MAESTRO DELL'AMBULANTE CANESSO

(ACTIF EN ITALIE DU NORD - À LA FIN DU XVIIE SIÈCLE)

A Book Peddler (Vendor of libri da risma, or dramatic and popular canzonette)

Oil on canvas, 67 1⁄2 x 40 3⁄4 in (171.5 x 103.5 cm).

1670/1690





Fig. 1

PROVENANCE

Patrick Home (1728-1808), Paxton House, near Berwick-on-Tweed; Miss Jean Milne Home, Paxton House; Home Robertson family, Wedderburn Castle and Paxton House; Christie's sale, London, 25 November 1960, lot 136 (as Giacomo Ceruti); Paris, Galerie Knoedler, 1969; Paris, collection of Maurice Rheims (1910-2003); since 2005, Switzerland, private collection.

LITERATURE

- Christopher Hussey, "Paxton House, Berwickshire. A seat of Miss Milne Home", *Country Life*, March 1925, p. 451, fig. 15, as Manozzi, Roman School, c. 1630 (i.e., Giovanni Mannozzi, called Giovanni da San Giovanni, 1592-1636);
- Magnolia Scudieri Maggi, in *Capolavori & Restauri*, exh. cat., Florence, Palazzo Vecchio, 14 December 1986 - 26 April 1987, pp. 299-300, under no. 9;
- Carlo Dumontet and Dennis E. Rhodes, "A bibliographical painting", *The Book Collector,* vol. 61, no 2, Summer 2012, pp. 219-225;
- Roberta D'Adda, Francesco Frangi and Alessandro Morandotti, in eidem, eds., *Giacomo Ceruti nell'Europa del Settecento, Miseria & Nobiltà*, exh. cat., Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia, 11 February - 28 May 2023, p. 138, pp. 160-161, cat. no. III.12;
- Riccardo Lattuada, "Vite di giovani picari, perdute o redente. Note su un curioso pendant di Pedro Nuñez de Villavicencio e Luca Giordano al Prado, e un'aggiunta al catalogo di Nuñez: il Venditore di libri da risma Canesso", *Rendiconti dell'Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere e Belle Arti di Napoli*, vols. LXXXI-LXXXII, 2020-2021 (forthcoming).

EXHIBITIONS

- *Maîtres Anciens*, M. Knoedler et Cie., Paris, 1969, no. 4 (as Giacomo Ceruti);
- *Giacomo Ceruti nell'Europa del Settecento, Miseria & Nobiltà*, Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia, 11 February - 28 May 2023, no. III.12

Comparative work:

Painting: A copy of this composition appeared at the Biennale degli Antiquari in Florence in 1967 (see *Mercanti, collezionisti e musei. Le ventiquattro Biennali di Firenze* , Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 2007, p. 42, no. 26, as An Almanac Seller by Giacomo Ceruti, c. 1710).

The recent exhibition in Brescia *Giacomo Ceruti nell'Europa del Settecento* (2023), which featured our figure of a peddler, offered an opportunity to reconsider this masterful composition in the context of genre painting in Lombardy between the end of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It was during this event, faced with the difficulty of identifying the artist, that the authors of the exhibition catalogue suggested giving him an eponymous name, the Maestro dell'Ambulante Canesso (Master of the Canesso Peddler), and our gallery has submitted the picture to the wisdom of art historians as we seek to unravel the mystery of its authorship.

Firmly set in front of a hazy landscape and powerfully portrayed in full length, our subject is balanced on the left by the edge of a stone building aligned with his supporting stick. His gaze is aimed directly at the beholder and his serious face tells us that he is striking a pose, frozen for eternity in an image of great dignity and true poetry. His oversized, worn-down clogs echo his tattered and patched clothes, and the picturesque wide-brimmed hat that protects him from the sun and bad weather, define his activity as

peddler, roaming the streets of towns and villages to sell his leaflets. He brings to mind the iconography adopted for serial depictions of small professions such as sellers of *libri da risma*, small unbound pamphlets of a few folded pages. The painter offers a meticulous description of these sheets, not to mention the still life of the wicker basket and the piece of leather covering it, used to protect the pamphlets from the rain, as well as the almost anecdotal description of the little flowers and foliage in the foreground. The hand-written piece of paper stuck on the wall does not seem to bear the artist's signature; only the first word "Chi a[...]" is decipherable. Such flyers were used in daily urban exchanges, often consisting of announcements made by individuals, for example regarding rooms for rent, and providing further realistic detail of seventeenth-century society.

