

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

THE MASTER OF THE BLUE JEANS

(ACTIVE IN NORTHERN ITALY IN THE LATE 17TH CENTURY)

Woman Begging with Two Children

Oil on canvas, 59 7/8 x 46 1/16 in (152 x 117 cm).



PROVENANCE

Albate (Lombardy), Villa Airoidi, known as Villa San Valerio, Airoidi Family (possibly the “dipinto grande con tre pitocchi” in the Airoidi Inventory of 1692; our thanks to Marina Dell’Omo, who will cite this in her forthcoming study of Lombard collections); Albiate, Villa Airoidi, Caprotti Family since the end of the 19th century; by descent, in 1999, to Guido and Ida Caprotti (1929-2012), who sold the painting (as by an anonymous artist) through Counts Verga Ruffoni Menon to the dealer Giorgio Baratti in Milan; with the Roman dealer Cesare Lampronti in 1999; Luigi Koelliker collection, 2002 (as attributed to Le Nain), Milan; with the Galerie Canesso, Paris (as Master of the Blue Jeans), 2009.

LITERATURE

-Gerlinde Gruber, in *Da Caravaggio a Ceruti. La scena di genere e l'immagine dei pitocchi nella pittura*

italiana, exh. cat., Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia, 28 November 1998 – 28 February 1999, p. 425, no. 90;

-Francesco Frangi, “Dai pitocchi al ‘buon villan’. Metamorfosi della pittura di genere a Milano negli anni di Parini”, in G. Barbarisi, C. Capra, F. Degrada, F. Mazzocca, eds., *L’amabil rito. Società e cultura nella Milano di Parini* (symposium papers, Milan, 1999), Bologna, 2000, II, pp. 1145-1162

-Gerlinde Gruber, in *Dipinti Lombardi del Seicento. Collezione Koelliker*, ed. by F. Frangi and A. Morandotti, Turin, 2004, pp. 156-161;

-Gerlinde Gruber, in *Maestri del '600 e del '700 Lombardo nella Collezione Koelliker*, ed. by F. Frangi and A. Morandotti, Milan, Palazzo Reale, 1 April - 2 July 2006, pp. 128-133;

-Gerlinde Gruber, “Il Maestro della tela jeans: un nuovo pittore della realtà nell’Europa del tardo Seicento”, *Nuovi Studi*, 11, 2006 [2007], pp. 159-170, fig. 241.

-Gerlinde Gruber, in *The Master of the Blue Jeans. A new painter of Reality in late 17th century Europe*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 16 September – 6 November 2010; New York, Galerie Didier Aaron, 20 January 2010– 4 February 2011, pp. 44-45, no. 9;

-Marta Tasinato, in *Giacomo Ceruti nell’Europa del Settecento, Miseria & Nobilità*, ed. by Roberta d’Adda, Francesco Frangi, Alessandro Morandotti, Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia, 11 February-28 May 2023, pp. 136-137, p. 160, cat. III.11.

EXHIBITIONS

-*Da Caravaggio a Ceruti. La scena di genere e l’immagine dei pitocchi nella pittura italiana*, Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia, 28 November 1998 – 28 February 1999;

-*Maestri del '600 e del '700 Lombardo nella Collezione Koelliker*, Milan, Palazzo Reale, 2006;

-*The Master of the Blue Jeans. A new painter of Reality in late 17th century Europe*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 16 September – 6 November 2010; New York, Galerie Didier Aaron, 20 January – 4 February 2011;

-*Jeans*, Utrecht, Centraal Museum, 22 November 2012 – 10 March 2013 (without catalogue);

-*Thread*, Denver, Art Museum, 9 June – 22 September 2013 (without catalogue);

-*Giacomo Ceruti nell’Europa del Settecento, Miseria & Nobilità*, Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia, 11 February-28 May 2023.

It was with a focus on this major composition, which lent its name to an expanding group of paintings by this anonymous artist, that Gerlinde Gruber initially published them in 2006-2007, before the Galerie Canesso’s exhibition of 2010-2011 in Paris and New York ¹. The mysterious author of a dozen or so works was promptly and appealingly dubbed the Master of the Blue Jeans, and his emergence into the history of art and fame was immediate, since the material represented has an enduring fascination and universality. As with his entire oeuvre, our picture is highly significant for tracing the history of jeans, being the first representation of the fabric in painting. This body of work thus connects with our world and, more particularly, with the contemporary world of jeans design.

The Woman Begging with Two Children, whose provenance can be traced, most probably back to the end of the 17th century but certainly to the end of the 19th century, to the Villa Airoldi-Caprotti in Albiate, where it remained until recently (see *Provenance*), suggests that our artist was active at least during one period of his life in this region – between Genoa and Lombardy – where a certain number of his works have been found.

