

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

ANDREA VACCARO

The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian

Oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 40 $\frac{1}{8}$ in (130 x 102 cm)

C. 1640



PROVENANCE

Lugano, collection of Piero Pagano (1929-2007); 2009, Gstaad (Switzerland), private collection.

LITERATURE

- Vincenzo Pacelli, in *Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*, exh. cat. (Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, 24 October 1984 – 14 April 1985), 2 vols., vol. 1, pp. 491-492, no. 2.268;
- Wolfgang Prohaska, in *Guido Reni e l'Europa. Fama e Fortuna*, exh. cat. (Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle, 1 December 1988 – 26 February 1989), ed. by Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, Andrea Emiliani and Erich Schleier, pp. 676-677, no. D53;
- Riccardo Lattuada, "I percorsi di Andrea Vaccaro (1604-1670)", in Mariacclaudia Izzo, Nicola Vaccaro (1640-1709). *Un artista a Napoli tra Barocco e Arcadia*, Todi, 2009, pp. 58-59, fig. 38;

-Nicola Spinosa, *Pittura del Seicento a Napoli da Caravaggio a Massimo Stanzione*, Naples, 2010, p. 423, no. 459;

-Michel Hilaire, *L'âge d'or de la peinture à Naples de Ribera à Giordano*, exh. cat. (Montpellier, Musée Fabre, 20 June – 11 October 2015), ed. by Michel Hilaire and Nicola Spinosa, pp. 162-163, no. 36.

EXHIBITIONS

-*Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*, Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, 24 October 1984 – 14 April 1985, no. 2.268;

-*Guido Reni e l'Europa. Fama e Fortuna*, Frankfurt, Schirn Kunsthalle, 1 December 1988 – 26 February 1989, no. D53;

-*L'âge d'or de la peinture à Naples de Ribera à Giordano*, Montpellier, Musée Fabre, 20 June – 11 October 2015, no. 36.

Monogrammed at lower right, “AV” intertwined

The painted narrative before us illustrates a rarely-depicted episode of the sacred narrative, the preparatory moments of the torture of Saint Sebastian, who has been condemned by the Roman Emperor Diocletian to be tied to a post in the middle of Rome's Campo Marzio and serve as a living target for his executioners (although the archers' arrows do not kill him outright). The combined iconography of Christ at the Column and the Pagan image of Apollo resulted in a representation of Saint Sebastian as a naked ephebe, whereas he was the centurion of the first cohort of guards, and we thus see him devoid of his armour. The fact that he has one arm raised and the other bent behind his back gives the figure a *contrapposto* (swaying) movement that seems natural. The tree and especially the sky makes the faces stand out, starting with the executioner in lost profile, as well as the two background figures, one with a very decorated helmet, and the other wearing a turban, set against the light, who speaks to him as he points to the saint. The tight composition thrusts the martyr's youthful torso into the extreme foreground, where the light is concentrated and echoed by the white loincloth.

The chiaroscuro effects remind us that the influence of Caravaggio (1571-1610) was decisive for Vaccaro's development, although even greater inspiration came from its adoption by Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), the Spaniard present in Naples from 1616 onwards – two artists who left their mark on our painter's earliest period. His artistic curiosity then shifted towards Guido Reni (1575-1642), Massimo Stanzione (c. 1585 – c. 1658) and the young Bernardino Cavallino (1616 – c. 1656). Our *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* lies at the meeting-point of these two distinct pictorial movements: while the protagonist's suspension of time seems inspired by Guido Reni (in the treatment of this subject in Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova – Palazzo Rosso), who was also present in Naples in 1620-1621, and Ribera (in the canvas of 1636 in the Prado, Madrid), Vaccaro transforms the narrative, with pathos eliminated in favour of a form of tension suggested by the upturned eyes, as the saint seemingly seeks help as he serenely accepts his fate. As his biographer De Dominici noted, Vaccaro's imitation of Guido Reni through his “belle arie delle teste, e nel divin girar degl'occhi al cielo” thus provided him with a means of evolving his style¹. While subtle chiaroscuro passages model the upper part of Saint Sebastian's body, the blue of the sky adds an airy note to the scene, revealing his adoption of light-filled painting and the Neapolitan interest in neo-Venetian colour between 1630 and the 1640s. During its exhibition in Naples in 1984-1985, our painting was very convincingly dated to the years around 1640 by Vincenzo Pacelli. The combined naturalism and Classicism of this beautifully-designed composition lends it both potency and sensuality.

A similar arrangement of the figures on the left, but with the men shown full-length, appears in a canvas formerly in Madrid in the collection of Sebastián de Borbon y Braganza².

Our painting is signed with the artist's double-initial monogram in the lower right corner, with the letters easily recognizable by their identical, symmetrically inverted lines. Andrea Vaccaro was the son of a painter, and soon adopted the tenets of Neapolitan Caravaggism and naturalism, also drawing more broad inspiration from the fertile melting pot of local painting in the first decades of the seventeenth century. He created his own style, both with respect to the consistency of form and the tranquil attitudes of his figures, which reflect the powerful influence of the Bolognese painter Guido Reni as well as those of Massimo Stanzione and Bernardo Cavallino. Between the mid-1630s and 1660, his oeuvre shows an awareness of Van Dyck (1599-1641), during the period of his great altarpieces, in which scriptural subjects take on an emphatic sense of Classicism. This highly balanced approach placed him in contrast with the manifestly Baroque language of Mattia Preti (1613-1699) and Luca Giordano (1634-1705). His command of form, calm and devout, made him one of the most active and sought-after masters in the enduring years of the Counter-Reformation. Parallel to that career, Vaccaro was also much engaged by private clients, especially for secular subjects, as well as painting individual figures with an underlying sensuality.

Notes:

- 1- Bernardo De Dominici, *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani*, 3 vols., Naples, 1742-1745, III, p. 149.
- 2- Nicola Spinosa, ed., *La pittura napoletana del '600*, Milan, 1984, no. 832.