

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

NICCOLÒ CASSANA

(VENISE, 1659 - LONDON, 1713)

Portrait of a Cook

Oil on canvas, 54 5/16 x 47 5/8 in (138 x 121 cm)



PROVENANCE

Siena, Castello di Certaldo, Counsellor Sannini collection.

LITERATURE

- Véronique Damian, *Portrait de Michael Sweerts et acquisitions récentes*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 2006, pp. 24-27;
- Raffaella Besta, in *La cucina italiana. Cuoche a confronto*, Piero Boccardo (ed.), cat. exh. Gênes, Musei di Strada – Palazzo Bianco, 27 March – 19 July 2015, pp. 96 - 99, no. 13.

EXHIBITIONS

- *La Cucina Italiana. Cuoche a confronto*, Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco, 27 March- 19 July 2015, pp. 96 -99.

Although Ratti, his biographer, reminds us that the artist was born in Venice in 1659, Niccolò Cassana retained a pictorial technique belying his Genoese origins (1). And indeed, the free, expressive style used to paint this astonishing *Portrait of a Cook* is reminiscent of the spirited art of Bernardo Strozzi (1581-1644), who had moved to Venice around 1632-1633, bringing with him Niccolò's father, Giovanni Francesco (ca. 1620- 1690), himself a painter as well (2). Niccolò's Genoese culture lies therefore in a family tradition, passed on to him when training under his father. Our artist truly began to consecrate himself to portraiture in 1683, at the age of 25, introducing himself to the Medici family by sending them his *Self-Portrait* (Florence, Uffizi Gallery). Giusto Sustermans (1597-1681), their official painter, had died two years before, and Cassana was hoping to attract the attention of Ferdinand de' Medici (1663-1713), which did indeed come to pass several years later, the two having met in Venice in 1687. In a 1974 article, Marco Chiarini studied Niccolò Cassana's activities at the Florentine court, which were not limited to official portraits: they also included three portraits of hunters painted for the Grand Duke Ferdinand, now separated between the storage rooms of the Uffizi and at the Villa della Petraia. Specifically regarding the pieces at the Uffizi, *Hunter with Dog* and *Hunter with Rabbit* exhibit characteristics shared with this *Portrait of a Cook*: a connection with the naturalism of the 17th century and a demonstration of the artist's very real pleasure at blending the art of portraiture with that of the still life (3).

The figure is posed in an interior, a dark wall behind him. The artist's palette makes use of fairly muted colours, such as the browns and pinkish reds that contrast with the luminous, seductively carefree whites. The vivid expression of the outward-facing gaze conveys a psychological tension that is also relayed by a posture which appears natural and yet at the same time artificially designed. The effects of the thick application of paint, including on the face, are occasionally pushed aside in favour of a more delicate, lighter touch, such as in the hair which has been painted from the tip of the brush. The more disciplined - and more descriptive - technique used in the composition of the poultry provides a contrast with the heavier presence of the brush, epitomized in the swirls of the upturned sleeves, as well as in the hands and the fur of the hat. The animals on the right are portrayed in clear detail: a magnificent turkey hangs by its feet from the wall with wings unfurled, while on the table a duck with another, half-plucked, fowl are plainly offered up to us in the foreground. This focus on the still life aspect, which we can also find in his portraits of hunters at the Uffizi, is confirmed in Cassana's floral and fruit tableaux, often referenced alongside his historical pieces containing a significant amount of animal life, in that association specific to the Genovese tradition, as seen with Grechetto (1609-1664) and Pieter Boel (1622-1674), serving to highlight the multi-faceted nature of our artist's talents (4). Furthermore, his brother, Giovanni Agostino (1658-1720) was himself specialised in genre scenes, his paintings revolving around still lifes and animals - apparently a common family trait.

Even if, in all probability, this painting was not commissioned by the Medici, it is nevertheless tempting to date it at approximately the time of the two other portraits of hunters, during a period when narrative painting was in vogue in Florence (beginning in the 1620s). Those who worked at the Court and had a link with the culinary arts were at that time voluntarily taken on as models. For example in 1634 Sustermans presented a marvellous double portrait of peasant women bringing food supplies to the Grand Duke's kitchens (Florence, Uffizi Gallery) (5). Later on Niccolò Cassana would contribute another handsome *Portrait of a Female Cook* (Florence, Uffizi Gallery) which, along with the *Female Dwarf of Princess Violante of Bavaria* (Florence, Palazzo Pitti), marked the end of the spontaneity of the artist's use of impasto in favour of smoother surfaces covered with lighter shades, heralding what would become the international artistic fashion of the 18th century (6).

Notes:

- 1- C. G. Ratti, *Delle Vite di pittori, scultori ed architetti genovesi*, Genoa, 1769, pp. 14-16: “tipo d’impasto e preparazione che indicano la sua origine genovese”.
- 2- Marco Chiarini, «Niccolò Cassana Portraitist of the Florentine Court», *Apollo*, September 1974, pp. 234-239; Marco Chiarini, “Niccolo Cassana”, *Gli ultimi Medici. Il tardo barocco a Firenze, 1610-1749*, exh. cat. Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Arts, 27 March- 2 June 1974; Florence, Palazzo Pitti, 28 June-30 September 1974, pp. 200-202; Marco Chiarini, “Cassana, Niccolo”, *Dizionario Biografico degli italiani*, vol. 21, Rome, pp. 434-436.
- 3- *Gli Uffizi. Catalogo Generale*, Florence, 1980, entries by Silvia Meloni Trkulja, pp. 209-210, nos. P383, P384.
- 4- The inventory of the Ferdinand collection (1714), published by Marco Chiarini (“I quadri della collezione del Principe Ferdinando di Toscana”, *Paragone* 301, 1975, pp. 57-98), cites numerous paintings by Niccolo Cassana, including: p. 62, under no. C.4V: “Di Niccola Cassana un baccanale, ove vi è una femmina in atto di sonare il cembalo, e puto che balla, con adornam”; p. 66, under no. C. 9V: “Di mano di Niccola Cassana Isac e Rachele con più animali di cameli e pecore, con veduta di paese, con adornamento intagliato e tutto dorato”; p. 75, under no. .C.19r: “due quadretti in tela alti s. 17 ?, larghi br. 1 s. 2, per ciascuno dipintovi di mano di Niccola Cassana, in uno frutte diverse, e nell’altro fiori di più sorte sopra di un pilastro”.
- 5- See now: Lisa Goldenberg Stoppato, *Un granduca e il suo ritrattista. Cosimo III de’ Medici e la «stanza de’ quadri» di Giusto Sustermans*, exh. cat. Florence, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, 16 June-22 October 2006, pp. 48-49, no. 13.
- 6- Marco Chiarini, *ibid.* note 2, exh. cat. 1974, pp. 202-203, nos. 113-114.