

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

PIER FRANCESCO MOLA

(COLDRERIO, CANTON OF TICINO, 1612 - ROME, 1666)

Portrait of a Young Boy in Renaissance Dress

Oil on canvas, 22 3/16 x 19 in (56.3 x 48.2 cm).

c. 1650/1660



PROVENANCE

In 1984, Paris, Giorgio Balboni; 1986, Lugano, Bruno Scardeoni; Lugano, private collection.

LITERATURE

- Jean Genty, *Pier Francesco Mola nelle collezioni private svizzere* (exh. cat., Lugano, Bruno Scardeoni antiquario, 10 May – 7 June 1986), p. 28-29;
- Mario Di Giampaolo, “Seicento tra Lombardia e canton Ticino. Pier Francesco Mola, il tenebroso paesaggista di Coldredrio”, exhibition review, Lugano, Galleria Scardeoni, *Antiquariato*, no. 71, May 1986, p. 24 (illus.);
- Francesco Petrucci and Lucia Piu, *Mola e il suo tempo. Pittura di figura dalla collezione Koelliker* (exh. cat., Ariccia, Palazzo Chigi, 22 January – 23 April 2005), Milan, 2005, p. 243, no. 63;

- Laura Damiani Cabrini, ed., *Omaggio a Pier Francesco Mola (1612-1666) nel quarto centenario della nascita*, (exhibition flyer, Rancate, Pinacoteca Cantonale Giovanni Züst, 1 April 2012 – 13 January 2013);
- Francesco Petrucci, *Pier Francesco Mola (1612 – 1666). Materia e colore nella pittura del '600*, Rome, 2012, p. 247, no. A17.

EXHIBITIONS

- Pier Francesco Mola nelle collezioni private svizzere*, Lugano, Bruno Scardeoni antiquario, 10 May – 7 June 1986;
- Omaggio a Pier Francesco Mola (1612-1666) nel quarto centenario della nascita*, Rancate (Mendrisio, Canton of Ticino), 1 April 2012 – 13 January 2013.

With its energetic, sketch-like brushwork, this bust-length portrait of a young boy, turning his gaze backwards, surprises us with an unexpected composition. The collared shirt, as well as the ample, archaizing, saffron-toned drapery hanging from his shoulders, lend a neo-Renaissance character to the sitter, although the picture was painted shortly after the middle of the seventeenth century. Crowned with blond curls, the boy's face is enlivened by large almond-shaped eyes, steeped in shadow, and he stands out against an azure sky crossed by pearly clouds with pink highlights, while on the left, a tree trunk frames the image. When the painting was exhibited for the first time in Lugano in 1986, the author of the accompanying text already noted that the colouring of the sky reflected the influence of the Venetian masters whom Mola knew well, having sojourned several times in Venice. Light is concentrated on the boy's right cheek and nose as well as the foreground area, particularly the right shoulder. The dreamy atmosphere, a little beyond time, shrouds this figure in mystery.

This enthusiastically-painted portrait emerged in 1986 at the Scardeoni Gallery in Lugano, and was later enshrined in the catalogue raisonné of Pier Francesco Mola (Petrucci, 2005, 2012). The Scardeoni catalogue made a point of comparing the composition with other works by the artist, notably the *Young Boy with a Dove* in the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. There the sitter is also dressed in Renaissance fashion, which was a style of pictorial dress often favoured by the artist. The expressive, wide-open eyes and the fullness of the face recur in the fascinating *Bacchus* in the Galleria Spada, Rome.

As Francesco Petrucci points out, this sort of iconography, which appears frequently in early inventories, does not offer much certainty in tracing the provenance of our painting, given the frequent inaccuracies in the record of dimensions or the descriptions themselves, which makes cross-checking difficult¹. Nonetheless, a reference to "Un ragazzo del Mola di 2 per alto" in the 1783 inventory of Prince Filippo II Colonna² could correspond to our subject and dimensions.

When the portrait reappeared, the author of the 1986 catalogue dated it to about 1655, whereas Petrucci places it within slightly broader parameters, approximately between 1650 and 1660, shortly after Mola's definitive return to Rome in 1649. This period of the artist's full maturity sees the blossoming of his attraction to such figures, marked by fluidity of pigment and swift, even abbreviated, execution, of which our *Portrait of a Young Boy* is an eloquent example.

Pier Francesco Mola was the son of an architect who was also a painter, and was born in the Ticino, the Italian region of Switzerland, but the family moved to Rome in 1613, when Pier Francesco was only one year old. Mola is recorded in the Eternal City until 1637, after which he travelled frequently between 1638 and 1647. After a brief apprenticeship with Prospero Orsi (1565/70-1635), who was also from Ticino, Mola entered the workshop of Cavalier d'Arpino (1568-1640) between 1625 and 1628. Scholars have hypothesized that he made a first trip to Venice in about 1634. His training in the studio of Albani (1578-1660) lasted two years – between 1638 and 1640, as proposed by Francesco Petrucci – the

period during which he was absent from Rome. Between 1641 and 1642 Mola returned to his native Coldrerio, and in 1644 he is documented in Venice in the wake of Guercino (1591-1666), in whose workshop he could have been at that time; in any case, Guercino's legacy is clear in Mola's work of the period 1640-1642. He settled permanently in Rome in 1648, where he enjoyed great success, also painting frescoes for the great Roman families (notably at the Palazzo Costaguti). Between 1653 and 1656, he worked under Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669) on the decoration of the church of San Marco, at the behest of Niccolò Sagredo, the Venetian ambassador to Rome. Around 1658-1659, he became the official painter of Prince Pamphilj, which demonstrates how established he was in Rome, and in 1662 he was elected *Principe* of the Accademia di San Luca, a few years before his death in 1666.

Notes:

- 1- Francesco Petrucci, *Pier Francesco Mola (1612-1666). Materia e colore nella pittura del '600*, Rome, 2012, p. 247, under no. A17.
- 2 - Eduard A. Safarik, *Collezione dei dipinti Colonna. Inventari 1611-1795 / The Colonna Collection of Paintings. Inventories 1611-1795*, The Provenance Index of the Getty Art History Information Program, New Providence-London-Paris, 1996, p. 668.