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An Unpublished *Caricatura* by Domenico Tiepolo

As is well known, Giambattista Tiepolo (1696-1770) was one of the greatest painters of the eighteenth century and the last of the many distinguished artists who worked in the tradition of Italian fresco-painting which began with Giotto. Giambattista had two sons, Lorenzo (1736-1776) and Giovanni Domenico (1727-1804), both of whom assisted their father in the creation and execution of his scintillating and sumptuous decorative cycles. Lorenzo seems never to have become an independent artist. Domenico did, however, achieve autonomy, and recent studies have made progress in describing the distinct character of his work.¹ He is now, after a long period of relative obscurity, praised not only for his frescoes, such as those formerly in the Tiepolo villa at Zianigo (now in the Ca'Rezzonico, Venice) but for his etchings and, above all, his drawings, particularly the series depicting scenes from the life of Punchinello, a humorously bumbling character derived from the *Commedia dell'arte*.² Still, because of their close association, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish with absolute certainty his work from that of his father. This is especially true in the case of the many caricatures attributed to the two artists.

According to the original Italian definition, a caricature is a *ritratto caricato* (exaggerated portrait), a term which has its etymological source in the words *carico*, meaning "load," and *caricare*, meaning "to overload or exaggerate for the sake of humor."³ The Venetian artist Antonio Maria Zanetti, the Elder (1680-1767) is probably responsible for introducing caricature in Venice.⁴ Zanetti's caricatures, the earliest of which is dated 1708, are, indeed, "exaggerated portraits" of specific people. Giambattista Tiepolo, who was a friend of Zanetti, began drawing caricatures at some time after 1740, and Domenico began even later. Unlike Zanetti, however, the two Tiepolos seem not to have made caricatures of specific people. Rather, they created epigrams of particular types of humanity, such as the hunchback, the tall, thin person, or the excessively fat person.

In 1943 a volume of over 100 caricatures, most of them by Giambattista, but a few, it has been said, signed by Domenico, was broken up and sold at auction.⁵ The caricatures in this volume, titled *Tomo terzo de caricature*, have been dated by George Knox⁶ to the period between 1754 and 1762. The precise provenance of the *Tomo terzo* is uncertain, but a catalogue of 1854 listing the contents of the collection of Conte Bernardino Cornian Algarotti, nephew of Francesco Algarotti, a friend of the Tiepolos, mentions "two large books" containing "a copious collection of humorous drawings by Tiepolo" as well as some drawings "in cartelle," that is, single sheets.⁷ Not all of the caricatures by the Tiepolos known to scholars today, however,

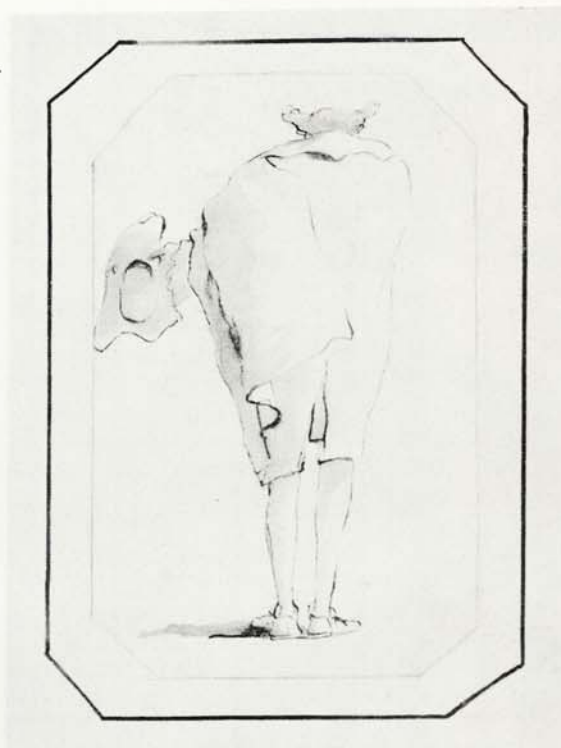


1. A Gentleman. Pen and ink drawing by Domenico Tiepolo. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia.

originally belonged to the *Tomo terzo*. Moreover, some of them, such as the *Gentleman* now in the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia (Fig. 1),⁸ seem to have been created after 1762.

