

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

ALESSANDRO MAGNASCO

Jonah and the Whale

Oil on canvas, 68 1/8 x 90 1/8 inches, (173 x 229 cm)



PROVENANCE

Venice, collection of Italo Brass (1870-1943); by descent to the present day.

LITERATURE

-Maria Pospisil, *Alessandro Magnasco*, 1944, p. LXXXVI, figs. 190-191;

-Benno Geiger, *Magnasco*, Bergamo, 1949, p. 145, fig. 489;

-Laura Muti and Daniele De Sarno Prignano, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Faenza, 1994, p. 260, no. 349, fig. 339;

-Fausta Franchini Guelfi, "Due 'Tempeste' di Alessandro Magnasco", in *Arte all'incanto. Mercato e prezzi dell'arte e dell'antiquariato alle aste Finarte 1993/1994*, Milan, 1994, p. 53.

Identifying the subject of this ambitious "burrasca di mare" (sea tempest) is certainly facilitated by the picturesque presence of the whale – half monster, half fish – regurgitating Jonah onto the shore among the flotsam of a shipwreck. The bow of the ship is still visible behind the rocky promontory to which two shipmates are clinging, one of them precariously. The swiftly sketched figure of Jonah, knotty and agitated, is infused with motion, and the long yellowish-brown mantle behind him accentuates the character of the Biblical prophet and his story (Jonah 2:1-10). The composition marvellously

demonstrates the expressive power of these diminutive figures, so typical of Magnasco, immersed in the immensity of nature, which affirms its omnipotence by toying with them. One has a clear sense of the threatening, cloud-swept sky, crossed by violent winds, to judge by how the waves shape themselves into white-crested peaks. The ships and the wooden elements of the promontory are also tossed about by the turbulent sea. Magnasco lends visionary fantasy to his *Jonah and the whale* in this tempestuous setting, adopting a composition he would develop with imagination and originality a few years later in the grand canvas of the *Sacrilegious Theft* (Milan, Museo Diocesano).

Our imposing picture is dated by Fausta Franchini Guelfi to the period between 1720 and 1725, and slightly later, in 1727-1728, by Laura Muti and Daniele De Sarno Prignano¹. The latter authors note that the handling is identical to that of a pair of pendants formerly in the Barnabò collection in Venice and then auctioned by Finarte, when Franchini Guelfi attributed them to Magnasco as regards both figures and landscape².

In the first half of the 1720s Magnasco was working in Milan before returning to his native Genoa, after 1732, the year he was widowed. This was also the period during which he began to execute his own landscapes, after the death in 1724 of Antonio Francesco Peruzzini (1643/1646-1724), his principal collaborator in that area. Fausta Franchini Guelfi does not believe that our seascape was painted by either Peruzzini or Carlo Antonio Tavella (1668-1738), the latter's name put forward by Maria Pospisil in her article of 1944. At the approximate time of our picture's execution, Tavella had long been absent from Milan, having settled in 1701 in Genoa, where he remained until his death. In Milan, he had frequented the workshop of Pieter Mulier (1637-1701), nicknamed "Tempesta" because of his renown in painting seascapes and storm scenes.

If we believe, as Anna Orlando does³, that Magnasco himself executed the marine setting in our *Jonah and the Whale*, this Milanese milieu and the art of representing "burrasche di mare" – and in particular its Netherlandish origins in the oeuvre of Tempesta – must have been foremost in Magnasco's mind, since one clearly feels its imprint here.

In 1949, Benno Geiger published our composition together with its pendant, *Saint Augustine and the Child* (another marine subject), when both canvases were in the same Venetian collection⁴. It was Geiger, Magnasco's greatest advocate, who rediscovered the artist between 1911 and 1930, dedicating an initial series of exhibitions to him in 1914, on the eve of the First World War, and publishing the first catalogue raisonné of his work, which then consisted of only seventy paintings. The oeuvre was to grow rapidly and exponentially in the decades that followed, culminating in a massive monograph of 1949, with extensive documentation.

Alessandro, an extremely talented and prolific artist, was the son of the painter Stefano Magnasco (c. 1635-1672). After his father's death, he left Genoa for Milan, where in 1677 he became a pupil of Filippo Abbiati (1640-1715). He quickly established himself as a figure painter, and began his career, working both independently and collaboratively, as author of figures in works by the landscape painters Antonio Francesco Peruzzini (1646/1647-1724), Crescenzo Onofri (c. 1630-1713/1715), Marco Ricci (1676-1730), and Nicola van Houbraken, as well as in Florence with the little-known Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Feret (1664?-1739), and alongside the painter of ruins Clemente Spera (c. 1661-1742). In 1703, he is documented in Florence with Peruzzini, painting distinguished pictures such as the *Hunting Scene* (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford) for the *Gran Principe* Ferdinand de' Medici. In Florence he certainly had occasion to study the prints of Jacques Callot (1592?-1635) and refine the graphic qualities of his figures, which stand mid-way between the art of the Genoese painter Valerio Castello (1624-1659) and that of his Venetian friend Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734), or later Francesco Guardi (1712-1792). In 1708 he was back in Genoa, where he was married, and he remained in contact

with his native city, where his mother and brothers lived, throughout his life. He returned to Milan in 1709, and his name appears regularly in the records of the Milanese Academy of Painters until 1719. A commission from the Austrian Governor of the city, Girolamo Colloredo-Mels, ensured his success, and opened doors to the great Milanese families such as the Archinto, Casnedi, Visconti and Angelini. As his biographer Ratti states, Magnasco was still very productive during his final years in Genoa⁵ and the many highly inspired works that have come down to us include the *Garden Party in Albaro* (Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco), which may be considered the painter's artistic testament.

Notes:

1 -Laura Muti and Daniele De Sarno Prignano, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Faenza, 1994, p. 260, no. 349, fig. 339; Fausta Franchini Guelfi, written communication (06/04/2018).

2- Laura Muti and Daniele De Sarno Prignano, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Faenza, 1994, p. 239, nos. 231 and 232, figs. 409-410; Fausta Franchini Guelfi, "Due 'Tempeste' di Alessandro Magnasco", in *Arte all'incanto. Mercato e prezzi dell'arte e dell'antiquariato alle aste Finarte 1993/1994*, Milan, 1994, pp. 49-53.

3 -Anna Orlando, written expertise, March 2018.

4 -Benno Geiger, *Magnasco*, Bergamo, 1949, p. 145, fig. 490.

5- Carlo Giuseppe Ratti, *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti genovesi*, Genoa, 1769.