SEBASTIANO RICCI

(BELLUNO, 1659 - VENISE, 1734)

Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well

Oil on canvas, 47 x 77½ in (119.5 x 197 cm), rounded at the corners
circa 1725





Fig. 1



Fig. 2

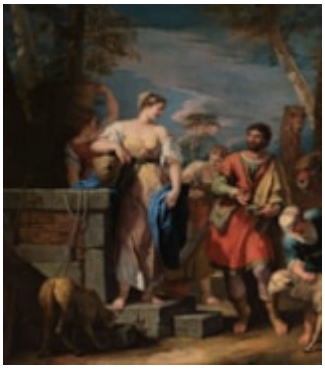


Fig. 3

PROVENANCE

Feltre, Countess Bellati; London, Sotheby's, 11 December 1991, lot 41; Paris, art market, 1996; since 1997, Brescia, private collection.

LITERATURE

Annalisa Scarpa, *Sebastiano Ricci*, Rome, 2006, pp. 165-166, cat. 62, ill. LVII; pp. 133, 658, figs. 645-646.

Related works:

Drawings:

-Sebastiano Ricci, *Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well*, preparatory drawing for the overall composition, with variants, in pen, ink and sepia wash on white paper; inscribed at lower centre "Rebecca", 195 x 267 mm. Venice, Gallerie dell'Accademia, inv. R 50 (fig. 1);

-Sebastiano Ricci, *Study of a Hand*, drawing in crayon and chalk on white paper, 126 x 181 mm; Windsor, Royal Library, inv. RL 7106. See Anthony Blunt and Edward CroftMurray, *Venetian Drawings of the XVII and XVIII Centuries in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle*, London, 1957, no. 424 (fig. 2).

The painting of *The Meeting of Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well*, an episode drawn from the Old Testament (Genesis, 24) was carefully prepared by Ricci, as seen in two drawings, one for the general structure of the composition, the other a detailed study of the right hand of Eliezer (see Related works).

The painter made only minor revisions to the compositional sheet in the Accademia in Venice, adding the figure of a shepherd in the foreground and a female figure in the background; the entire composition is already established in the elegant pen drawing. The painting itself is a relatively recent rediscovery, promptly catalogued in Annalisa Scarpa's 2006 monograph on Ricci, one of the key players in the Venetian art world of the eighteenth century and the context of Rococo painting in Europe in the early Enlightenment period.

At the center of the composition is Eliezer, Abraham's steward, who had been entrusted by the patriarch with the delicate mission of returning from his native Mesopotamia with a wife for his son Isaac. Guided by an angel, he meets Rebecca at the well, who quenches his thirst (as well as that of his camels), thus fulfilling the prophecy he had had from God. Eliezer then offers her jewelry, marking the beginning of this union. The next day, with the agreement of her family, he leads Rebecca to Isaac, whom she marries.

This ambitious scene unfolds across a frieze-like arrangement; the format was at some point rounded at the corners, no doubt to adapt it to domestic interior decoration. The artist focuses on the protagonists of the Biblical story, who are depicted with elongated, elegant forms, fluid and supple in their movements and swathed in twirling drapery with magnificently shimmering effects of light. The main figures are accompanied by picturesque secondary scenes, and the composition continues with a busy group of people and animals approaching the well: women, extraneous to the story, come to fetch water. There are camels, and two shepherds accompany a flock of sheep who are quenching their thirst.

The Biblical episode lends itself to immersion in a natural setting, more detailed in the background on the left, where one sees imposing, swiftly-sketched buildings, while on the right, dense trees suggest the edge of a forest. Studying the expansive atmosphere of the setting, with its gentle, poetic landscape sketched against a clear sky, Annalisa Scarpa found it very likely that Sebastiano's nephew, Marco Ricci (1676-1730) was involved. Marco trained with his uncle and was often his close collaborator in these sorts of painterly passages. The contrasts of the foreground fades towards the horizon in vaporous tonalities – pinks, blues and whites – which (again according to Scarpa) recall the jointly-authored pictures painted by the Ricci for Consul Smith and now housed in the British Royal Collections.

Annalisa Scarpa dates our composition to the years around 1725, noting a close affinity of style with the canvas of the same subject (but of different design) in the Palazzo Reale, Turin, a documented work of 1727[1](Fig. 3). There are clear echoes in the figure of Eliezer, whose right hand is extended with the same gesture, for which a preparatory drawing exists in the British Royal Collections (see Related works). The Turin canvas also includes the young woman with the water jug on her head. However, our composition gives greater emphasis to the scenic structure, with a dreamlike atmosphere given to the broad landscape, and a lightness of touch that verges on the unreal and creates the charm of this composition.

Sebastiano Ricci's long career was that of a wandering artist, summoned by his patrons from one city to another in different countries. Numerous trips through the Italian peninsula allowed him to continue his training while fulfilling commissions: firstly to Bologna, where he completed his training with Giovanni Gioseffo Dal Sole (1654-1719), then to Parma where he worked for Duke Ranuccio Farnese, and on to Rome, which offered him occasion to see the art of the great painter-decorators Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669) and Baciccio (1639-1709). At the beginning of the eighteenth century, his return to Venice was that of an artist with a broader culture, aware of the latest developments in Bolognese, Parmesan, Roman and Milanese art. He then distinguished himself in fresco decoration, especially in Florence (1706-1707) with the *Apotheosis of Hercules* in the Palazzo Marucelli and *Diana and Actaeon* in the Palazzo Pitti, characterized by clarity and dazzling light, and figures that swirl and flow beyond the frame – entirely Rococo in taste – with a grand overall lightness.

Between 1712 and 1716, Ricci was in London together with his nephew Marco, exporting his own Venetian culture, which gradually established itself as a form of European culture. In 1716 he was received in Paris at the Académie, and then returned permanently to Venice, where he continued to work for English clients, especially Consul Smith (1674-1770), producing a series of paintings now at Hampton Court.

Note:
1- Annalisa Scarpa, *Sebastiano Ricci*, Rome, 2006, pp. 312-313, fig. 63