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Felice Giani

**St. Florian, Accompanied
by St. Petronius, Intercedes
with the Virgin for the Plague
to Cease in the City of Bologna**





Felice Giani

(San Sebastiano Curone, 1758 - Rome, 1823)

St. Florian, Accompanied by St. Petronius, Intercedes with the Virgin for the Plague to Cease in the City of Bologna, ca. 1790

Oil on canvas; 36 x 30.5 cm

PROVENANCE: Private collection, Italy.

No attribution problem attaches to this study because Felice Giani's tight, summary style of painting and his ability to use a brush charged with paint without any trace of a detailed preparatory drawing are instantly recognisable.

Giani – who was also a great decorator of interiors and a tireless draughtsman – painted relatively few easel works and most of those were on paper, thus putting this oil on canvas study in a class of its own.

I imagine that the subject matter can be inter-



preted as relating to an outbreak of the plague in Bologna, given the presence in the background of a city with towers closely reflecting the standard image of Bologna and the presence of that city's two patron saints: Bishop St. Petronius preceded by the city's banner with a lion rampant crowned, and St. Florian whose cult is recorded in the city from the 12th century. Both saints, Petronius and Florian, are also portrayed in the large and famous votive standard known as the "Plague Altarpiece" painted by Guido Reni for the Basilica of San Domenico after the plague of 1630 (and now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna).

Giani's composition betrays a Baroque approach: see for example, in the superb foreground, the expanse of plague victims in a violent clash of light and shadow reflecting the iconographic models of the 17th century, starting with Mattia Preti. In the upper part of the canvas, on the other hand, the luminous, sunny palette points to Giani's formative years in the Gandolfis' circle in Bologna. Thus we may date this small painting (possibly an *ex voto*) to the 1790s. Far from being a preparatory work for a more demanding picture, like almost all of Giani's smaller pictures it was intended for a tight circle of friends and connoisseurs.

Felice Giani was born in 1758 in San Sebastiano Curone near Alessandria, then an imperial fief

belonging to Prince Andrea Doria Pamphili who was to become Giani's protector in Rome. Giani is recorded in Bologna in 1778, where he studied under Domenico Pedrini and Ubaldo Gandolfi. After winning a prize at the Accademia Clementina for his *Baptism of Christ* (now in the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna) in 1779, he moved to Rome in 1780. His crucial formative years fall between his arrival in the papal capital and his first summons to Faenza in 1786 (it was in Faenza, not far from Bologna, that Giani was to produce some of his masterpieces in the field of interior decoration).

Pompeo Batoni, Christopher Unterperger and the architect Giovanni Antonio Antolini were Giani's openly stated models and referees in Rome, yet his work dateable to the 1780s reveals a more complex picture of his cultural associations, stretching from the northern European painters in Füssli's circle to Cades, Giovan Battista Dell'Era and Angelica Kauffmann.

From the 1790s onwards interior decoration was to become Giani's preferred field of action, an extremely successful field in which he played a truly pioneering role, drawing the residences of the Napoleonic era which he decorated in Italy into the context of an avant-garde civilisation capable of competing at the international level.

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