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Giovanni Bilivert
Head of a Youth with Closed Eyes

GIOVANNI BILIVERT
(Florence, 1585 – Florence, 1644)

HEAD OF A YOUTH WITH CLOSED EYES

Oil on paper, laid down on canvas
35.8 x 27.9 cm; 14 1/10 x 11 in.

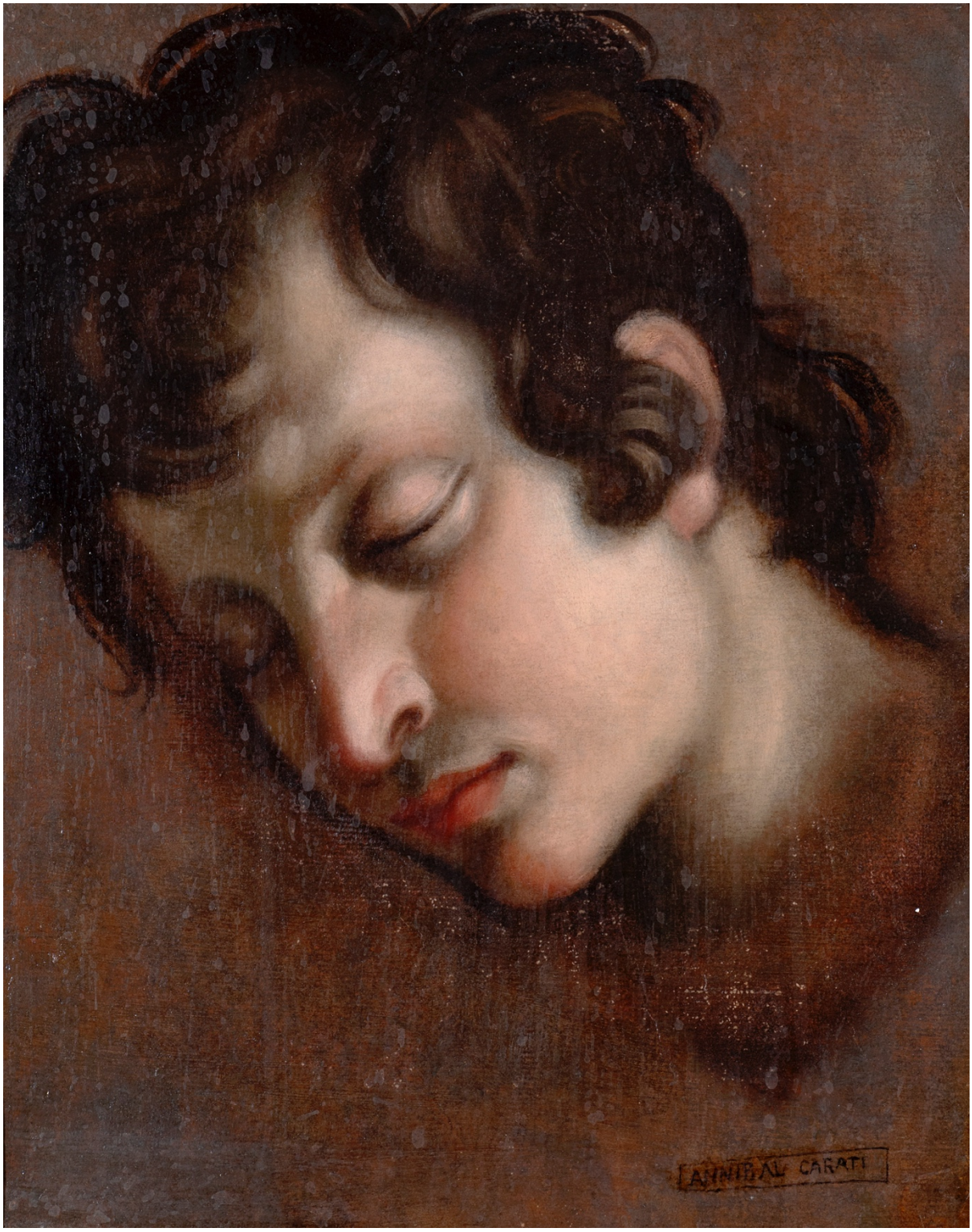
Inscribed in a cartouche at lower right: “ANNIBAL CARATI”

Provenance

Private Collection.

Literature

Unpublished


ANNIBAL CARATI

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This previously unpublished head offers a particularly revealing case study in the appreciation and collecting of oil studies on paper during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A young boy is shown with his eyes closed and his head inclined, the features and curling hair rendered with considerable precision, while the surrounding brown field remains largely unworked. The contrast between the carefully resolved head and its summary setting suggests a study focused on a particular motif rather than a finished portrait. Its execution suggests a preparatory function, although the painting for which it may have been intended has yet to be identified.

