GIUSEPPE CESARI, CALLED IL CAVALIER D'ARPINO

The Victory of Constantine

Oil on canvas, 68 1/2 x 150 3/8 in (174 x 382 cm)

PROVENANCE

Ferrara, Saracco-Riminaldi collection (Inventario Saracco-Riminaldi, 19 February 1878, no. 1189: "Quadro grande a chiaroscuro rappresentante una battaglia. Lire 15").

LITERATURE

Herwarth Röttgen, in *Il Cavalier d'Arpino*, exh. cat., Rome, Palazzo Venezia, June-July 1973, p. 48, fig. 26;
Herwarth Röttgen, *Il Cavalier Giuseppe Cesari D'Arpino. Un grande pittore nello splendore della fama e nell'incostanza della fortuna*, Rome, 2002, p. 483, no. 267;
Marco Simone Bolzoni, *Il Cavalier Giuseppe Cesari d'Arpino. Maestro del disegno. Catalogo ragionato dell'opera grafica*, Rome, 2013, p. 394, under no. 291.

This painting – a scene of purified draughtsmanship and dynamic movement – is perhaps the last masterpiece by the Cavalier d'Arpino, and represents the victory of Constantine over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge, just north of Rome. The hero, Constantine, leads the battle on his rearing white steed: he grasps his spear, looking towards his enemy Maxentius, who has fallen from his horse before the bridge packed with combatants, and is recognisable by his crown, still in place on his head. As in the fresco of the same subject by Raphael (1483-1520), painted a century earlier in one of the Vatican stanze, Maxentius is about to be submerged in the Tiber. The action unfolds in true theatrical fashion, but whereas Raphael painted a dense and fairly confused skirmish, Arpino simplifies the movements of the two armies and the postures of the soldiers, and lends individuality to each horse, such as the one in the right foreground, which tries vainly to get to its feet.

The Cavalier d'Arpino had already shown his skills in an ambitious military scene, the grand fresco of the *Battle of Tullius Hostilius against the Veii* (Rome, Palazzo dei Conservatori, Salone), and some of

its motifs are adopted here, especially the poses of the bodies lying on the ground in contorted foreshortening. The extreme attitudes of some of the horses, like stills from a moving image, make a potent visual impact.

Rising over Constantine is a standard surmounted by a cross, the emblem he had seen in a vision on the eve of this decisive battle. He was to be the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. Leading his army to victory over Maxentius in 312, Constantine reconquered Italy, and this was therefore a fundamental achievement. Constantine thus appears to whoever visits Rome as a link between two worlds, since in building the so-called "Constantinian" Basilicas, he transformed pagan Rome, which he still embodied, into a Christian capital.

Herwarth Röttgen dates the painting to the years 1635/1640, regarding it as one of the last works by the Cavalier d'Arpino for evident reasons of style: it is painted with the long brushstrokes characteristic of his late period, and is stylistically comparable with the fresco of the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, also in the great *Salone* of the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome. The artist, born in Arpino, arrived in Rome in 1582 and established his whole career there. He ran his own studio, where, among other students, the young Caravaggio (1571- 1610), who had come from Lombardy to the "Eternal City", worked as a painter of flower and fruit. While living in Rome, Giuseppe Cesari enjoyed the patronage of the pontiffs Sixtus V (1521-1590), and Clement VIII (1536-1605). His oeuvre – both in murals (Quirinale, Capitol, Palace of the Conservators etc...) and easel painting – holds its place between the Mannerist and Baroque eras. Between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries, the name of the Cavalier d'Arpin circulated widely in Rome, with a reputation comparable to that of Caravaggio in the early 17th century, following the success of his cycle of the story of St. Matthew in the Contarelli chapel (church of Saint-Louis-des-Français).
This long monochrome frieze, painted like a relief sculpture, brings to mind the Roman funerary sculpture, including the third-century Ludovisi sarcophagus, that must certainly have inspired Arpino in passages such as the head of the neighing horse. The motif recurs in the modern period in Picasso's *Guernica* of 1937 – another brilliant manifesto against the violence of war, containing (also in black and white) all the tragic power such narrative can give.