DENYS CALVAERT

(ANVERSA? CA. 1540 - BOLOGNA, 1619)

The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine

Oil on copper, 19 $^{3}/_{4}$ x 14 $^{1}/_{8}$ in (50 x 36 cm)



PROVENANCE

France, private collection.

LITERATURE

Unpublished.

This impressive and newly-rediscovered painting on copper represents the *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*. Catherine was the daughter of the King of Alexandria, as indicated by her crown, and her story, told in mediaeval fables, had become widespread by the fifteenth century, even being printed in Caxton's English edition of Jacopo da Voragine's *Golden Legend*. Half-kneeling on the lowest step of the throne on which the Virgin Mary and infant Jesus are seated, she receives the mystical ring from the latter, while behind her an Angel holds a palm of martyrdom, alluding to her future persecution and death for having converted to Christianity. At lower left, supported by Saint Elizabeth, the young John the

Baptist gives further emphasis to the story through his gesture and gaze towards the beholder. Behind the throne, described in half-shadow, Saint Joseph rests in a meditative attitude. The sense of decorum is marked by exoticism: the Alexandrian princess is richly adorned, her crown studded with precious stones, and her robe cloaked in a splendid yellow mantle. Pictorial space is extended by the view onto a distant landscape, while in the immediate foreground the delicate plants and flowers suggest the scene is unfolding partly outdoors. The gold-fringed green drapes add to the magnificent setting for this cameo from the *Golden Legend*.

Attributed to the Flemish-born artist Denys Calvaert by Daniele Benati, and then by Alberto Crispo and Angelo Mazza, the skilfully-constructed pyramidal composition is remarkable for its vivid, sparkling colours that take on a precious quality on the copper ground; this picture was certainly painted for domestic ownership. A considerably larger canvas of the same composition exists in a private collection[1], reminding us how the painter was also very much at home with altarpiece formats[2]. However, the general atmosphere differs greatly between one painting and the other: steeped in a penumbral glow, our copper involves us in the scene much more intimately than the large-scale work, which was conceived for a broader audience and thus uses greater clarity and luminosity. The charm of the copper studied here is enhanced by the Angel behind the Holy Couple, releasing a cascade of flowers over their heads, which thus echoes the greenery in the foreground. In his text on the larger canvas, Jurgen Winkelmann relates the composition to an altarpiece of 1588 by Annibale Carracci, the *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saint Matthew* (formerly in Reggio Emilia and now in Dresden), which must have preceded it, and thus suggests a date in the 1590s, which is valid for our copper as well.

Calvaert's artistic evolution, starting with a youthful journey to Italy to perfect his training, shows that he remained faithful to sixteenth-century Mannerism throughout his life, giving pride of place to *disegno*. He was more responsive to the art of Correggio (1489?-1534) than to that of the Carracci. Having left his native Flanders for Rome, he stopped in Bologna and spent time in the workshops of Prospero Fontana (1512-1597) and then Lorenzo Sabatini, collaborating with the latter, notably in the *Holy Family with the Archangel Michael* (Bologna, San Giacomo Maggiore) and the *Assumption* (Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale). *The Allegory of Vigilance* (1568; Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale) is the artist's first signed work. In 1572 he left for Rome with Sabatini to work under his guidance on the frescoes in the Sala Regia in the Vatican. His visual contact there with the great masters of the Renaissance, whom he copied – Michelangelo, Raphael, Sebastiano del Piombo – ensured a true grounding in the purest tradition of Italian art. This stood him in good stead, as when he returned to Bologna in about 1575, he set up an academy that was to be much frequented, especially by the great Bolognese artists of the future, Guido Reni (1575-1642), Domenichino (1581-1641) and Albani (1578-1660), before they in turn took the more innovative path of the Carracci.

Notes:

1-For a reproduction of this privately-owned work (160 x 140 cm), see Jurgen Winkelmann, in *Arte emiliana dalle raccolte storiche al nuovo collezionismo*, ed. by Graziano Manni, Emilio Negro and Massimo Pirondini, Modena, 1989, pp. 54-55, no. 33.

2- Simone Twiehaus, *Dionisio Calvaert (um 1540-1619). Die Altarwerke*, Berlin, 2002.