In this drawing we see a portly gentleman in a coat with pleated tails, from beneath which protrudes an *épée*, knee-breeches, hose and shoes with square buckles. The tail of his wig trails down his back, and two curious horn-like tufts project outward obliquely from his head. His plump cheeks are described by simple, pear-shaped curves. His tricorne hat is tucked beneath his left arm, while his right arm, hand resting on a walking stick, points downward and slightly outward, with the laced cuff of his shirt extending beyond the sleeve. His feet are pointed outward at amusingly improbable angles. Before discussing the attribution of this drawing, we might do well to look first at examples of Giambattista's and Domenico's caricatures and try to extract some elemental principles of their draughtsmanship and expression.

2. A Gentleman Holding a Hat. Pen and ink drawing by Giambattista Tiepolo. Robert Lehman Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Giambattista's virtuosity is clearly seen in his caricature of a gentleman holding a hat in the Robert Lehman Collection, New York (Fig. 2). Here the pronounced verticality of the design has been established by the swift diagonal lines of the cloak, which, together with the strong gesture of the figure's left arm and the attenuation of its body, impart a sense of animation and vitality characteristic of all of Giambattista's drawings. The fluent, rhythmical lines have been drawn quickly and with unerring control, rippling suddenly to describe the undulation of cloak and hat, but elsewhere swept across the page in a "long, living arc." The masterful way in which Giambattista varies the thickness and density, even the quality of the lines, the sure use of washes of various tones, and the luminous, untouched highlights that appear to be not simply spaces void of ink but radiant projections illuminated by a light brighter than the paper itself—all of these produce a deft chiaroscuro effect which describes a figure of three-dimensional masses, existing in a space which we clearly perceive as ambient in spite of the absence of any background. In unison with Giambattista's brilliant clarity of form, these qualities have endowed the figure with a virile plasticity which reflects the artist's life-long interest in sculptural forms and ideas.

Domenico's style, as we encounter it in a signed work in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (Fig. 3), is markedly different from



that of his father. Here we see a line which is broken, nervous, almost fretful, and even where the artist makes a long, sweeping line with his pen, such as in the profile of the figure's paunch, he does so without the spontaneity and control of gesture found in his father's drawings. Moreover, Domenico's forms, although they are shaded with pen and wash, have none of the vivid plasticity of his father's figures. Even so, the figure does possess a sense of weight not usually present in Giambattista's work. The pose of Domenico's figure seems static when compared to those of his father's figures. In Giambattista's *Gentleman* (Fig. 2), for example, there is a sense of momentary rest, as if the figure in the next instant will bow or step forward. Domenico's figure, by comparison, seems earthbound, almost rooted to the ground and incapable of animation.

In spite of its differences from that of his father, Domenico's style is of a quality that demands appreciation. His caricatures convey a sense of nervous tension which places them beyond the realm of the playfully humorous drawings of Giambattista, who brilliantly exaggerates human features for comic effect, and yet retains in those very exaggerations a certain spirited gracefulness.⁹ Domenico's ungainly figures, on the other hand, convey a sense of what might be called the awkwardness of human existence. Giambattista's caricatures gently mock not only physical features but a kind of pompous elegance and

3. Left: *A Gentleman and Other Studies*. Pen and ink drawing by Domenico Tiepolo. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Rogers Fund), New York. Reproduced courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

4. Right: *A Fat Nobleman*. Pen and ink drawing by Giambattista Tiepolo. Robert Lehman Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Reproduced courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

self-importance. Indeed, he brings grace and elegance, two extremely important qualities of eighteenth-century art and society, into the sphere of the ridiculous. Domenico's caricatures seem ambiguous in intention. He does exaggerate physical features, but we do not smile, at least not for long, at these distortions. Rather, we feel a sympathy for his figures, and the element of mockery is almost immediately lost. In Domenico's hands caricatural drawing has a far greater depth of expression. The style is for him a vehicle for conveying a vision of the world and the human beings who inhabit it, a vision which reaches its clearest delineation in his Punchinello series and in some of his drawings of Venetian society.

