

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

ALESSANDRO MAGNASCO

The Painter's Workshop or Il pittor pitocco

Oil on canvas, 23 13/16 x 16 3/4 in (60.5 x 42.5 cm)



PROVENANCE

Genoa, 1912; subsequently Venice, collection of Benno Geiger (1882-1965); Venice, collection of Italo Brass (1870-1943); 1960, Lugano, private collection; 2010, Paris, galerie Canesso; 2011, Milan, private collection.

LITERATURE

Benno Geiger, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Vienna, 1923, p. 56, no. 247;

Giuseppe Delogu, *Pittori minori liguri, lombardi, piemontesi del Seicento e Settecento*, Venice, 1931, p. 128, fig. 152;

Alessandro Morandotti, *Cinque Pittori del Settecento: Ghislandi, Cresspi, Magnasco, Bazzani, Ceruti*, exh. cat., Rome: Antiquaria, 1943, fig. 44;

Maria Pospisil, *Magnasco*, Florence, 1944, p. XXXV, fig. 147 [fig. 149];

Benno Geiger, *Magnasco*, Bergamo, 1949, p. 144, fig. 149;

Laura Muti and Daniele De Sarno Prignano, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Faenza, 1994, pp. 258-259, no. 340, p. 487, fig. 280;

Fausta Franchini Guelfi, in eadem, ed., *Alessandro Magnasco (1667-1749). Les années de la maturité d'un peintre anticonformiste*, exh. cat. (Paris galerie Canesso, 25 November 2015 – 31 January 2016; Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco, 25 February – 5 June 2016), pp. 34-35, no. 1.

EXHIBITIONS

Alessandro Magnasco (1667-1749). Les années de la maturité d'un peintre anticonformiste, Paris, galerie Canesso, 25 November 2015 – 31 January 2016; Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco, 25 February – 5 June 2016, no. 1.

The iconography of the “pittor pitocco” (the beggar-painter) was frequently treated by Magnasco, though always with variants. Here he has depicted the wretched figure of a painter in a paltry, summarily-described interior, painting an itinerant violinist dressed in tatters, a stringed instrument tucked under his arm and seemingly holding a score in his right hand, while singing or reciting poetry as he gestures with his raised left hand. By means of this self-referential passage, Magnasco sarcastically plays on the condition of the artist, either painter or musician. On the right a woman breastfeeds a child, evoking the symbolism of Charity, and a hirsute assistant occupies the space between her and the painter’s back. In the lower right corner, a long rifle and a breastplate – commonplace elements in the artist’s compositions – fill the foreground intriguingly. An open window in the upper left corner allows a strong light to play on the woman and the shoulder of the painter, within an otherwise dark interior.

Both the subject and the attenuated, tormented pictorial language lead us back to obvious visual sources, in particular the series of beggars by Jacques Callot (1592 ?-1635). Muti and De Sarno Prignano (1994) date the painting to the years 1722-1723; Franchini Guelfi situates it later, for motives of style, around 1730, which is late in the artist’s career. In a further version of the subject in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the violinist’s place is taken by a simple beggar, or in yet another iteration (Prague, Narodni Galerie) by a beggar with a parrot. Each of these variations on the same theme – not fully listed here – reflect the range of our artist’s whimsical imagination.

This is a symbolic rather than realistic portrait, in which the artist identifies with his subject. When Magnasco wanted to represent himself faithfully, one sees a completely different face.

In the *Hunting Scene* (Hartford, CT, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art) and especially in what may be considered his artistic testament, the *Garden Party in Albaro* (Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco), he appears richly dressed, drawing Genoese aristocrats on the terrace of their villa.

Magnasco’s treatment of paupers, as subjects, was deliberately non-academic, and his approach was also expressed on a material level. He rejected outlined contours and bright colouring, instead favouring a dark, subdued tonal range of browns and greys, as well as fragmented, motion-filled brushwork that was not subject to drawing.

Alessandro Magnasco was rediscovered in the years 1911-1930, under the stewardship of his great advocate, Benno Geiger, who curated an initial series of exhibitions on the artist in 1914, just before the onset of the Great War, and who effectively published the first catalogue of his oeuvre, which at that time comprised only seventy paintings. This expanded rapidly in the subsequent decades, with numerous additions, culminating in Geiger’s enormous monograph of 1949, which contained extensive historical documentation.

The artist, son of the painter Stefano Magnasco (c. 1635-1672), was extremely talented and prolific. After the death of his father, he left Genoa for Milan, where he was apprenticed to Filippo

Abbiati (1640-1715), in about 1677. He very soon became established as a figure painter, working in two fields – one as independent artist, the other as figure painter for landscapists such as Antonio Francesco Peruzzini (1646/1647-1724), Crescenzo Onofri (c. 1630-1713/1715), Marco Ricci (1676-1730), Nicola van Houbraken (1660-1723), and in Florence with the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Feret (1664/1665-1739) or with the painter of ruins, Clemente Spera (c. 1661-1742). In 1703 he is documented in Florence with Peruzzini, and his work for the Medici *Gran Principe* included refined pictures such as the *Hunting Scene* (Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art). It was certainly in Florence that he had occasion to study the engravings of Jacques Callot, which enabled him to focus on the graphic qualities of his figures, mid-way between the style of the Genoese Valerio Castello (1624-1659) and that of his Venetian friend Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734), or later of Francesco Guardi (1712-1792). In 1708 he was back in Genoa, where he married, and for the rest of his life he remained in contact with his birthplace, where his mother and brothers lived. He returned to Milan in 1709, residing there until 1719, and his name appears regularly among those of the local Painters' Academy. The commission from the Austrian Governor of Milan, Girolamo Colloredo-Mels, ensured his success and gave him access to the great Milanese families such as the Archinto, Casnedi, Visconti and Angelini, among others. His last Genoese years were very active, as we learn from Carlo Giuseppe Ratti, his biographer.¹

Note:

1 C. G. Ratti, *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti genovesi*, Genoa, 1769.