

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

MATTIA PRETI

(TAVERNA, 1613 - LA VALLETTA, 1699)

Portrait of a Soldier

Oil on canvas, 47 7/8 x 38 3/4 in (121.5 x 98.5 cm)



PROVENANCE

Heinz Kisters (1912-1977), Kreuzlingen (Switzerland) ; Habsburg, Feldman sale, Hôtel des Bergues, Geneva, 3 July 1988, lot 81/168 (as “attributed to Pier Francesco Mola”); Lugano, private collection.

LITERATURE

-Laura Laureati, in *Pier Francesco Mola 1612-1666* (exh. cat., Lugano, Museo Cantonale d'Arte, 23 September – 19 November 1989; Rome, Musei Capitolini, 3 December 1989 – 31 January 1990), pp. 313-314, no. IV.9;

-John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti. Catalogo ragionato dei dipinti*, Florence, 1999, p. 164, no. 77;

-Keith Sciberras, in *Caravaggio e i caravaggeschi. La pittura di realtà* (exh. cat. Sassari, Palazzo Ducale, 26 June – 30 October 2015), ed. by Vittorio Sgarbi, no. 18, pp. 132-133;

-Giorgio Leone, in *Mattia Preti. Un giovane nella Roma dopo Caravaggio* (exh. cat., Rome, Galleria

EXHIBITIONS

-*Pier Francesco Mola 1612-1666* (exh. cat., Lugano, Museo Cantonale d'Arte, 23 September – 19 November 1989; Rome, Musei Capitolini, 3 December 1989 – 31 January 1990);

- *Caravaggio e i caravaggeschi. La pittura di realtà* (exh. cat. Sassari, Palazzo Ducale, 26 June – 30 October 2015), ed. by Vittorio Sgarbi.

Comparative work:

Painting: A black and white photograph of a version of our canvas is catalogued (inv. no. 53531) in the archive of the Fondazione Zeri, Bologna, as in a private collection in Rome (where it may still be?): (<http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/scheda/opera/55406/Preti%20Mattia%2C%20Soldato>)

In 1989-1990, during the exhibition on Pier Francesco Mola and his Roman contemporaries, this canvas was recognized as a work by Mattia Preti; ten years later John Spike included it in his catalogue raisonné of the Calabrian painter. The scholar dates our military portrait to about 1635, in an early period corresponding to Preti's first Caravaggesque manner. It was in Rome that the artist evolved in that direction, as opposed to his brother Gregorio, who was more classicizing and had arrived in the Eternal City somewhat earlier; for his part Mattia was sensitive to Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro. This kind of composition, its background crossed by a diagonal shaft of light, had been broadly adopted by Caravaggio's followers, and notably by Bartolomeo Manfredi (1582-1622).

Light coming from the left plays on the man's armour, with rich passages of white pigment creating reflections on the shoulder, right arm and helmet, which is topped by three ostrich feathers, also painted in white. A blue scarf adorns his corselet, swirling into

grey background, suspended in seemingly set in motion by an silent wind. The armour has touches, including emphatic

elements and especially the volute, partly hidden by the magnificent scarf. The figure has great visual energy, conveying the features of a middle-aged man, not holding a halberd as the brown- space and imaginary, decorative repoussé

is often the case, but grasping the pommel of a sword. This subject recalls Caravaggio's pictures of concerts or card or dice players, often located in guardrooms, the logical setting for such armed figures, as represented by French artists of the period, and before them, Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652).

In Rome, Preti would no doubt have had direct knowledge of paintings by Valentin de Boulogne (1591-1632), Nicolas Régnier (1591-1667) and Nicolas Tournier (1590-1639). The oeuvre of the latter includes several examples of a single-figure *Portrait of a Soldier* (Toulouse, Musée des Augustins; Paris, private collection).¹ The young Mattia Preti also treated these Caravaggesque subjects in more ambitious compositions, for example, in the *Concert* housed in the Thyssen Museum in Madrid, or the *Concert* in the Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome, or again in the *Denial of Saint Peter* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Carcassonne. At the same time he also depicted single figures of men in armour, as in the canvas in the Museo Civico, Rende (near Cosenza, in Calabria), although that composition is quite different.²

Soon enough Mattia Preti left the south, probably sojourning briefly in Naples, where he looked with interest at the naturalism of Battistello Caracciolo (1578-1635), paying close attention to the Neapolitan's Caravaggesque handling of light.

In the early 1630s, aged about eighteen – the first secure trace of his arrival in Rome dates from Easter

1632 – he had already joined his older brother, but we cannot rule out, as Gianni Papi believes, that Mattia arrived there even earlier, as a child in Gregorio's wake, and that he began his training in about 1624. He remained in the Eternal City until 1644 and then left for Venice for several months of study before returning to Rome, until 1651. After a brief sojourn in Modena he travelled to Naples, and then Malta (arriving there in 1661), where he met with enormous success.

Notes:

1-Nicolas Tournier: *Un peintre caravagesque, 1590-1639* (exh. cat., Toulouse, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 29 March – 1 July 2001), pp. 126-129, nos. 22-23.

2-John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti. Catalogo ragionato dei dipinti*, Florence, 1999, p. 247, no. 174.