

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

ALESSANDRO MAGNASCO

Teaching a Magpie to Sing

Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{8}$ in (48.5 x 38.5 cm)



PROVENANCE

Genoa, collection of Aldo Zerbone (1937-2019); 2016, Milan, private collection.

LITERATURE

- Fausta Franchini Guelfi, "Magnasco inedito: contributi allo studio delle fonti e aggiunte al catalogo", *Studi di Storia delle Arti*, V, 1986, p. 297, fig. 107;
- Fausta Franchini Guelfi, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Soncino, 1991, p. 52-53, no. 21;
- Laura Muti and Daniele De Sarno Prignano, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Faenza, 1994, p. 271, no. 419, fig. 438;

-Fausta Franchini Guelfi, in *Alessandro Magnasco (1667-1749) Les années de la maturité d'un peintre anticonformiste*, ed. by Fausta Franchini Guelfi, exh. cat., Paris, Galerie Canesso, 25 November 2015 – 31 January 2016; Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Bianco, 25 February – 5 June 2016, pp. 40-41, no. 4.

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.

A dark, spare interior provides the setting for a picaresque figure seated on a stool and dressed in a white mantle, casually thrown over his shoulders and covering an entirely blue dress, topped by a black hat adorned with a feather. Holding a musical score, he beats time as he gives a singing lesson to a magpie perched on a barrel. Behind, another seated man accompanies him on a bassoon. A rifle rests against the back wall. The staging, with the two protagonists arranged on intersecting diagonals, attests to the quality of Magnasco's scenic and spatial imagination: even in his most complex works, the artist relied on symmetry to structure his compositions. The style of the painting is typical of the years 1720-1725.

The two characters in this painting belong to the *birba vagabonda*, the wandering multitude described in Raffaello Friano's *Il vagabondo, ovvero sferza dei bianti e vagabondi* (1621), one of the most widely distributed and reprinted books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in *L'Arte della furfanteria* (1622) by Giulio Cesare Croce, the author of *Bertoldo*. These works narrate the swindles carried out by a miscellaneous population of beggars, cheats and charlatans, but also of thieves and street bandits, often depicted by Magnasco at rest or in a moment of relaxation, accompanied by women and children, in dilapidated and decrepit interiors.

They are the beggars of Jacques Callot's engravings and the pícaros of countless Spanish stories such as *La Vida del pícaro Guzmán de Alfarache* by Mateo Alemán (1599 and 1604) and the *Historia de la vida del buscón llamado don Pablo, ejemplo de vagabundos y espejo de tacaños* by Francisco de Quevedo (1626), to name only the best-known works circulating until the end of the 1700s through multiple Italian translations. This so-called paupers' literature treated the subject of organized begging, analyzed its complex frauds and meticulously described their trickery.

Magnasco was the only Italian painter – alongside Todeschini (1664-1736) – who drew on this cultural source, for patrons who sought playful pictures, in clear contrast with the commemorative and decorative painting of the time. In the context of this extensive picaresque iconography, embraced with variations by Magnasco throughout his life, *Teaching a Magpie to Sing* illustrates the genre of small concerts for instruments and animals, such as *The Song of the Magpie and the Cat's Meow accompanied by lute, spinet, tambourine and cello* (private collection)¹. In both the paintings by the Flemish and Dutch *bamboccianti* and picaresque novels, concerts for inappropriate instruments and singers had burlesque connotations, and can be associated with a specific genre of music linked to carnival celebrations; this includes pieces such as the *Capricciata e contrapunto bestiale per cane, gatto, cuculo e civetta* composed for Shrove Tuesday by Adriano Banchieri in 1608. Rossini's celebrated *Duetto buffo per due gatti* is perhaps its last manifestation.

The first *Teaching a Magpie to Sing* was painted by Magnasco at the very beginning of the eighteenth century for a refined patron who was drawn to this sort of mischievous art, the Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici, heir to the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. During Magnasco's Florentine sojourn (c. 1703-1709) a pair of pendants were exhibited in the Uffizi Gallery and were later described in Ferdinando's posthumous inventory (1713) as *The School for Rascals* and *Teaching a Magpie to Sing*.

The latter is recorded as “a vagabond seated with a sheet of paper in his hand beating time and teaching a magpie to sing”², where the noun *biante* (vagabond) reveals an awareness of the so-called paupers’ literature in the Florentine cultural milieu for which Magnasco worked successfully until he returned to Milan. The subject of teaching a magpie was also painted by two other contemporary artists, known for their picaresque canvases: Giacomo Francesco Cipper, known as Il Todeschini (1664-1736) and Giuseppe Maria Crespi (1665-1747).

Fausta Franchini Guelfi

Notes:

1-Fausta Franchini Guelfi, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Soncino, 1991, pp. 50-51, no. 20.

2-Fausta Franchini Guelfi, *Alessandro Magnasco*, Genoa, 1977, p. 103.