

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

AGOSTINO TASSI

(PONZANO ROMANO, NEAR ROME, 1578 - ROME, 1644)

A Shipyard

Oil on canvas, 29 3/8 x 38 3/4 in (74.5 x 98.5 cm)



Fig. 1

PROVENANCE

France, private collection.

LITERATURE

- Véronique Damian, *Paysages nocturnes d'Agostino Tassi*, Paris Galerie Canesso, 2010, pp. 46-51.

The vicissitudes of time – as often happens – have not separated these masterful compositions, instead happily passing them down to us as a pair. They were conceived to be presented together and preserving them thus today enables us to retrace the artist's creative process. One is obviously a

nocturne and the other a day scene, and one alludes to an episode from mythology (fairly frequent in the history of painting) while the other is taken from daily life, although the view of a shipyard was probably based on something Tassi could actually have seen, especially in Livorno. Both the first subject and the second were dear to the artist, who delighted in treating them throughout his career.

Let us first discuss the *Shipyard*, whose origins lie in one of the artist's preferred subjects, boats; numerous drawings made during Tassi's lengthy sojourn in Livorno are of ships or shipyards. These studies "dal vero" and devoid of figures, as we can see in the sheet in the Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo, the *Shipyard at Livorno*, later evolved into painted compositions, with the addition of a landscape background or ancient ruins in order to make them more picturesque. In the recent Agostino Tassi exhibition in Rome (2008), Patrizia Cavazzini included a shipyard scene with the building of a galley, and her introductory essay featured another shipyard, different in spirit (most of the composition was taken up by Classical ruins); both pictures are now in a private collection.¹ Our canvas is particularly ambitious: the scene takes place in the interior of an immense warehouse, with openings on the sides, where two enormous pillars frame the composition. Openings in the vault reveal the tiny silhouettes of figures leaning down to observe what is happening below, where multiple activities are taking place, ranging from the building of a galley to the repair of a galleon. Cannons, an anchor, and long wooden beams are strewn on the ground, where a few fires have been lit to provide warmth, and those involved in this great shipyard scene are busy sawing, carrying, pulling, or manning the pulleys that hang from the vault – all conveying the sense of a world witnessed by the painter. Against the pale background one can just make out crowds of tiny figures on an enormous bridge, which offers a visual link with the pendant composition. Indeed, these thread-like people are drawn in the same manner, barely sketched into the pigment. The yellow and white background stands in contrast to the sombre browns of the foreground.

The subject of *The Capture of Troy* (Virgil, *The Aeneid*) (fig. 1) is immediately clear from the presence in the foreground of the Trojan hero, Aeneas, son of Anchises and Aphrodite, here seen bearing his father on his shoulders. Protected by Aphrodite, shown standing in her chariot in the sky, Aeneas is accompanied by his son Ascanius and his wife Creusa, who carries the Penates, the sacred household gods of Troy, as they try to escape the city. It is thanks to the goddess that they will succeed in escaping from burning Troy and seek another city in which to make their homeland. This composition reveals Tassi at his most economic, allusive rather than descriptive. The space is ingeniously divided into two sections by the ramparts of Troy, and the artist takes the opportunity to cite the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, and its adjoining bridge. Behind this great brown barrier, Troy burns, as one can understand from the strident yellow light, and people are shown jumping into the water to save themselves or attempting to flee on whatever navigation they can find. In the foreground, accompanied by a torch-bearer, Aeneas and his family find the boat that will save them. This group is one of the artist's focal points, studied in varying arrangements and media, starting with preparatory studies of individual figures, as one can deduce from a sheet in the British Museum, London. Thanks to the recent rediscovery of a painting of a *Gallery* (Prato, Museo Civico, inv. no. 1277) – in fact an imaginary view of a gallery solely containing canvases by Tassi – one can also see that this figure group alone could constitute the subject of a painting.²

Our painting should be dated to the artist's late period, no doubt around 1639, by comparison with the other fiery nocturnes presented in this catalogue. While deliberately alluding to the "fantasie infernali" (infernal fantasies) painted in Florence by Filippo Napoletano (1589-1629), it surpasses *Aeneas' Flight from Troy* (Florence, Palazzo Pitti), painted by the Neapolitan artist for Cosimo II de' Medici, and dated

by Marco Chiarini to the end of his second Florentine sojourn, about 1619-1620.³ With their shared interest in fire, each of these painters was part of a Northern European pictorial tradition, first and foremost that of Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525/30-1569), and later that of Jan “Velvet” Brueghel (1568-1625), especially bearing in mind Aeneas’ Flight from Troy (Munich, Alte Pinakothek, painted circa 1595-1596), or that of Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610), a version of whose *The Burning of Troy* (painted in Rome, 1600-1601) is also in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.⁴

The three fire scenes presented in this catalogue show how Tassi sought a different composition every time, completely rethinking its context. The taste for cities engulfed in flames, with multiple points of conflagration, belongs to the same trend it foreshadowed: views of nocturnal volcanic eruptions, punctuated by glowing sources of fire, as painted by Pierre-Jacques Volaire (1729-1799). These are dramatic visions of something resembling a dreamworld.

Notes:

1 - Patrizia Cavazzini, in *Agostino Tassi (1578-1644). Un paesaggista tra immaginario e realtà*, exh. cat., Rome, Palazzo di Venezia, 19 June – 21 September 2008, p. 50, fig. 48 and pp. 184-185, no. 9.

2 - Paolo Benassai, in *Agostino Tassi (1578-1644). Un paesaggista tra immaginario e realtà*, exh. cat., Rome, Palazzo di Venezia, 19 June – 21 September 2008, pp. 218-219, no. 27.

3 - Marco Chiarini, *Teodoro Filippo di Liano detto Filippo Napoletano 1589-1629. Vita e opere*, Florence, 2007, p. 255, no. 28.

4 - Rüdiger Klessmann, *Adam Elsheimer 1578-1610*, exh. cat., Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland; London, Dulwich Picture Gallery; Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut, 2006, pp. 18 and 72-73, no. 10.