

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

MAESTRO S.B. (DOCUMENTÉ ENTRE 1635 ET 1655) POUR LA
NATURE MORTE. LUIGI GARZI, (ROME, 1638-1721) ATTRIBUÉ À,
POUR LA FIGURE MASCULINE. PEINTRE ROMAIN ACTIF VERS 1660,
POUR LA FIGURE FÉMININE

Idyll by a Fountain Basin (Still Life with Male Figure and Still Life with Female Figure)

Oil on canvas, 46 ½ x 63 in (118 x 160 cm) each



PROVENANCE

Naples, Vittorio Carità collection; Naples, private collection.

LITERATURE

-Ferdinando Bologna, in *Natura in Posa* (exh. cat., Bergamo, Galleria Lorenzelli, September-October 1968, under no. 45), as by Giuseppe Recco and Francesco Gessi;

-Roberto Middione, "Giuseppe Recco", in *La natura morta in Italia* (2 vols.), Milan, II, 1989, p. 903 (Giuseppe Recco);

-Valeria Di Fratta, in *Da Artemisia a Hackert. La collezione di un antiquario* (exh. cat., Reggia di Caserta, 16 September-16 January 2020), p. 202, under no. 94.

These two masterly paintings, conceived as pendant compositions, hitherto never illustrated and only cited in comparative literature, are here presented for the first time with an entirely

new study of style and attribution, though not without a certain degree complexity. We are faced not only by the challenging question of authorship of the still life elements but also

that of the figure painter or painters with whom the first artist collaborated.

Recently rediscovered, this pair of pictures are true masterpieces in the field of still life. Two young people meet by the basin of a fountain, its outer wall running (like the mirror of water) from one canvas to the other, on the same level. Classicizing reliefs decorate the inner side of the low wall supporting the young woman as she leans across to respond to the young man who makes an explicit display of the trout he has just taken out its element. Given the emblematic nature of fish, symbolic of water, life and fecundity, no one can ignore the licentious subtext here, especially since the young woman correspondingly points to a gourd, posed as suggestively as the cluster of figs above it, further underlining the theme of fertility. Halfway up the canvases, we see a change of register as the compositions open out onto a background of wooded landscape and blue sky, before which we see a vine spreading its branches across both paintings, allowing the still life painter to describe some beautiful bunches of black grapes. Exhibiting fruits and vegetables along the little wall of the basin so as to exploit the play of their reflections on the surface of the water is a rare, if not unique, concept, and the mirror-like effect is rendered perfectly. The watermelon, melon and figs are sun-drenched, bursting open, and show off their flesh and seeds, and throughout, fruits and vegetables display the black spots that signify the passing of time as they reach their maturity.

Our paintings interact with each other through the figures, narrating a scene at once mischievous and joyful, and easy to understand. It no doubt drew on some widely known erotic literature, present in every age since Antiquity. In the seventeenth century *L'Adone* (1623) by the Neapolitan poet Giambattista Marino (1569-1625), a lengthy verse narration of the story of Venus and Adonis, was the most popular such text. The licentious poem belongs to an enduring tradition of erotic or obscene literature that goes back to the *Carmina Priapea*, a series of anonymous Latin verses centred on the phallic deity Priapus, and the compendium remained highly successful in the Renaissance and indeed until our own time.

This display, at the same time calibrated and spontaneous, might prompt us to think we are in a garden, completely recreated by the artist for this occasion. Its aim is to serve as a framework for this most explicit scene, which could be summarised in one of the precepts issued by Priapus in the *Carmina Priapea*: “quod meus hortus habet sumas inpune licebit / si dederis nobis quod tuos hortus habet” (Whatever my garden contains you may freely have, if you give us whatever is in yours).¹

The presence of a monogram in the *Still Life with Female Figure*, below the tomato – its interlaced letters are hard to read, and could be either “GR” or “CR” (and we would add a note of caution in accepting them as autograph) – had initially led Ferdinando Bologna to suggest Giuseppe Recco as author of the still life and the Bolognese painter Francesco Gessi (1588-1649) for the figures.