Thanks to recent scholarship by Carlo Dumontet and Dennis E. Rhodes, we know a little more about these small miniature works held by our travelling salesman. The larger of the two contains the tale of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book IV. The title – "Pirramo e Tisbe. Historia compassioneuole, amorosa, antichisima, & essemplare" – appears above a woodcut of which only the uppermost landscape setting is visible, followed by more text with the customary publication details, of which only the ending "NO" appears (no doubt the city of Bassano). A second booklet conceals the scene from Ovid's drama, well- known through Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*[1]. As for the second pamphlet, the "Gallo di Mona Fiore" (or "Mistress Fiore's cockerel"), it contains a popular satirical song, played repeatedly since the Middle Ages and even found in the classical music repertoire as it occurs in a tablature for Spanish guitar of 1665 (seemingly published in Rome)[2].

When in 1960 the painting left the Home collection at Paxton House – where it had been since the eighteenth century – and was offered for sale, it was attributed to Giacomo Ceruti (1698-1767), the principal Lombard exponent of pauperist painting, and this classification was adopted by the Knoedler gallery in Paris. The authors of the Brescia catalogue rejected the attribution to Ceruti, suggesting it might be by the same (possibly Italian) hand as a work formerly in the Medici collections representing An old woman buying a brooch from an itinerant salesman (Florence, Uffizi, Depositi Gallerie, inv. 1810, no. 2782; fig. 1). Both compositions share a stone wall with a handwritten, and in this case partly torn, paper flyer[3].
At the end of an article of 1925 published in *Country Life* about Paxton House, the country residence built soon after 1766 by Patrick Home (1728-1808), Christopher Hussey mentions its collection of paintings, and reproduces our peddler, with the caption "Anonymous Roman, about 1630", and therefore already in search of authorship a century ago, as remains the case today[4].

Our artist might be foreign rather than Italian, notwithstanding the use of the Italian language on the pamphlets and flyer – that is, someone who had probably come to Northern Italy and worked in Lombardy and/or the Veneto, bearing in mind the realistic subject-matter, as found in Giacomo Ceruti. On the other hand, Riccardo Lattuada has explored a Spanish trail, suggesting that the author of our work could be the Spaniard Pedro Núñez de Villavicencio (c.1635-1695).

The composition is of major historical and documentary interest because of the handwritten announcement and the printed editions of *libri da risma*, faithfully described by the artist. These bear fascinating witness to writing in public spaces in the period. Through these contemporary details, the artist succeeds in transporting us to the end of the seventeenth century, in true proximity to this man, and indeed with empathy for him, as he exercises his profession as a street vendor. We do not lose hope of one day knowing the identity of the author.

Notes:

1 - Carlo Dumontet and Dennis E. Rhodes identified a copy of this edition in the Victoria & Albert Museum, published by Giovanni Molino (Treviso, 1696-1700) and printed in Bassano and Treviso, which offers a good idea of what such pamphlets could look like. Based on history or popular drama, these texts were poetic – they are written in rhyming verse – and we may well imagine they could be set to music. However, as Carlo Dumontet has pointed out to us, our traveling salesman is holding another edition, distinct from Molino's, firstly because the woodcut is different and secondly because the name of the town where it was published ends in NO, it can therefore only be an edition printed in Bassano. Still according to him, the printing press could only be that of the Remondini family of Bassano, which would thus appear to define our artist's area of activity, somewhere between Bassano and Milan, and could confirm his presence in Italy towards the end of the seventeenth century. But these editions had wide circulation, and there existed older editions, already published with the same title, for example one published in Verona in 1597 by Francesco dalle Donne. One cannot therefore be sure of documenting the Italian sojourn of an artist from abroad.

2 – "Essere il gallo di Mona Fiore" ("being Mona Fiore's cockerel") was said of a man who falls in love with every woman he meets.

3 – The entry on our painting cites the document of acquisition of the Florentine painting, dated 4 August 1689, with reference to the seller, a certain "Niccolò Magliani pittore" – also a painter, but to whom we cannot attribute any work, given our current state of knowledge. See Magnolia Scudieri Maggi, in *Capolavori & Restauri*, exh. cat., Florence, Palazzo Vecchio, 14 December 1986 – 26 April 1987, pp. 299-300, no. 9.

4 – When it was in the Home collection, the picture bore an old and uncertain attribution to the Florentine painter Giovanni Mannozzi, called Giovanni da San Giovanni (1592-1636), who was active in Rome between 1621 and 1628; this was already in question by the time of the 1925 article, where it was captioned as Roman School, about 1630, with the comment "The most interesting picture in the house"; the author added that the picture "might be attributed to the school of Murillo".

5 - Riccardo Lattuada, "Vite di giovani picari, perdute o redente. Note su un curioso pendant di Pedro Nuñez de Villavicencio e Luca Giordano al Prado, e un'aggiunta al catalogo di Nuñez: il Venditore di libri da risma Canesso", *Rendiconti dell'Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere e Belle Arti di Napoli*, vols. LXXXI-LXXXII, 2020-2021 (forthcoming).