

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

MATTIA PRETI

(TAVERNA, 1613 - LA VALLETTA, 1699)

Astronomer with an Armillary Sphere

Oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 28 3/4 in (98 x 73 cm)



PROVENANCE

London, private collection

LITERATURE

- Yuri Primarosa, "Il talento e il mestiere. Nuova luce sull'«Allegoria dei cinque sensi» di Mattia e Gregorio Preti", in *Il trionfo dei sensi. Nuova luce su Mattia e Gregorio Preti*, exhibition catalogue, ed. by Yuri Primarosa, (Rome, Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, 22 February – 16 June 2019), Rome 2019, pp. 30-32, fig. 26, p. 34, note 45.

The authorship of this portrait was first given to the great southern Italian master by Nicola Spinosa, and this was echoed by Yuri Primarosa in the catalogue of the exhibition on the brothers Gregorio and Mattia Preti recently held in the Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

Mattia Preti left his native Calabria relatively early, probably spending a short time in Naples, where he would certainly have been drawn to the intense Caravaggesque light and naturalism of Battistello Caracciolo (1578-1635). By the beginning of the 1630s, aged about eighteen – the only secure record of his presence in Rome is Easter 1632 – he had already joined his older brother Gregorio, but it cannot be ruled out, as Gianni Papi believes, that Mattia had already arrived in the Papal City when he was still a child, in Gregorio's wake, and that he began his training as early as 1624. Our composition, dated by both Nicola Spinosa and Yuri Primarosa to about 1635, and therefore a youthful work from his Roman period, was painted while the artist was still clearly adopting the Caravaggesque manner and a strong chiaroscuro, precisely when Caravaggio's immediate legacy was in its final phase.¹ Such a date is contemporary with that of the *Concert with a fortune-telling scene* (Turin, Pinacoteca dell'Accademia Albertina), a collaborative work by the two brothers which is ambitious, powerfully coloured and marked by a shadowy background. The subject of the present canvas recalls compositions such as the *Archimedes in Syracuse* (Varese, Pinacoteca Larizza), or, as regards facial features, the *Denial of Saint Peter* (Rome, Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, and Carcassonne, Musée des Beaux-Arts).

Emerging from the penumbra, bright red and gold tonalities define the drapery of the figure's clothing. The man's gaze is shaped by a furrowed brow and his eyes are directly and expressively set on the spectator. These physiognomical details bring to mind Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), who sojourned in Rome between 1612 and 1616 before moving to Naples, and in particular his figures of philosophers and saints, in which an emphatic chiaroscuro formed an integral part of the composition. These physical characteristics look forward to other compositions by Preti, such as the *Diogenes* (Buscot Park, Oxfordshire, National Trust) dated to about 1636 by John Spike.²

In all likelihood, and bearing in mind the dress, which has a contemporary feel to it, it seems that the sitter wished to be portrayed as an astronomer. The voluminous book open on his lap – he is seated – and the armillary sphere set on top of it lend support to its interpretation as an allegorical portrait.

The armillary sphere is an attribute associated with astronomers such as Ptolemy or Copernicus. Ptolemy (100-168) believed our world was the centre of the universe, whereas Copernicus (1473-1543) placed the Sun there, supplanting the Earth. It was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century that the latter hypothesis prevailed, and the first heliocentric armillary spheres were made.

Notes:

1-Gianni Papi, "La giovinezza di Mattia Preti", in *Il trionfo dei sensi. Nuova luce su Mattia e Gregorio Preti*, ed. by Yuri Primarosa, Rome, Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini, 22 February – 16 June 2019, pp. 35-37.

2-John T. Spike, Mattia Preti. *Catalogo ragionato dei dipinti*, Taverna, 1999, p. 121, no. 13.