

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

LAMBERT SUSTRIS

The Baptism of Christ

Oil on canvas, 37 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 60 $\frac{1}{4}$ in (95 x 153 cm)

circa 1540/1545



PROVENANCE

Dijon, private collection; 1969, Munich, with Julius Böhler; 1981, Lucerne, with Böhler & Steinmeyer; 1981, Austria, private collection, and by descent to the present day

LITERATURE

- The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. CXI, no. 801, December 1969, unpaginated [2 pages], pl. XXIII;
- Gemälde Alte Meister. Plastiken, zeichnungen, kunstgewerbe*, exhibition catalogue (Munich, Julius Böhler Gallery, October-November 1973), Munich, 1973, p. 6 cat. 8, illus.;
- Luciana CROSATO LARCHER, "Un nuovo 'Battesimo di Cristo' di Lamberto Sustris", *Arte Veneta*, XXVII, 1974, pp. 241-244;
- Vittorio SGARBI, "Giovanni De Mio, Bonifacio de' Pitati, Lamberto Sustris : indicazioni sul primo tempo del manierismo nel Veneto", *Arte Veneta*, XXXV, 1981, p. 58, p. 61 note 36;
- Rodolfo PALLUCCHINI, "Note carianesche", *Arte Veneta*, vol. XXXVI, 1982, p. 195 fig. 5, p. 196;
- Mauro LUCCO, "Il Cinquecento (parte seconda)" in Camillo SEMENZATO, ed., *Le Pitture del Santo a Padova* (IX. Fonti e studi per la storia del Santo a Padova. Studi, 5), Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1984, p. 170;
- Bert W. MEIJER, "Over van Scorel in Venetië en het vroege werk van Lambert Sustris", *Oud Holland*, vol. CVI, no. 1, 1992, p. 9 and fig. 15, pp. 10, 14-15, p. 18 note 30;
- Bert W. MEIJER, "Piero and the North", *Studies in the History of Art*, vol. 48, 1995, p. 154, p. 159 note 66;

- Robert ECHOLS, "Tintoretto, Christ at the Sea of Galilee and the Unknown Later Career of Lambert Sustris", *Venezia Cinquecento*, vol. XII, 1996, p. 99;
- Angela TAMVAKI, "Lambert Sustris and El Greco" in *El Greco in Italy and Italian Art Symposium* (Rethymno, Crete, 22-24 September 1995), Rethymno, University of Crete, 1999, p. 391;
- Irina ARTEMIEVA, "La 'Sommersione del faraone' di Lambert Sustris", *Arte Veneta*, vol. LX, 2003, p. 147;
- Mauro LUCCO in *Le Ceneri Violette di Giorgione: Natura e Maniera tra Tiziano e Caravaggio*, exhibition catalogue (Mantua, Palazzo Te, 5 September 2004–9 January 2005), Milan: Skira, 2004, p. 49, pp. 248-249 cat. 78, illus.;
- Peter HUMFREY, "After Giorgione. Mantua" (exhibition review), *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. CXLVI, no. 1220, November 2004, p. 783 and fig. 95;
- Vincenzo MANCINI, "Lambert Sustris e la decorazione ad affresco a Villa dei Vescovi. Sulle tracce di Lambert Sustris tra Padova e l'Europa", in Lucia BORROMEO DINA, ed., *Villa dei Vescovi*, Vicenza: In Edibus, 2012, pp. 58-59, illus.;
- Benjamin COUILLEAUX in *Lambert Sustris Un artiste de la Renaissance entre Venise et l'Allemagne*, exhibition catalogue (Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 18 November 2017–4 March 2018), Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts / Illustria, 2017, pp. 37-39, 42, cat. 6, illus.;
- Benjamin COUILLEAUX, *Lambert Sustris: biographie, fortune critique et catalogue raisonné*, doctoral thesis in art history, supervised by Michel Hochmann, Paris, École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2021, vol. I, pp. 57-58, 201-203, cat. PA 21 ; vol. II, ill. cat. PA 21 (unpublished).

EXHIBITIONS

Munich, Julius Böhler Gallery, October–November 1973: *Gemälde Alte Meister. Plastiken zeichnungen kunstgewerbe*, no. 8;

Mantua, Palazzo Te, 5 September 2004–9 January 2005: *Le Ceneri Violette di Giorgione: Natura e Maniera tra Tiziano e Caravaggio*, no. 78;

London, Colnaghi Gallery, 2014 (no catalogue);

Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 18 November 2017–4 March 2018: *Lambert Sustris. Un artiste de la Renaissance entre Venise et l'Allemagne*, no. 6.

