FRANCESCO CAIRO

(MILAN, 1607 - 1665)

The Martyrdom of Saint Euphemia

Oil on canvas, 75 x 87 13/16 in. (192,5 x 223 cm)





Fig. 1

PROVENANCE

Probably the painting mentioned in the inventory made after the artist's death: "Un Martirio di S. Eufemia entro a Leoni alto Br. 4. largo Br. 4. opra del Cavagl.e." (item n°252 in the posthumous inventory of 29 July 1665) [1]. England, private collection.

LITERATURE

- Francesco Frangi, "Francesco Cairo, Alessandro Tiarini e la strana storia delle ante di Sant' Eufemia a Milano", *Nuovi Studi,* 2005, 11, pp. 249-263;
- Véronique Damian, *Deux tableaux de la collection Sannesi. Tableaux des écoles émilienne et lombarde*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 2006, pp. 50-55;
- Véronique Damian in, *Dipinti del Seicento. Influssi caravaggeschi tra Lombardia e Napoli*, Chiara Naldi ed., exh.cat., Galleria Canesso Lugano, 26 April- 15 June 2013, pp. 40-47.

The lengthy inventory of paintings belonging to Francesco Cairo - 294 items - drawn up on 29 July 1665 just after his death, includes a *Martyrdom of Saint Euphemia with Lions* (n°252)[2].This record has a twofold relevance: firstly it attests that the painter did indeed treat this subject, but more significantly, given its large-scale dimensions (4 x 4 braccia, or approximately 240 x 240 cm, perhaps including the frame) and square format (or apparently so), it closely resembles those of our canvas. These two elements strongly suggest that the work cited in the inventory may be identified with the present painting, only recently published by Francesco Frangi in the journal *Nuovi Studi,* no. 11.

The subject is rarely treated in painting. It illustrates the martyrdom of Saint Euphemia, described in detail by Jacopo da Voragine in the *Golden Legend.* The episode takes place at the time of Diocletian and the early Christian martyrs. After several unsuccessful attempts to eliminate Euphemia, who did not wish to abjure her Christian faith, she was thrown "into a pit where there were three wild beasts so ferocious that they would swallow any man", but amazingly they did her no harm. An executioner was then sent to drive "his sword into Euphemia's side, thus making her a martyr for Christ. To reward the headsman for his service, the judge draped him in a silk garment and girded him with a gold belt, but as the man went out, he was snatched by a lion and devoured by the same"[3]. Indeed our painting shows this man seen from behind, his arms raised in surprise at the sudden attack, and an empty scabbard on his waist; given the presence of the sword in the saint's side, it is not difficult to deduce that he has just committed the cruel act himself. Stories about martyrs naturally lend themselves to the spectacular, and here the artist has taken advantage of the theatrical element, concentrating more on action than decorum. The dark background thrusts the two figures into the immediate foreground, arranged along two contrasting horizontal and vertical diagonals. Two of the pieces of clothing worn by the richly-dressed executioner -the strange short red breeches and twirling beige doublet - evoke the gift of the "silk garment" mentioned in the *Golden Legend.*

A very recent study by Francesco Frangi shows that Cairo was here responding to a canvas with the same subject - *The Martyrdom of Saint Euphemia* -now in the first chapel on the left in San Paolo Converso, Milan, but which originally decorated the organ shutters in that church. The Milanese painting has suffered a good deal: having been divided into two sections, as appropriate to its function, it was later found out into four pieces. After a radical restoration between 1932 and 1935, it was reframed and is now visible as a single pièce, even if its state of preservation hinders close reading of the composition. This work and its complex vicissitudes are given lengthy analysis by Francesco Frangi, but we will refrain from quoting this in detail, referring the reader to his article (see *literature*).

