

# Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

DENYS CALVAERT

(ANVERSA? CA. 1540 - BOLOGNA, 1619)

*Cleopatra*

Oil on wood panel, 57 1/8 x 42 7/8 (145 x 109 cm).

Two wax seals are visible on the back of the panel, in the lower part.



## PROVENANCE

Paris, Audap-Godeau-Solanet sale, Hôtel Drouot, 4 December 1986, lot 7 (as School of Fontainebleau) ;  
New York, private collection.

## LITERATURE

- Daniele Benati, *Lorenzo Sabbatini: quadri "con donne nude"*, in *Scritti di storia dell'arte in onore di Jürgen Winkelman*, Naples, 1999, pp. 55, 57 note 22, fig. 6;
- Angelo Mazza, *La galleria dei dipinti antichi della Cassa di Risparmio di Cesena*, Milan, 2001, under no. 24, pp. 146, 148, note 11;
- Véronique Damian, *Reni, Vermiglio et Cairo, trois figures caravagesques*, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 2012, pp. 12-17.

## EXHIBITIONS

- *Kleopatra*, cat. exh., Bonn, Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 26 juin – 6 octobre 2013, p. 323, n° et fig. 30 ;

- *Le mythe de Cléopâtre*, cat. exh., Paris, Pinacothèque de Paris, 10 April – 7 September 2014, no. 212.

Our painting of Cleopatra was published by Daniele Benati in 1999 together with another version of the subject, also by Calvaert, which was then on the Milanese art market and now forms part of the picture gallery of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Cesena.<sup>1</sup> The latter, also painted on panel, contains a number of variant passages, especially as regards the colour of the draperies and, in a more general manner, the sense of decorum; the jewellery is also different.<sup>2</sup>

These two compositions are new additions to the catalogue of Denys Calvaert, a painter from Antwerp whose sojourn in Italy was centred on Bologna, where he established himself professionally. In the area of genre painting, he had extended contact with his second teacher, Lorenzo Sabatini (c. 1530-1576), and Benati's article emphasises the continuity between the two, since Calvaert's secular subjects were surely the result of mature reflection on the naked heroines painted by his master. But one could hardly imagine the presence of the powerful body before us without a study of Michelangelo's work. The dynamic pose and its fine Mannerist balance give the figure its surging motion, provoked, one imagines, by the pain of the asp's bite. The work's overall energy is magnificently rendered through the sizeable format chosen for this picture, since the panel's ambitious dimensions allowed Calvaert to describe Cleopatra's body on an almost life-size scale. He also endowed the figure with grace by the turn of the head and upturned eyes – a motif much exploited later by his pupil Guido Reni (1575-1642) – which he had been able to admire and borrow from the Roman frescoes of Raphael (1483-1520), and in particular from the beautiful figure of *Galatea* in the Villa la Farnesina.

Cleopatra, bitten on her breast by an asp, and naked but for a heavy red fabric, appears – as she might on stage – as the model of a tragic heroine. The historical event of the suicide of Egypt's sovereign occurred in 30 BC in Alexandria, upon the arrival of the triumphant Octavian. Mark Anthony has just killed himself, and Cleopatra, summoned by her Roman victor, requests privacy with her most trusted servants, Iras and Charmian; she too then takes her own life. The story is that she asked for a basket of figs, and that these concealed two asps. The tragic aspect of her death, elevated by powerful imagery, could only enhance the tendency to romanticize the demise of this great ruler. In the background, the two servants appear with the mask of tragedy on their faces, gesturing wildly and with their dresses twirling as evidence of their headlong rush; indeed the lines of perspective converge on these two female figures. The luxurious interior, essentially reduced to the opulent scalloped and gold-fringed bed is appropriate to the rank of a Queen of Egypt, but there is no question that it was also in perfect sympathy with the decorated rooms of the private collectors who sought this kind of art in Calvaert's day.

Both Daniele Benati and Angelo Mazza underline how our *Cleopatra* connects with Calvaert's *Death of Lucretia* in the Musée Magnin, Dijon, as it follows the same criteria for presenting the heroine in a sculptural pose, emphatically raising a dagger before delivering the fatal blow<sup>3</sup>. There, within a sort of architectural alcove, an opening gives us a glimpse of two servants running in, and this similarity of composition offers a point of comparison for dating these paintings. At the turn of the century, the artist gave increased importance to the spatial settings of his scenes, reducing the scale of his figures; so it would appear that he painted our canvas in the 1580s or 1590s.

Calvaert's artistic evolution, starting with a youthful journey to Italy to perfect his training, shows how he remained faithful to sixteenth-century Mannerism throughout his life, giving pride of place to *disegno*. He was more responsive to the art of Correggio (1489?-1534) than to that of the Carracci. Having left his native Flanders for Rome, he stopped in Bologna and spent time in the workshops of Prospero Fontana (1512-1597) and then Lorenzo Sabatini, collaborating with the latter, notably in the *Holy Family with the Archangel Saint Michael* (Bologna, San Giacomo Maggiore) and the *Assumption* (Bologna,

Pinacoteca Nazionale). The *Allegory of Vigilance* (1568; Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale) is the artist's first signed work. In 1572 he left for Rome with Sabatini to work under his guidance on the frescoes in the Sala Regia in the Vatican. His visual contact there with the great masters of the Renaissance, whose work he copied – Michelangelo, Raphael and Sebastiano del Piombo – ensured a veritable grounding in the purest tradition of Italian art. This stood him in good stead, as when he returned to Bologna in about 1575, he set up an academy that was to be much frequented, especially by the great Bolognese artists of the future, Guido Reni (1575-1642), Domenichino (1581-1641) and Albani (1578-1660), before they in turn took the more innovative path of the Carracci.

#### Notes:

- 1- Daniele Benati provides an illustration of our painting, which he recognises as the finer of the two.
- 2- Angelo Mazza, *La galleria dei dipinti antichi della Cassa di Risparmio di Cesena*, Milan, 2001, pp. 142 -148, no. 24. The painting was purchased in 1993 by the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Cesena and measures 144 x 103 cm, thus with dimensions close to ours. Mazza (note 11) also points out the existence of a reduced-scale version of the composition on the Italian art market in 1998.
- 3- Arnauld Brejon de Lavergnée, *Dijon, musée Magnin. Catalogue des tableaux et dessins italiens (XV<sup>e</sup>-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, Paris, 1990, p. 121, no. 116 (wood panel, 145 x 110 cm; as Anonymous, Bolognese School, late sixteenth century). The painting was reattributed to Calvaert by Benati (*op. cit.* in Literature, above, 1999, p. 57, note 22).