

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

ANTONIO MANCINI

(ROME, 1852 - 1930)

Youthful Self-Portrait / Self-Portrait of "Follia", 1882

Oil and bitumen on pouncing paper, laid on canvas

25 3/16 x 19 1/16 in (640 x 485 mm)

Signed, inscribed and dated at lower right: Ant. Mancini / un epilettico 1882



PROVENANCE

Portolano collection, Naples.

LITERATURE

- M. Sciuti, "La malattia mentale di Antonio Mancini", *L'Ospedale Psichiatrico*, fasc. III, Naples 1947, pp. 47, 53, fig. 22;
- *Ottocento. Catalogo dell'Arte Italiana dell'Ottocento*, vol. 30, Milan 2001, p. 280 (ill.);
- C. Virno and M. Carrera, eds., *Gemito, Mancini e il loro ambiente. Opere giovanili*, exhibition

catalogue (Rome, Giacometti Old Master Paintings, 19 May - 16 June 2017), Rome 2017, p. 47 and note 28, pp. 132-133.

This work is included in Cinzia Virno's forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the paintings of Antonio Mancini to be published by De Luca Editori d'Arte, Rome.

Mancini portrayed himself with great regularity throughout his life, ranging from initial studies made when he was about fourteen to 1929, one year before he died. This work is part of the group of youthful self-portraits created during the so-called "periodo della follia" – a period of mental instability that began after he returned from his second sojourn in Paris at the end of 1878 and ended in 1883, when he moved from Naples to Rome. This period obviously includes the brief time he spent in the provincial psychiatric hospital in Naples between October 1881 and February 1882.

Painted with broad, confident brushstrokes, and deliberately leaving the area at lower right unfinished, this picture is one of the self-portraits that most clearly convey the painter's mental distress, especially for its wild gaze and the unnatural, sardonic smile. The figure emerges from the neutral ground of the pouncing paper, and the face is painstakingly described, with hair precisely parted, while his clothing, including an emerging white collar, is created with abbreviated, vigorous brushwork. His desire to give himself an insane appearance is underlined by the autograph inscription in which Mancini refers to himself "un epilettico" – as an epileptic.

During his time in hospital, the artist was not prohibited from painting, and indeed he produced many portraits of nurses and orderlies, and a large number of self-portraits. The work studied here, painted in the hospital and dated 1882, was therefore completed before the end of February of that year.

In 1947, Michele Sciuti – director of the Naples psychiatric hospital at that time – dedicated a fairly complete text to the most acute phase of Mancini's illness, documenting almost all the portraits and self-portraits made by the painter during his stay there and in the period that immediately followed.

Unfortunately many of these works remain untraced.

Apart from representing a rare example of this type of self-portrait, the painting before us should also be considered as one of the most significant, for its truly explicit reference to the insanity of the individual, as can be judged by the expression. Like this one, most of the surviving self-portraits from this period are executed on paper, in near-monochrome. Here, the dominant tonality is brown, barely lit by some strokes of white, whereas elsewhere we find sanguine-coloured oil paint, as in the *Self-Portrait* in the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, or in that housed in the Museo della Scienza e della Tecnica in Milan. This work formed part of the Portolano collection, known as one of the most important Neapolitan collections of nineteenth-century art.

Cinzia Virno