The boy's closed eyes, the inclination of his neck and his youthful appearance may point to a specific narrative context. A *Sacrifice of Isaac* is one possibility, but the suggestion must remain hypothetical: the motif could equally have served another composition requiring a youthful figure with closed eyes.

The handling of the paint, the modelling of the face and the type of the head provide persuasive grounds for proposing an attribution to the Florentine painter Giovanni Bilivert. Born in Florence into the family of a goldsmith from Maastricht, Bilivert trained with Cigoli and accompanied him to Rome in 1604. Back in Florence, he entered Medici service as a designer for the grand-ducal pietre dure workshop in 1609, alongside his activity as a painter. His work encompassed altarpieces and devotional subjects as well as mythological and allegorical scenes for aristocratic patrons. Biblical narratives and episodes of love and temptation offered scope for his graceful figures, rich colour and expressive treatment of gesture. In his later paintings, the influence of Francesco Furini encouraged softer tonal transitions and effects of half-light.[1]

The present head fits naturally within Bilivert's oeuvre, retaining his characteristic manner in oil on paper, a technique sparsely documented in his surviving work but well established in seventeenth-century Florence. Comparable youthful types occur in *Saint Zenobius Revives a Dead Boy* in the National Gallery, London, probably painted in 1610–1620, and in the *Sacrifice of Isaac* in a private collection reproduced by Giuseppe Cantelli.[2] Bilivert's surviving drawings also attest to his close attention to youthful physiognomies and to the expressive possibilities of the inclined head.[3]
A related youthful type appears in the head of the Tobias in Bilivert's *Guardian Angel* of 1625, in the Oratorio di San Sebastiano dei Bini, Florence (fig. 1). Although no direct

[1] Hoogewerff 1968, *ad vocem*.

[2] London, National Gallery, inv. NG1282. For the Sacrifice of Isaac, see Cantelli 1983, fig. 42.

[3] Thiem 1983, p. 276, pls. 37-38; p. 281, nn. 16–17. Particularly relevant is the Head of a Young Boy with lowered eyes, Rome, Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe (as catalogued in 1983), inv. F.C. 128233, black, white and red chalk on blue paper, 140 × 144 mm. Thiem suggests that it may have served as a study for the angel in The Guardian Angel and Tobias. It is cited here as evidence of Bilivert's practice of studying youthful heads, not as a preparatory drawing for the present oil study.

compositional or preparatory connection can be established, the child's head offers a useful comparison in its facial type and handling, particularly in the modelling of the features and the transitions between light and shade.[4] A second close comparison is offered by *Venus, Cupid and Pan*, an oil on copper offered at Sotheby's, London, on 4 July 2012 (lot 29; fig. 2). The unusually precise finish of the present oil study, the modelling of the head, the articulation of light and shade around the eyes and the shape of the nose recall the treatment of the heads in that painting. The supports are different – copper in the Sotheby's picture and paper, subsequently laid down on canvas, in the present work – but both depart from conventional painting directly on canvas. The comparison suggests a similar approach to constructing the head through finely controlled tonal transitions on these different surfaces, lending further support to the proposed attribution.[5]

At the lower right, a rectangular cartouche bears the name of Annibale Carracci, brushed in black. This addition, presumably made at the instigation of an early owner, belongs to a later episode in the work's history. The appearance of the lettering is compatible with a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century date, although its precise chronology remains to be established. The inscription records an attribution rather than a signature: by the time it was added, the head was being identified with Annibale, and its probable Florentine origin had been obscured.

The cartouche is thus of particular interest for the reception of oil studies. It provides material evidence of the authority of Annibale's name and of the readiness to associate an accomplished, isolated study of a head with his practice. If the proposed early dating of the inscription is correct, the work offers a striking witness to this process during the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Preserved through the recent restoration, the inscription remains an integral part of the object's collecting history. Together with the proposed recovery of its Florentine authorship, this earlier attribution makes the study a valuable witness to the esteem in which heads associated with the Carracci were held.

[4] See also Thiem 1983, p. 276, fig. 1, where the painting is discussed under the title The Guardian Angel and Tobias and recorded at the Certosa di Galluzzo.

[5] Sotheby's, *Old Master & British Paintings Evening Sale*, auction catalogue, London, 4 July 2012, lot 29, "Giovanni Bilivert: Venus, Cupid and Pan," https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2012/old-master-british-paintings-evening-sale/lot.29.html (accessed 9 October 2026). The catalogue describes the copper support as unusual in Bilivert's oeuvre and relates its polished surface to his careful brushwork.



Fig. 1. Giovanni Bilivert, *Guardian Angel*, 1625, detail of the Tobia's head, oil on canvas, 291 × 207 cm, Florence, Oratorio di San Sebastiano dei Bini.



Fig. 2. Giovanni Bilivert, *Venus, Cupid and Pan*, detail, oil on copper, 45.7 × 33 cm. Sotheby's, London, 4 July 2012, lot 29.

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