

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

GIACOMO CERUTI, CALLED IL PITOCCHETTO

(1698 - 1767)

Portrait of a Capuchin friar

Oil on canvas, 36 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{3}{4}$ in (93 x 78 cm)



PROVENANCE

Zurich, collection of Ferdinand Loetscher (1906-1964) and Elisabeth Loetscher-Schuler (1905-1976); by descent to Hugo Loetscher (1929-2009); acquired from him in 1983, through Giovanni Testori (1923-1993), by Geo Poletti (1926-2012), Lugano (Switzerland); 2010, London, Private collection.

LITERATURE

-Giovanni Testori, in *Manzoni. Il suo e il nostro tempo*, exh. cat., Milan, Palazzo Reale, October 1985 – February 1986, no. 6;
-Marco Bona Castellotti, *La pittura lombarda del '700*, Milan, 1986, fig. 189;
-Stefano Bruzzese and Francesco Frangi, in *Testori a Lecco. Tra Alessandro Manzoni ed Ennio Morlotti*, exh. cat., Lecco, Villa Manzoni – Musei Civici, 16 October 2010 – 30 January 2011, pp. 69, 70-71;

- Véronique Damian, *A Selection of Paintings from Galerie Canesso*, Paris, exh. cat., New York, Didier Aaron Gallery, 20 January – 4 February 2011, pp. 20-21;
- Francesco Frangi, in *Giacomo Ceruti nell'Europa del Settecento. Miseria e Nobiltà*, Roberta d'Adda, Francesco Frangi, Alessandro Morandotti (eds.), exh. cat., Brescia Museo di Santa Giulia, 14 February-28 May 2023, pp. 112-113, 117, no. II.4.

EXHIBITIONS

- Manzoni. Il suo e il nostro tempo*, Milan, Palazzo Reale, October 1985 – February 1986, no. 6; Testori a Lecco. Tra Alessandro Manzoni ed Ennio Morlotti, Lecco, Villa Manzoni – Musei Civici, 16 October 2010 – 30 January 2011;
- A Selection of Paintings from Galerie Canesso*, Paris, New York, Didier Aaron Gallery, 20 January – 4 February 2011;
- Giacomo Ceruti nell'Europa del Settecento. Miseria e Nobiltà*, Roberta d'Adda, Francesco Frangi, Alessandro Morandotti (eds.), Brescia Museo di Santa Giulia, 14 February - 28 May 2023.

Portraiture holds a distinct place in the multi-faceted career of this great and solemn Lombard painter, tangibly expressing the essential humanity of his genius. This *Portrait of a Capuchin Friar* is one of the most recent additions to the Ceruti's oeuvre. Giovanni Testori presented it to a broad public in 1985, as part of an exhibition held in Milan about Alessandro Manzoni, suggesting it was painted around 1740; this dating has recently been adjusted by Francesco Frangi, who placed its execution during the painter's lengthy and fruitful time in Brescia. It should thus be considered a creation of the latter years of this period, which stretched from 1721 to 1734.

While Ceruti was born in Milan, Brescia was certainly his adopted home, and it was there that he was intensely productive both in portraiture and genre scenes, as we know from the celebrated series of fifteen paintings of beggars and scenes from popular life, known as the Padernello cycle, probably commissioned by the Avogadro family of Brescia. Each of the figures in these pauper paintings stands out as a true likeness, one more striking than the other.

Our portrait – an image of extraordinary energy and realism – is set in an oval with a brown-grey background and its focus is on the bust and left hand of the Capuchin friar, whose remains unknown. He wears a habit of brown cloth, drawn in at the waist by a rope, under a cloak with the pointed hood of his order, which was defined by austerity and poverty. His face brims with determination, and the three-quarter profile reveals not only the tonsure and long beard that are also characteristic of this order, but a forthright, direct gaze meeting that of the beholder. He humbly expresses acceptance of his vocational choice. In the foreground, the crucifix firmly held in his outstretched hand seems more like a commander's baton. The combined tension of the obvious religious message and the power of conviction expressed through facial features is conveyed by a vigorous and precise pictorial language.

The broad, keen handling of the vertical black brushstrokes that define the shadows act as a rhythmic foil to the brown areas of cloth, or lend emphasis to the drawing of the ear or the tight lips. The friar's eyes, tinged with melancholy, are toned with hazelnut. Overall, the portrait is like a lively dialogue between various tonalities of brown and black.

The beard initially induced Testori to believe that this could be the Frayer Cristopher, the character from Manzoni's novel, also a Capuchin. The way this religious individual is presented in action, as it were, could bring to mind the Capuchins' evangelising mission and rapid spread, supported by Charles Borromeo, the famous Archbishop of Milan, with a reminder of their important role during the Counter-

Reformation; but this picture was painted during a much later period.

The portrait was no doubt executed *dal vero*, and seems to be a startling declaration of truth.

After Brescia, the artist worked in Gandino, near Bergamo, on his way to Venice, where he continued to explore the painting of reality. This resulted in his masterpiece of 1736, the *Three Beggars* painted for Marshal Schulenburg in Venice (now in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid), a painting that elevates poverty to a spiritual state.

Giacomo Ceruti stands out as a talented naturalist who concentrated both on his models and on their philosophical significance, and his approach left a legacy in the Milanese *Illuminismo* of Alessandro Magnasco (1667-1749) and, considerably later, in the great narrative and social scenes of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), to cite but one example.