

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

FRANCESCO HAYEZ

(VENICE, 1791 - MILAN, 1882)

Portrait of Count Francesco Borgia (1794-1861)

Oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 18 3/4 in (60 x 47.5 cm)



PROVENANCE

Luigia Borgia Ferrari (c.1796-1855); by descent to her daughter Alcmena Borgia Litta (1825- 1900) in 1855; Paris, private collection

LITERATURE

Fernando Mazzocca, *Francesco Hayez. Catalogo ragionato*, Milan, 1994, p. 189, no. 124.

A label on the back of the canvas bears the following inscription in pen and ink: "*Ritratto di Francesco Borgia mio Padre regalato a Luigia Borgia Ferrari mia Madre il 31 Ottobre dell'Anno 1825 in occasione della mia nascita e da mia madre lasciandomi come particolare legato nel suo testamento / Alcmena Borgia Litta / Il 30 Aprile 1855*".

Painted before 1825

Depicted in three-quarter profile, Francesco Borgia's face is enhanced by a clear, expressive gaze. The rendering of the model touches on the "essential", to cite the word used by the Hayez expert Fernando Mazzocca, who also draws a parallel with the portraiture of one of the artist's friends, the Neoclassical painter Pelagio Pelagi (1775-1860).

An inscribed label on the back of the canvas not only provides the identity of the sitter but informs us about when the picture was painted. According to the inscription, the portrait was given by the sitter to his wife on 31 October 1825. The dating of circa 1828 initially proposed by Fernando Mazzocca in his monograph¹, must be revised, since – going by the inscription on the back of the canvas – the portrait was executed before 31 October 1825, even if only slightly earlier.

The nobleman Francesco Borgia belonged to the so-called Velletri (near Rome) branch of the celebrated Spanish family and was a career soldier. In 1822 in Rome he married Luigia Ferrari Oltrocchi (1796-1855), who was also portrayed by Francesco Hayez, although the portrait remains untraced². Francesco Borgia was second in command and then commander of the Civil Guard of Milan in 1848, when the city succeeded in chasing out the Austrian army during the revolution there.

In his *Promenades dans Rome*, under the date 29 August 1827, Stendhal writes of an evening spent at the residence of "Madame la Duchesse de D..."³, where while admiring a portrait said to be by Giorgione on the piano, he found himself in conversation with Count Francesco Borgia, whom he describes as a friend of the arts: "M. le comte Borgia, of Milan, having waged war in the days of Napoleon with a valour worthy of his ancestors, protects the arts in peacetime; he has just had Pelagi paint a very fine copy of this portrait ["a magnificent portrait of Cesare Borgia by Giorgion (*sic*)"]". Stendhal further describes him as "A man remarkable for his fiery spirit [...]" as he made passionate, improvisatory remarks about the putative portrait of his ancestor, the Renaissance prince Cesare Borgia (1475-1507) who has passed down to posterity especially through Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532).

The numerous portraits by Hayez of members of the Italian nobility bear witness to the artist's swift rise to fame in Milan; Stendhal does not hesitate to consider him as the "foremost living painter [...]"⁴. He did indeed prove to be the greatest portraitist of his time, presenting his contemporaries through images steeped in reality, combining physiognomy and soul to create a sense of great expressive energy.

His work as portraitist should not overshadow his output in fresco, for example at the Palazzo Reale in Milan, or that as a painter of literary subjects in the troubadour taste.

During his long years of training in Rome, between the end of 1809 and 1818, Francesco Hayez had occasion to frequent his fellow-Venetian Antonio Canova (1757-1822) and infuse his style with current Neoclassicist language. In Milan, after spending a few years in Venice, this great nineteenth-century Italian painter epitomised the hopes and disillusion of Romanticism – like Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) – above all through his choice of literary and historical subjects.

Notes:

1-Fernando Mazzocca, *Francesco Hayez. Catalogo ragionato*, Milan, 1994, p. 189, no. 124.

2-*Le Memorie* de Francesco Hayez, p. 275: "1828. Ritratto della Contessa Luigia Borgia Ferrari, del Conte Borgia, di Milano" (<https://archive.org/details/lemiememoriedett00haye/page/274/mode/2up?q=borgia>). See Fernando Mazzocca, *Francesco Hayez. Catalogo ragionato*, Milan, 1994, p. 189, no. 125. (without illustration or location). Luigia Borgia Ferrari was from Cremona, and her second marriage, facilitated by Pauline Borghese, was to Count Francesco Borgia. She was known to be a friend of Stendhal.

3-Probably Elizabeth Hervey, second wife of William Cavendish, fifth Duke of Devonshire, who had been widowed in 1811 and retired to Rome, where she died in 1824. This obviously creates an anachronism, as has been noted by annotators; see Stendhal, *Promenades dans Rome*, ed. by V. Del Litto with a preface by Michel Crouzet, Paris: Gallimard, 1973, pp. 42, 662, note 5.

4-See Fernando Mazzocca, *Francesco Hayez. Catalogo ragionato*, Milan, 1994, p. 31.