Related works

Other versions

Lambert Sustris, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1548/1553, oil on canvas, 228 x 78 cm, present whereabouts unknown.

Lambert Sustris, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1552/1553, signed *Lambertus de Amsterdam* on a rock under the Baptist's feet, oil on canvas, 129.4 x 236.1 cm, Caen, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Inv. 40.

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Anonymous, oil on canvas, 92 x 152 cm, present whereabouts unknown (Rome, private collection; Bertolami Fine Art sale, Rome, 2 July 2020, lot 86 (as "follower of Lambert Sustris"): slightly tighter composition at top and bottom, rays at upper right corner leading to the halo of the Holy Spirit.

A masterpiece of the artist's maturity in Padua, this *Baptism* may be considered the first known treatment of the Biblical subject by Sustris. The episode of Christ being baptized in the River Jordan by his cousin John the Baptist offered an occasion for a large open-air scene, with a panoramic vista that allowed for the depiction of an ample environment peopled by numerous figures. Behind the peaks on the horizon, the light of dawn shines gently on the banks of the Jordan, marked by rustic structures in

the background and punctuated in the centre by three groups of robust trees; the warm tones of the green meadows, which evoke the Veneto more than they do Palestine, contrast harmoniously with the clear waters of the river, which turns into a small waterfall before the site of baptism. The majesty and intensity of the sacred subject are enhanced by the beauty of nature, which, like Christ, is at once human and divine. The setting is entirely in keeping with the moment when the last of the prophets, having announced the advent of the Messiah, moves towards his cousin and bathes his head with water from the Jordan, baptizing him, while the Holy Spirit appears in the form of a dove, in accordance with the Gospel narrative.

Spread around Jesus and John the Baptist, a crowd reflects the iconographic tradition, although it is rarely so populated in Venetian or Paduan depictions of the subject. The detail of Angels holding Christ's robes was perhaps inspired by a glorious precedent in Padua itself: the fresco of the *Baptism* painted by Giotto at the beginning of the fourteenth century in the Scrovegni Chapel, which involves a similar moment. Beside the angels, the younger people undressing are catechumens, or those who aspire to baptism. This motif is rare in the Venetian milieu but appears in the fresco of the subject painted by Raphael's colleagues in the Vatican Loggia, which might have been a source of inspiration for Sustris. The procession dominated by horsemen may refer to the Gospel description of a motley crowd eager to receive baptism, including publicans and soldiers (Luke 3:10-14). This stands in counterpart to the men and women gathered on the opposite bank of the Jordan, at a distance from the main scene. Naked figures appear to be wanting to follow the example of the baptized Jesus, while being challenged by two older bearded men in Eastern dress. Could the latter symbolize the Old Law, resistant to the advent of Christ and his precepts?

The slender, slightly ethereal aspect of the figures and the fresh tonalities of the landscape indicate the canvas was painted at the beginning of the 1540s, during Sustris' initial activity in the area around Padua. The *Baptism* thus recalls the large landscape frescoes of the Odeo Cornaro (c. 1539-1541) and those of the Villa dei Vescovi in Luvigliano (between 1542 and 1548), iterated on a smaller scale but with the same interest in monumentality. In style it resembles other easel paintings by the artist executed between roughly 1540 and 1545, such as *The Circle of True Education and Happiness* (Venice, private collection) and *The Way to Calvary* (Ro Ferrarese, Fondazione Cavallini Sgarbi).

In our *Baptism of Christ* Sustris aims for a formal grandeur and rich iconography that he was to bring to fruition in the grand treatment of the same subject in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Caen, painted around 1552-1553 for Cardinal Otto Truchsess von Waldburg. The artist was moving to a new stage in the emotional, formal and almost symbiotic balance between landscape and figures.

A native of the old Low Countries, Lambert Sustris probably trained with Jan van Scorel in Utrecht or Haarlem. He was in Rome in 1536 and probably arrived in the Veneto by the end of the 1530s. He spent most of the 1540s in Padua, where he painted landscape frescoes in the Odeo Cornaro and the Villa dei Vescovi in Luvigliano. Sustris then travelled to Augsburg in Bavaria, where he is recorded in 1552, in the circle of Emperor Charles V. Northern by birth and training and profoundly influenced by the ancient and modern culture of Rome, he made a decisive contribution in spreading the language of Raphael in the Veneto and establishing a local version of Mannerism imported from central Italy. Having fully assimilated the Venetian aesthetic, Sustris played a key role in its international dissemination through his activity in Bavaria. His sensitive approach to landscape, attentive to both the reality of the world and the expressive potential of nature as a framework for Biblical or mythological scenes, represents a milestone in the history of the genre during the modern era.