It was not until 1674 that local guides list the painting as a work by Titian or Veronese, and these early attributions were constantly repeated until the beginning of the nineteenth century, after which they were understandably no longer taken into consideration [4]. Recent contributions have noted that the picture in San Paolo Converso has striking parallels with Venetian art, and there is general agreement in dating it to the second half of the Cinquecento [5]. Frangi himself sees it as the work of a painter representing a link between the Veneto and Lombardy, and cautiously proposes an artist from Crema, Giovanni da Monte (1525/1530-1585/1590), who was in Venice as a young man and was likely to have been a pupil of Titian. The work is still mysterious today, and in the absence of archival documents relating to its

commission and function, its authorship must remain hypothetical.

Did Cairo himself - a true admirer of the great Venetian painter, whose works he copied and owned - believe this prestigious attribution, or was his response based on a correct knowledge of the work's author? [6] We must admit that the reason for Cairo's execution of our painting eludes us: if it had been regularly commissioned it would be odd to find it in his home at his death in 1665. One might be tempted to believe that he painted it for himself, with the ultimate aim of study. There is no doubt that the visual impact of the organ shutters impressed him enough to lead him to create his own interpretation of this dramatic narrative.

In any case, our painting does not present significant variants; rather, these are to be found in numerous details, due especially to a highly fluid pictorial technique that was characteristic of the painter dubbed "the Lombard Titian" by Carlo Torre. Cairo lends the compact forms - notably that of the saint - a strong emotional content by using muted tonal harmonies. The handling of blue, brown, and red, and especially the white of the executioner, is bold and energetic, with broad, thick brushstrokes. It is these qualities that suggest a moment late in his career, during the mature period between the late 1650s and early 1660s. Frangi also notes how our picture displays stylistic parallels to the melancholy-tinged atmosphere of late masterpieces by the painter such as *The Apparition of the Virgin and Child to Saint Anthony of Padua* (Piacenza, Santa Teresa) or *Saint John the Baptist Taking Leave of His Parents* (Aicurzio, Sant'Andrea) [7]. It is interesting to see that Cairo once again adopted the male figure of the executioner, seen from behind as he enters the composition, in his *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* (Milan, Santo Stefano)[8].

As far as we can tell, the rhetorical tone of the scène pleased Cairo, and to develop it further he extended his composition by 35 cm in width compared to the painting in San Paolo Converso, which measures 180 x 188 cm. The image before us is a highly effective blend of the supernatural, horrified, and wonderful, ail seen through an expansive and spectacular lens.

Notes:

1- Taking one Milanese *braccio* as 60 cm, the picture would measure 240 x 240 cm (94 _ inches square). See Francesco Frangi, *Francesco Cairo,* Milan, 1998, doc. 18, p. 341, no. 252.

2- The painting, formerly believed to be by Francesco Maffei (c. 1605-1665), was attributed to Cairo by Francesco Frangi when he saw it during conservation; we are grateful to him for pointing out the existence of the artist's posthumous inventory Spécial thanks go to Ottorino Nonfarmale for having restored the painting in Italy.

3- Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend,* transl. W. G. Ryan, Princeton, 1993, vol. 1, pp. 181-183.

4- Carlo Torre, *Il ritratto di Milano* (1674), 1714, p. 62; but already mentioned in 1671 in A. Santagostino, *L'Immortalità e la gloria del pennello. Catalogo delle pitture insigni che stanno esposte al publico nella città di Milano,* 1671, éd. Marco Bona Castellotti, Milan, 1980, p. 335, no. 372.

5- M. Bona Castellotti, as in note 4, p. 335, no.372; Maria Teresa Fiorio, "Sant'Eufemia", in *Le chiese di Milano,* Milan, 1984, p. 252; Alessandro Morandotti, *San Paolo Converso in Milano*, Milan, nd [1984], pp. 46-47.

6- Francesco Frangi (as in note 1, pp. 127-129) notes the artist's predilection for the Venetian masters of the sixteenth century, as reflected in the posthumous inventory of painting made at his death in 1665. The document is fascinating as it attests to the fact that Cairo was not content solely to copy Titian or Veronese but that he himself owned Venetian Cinquecento paintings, including several by Titian.

7- F. Frangi, as in note 1, no. 90 and 100, pp. 277, 285. 8- F. Frangi, as in note 1, no. 121, p. 289.