

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

BARTOLOMEO BIMBI

(SETTIGNANO/FLORENCE, 1648 - FLORENCE, 1730)

Bear Cub

Oil on canvas, 18 7/8 x 25 9/16 in (48 x 65 cm)



PROVENANCE

Italy, private collection.

LITERATURE

Unpublished.

The subject of this quite well-preserved painting is a small brown bear, seen in profile, actually a cub, bearing a broad collar of black leather with round metal studs and a leash-ring. Carefully set on a grassy plane against an atmospheric background of pearl-grey, the bear has its jaws shut and looks perfectly tame. What is striking about this figure is the vibrant rendering of the animal's thick coat, so softly furry one can almost feel it, bathed in brilliant effects of light, with patches that are dazzlingly lit and others that are very dark, almost indistinct. The stance of this plantigrade bear, obviously stone-still, allows the observer to take in its anatomical features, especially the carefully depicted head and the sharp claws reflecting almost metallic glints.

The stylistic features and painstaking description of the animal, worthy of an artist surely well versed in the genre of nature painting typical of scientific documentation, leaves no doubt that this work belongs to the autograph catalogue of Bartolomeo Bimbi, a foremost representative of Florentine still-life painting in the late Baroque.

Born in Settignano in 1648, Bimbi began his formation at an early age in Florence in the schools of Lorenzo Lippi, Onorio Marinari, and Agnolo Gori, after which he went to Rome, where he was a pupil of maestro Mario de' Fiori, thanks to whom he specialized in still lifes, a genre wherein in a very few years he became a leading figure in Tuscany. His painstaking, detailed descriptions of nature and impeccable pictorial technique raised a great demand for his work, not only among the local nobility but also among members of the Medicean grand-ducal family, especially Cosimo III, who engaged him mainly as a scientific documentarist. Working closely with such eminent scholars and scientists as Pier Antonio Micheli and Francesco Redi, Bimbi over several decades depicted stupendous, flower-filled vases for the private market as well as canvases replete with flowers, fruit, vegetables, and animals painted with almost hyperrealistic intensity. The elegance and beauty of his compositions, enhanced by a rich range of brilliant enamel-like colors, favored his success as an artist, highly esteemed until the end of his days, which came in Florence in 1730. On Bimbi see especially *Bartolomeo Bimbi. Un pittore di piante e animali alla corte dei Medici*, S. Meloni Trkulja and L. Tongiorgi Tomasi (edd.), Florence, 1998, and S. Bellesi, *Catalogo dei pittori fiorentini del '600 e '700. Biografie e opere*, 3 voll, Florence, 2009, I, pp. 85-86 and II, pp. 60-67 (with bibliography).

Although paintings of bears are not often to be found, there are some interesting examples from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Florence, where the bear can be alone or in group compositions, sometimes with other animals. Among the most interesting ones, historically and artistically worthy of mention in the present context, are two sculptural compositions that have been objects of fairly recent study and show some affinity with the painting under discussion for their naturalistic rendering of animals. We refer to the small bronze by Antonio Susini, *Coppia di orsi con un cane*, at antiquarian Giovanni Pratesi's (see S. Bellesi in *Maria de' Medici. Una principessa fiorentina sul trono di Francia*, exhibition catalogue, C. Caneva and F. Solinas (edd.), Florence, Leghorn, 2005, pp. 100-101) and to the Orsetto in Pietra Serena stone by Carlo Marcellini which is in the garden of Villa Medicea di Poggio Imperiale, Florence (see M. Visonà, *Carlo Marcellini. Accademico "spiantato" nella cultura fiorentina tardo-barocca*, Ospedaletto/Pisa, 1990, fig. 20).

The probable connection of the present canvas with the House of Medici is suggested by the metal studs on the bear's collar, which recall the balls or bezants in the coat of arms of this Tuscan grand-ducal family. *Orsetto* is a noteworthy acquisition to the animalist paintings by Bimbi, who is known today mainly for some works of Medicean provenance held mainly in galleries in Florence. It bears similarities to other depictions of mammals immortalized by Bimbi's brush, such as *Caracos (Flamingo)* and *the White Fox* or his two versions of *The Two-Headed Calf* (on these works see especially S. Meloni Trkulja in *Bartolomeo Bimbi. Un pittore di piante e animali alla corte dei Medici*, op. cit., pp. 200-203, nos. 124-126; with bibliography). Datable to the second or third decades of the eighteenth century, this work also recalls certain works by other still-life Tuscan painters of the period, particularly some by Pietro Neri Scacciati, the author of interesting paintings of animals in open settings, although Scacciati's ludicrous or comical treatment of the subject is quite different from Bimbi's (on the works of this artist see especially M.M. Simari in *Natura viva in Casa Medici. Animal paintings in the Medici Collections*, exhibition catalogue by M. Mosco, Florence/New York, Florence, 1986, pp. 71-83).

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