Although the Missouri caricature was offered to the Museum as a work by Giambattista, it was immediately recognized as by Domenico.¹⁰ This attribution can be demonstrated by a comparison between the caricature and Giambattista's *Fat Nobleman*, also in the Robert Lehman Collection (Fig. 4). In the latter are all of those qualities of style that we have noted in the first caricature by Giambattista discussed here (Fig. 2). The line, masterfully varied in thickness and density, is vibrantly assured, its movement fluid and gracefully rhythmical. In the Missouri drawing line is distinct and precise, yet it is also hesitant and tremulous, and the artist seems to have reworked the contour in several places. Moreover, in spite of the obesity of Giambattista's figure (Fig. 4), the drawing has a light, airy and fantastic quality which is absent from the Missouri drawing where the figure's bulk, in spite of the flatness of form, seems to possess weight and to respond to gravity.

That the Missouri caricature is the work of Domenico is easily seen when we compare it to the artist's signed caricature mentioned earlier (Fig. 3), in which we encounter the same broken, almost nervous line, especially in the coat of the figure. There is also a similar touch of realism, manifested not only in the illusion of the figure's weight but in the careful, almost obsessive attention to the particulars of objects such as the folds of the coat-tails in both drawings. It should be noted too that Giambattista's fanciful exaggeration of physical features is not found in either of Domenico's works, for unlike his father, he seems to have based his exaggerations of form more closely on the direct observation of nature.

Domenico's caricature (Fig. 1) at the time of purchase was said to be a portrait of Sebastiano Ricci, a Venetian painter who was overly fond of cheese. This description of the subject is probably due to the figure's resemblance to Giambattista's *Fat Nobleman* (Fig. 4), which, according to Antonio Morassi, was probably inspired by the caricature of Ricci by Pier Leone Ghezzi now in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (MS. Ottob. Lat. 3116, f.85).¹¹ Giambattista's figure, however, does not seem to be a caricature of a specific person, as Ghezzi's certainly is, and is therefore probably not a portrait of Ricci. Even if Giambattista's figure was inspired by Ghezzi's, it nevertheless seems to be a humorous portrayal of a particular type. Likewise, Domenico's figure (Fig. 1), in spite of its relative realism, also represents a type of middle-aged Venetian gentleman of the eighteenth century.



That the figure in the Missouri caricature is simply an anonymous specimen of humankind may be gathered from its relationship to Giambattista's *Fat Nobleman* (Fig. 4), which served as a model for many figures appearing in drawings of Domenico's later years. In a scene of everyday life, the *Country Walk* (Fig. 5) formerly in the collection of Dr. O. Wertheimer of Paris, the figure on the left imitates Giambattista's *Nobleman* except for the addition of a large bow-knot and flowing tail to the wig.¹² This figure reappears in a rare multi-figured caricatural drawing by Domenico at Turin (Fig. 6) as the second figure from the left. Here it is rather a more faithful rendition of Giambattista's original. Also the fourth figure from the left is almost identical with the one already mentioned in the *Country Walk*, and both are not far from the Missouri figure. A further case of a figure similar to the father's caricature is found in the *Cardplayers* in the Paul Bernat Collection, particularly the hunchback on the left.¹³ It is clear, then, that Domenico was fascinated by Giambattista's *Fat Nobleman* and made numerous variations of it in his own drawings, one of which is the Missouri caricature.

Aside from accentuating the exemplary position of Giambattista's work in Domenico's imagination, the above comparisons also establish a frame of reference for dating the Missouri caricature, otherwise a

5. *Country Walk*. Pen and ink drawing by Domenico Tiepolo. Formerly in the Otto Wertheimer Collection, Paris. Reproduced courtesy of Sotheby and Company.



