Raphael Mengs. During his years in Rome he completed a ceiling painting of *Cupid and Psyche* for the Villa Borghese and received commissions for the decoration of several Roman palaces. The last years of his career were spent in Venice. His son Francesco Novelli followed in his father's footsteps as an engraver and

designer of prints and book illustrations.

Novelli is best known today for his drawings. He was an inventive and versatile draughtsman, and, as one contemporary source noted, '*The drawings and painted works by Novelli showed not just a profound knowledge, but also a supreme degree of fantasy, and I myself saw him change in ten and more ways the same subject.*'² His many and varied drawings – executed in both pen and ink and watercolour and, more rarely, in red chalk – include studies for paintings and altarpieces, as well as a significant number of designs for book illustrations, prints and frontispieces. Large groups of Novelli's lively and colourful drawings are today in the collections of the Museo Correr in Venice, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York and the Albertina in Vienna.

1. James Byam Shaw and George Knox, *The Robert Lehman Collection, Vol.VI: Italian Eighteenth-Century Drawings*, New York, 1987, p.74.

2. '*Regnava sì nel disegno che nelle opere a pennello del Sig. Novelli oltre che un profondo sapere una somma fecondità di fantasia ed io stesso l'ho veduto cambiare in dieci e più maniere un medesimo soggetto.*'; G. Avelloni, *Documenti intorno agli ultimi anni del Sig. Pietro Antonio Novelli*, MS.877.26, Venice, Seminario Patriarcale, p.14.