

Punchinello Is Helped to a Chair, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo

Punchinello Is Helped to a Chair

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo
Italian, about 1791
Pen and brown ink,
brown wash, and black
chalk
13 15/16 x 18 1/2 in.
84.GG.10

Background Information

In his distinctive black mask, the popular 18th-century character **Punchinello** totters shakily toward a chair

with the help of an attendant and a long cane. A comic character in Italian theater, his hunchback, beaklike nose, and stupidity made him the focus of much humor in the *commedia dell'arte* and other popular entertainments. Other characters, also wearing masks, stand around watching the scene, preparing a chair for the weary Punchinello, and fetching an umbrella.



Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo produced this drawing as part of a series of 104 works dealing with specific episodes in the life of Punchinello, entitled *Divertimento per li ragazzi* (Diversions for Children). The scenes, whose themes range from amusement to tragedy, explore the complex character of the hunchbacked fool. As a testament to Tiepolo's fondness for this subject, he decorated his family home, Villa Ziani, with images from the series.

Tiepolo sketched the drawing first in black chalk, which was easy to change, before drawing in the figures with pen, ink, and brown wash. The numerous black chalk lines that still remain suggest that the artist made several changes to the design before he settled on this scene.

About the Artist

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (Italian, 1727–1804)

Although very successful as a painter and engraver, Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo made some of his most provocative works as drawings. He trained in the studio of his famous father, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, and was independently producing works for his own commissions by the age of twenty. He continued to work with his father while at times executing his own designs until his father's death in 1770. His subjects, both religious and secular, reveal that he developed a more straightforward approach to composition than his father's work demonstrates.

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Tiepolo seems to have stopped working for about fifteen years, after which time he began painting and drawing in a completely different manner. Punchinello, a physically deformed clown and bumpkin based specifically on a character from the *commedia dell'arte*, became the protagonist of his work. These amusing and elaborately detailed drawings poked fun at pretensions and inspired viewers to reflect on their own behavior.

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Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely the work of art and describe what you see.

Describe the characters. (*six masked men with tall, white hats; two women*)

What can you tell about the characters? (*They are all focused on the figure with a black mask who is having trouble walking; they must have lived a long time ago, etc.*)

What accessories do you see in the drawing? (*hats, shoes, ruffled collars, masks*)

What do these accessories communicate about the types of people? (*They may be clowns; they may be performers in costume; they may be dressed for a masked ball.*)

What do the gestures communicate? How do the gestures set up the conflict in the scene depicted in the drawing? (*They are all focused on helping or watching the figure in the black mask.*)

Who may be the main character in the drawing? (*the man in the black mask whose body is turned toward the viewer or audience*)

How do you know that this may be the main character? (*He is in the **foreground**; he has a different mask; other figures appear to be looking at him; he is being directed to the only chair in the room, which is in the center of the drawing.*)

Who do you think is attempting to resolve the conflict in the scene? How do you know? (*An unmasked female figure is attempting to resolve the conflict. She is holding the main character by the arm and helping him walk.*)