6. A Group of Gentlemen. Pen and ink drawing by Domenico Tiepolo. Photo courtesy of Biblioteca Reale, Turin.

difficult task. The similarity in type and treatment of the Missouri drawing to the above-mentioned works may indicate a like relative date. The *Country Walk* (Fig. 5) and the *Cardplayers*, as well as the *Gentleman* in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 3) each bear a signature, and, as Byam Shaw proposes, such signatures almost always occur on drawings of the second half of Domenico's career.¹⁴ On the basis of this circumstantial evidence, a date after 1790 can be considered most likely.

An unusual feature of the Missouri drawing is the treatment of the border, which is composed of canted inner corners washed and edged within in pen—(we are not aware of a precisely similar handling in other caricatures associated with the two Tiepolos). The border is clearly a contrivance, almost a *trompe l'oeil* imitation of a mounting common to many Tiepolo caricatures (see, for example, Figs. 2 and 4). In the case of many of these, the corners of the drawing were clipped and, after it was attached to the mat, was then edged with ink panned on the mat. This sort of mounting is found in many instances with Giambattista and may have been used by Domenico as well. The Missouri caricature presents a rare copy of that practice. In addition, the drawing is attached to a mat which is to be seen at the edges of the illustration (Fig. 1). This framing device is the kind of afterthought

which can be conceived as a logical follow-up to the standard practice, a circumstance which tends to confirm the date proposed above. Likewise, the device connotes just the finality which we expect of Domenico. The vast majority of his later drawings in series have at least a margin-line and many of them a wash border. Apparently, such margination is the exception with Giambattista.

Domenico Tiepolo is at times seen as a timorous sort who deferred to the specter of his father's genius. Such a psychological characterization might account for his apparently obsequious attachment to his father's figurative vocabulary. His seeming servitude, however, is based on practicality more than anything else. His father's art or, in other instances, his father's figures, sufficed conveniently for the accomplishment of his own artistic goals. As student, co-worker and devoted son, his amenability to his father's direction during his early years is quite understandable. Following Giambattista's death in 1770, Domenico succeeded him as the leading *frescante* in Venice. He held this position for the remainder of the century, owing to the endorsement of the arbiters of official taste, who in Venice were very conservative, and accordingly he was expected to carry on his father's "grand manner" in history painting. This obligation he discharged with diligence, but his most valuable works, from the point of view of the history of art, are his drawings, and among these his caricatures hold an important place.

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¹See especially J. Byam Shaw, *The Drawings of Domenico Tiepolo* (London 1962); A. Mariuz, *Giandomenico Tiepolo* (Venice n.d.); and G. Knox, *Giambattista and Domenico Tiepolo, A Study and Catalogue Raisonné of the Chalk Drawings*, 2 vols. (Oxford 1980).

²For Domenico's Punchinello series see the exhibition catalogue, *Domenico Tiepolo's Punchinello Drawings* (Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington 1979).

³J. Schultz, ed., *Caricature and Its Role in Graphic Satire* (Department of Art, Brown University and Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence 1971) 8.

⁴Ibid.

⁵G. Knox, *Tiepolo, A Bicentenary Exhibition, 1770-1970* (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge 1970) no. 87.

⁶Ibid.

⁷M. Levey, "Two Footnotes to Any Tiepolo Monograph," *Burlington Magazine* 104 (March 1962) 118-119.

⁸Acc. no. 74.194. 18 x 11.3 cm. (within border).

⁹For an excellent study of Giambattista's caricatural style see M. Kozloff, "The Caricatures of Giambattista Tiepolo," *Marsyas* 10 (1960-61) 13-33.

¹⁰N. E. Land first made, verbally, the attribution to Domenico. Edwin Sledge, "Tiepolo Caricatura," (unpublished undergraduate term paper), concurs with that attribution.

¹¹A. Morassi, *Disegni veneti del settecento nella collezione Paul Wallraf* (Venice 1959) 59, no. 87.

¹²The *Country Walk* was recently sold at auction. See Sotheby's catalogue, *Old Master Drawings*, (New York, January 16, 1985) no. 199.

¹³For an illustration of the *Cardplayers* see Knox, *Tiepolo* no. 103.

¹⁴Byam Shaw, *The Drawings*, 63-64.

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