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Annibale Carracci
Portrait of. Young Girl

ANNIBALE CARRACCI
(Bologna 1560 – Rome 1609)

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG GIRL

Oil on paper, laid down on canvas
37.5 x 27.5 cm; 14 3/4 x 10 7/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, United Kingdom; Sotheby's, New York, Old Master Drawings, 29 January 2020, lot 30.

Literature

Unpublished



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This engaging *Portrait of a Young Girl* emerged on the art market in 2020, when it was presented at Sotheby's, New York, as a newly discovered work by Annibale Carracci. The attribution had been independently supported by Erich Schleier and Keith Christiansen and it is retained here.[1]

The painting is unusual both for its subject and for its medium. The speed and responsiveness of oil on paper made it particularly well suited to recording sitters whose expressions were difficult to hold, and images of childhood – like studies of old age – form a notable strand within this kind of practice. Children are well represented in Annibale's drawings but occupy a more restricted place within his painted production. An important point of comparison is *Two Children Teasing a Cat* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. 1994.142), generally dated to about 1590, shortly after Annibale's return from Venice in 1587. Necessarily more highly finished and conceived as an autonomous composition on canvas, the Metropolitan painting differs in function from the present, rapidly executed study on paper. Even so, the young girl provides a useful comparison: the small accents of colour in the hair, the lively modelling of the face as it shifts between frontal and oblique planes, and the broken, colouristic handling of the dress all find close analogies here.

The characteristics of the present head distinguish it decisively from a generic *testa di carattere*. The subtle modulation of light across the face reinforces the impression of direct observation, while the coral necklace and the small touches of colour suggesting flowers in the sitter's hair give the image a degree of individual specificity. They support its interpretation as a portrait, probably painted directly from life, and suggest a child presented with some care and belonging to a family of a certain social standing. At the same time, the direct gaze and concentrated description of the mouth preserve the spontaneity of a study rather than the formality of an official likeness. The work thus occupies an intermediate position between portraiture and study from the living model. This approach is closely connected with the emphasis placed on direct observation within the Carracci academy in Bologna. According to Malvasia, drawing *dal modello* formed a fundamental part of its teaching, extending from male and female models to anatomical study and the observation of everyday life.[2] Bellori similarly made Nature itself central to his account of Annibale's formation, presenting it as the painter's true teacher.[3] Oil sketches on paper can reasonably be understood within the same experimental culture.

The precise function of such rapidly painted heads is nevertheless difficult to establish. Some may have served as preparatory studies for figures subsequently developed in larger compositions; others as *ricordi* of particularly successful physiognomies, models retained for

[1] Sotheby's, Old Master Drawings, New York, 29 January 2020, lot 30, "Annibale Carracci, Portrait of a Young Girl".

[2] Malvasia 1967, p. 277.

[3] Bellori 1672, p. 39.

workshop use, demonstrations by a master, or exercises by pupils. The inexpensive and relatively fragile nature of paper may suggest objects conceived outside the conventional hierarchy of finished paintings on canvas or panel, yet this did not prevent them from acquiring an autonomous status as collectable works. The post-mortem inventory of the collection of Marchese Alessandro Facchinetti, drawn up in Bologna in 1685, for example, records numerous framed works on paper, including examples executed in oil, alongside paintings in more conventional formats.[4]

This variety of possible functions also helps to explain why the attribution of individual examples within the Carracci group remains particularly complex. Their abbreviated handling, rapid execution, and often uncertain original purpose reduce the usefulness of conventional stylistic criteria when distinguishing Annibale from Agostino, Lodovico, or painters active in their immediate circle. A fundamental framework for the discussion was provided by the 2006 exhibition devoted to Annibale. In the section significantly entitled *Il laboratorio del vivo*, Daniele Benati brought together a number of heads in oil on paper of solid attribution to Annibale, alongside comparable studies in oil on canvas and drawings, treating them as part of a broader investigation of the living model rather than as an isolated technical category.[5]

Seen within this context, the present *Portrait of a Young Girl* stands apart for the specificity and freshness with which the sitter is observed. The ornaments in her hair, the coral necklace, and the directness of her expression give the image the character of an individual portrait, while the rapid and economical handling preserves the immediacy of a study from life. As a rare painted image of childhood executed in oil on paper, the work gives particularly intimate form to the Carracci commitment to observation from life, preserving with unusual immediacy the encounter between painter and sitter.

[4] Morselli 1998, pp. 221-227.

[5] Benati and Riccòmini 2006, cats. II.3, II.6, II.9, II.10, II.11, II.13, entries by Daniele Benati; entry II.13, pp. 118-119, by Alessandro Brogi.

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