

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

FRANCESCO MONTELATICI, CALLED CECCO BRAVO

(1601 - 1661)

Ulysses and Nausicaa

Oil on canvas, 38 3/16 x 53 1/8 in (97 × 135 cm)



PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Belgium; Houston, Texas, Mark Fehrs Haukohl collection.

LITERATURE

- Véronique Damian, *Deux caravagesques lombards à Rome et quelques récentes acquisitions*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 2001, pp. 46-49;
- Francesca Baldassari, *La collezione Piero ed Elena Bigongiari. Il Seicento fiorentino tra "favola" e dramma*, Cassa di Risparmio di Pistoia e Pescia – Milan, 2004, pp. 33-35, fig. 22;
- Sandro Bellesi, *Catalogo dei pittori fiorentini del '600 e '700. Biografie e opere*, 3 vols., Florence, 2009, I, p. 204;
- Giuseppe Cantelli, *Repertorio della pittura fiorentina del Seicento. Aggiornamento*, 2 vols., Pontedera, 2009, I, p. 152;
- Francesca Baldassari, *La pittura del Seicento a Firenze. Indice degli artisti e delle loro Opere*, Turin, Robilant + Voena, 2009, pp. 558, 578, fig. 337.
- Francesca Baldassari, *Cecco Bravo Dipinti*, 2 vol., Todi, 2024, I, p. 29-31, fig. 23, p. 166-167, no. 56.

A true example of pure painting, this canvas by Cecco Bravo furthers our reconstruction and understanding of the oeuvre of an artist who was undoubtedly the most eccentric representative of the seventeenth-century Florentine school. The pigment – frayed at the edges, as it were – appears blurred,

lacking defined contours, and yet conveys an astonishing mastery of drawing; this points to Cecco Bravo's late period, after 1650 and certainly prior to 1660, the year he left for Innsbruck to work at the court of the Archduke Ferdinand Karl of Austria, who had married Anna de' Medici. During that decade, Cecco Bravo's paintings, almost entirely executed for private patrons, reflect the evolution of a personal style that oscillated between Florentine and Venetian poetics. From the former he took the *morbidezza* of pictorial handling introduced into Florentine painting by its leading practitioner Francesco Furini (1603-1646), though this ultimately derives from the art of Correggio (c. 1489-1534). This influence is expressed through the adoption of evanescent colours in attenuated tones, including the yellows and reds we see here, as well as a highly original lilac that was characteristic of our artist's palette. From Venice, on the other hand, Cecco showed his awareness of the painting techniques favoured by Bernardo Strozzi (1581-1644), with whom he shared a fondness for whites, used in their most complete form, unalloyed by any other colour. Certain parts of this painting illustrate this in a masterful way – the knee and the drapery surrounding it, and the end of the Queen's sleeve in the foreground. This allusive, swift technique also evokes the pictorial freedom found in the late work of Titian, and – more closely, but still in Venice – the style of Sebastiano Mazzoni (1611-1678), Francesco Maffei (1600-1660) and Girolamo Ferabosco (1604/05-1679). Cecco arranges his lighting solely through colour – including white – which provides foreground rhythm, while the background is left in shadow. The definition of three-dimensional space is abolished: we cannot judge the distance separating the protagonists from the Olympian setting from which Minerva and Hermes observe the scene. What endures is the brilliance of the artist's brushstroke and his broadly-sketched draughtsmanship – the peculiarities behind Cecco Bravo's fame. The contours of the faces in the lower part of the painting are purposely left without explicit definition, and the hands, with their attenuated fingers, are so expressive in their movement that they create a ballet of forms. Stylistic comparison with other paintings by the artist suggests a date between his *Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar* (Florence, Uffizi Gallery), dated between 1655 and 1660, and the late *Apollo and Daphne* (Ravenna, Pinacoteca Comunale) (1). Our canvas shares certain characteristics with *Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar*, including the strange position of the woman on the left, her leg bent backwards, and the depiction of the same red shoes in the foreground. Cecco Bravo here illustrates an episode from ancient history, taken from Book VI of Homer's *Odyssey*, which represents the moment when Ulysses turns down the proposal of King Alcinous and Queen Arete to marry their daughter Nausicaa. This scene appears to be unique in seventeenth-century Florentine painting; it was more common to represent the meeting of Ulysses and Nausicaa by the river, and the picturesque moment when she offers him clothing to cover his nudity. The episode depicted here is associated with the theme of dreams, so cherished by Cecco Bravo, who developed the theme more specifically in a series of highly fantastic drawings. After leaving Calypso's Isle, Ulysses is shipwrecked and washed up on the coast of Phaeacia. Minerva intervenes on behalf of Ulysses so that the Phaeacians provide him with the means to return to Ithaca. She sends a dream to Nausicaa, suggesting she go down to the river to wash her clothes. There, Nausicaa meets Ulysses, endowed by Minerva with supernatural beauty: "He appeared bigger and stronger [...] radiating charm and beauty". She rapidly falls under his spell. The goddess is fairly easy to recognize here, accompanied by Hermes, who also intervenes several times in the tale of the heroic voyager. Sketched in grisaille in the sky, Minerva echoes the figure, painted earlier and also in grisaille, that forms part of the frescoed decoration of the Casa Buonarroti in Florence. Ulysses is warmly welcomed by King Alcinous and Queen Arete, to whom he recites his adventures. Moved by his account and his exploits, they offer him their daughter in marriage, but Ulysses refuses since his only desire is to be able to finally return home to Ithaca, where his wife Penelope has been waiting for him for twenty years. The king then places a ship and men at his disposal and has him accompanied to his destination, laden with gifts. The gracious Nausicaa, "whose demeanour and beauty seem those of an Immortal", a young virgin "with fair white arms", is here bathed in *sfumato* that accentuates her sensuality. She is

accompanied, rather surprisingly, by a small Cupid who draws his bow in the hero's direction. Usually an attribute of Venus, the Cupid is deliberately introduced by the artist into stories of unrequited love. Such a figure can be seen, for example, in the sky of the *Apollo and Daphne* in the Pinacoteca Comunale, Ravenna. This complex and sumptuous composition, deriving spiritual liveliness from its elongated figures, was no doubt painted in response to a specific request from a cultivated collector who might have wanted to illustrate a thwarted marriage proposal or (more likely) an example of virtue. Ulysses does not give into temptation when faced by the final trial inflicted on him before his definitive return to his homeland.

Notes

1. Roberto Contini, *Cecco Bravo, Firenze 1601-Innsbruck 1661. Pittore senza regola*, exh. cat., Florence, Casa Buonarroti, June 23 – September 30, 1999, pp. 88-89, no. 24; pp. 104-105, no. 32; p. 34.