The scene describes three figures standing in an undefined space, with a small brazier burning before them (a possible allusion to an allegory of winter) and a pot of water set on the ground. The little boy holds a bowl, perhaps filled with a hot drink, from below, as if to warm himself. The little girl warms her hands under her apron and like the two other members of her family, she is dressed in a patchwork

of worn and torn clothing. Some bread can be seen emerging from her pocket, hidden under her apron, and the pocket also seems to be made of jeans fabric.

The mother, still young, leans on a stick, and is clothed in the magnificent indigo blue colour, more or less faded, that dyed her apron. The vertical seam reveals typical saddle stitches of the kind still found on jeans today. Her right hand holds a begging bowl, seemingly a cup with handles, whose bottom faces the beholder, like the woman's gaze. As a whole, this group of figures challenges us: are they truly begging for alms? Their dignified expressions, their resilience in a chilly season (as implied by their attitudes and full covering), their clean appearance even though clothed in probably second-hand items, distract us from a simple scene of begging. Defining a context for the creation of these works is not an easy task: each image represents everyday life with a certain level of destitution, and seems to describe the same family, as the characters sometimes repeat themselves, from one painting to another.

In the European context of 17th-century painting of reality, the Master of the Blue Jeans stands out for having portrayed the humblest of individuals dressed in Genoese fustian, a blue fabric of a more or less intense tone now known under the more global name of jeans. The resurgence of this group of pictures enables us to draw attention to the Genoese origin of this material, widely used from the 16th century onwards and which very soon became widely distributed through international export – in particular to England where, in 1614, the accounts of a Lancashire tailor attest to the use of fustian from Genoa (Gênes in French), written as “Geanes”, and later “jeans”².

While this resistant fabric was favoured for clothing the most modest classes, its history is inseparable from this particular blue and consequently from the history of dyeing, a dual narrative that regards both the fabric and the pigments used by the Master of the Blue Jeans. Analyses of the blue paint used by our anonymous artist have made it possible to identify the pigment, which recurs in each of these paintings: it is indigo, a dye of plant origin, which happens to be the same as that used to dye jeans material. To obtain a relatively dark indigo blue, the painter would mix it either with lead white (for the lighter tones) or carbon black (for the darks). Jeans blue stands out particularly well in these compositions, juxtaposed with the browns and grey-browns of the dark backgrounds or other clothing.

Our artist specialized in scenes of everyday life; his characters, often gathered around a frugal meal, are beggars, women sewing, or in one case a woman barber at work, and he clearly belonged to the “painters of reality” movement, of which Lombardy was a true melting-pot. The artist was part of this particularly prolific current – or indeed one of its pioneers – between the second half of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th, as typified by Giacomo Ceruti (1698-1767) during the first half of the 18th century.

Considerations of style and subject-matter allow us to find parallels with the art of the young Austrian painter Cipper, known as Todeschini (active in Lombardy from the end of the 17th century), not to mention important precedents like the Danish painter Eberhard Keilhau, known as Monsù Bernardo (1624-1687), who sojourned in Bergamo and Milan between 1654 and 1656. There must also have been an awareness of Flemish artists such as Michael Sweerts (1618-1664), who could have inspired the smooth, clean technique in the present canvas.

But more than that, our painter seems to have transcribed the very soul of Lombardy, capturing the silent, dignified austerity that emanates from these characteristic figures. What remains to be better understood is the link between the Master of the Blue Jeans and his illustrious European predecessors such as Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), Georges de La Tour (1593-1652) or the Le Nain brothers, who earlier in the 17th century had also ventured on the path to realism and pauper painting. Some of these names have in the past been mentioned with respect to compositions by our artist, and indeed Federico Zeri thought of Le Nain when he studied the *Woman Sewing with Two Children* (Milan, Fondazione Cariplo) – an attribution also put forward for the composition presented here.

Notes:

- 1- Gerlinde Gruber, “Il Maestro della tela jeans: un nuovo pittore della realtà nell’Europa del tardo Seicento”, *Nuovi Studi*, 11, 2006 [2007], p. 159-170; *eadem*, *The Master of the Blue Jeans. A new painter of Reality in late 17th century Europe*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 16 September – 6 November 2010; New York, Galerie Didier Aaron, 20 January 2010– 4 February 2011, pp. 44-45, no. 9.
- 2- Alfred P. Wadsworth and Julia De Lacy Mann, *The cotton trade and industrial Lancashire 1600-1780*, Manchester University Press, 1931, p. 19.