

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

DOMENICO PIOLA

(GENOA, 1627 - 1703)

Nativity

Oil on canvas, 49 5/8 x 38 1/8 In. (126 x 96.8 cm.)



PROVENANCE

Perhaps Genoa, collection of Angelo Costa (1901-1976); Sotheby's sale, London, 8 July 1987, lot 49 (as Domenico Piola); Lugano, private collection.

LITERATURE

- Anna Orlando, *Genova e il collezionismo nel Novecento. Studi nel centenario di Angelo Costa (1901-1976)*, Turin-London, 2001, p. 178, no.XCVIII, fig. 185 (whereabouts unknown);
- Véronique Damian, *Pittura italiana tra Sei e Settecento. Un portrait de lévrier par Baccio del Bianco*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 2004, pp. 40-43;
- Daniele Sanguinetti, *Domenico Piola e i pittori della "sua casa"*, 2 vol., Soncino, 2004, 2, n° I.64, pp. 399, 308;
- Valentina Borniotto, *Domenico Piola 1628-1703. Percorsi di pittura barocca*, Daniele Sanguinetti (dir.),

cat. exp. Gênes, Palazzo Nicolosio Lomellino, Musei di Strada Nuova, 13 October 2017 – 7 January 2018, pp. 79, 128-129, no. 20.

EXHIBITIONS

Domenico Piola 1628-1703. Percorsi di pittura barocca, Daniele Sanguinetti ed., exh. cat. Genova, Palazzo Nicolosio Lomellino, Musei di Strada Nuova, 13 October 2017 – 7 January 2018.

The œuvre of Domenico Piola, the true founder of the "Casa Piola", the family firm of painters, has his catalogue raisonné, as his son Paolo Gerolamo has thus been honoured in 2002 (1). A good number of scholarly contributions have recently cast light on the career of this prolific artist and on his fundamental status in the evolution of Genoese painting during the later seventeenth century (2). The theme of the Nativity was treated several times by Piola, especially in his early works, when his style was most steeped in the naturalism of Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, known as Grechetto (1609-1664). Our painter executed a monumental version of the subject in a frescoed medaillon for the church of Santa Marta in Genoa, which still displays the influence of Castiglione, and one may also compare Piola's two *Adorations of the Shepherds* in the Church of San Francesco d'Assisi in Recco and in the Oratory of the Santissima Annunziata in Spotorno (3).

Each of these works shares the same highly original and strongly volumetric conception, with the placement of the Christ Child at the centre of a compositional curve of figures. Seen from behind in the foreground, the shepherds function as spectators, drawing the viewer into more intimate participation. Beautiful details, executed with rich, painterly handling, such as the turbaned shepherd musician or the shoulder and scarf of the woman carrying a child, appear in contrast to other more lightly-applied passages, such as the cherubs' heads over the Christ Child.

In the present painting, Domenico Piola evokes the tradition of the nocturnes painted by Luca Cambiaso (1527-1585), such as the *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the Brera Gallery in Milan. Here, the Christ Child is illuminated by divine light, a physical manifestation of God's power, and therefore of his presence; and the light heightens the symbolic value of the passages in white, which are set apart from the brown, almost monochrome tonalities. In a more general manner, the contrasts between light and shadow contribute to how the image, and its expression of space, are built up. The scene is set outside the stable, and the stable itself is conceived as an open structure and part of the scenery that frames the composition, together with the column on the left. Piola fuses the dramatic and indeed visionary aspects of this light, which literally radiates the scene, with its narrative and even anecdotal side, as represented by the animals, of the kind so dear to Castiglione. The latter's technique is also brought to mind by the thick, pronounced brushstrokes, allowing for a date in the late 1640s.

Thanks to his biographer Ratti, we know that Domenico was first apprenticed as a youth to his father and then his brother, both of whom died prematurely in 1640 (4). Essential contributions to his evolving style came from a study of various sources: the frescoes painted by Perino del Vaga (1501-1547) in the villa of Andrea Doria al Fassolo, the naturalism of Castiglione, and the late Lombard Mannerism found in Valerio Castello (1624-1659). When Castello died, Piola became the most prominent painter of grand decoration for Genoese private patrons, both for religious commissions and frescoes, and on his own death in 1703, these great enterprises were continued by his sons.

Notes:

1- Alessandra Toncini Cabella, *Paolo Gerolamo Piola e la sua grande Casa genovese*, Genoa, 2002.

2- Ezia Gavazza, Federica Lamera, Lauro Magnani, *La pittura in Liguria. Il secondo Seicento*, Genoa, 1990; Ezia Gavazza, Lauro Magnani, *Pittura e decorazione a Genova e in Liguria nel Settecento*, Genoa; Federica Lamera, "Biografia di Domenico Piola", in *Domenico Piola. Frammenti di un barocco*

ricostruito. Restauri in onore di Ezia Gavazza, exh. cat. Genoa, Museo dell'Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti, 22 March -11 May 2003, pp. 26-28. Dott. Daniele Sanguineti is currently preparing a study of Domenico Piola which will include our painting

3- Ezia Gavazza, Federica Lamera, Lauro Magnani, *La pittura in Liguria. Il secondo Seicento*, Genoa, 1990, figs. 20, 25, 26.

4- C. G. Ratti, *Delle Vite de'pittori, scultori, ed architetti genovesi e dei forestieri che in Genova hanno operato, 1769*, [Genoa, 1965 and Bologna, 1969], II, p. 29-51.