

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

THE MASTER OF THE BLUE JEANS

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

A Meal with a Woman and Two Children

Oil on canvas, 30 5/8 x 39 3/4 in (77,7 x 101 cm).



PROVENANCE

Buenos Aires, private collection.

LITERATURE

- Gerlinde Gruber, *An unpublished work by the Master of the Blue Jeans and other scenes of everyday life*, Chiara Naldi (ed.) exhibition catalogue, Lugano, Galleria Canesso, 2012, pp. 34-39.

EXHIBITIONS

- *An unpublished work by the Master of the Blue Jeans and other scenes of everyday life*, Lugano, Galleria Canesso, 2012.

The composition before us consists of a woman – no longer young – seated on the ground, accompanied by two children. All three appear to be of a humble social class, dressed as they are in rural clothing, and with both children wearing threadbare, torn clothes.

The painter's eye is entirely focused on these three figures, whose dress is the subject of detailed description; however, we do not know where they are. The space surrounding them is dark, and one can only glimpse a fragment of a wall. If we are right in interpreting the piece of white fabric at lower left – where the woman is seated – as a cushion, then an interior setting is plausible, but there are no

other clues regarding the space they inhabit.

The description of the peasant clothing they all wear, on the other hand, is carried out with especially painstaking care. The old woman wears a substantial dark brown dress the skirt highlighted by a reddish passage that might be an underskirt, though it is hard to offer a clear reading of this surface, devoid of folds. Over her skirt the woman wears an apron of blue jeans material, evidently as further protection; she holds one end of it in her left hand so as to create support for the ceramic bowl from which she sups with a metal spoon.

Her upper body is clothed in a white shirt, with a brown bodice over it, and over that, a white collar tucked into the breast and held in by laces tied around her waist. The woman seems to have her left leg raised and bent towards the breast to support the plate, while her right leg is stretched out, thus revealing her injured, bandaged foot. Behind her, to the right, crouches a little girl, with superimposed red and dark brown skirts making her lower body particularly voluminous, while her upper body is covered in a robust dark brown material. One can deduce from the small white collar partly emerging from her dress that she is wearing a shirt too, though this is not visible. Her white smock, now turned grey, is tied directly under her chest, as is the custom even today in the traditional costume of some Alpine valleys. Her head is wrapped in a kerchief of the same fabric, albeit now torn. Her hands are probably crossed in her lap, hidden under another piece of cloth tied around her neck, and she is spoon-fed by a young boy. One wonders why, given that she is old enough to feed herself; perhaps she is too weak. Open-mouthed, she awaits the next spoonful, her condition a picture of sadness. The boy who feeds here also wears a serious expression as he delicately holds her head with his left hand. It is somewhat unclear where the soup or purée that fills his spoon has come from. The only plate visible is the one held by the old woman, whose face – almost a mask – has the pallor of illness, in contrast with the skin tone of her hands.

The brown jacket worn by the boy is so torn in some parts of the sleeve that we see a bit of red material underneath it; thus he too is wearing several layers, which could indicate that all three figures are exposed to cold temperature. The boy is probably standing, and wears a relatively broad white collar and a hat decorated on its front with a feather and a red ribbon.

The painting can be related to a group of works attributed to the Master of the Blue Jeans, an anonymous artist active in Lombardy towards the end of the seventeenth century.¹

Even though the jeans apron in the present painting is not worn enough for us to see the weave, it is similar to the material depicted by our anonymous master in another painting also dominated by a female figure, the *Woman Begging with Two Children*, in which the wear reveals the interweaving of white and blue threads.

In this painting the Master of the Blue Jeans characteristically reworks subjects he had treated in other works. Indeed the old seated woman is closely related to the figure in a painting formerly in the Cucchi collection in Novara but now unfortunately untraced, the *Old woman with a Young Boy*. The latter work is known only through a black and white photograph, but as far as one can tell the two pictures closely resemble one another. Nonetheless, the woman in the Cucchi collection painting has an apron that seems white, and the foot bandage is stained with blood, which draws attention to the wound. The child has a wound too, as we can see from his bandaged head. The ex-Cucchi picture, then, seems to have a thematic focus on injury, while in our canvas both children appear uninjured, and the bandage wrapped around the woman's foot is free of any blood. Yet the protagonists before us are not in a happy situation: they may have food, but this is far from a joyous banquet, and they seem fully aware of their wretched meal, its poverty in stark contrast with the refinement of the metal spoon. The gaze of the old, sick woman is directed at the viewer, who is thus directly confronted by her poverty.

Likewise, the two children can be compared with those depicted in another of the Master's works. In the *Frugal Meal with Two Children*, a young boy spoonfeeds a little girl, but in this case he is dressed

quite differently, and the girl, unlike her counterpart in our picture, has her eyes closed, holds a piece of bread, and wears a black kerchief – not white and threadbare – around her head.

As regards style, this painting is of great interest: it is precisely because we have the chance to compare the two versions of the motif of the seated old woman that we can study the differences between them. Above all, if we look at how the shirtsleeve swells in the Galleria Canesso painting, we can see how the Master of the Blue Jeans uses sharper tonal modulation to reveal the structure of the folds – with a slightly more geometrical effect, and thus tending towards abstraction.

The refinement and delicacy of the skin tones, especially in the face of the girl, recall the pictorial handling of the *Beggar Boy with a Piece of Pie*.

G. G.

Note:

1- On the Master of the Blue Jeans, see 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; and *The Master of the Blue Jeans. A new painter of reality in late 17th century Europe*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Galerie Canesso, 2010.