GIUSEPPE ANTONIO PETRINI

(CARONA, TICINIO, SWITZERLAND, 1677 - 1755/1759)

Allegory of Sculpture

Oil on canvas, 35 7/16 × 47 1/4 (90 × 120 cm)



PROVENANCE

Parma, private collection.

LITERATURE

Chiara Naldi in, *Massimo Stanzione, Guercino, Hendrick De Somer et Fra' Galgario. Tableaux redécouverts du XVIe au XVIIIe siècle*, Véronique Damian ed., Paris, galerie Canesso, 2016, pp. 50-55.

This *Allegory of Sculpture* belongs to of Giuseppe Antonio Petrini's early maturity, reflecting elements entirely typical of his style. The range of tonalities, with blues and greys set alongside the ochres and reds of clothing and flesh, the solid colours that simplify volume, the strong light that sculpts surfaces, and the type of bald, bearded old man – all these point to the authorship of this Ticinese artist.

The strength of this painting lies in its contrasts. Absorbed in his art, the figure of the sculptor exudes emotional tension, further conveyed by the divergent oblique lines on his work surface, composed of various tools and his own arm, in the foreground, which serves as an extension of the diagonal tree-trunk in the background. His gesture can also be seen as contradictory, with his arm creating a sort of barrier separating the sculptor from the viewer, as if he wanted to protect the work he has just

completed, and from which he seems to be inseparable. Yet at the same time his gaze invites our proximity, as well as our curiosity about his state of mind. The furrowed features of the old man, emphasized by chiaroscuro, stand in opposition to the smooth lines of the marble head, which is inspired by the ideal of Classical beauty; Alessandro Morandotti (written communication) thinks one could draw a parallel between this depiction and the iconography of David with the head of Goliath. The single black cloud in the leaden sky seems to symbolise the old man's thoughts, and he appears suspended in an undefined time and place, with scarcely any indication of landscape.

This picture can be perfectly integrated within Petrini's oeuvre, which contains numerous depictions of isolated half-length figures, particularly saints and prophets, but also philosophers, mathematicians and astronomers, most of them destined for private ownership. Secular subjects were close to the painter's heart, and represent a rare and uncommon element of Lombard painting of his time; such requests no doubt came from individual patrons. Specifically, Petrini painted both religious works and figures of mathematicians, astronomers and wise men of Antiquity for Giovanni Battista and Gian Pietro Riva. The Riva family had connections with the literary and intellectual milieu in Venice, and with the Accademia delle Scienze in Bologna. Petrini was far from indifferent to the stimuli of the nascent Italian Enlightenment, which was congenial to his ideals of a reformed religious life.

In painting, his search for moral rigour was conveyed both in sacred and secular subjects – as is the case in our painting – by means of a severe, essential style, an austere and rarefied atmosphere, an extreme clarity of narrative, and calm monumentality and sobriety of gesture. There is no place in Petrini's style for Rococo eccentricity, dramatic ecstasy or worldly capriciousness. Rather, his silent figures appear absorbed in meditation, and the artist investigates the psychological dimension of his figures through an anti-naturalist stylisation of facial features, and a discreet, internalized pathos. Petrini drew his models from seventeenth-century figurative culture and the *Barocchetto lombardo*, while consciously seeking to contain its more excessive idioms. With Cerano he shared the use of colder tonalities, but abandoned the artifice of late Mannerism that could also be found in Morazzone. Petrini was always steeped in Lombard tradition, profoundly influenced by the religious context established by Saint Charles Borromeo, and expressed through a concrete vision of life, closely allied with a solid moral grounding, which served as a foundation for the painting of reality.

While the painting's format, its composition, and the choice of a stormy background crossed by a tree-trunk echo concepts the painter had used between 1720 and 1730 – as in the *Saint Jerome*, formerly in a private collection in Ljubljana (1) – the formal simplicity and cooler, almost metallic chromatic range, point to works from the decade that followed, once again in the same format, such as the two *Prophets* in the Borromeo Collection (2) or the *Mathematician*, formerly in a private collection in Varese (3).

Petrini's biography remains a matter of conjecture, as it presents several lacunae as regards documents. Nonetheless, the catalogue of the 1991 exhibition remains fundamental for establishing an outline of the artist's career. One can see his works in quite a number of Italian cities, but we know that the painter was closely tied to his native region. He was born in 1677 to a family of sculptors and stucco-workers in Carona, in the Italian part of Switzerland, and after his initial activity in the Valtellina, he became the pupil of Bartolomeo Guidobono (1654-1709) in Genoa, according to the biographer Carlo Giuseppe Ratti. He may also have been in contact with the Bolognese artists Giuseppe Maria Crespi (1665-1747) and Federico Bencovich (1667-1753). He was principally active in Lombardy and Piedmont, and he was unquestionably inspired by great seventeenth-century painters such as Cerano (1575-1632), Cairo (1607-1665) and Morazzone (1573-1626). In his mature period, he lightened his tonal range, adopting colder hues, and an even more raking light, while the influence of the Venetian painting of Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734), Tiepolo (1696-1770) and Pittoni (1687-1767) asserted itself to a greater degree.

Chiara Naldi

Notes:

1- Rudy Chiappini (dir.), *Giuseppe Antonio Petrini*, exh.cat.., Lugano, Villa Malpensata, 14 septembre - 24 novembre 1991, pp. 164-165, no 29.

2- *Ibid.*, pp. 154-157, nos 24 and 25.

3- *Ibid.*, p. 168, no 31.