Recently, Alberto Cottino proposed a Roman context for these works, recognising the hand of the Master S.B., also known as the Pseudo Salini.² Their sizeable dimensions are, moreover,

typical of Roman overdoor paintings. The oeuvre of the monogrammist S.B. is a recent creation. In 1990, rejecting an attribution to Luca Forte of the beautiful still life then in the Lodi collection, Giuseppe De Vito compared it to two compositions formerly in the Galleria Canelli, Milan³ and came to the conclusion that the author was not Neapolitan but rather from “central Italy”. The stonework in one of these latter compositions bears a monogram in capital letters, read as “S.B.P.”, and the date 1655.⁴ An initial overview of the monogrammist S.B. was published by Cottino in 2003,⁵ adding to the body of work formerly attributed to Tommaso Salini (c. 1575-1625). More recently, in 2005, Bocchi devoted an extensive study to this still enigmatic artist, who was no doubt a pupil of Salini, and who has thus become a new follower of Caravaggesque still life.

But more than anything else, the detail of the fruit basket is like an artist’s signature, and can be found in a number of his compositions, including the *Vegetables, fruit, mushrooms, two waterfowl and a deer head* (private collection).⁶ We could multiply the citations of similar patterns in his various compositions: citrus fruits, for example, appear in one of the two pictures in the Accademia Carrara, Bergamo while the other contains cabbage and green zucchini in the middle ground.⁷ On the other hand, the beautiful branch of blackberries running along the wall is a completely new element in the artist’s repertoire. In our two paintings, the Master S.B. shows the extent of his talent with a supreme level of quality, rarely achieved in his other compositions, and probably reflecting an important commission.

We must, of course, imagine the intervention of one, or in this case, two painters as regards the figures. Scholars agree in ascribing them to artists from the school of Andrea Sacchi (1599-1661), comparing the male figure to those by Luigi Garzi (1638-1712). As for the young woman, it remains to be seen who painted the figure. When Luigi Garzi was still a boy, he first trained with the Antwerp painter Vincent Adriensen, called il Manciola (1595-1675), and then with another Fleming, the landscapist Salomon Backereel (1602- 1660), before joining Andrea Sacchi when he was about fifteen, and remaining with him into his twenties.

The Master S.B., who was no doubt of Northern origin, and documented through paintings dated between 1635 and 1655, could have been active a little earlier. Indeed, his collaboration with Luigi Garzi could have taken place when the latter had completed his apprenticeship with Sacchi, although evidence of his work as figure painter is rare in the 1660s. His collaboration with Northern still life painters such as Karel von Vogelaer (1653-1695) or Christian Berentz (1658-1722) is well documented, even if this relates to later work, at the beginning of the 1680s. Here Garzi shows his assimilation of the Classicizing language developed by his master Sacchi, particularly in his already very fine mastery of anatomy in the nude torso of the young man, as well as in the head, half set against the sky, his hair blown by the breeze, and in the type of facial features that was dear to Garzi.⁸

These two extraordinary compositions – with revisions made during execution, especially in the backgrounds, as shown by infrared reflectography – newly enhance the spectacular history of seventeenth-century Roman still life painting.

Notes:

- 1- *Carmina Priapea*, V. We are grateful to Professor Giacomo Jori for this reference.
- 2- The authorship of this master was first put forward by Alberto Cottino, followed by Ilaria Della Monica, Riccardo Lattuada (both in writing) and Gianluca Bocchi (verbally).
- 3- Giuseppe De Vito, "Un diverso avvio per il primo tempo della natura morta a Napoli", *Ricerche sul '600 napoletano*, 1990, p. 121.
- 4- See Claudia Salvi, in *L'Œil gourmand. A Journey through Neapolitan Still Life of the 17th century* (exh. cat., Paris, Galerie Canesso, 26 September - 27 October 2007), pp. 76-77, figs. 1, 2, 3.
- 5- Alberto Cottino, "La natura morta a Roma: il naturalismo caravaggesco", in *La natura morta italiana tra Cinquecento al Settecento* (exh. cat., Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, 26 June - 12 October 2003), ed. by Mina Gregori, pp. 124-126.
- 6- Gianluca Bocchi and Ulisse Bocchi, "Pseudo Salini o Maestro SB", in *Pittori di natura morta a Roma. Artisti italiani 1630-1750*, Viadana, 2005, p. 190, PS.25.
- 7- *Ibidem*, p. 169, PS.5, PS.6.
- 8- Luigi Garzi 1638-1721. Pittore romano, ed. by Francesco Grisolia and Guendalina Serafinelli, Milan, 2018, in which see especially the following: Guendalina Serafinelli, "Echi e predominanze fiamminghe nella formazione e produzione di Luigi Garzi", pp. 13-55; and Francesco Gatta, "Luigi Garzi: nuova luce sul periodo giovanile e sulla prima maturità (1653-1676)", pp. 57-77.