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Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, called Il Grechetto

Bust of Infant Saint John the Baptist

GIOVANNI BENEDETTO CASTIGLIONE, CALLED IL GRECHETTO
(Genoa 1609 - 1664 Mantua)

BUST OF INFANT SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

Oil on paper laid on canvas.
51 x 37 cm; 20 1/8 x 14 5/8 in.

Provenance

Dorotheum, Vienna, 19 April 2016, lot 228 (as 'Lombard School, 18th Century"; Private collection.



As Anna Orlando has recently emphasised, Castiglione's activity as a portraitist remains among the least thoroughly understood aspects of his production, despite the considerable reputation he enjoyed among his contemporaries.[1] Raffaele Soprani, writing in 1674, praised his exceptional ability to capture likeness and recorded portraits of members of the Raggi family and of Marc'Aurelio Rebuffo, while Luca Assarino had already mentioned a portrait of Doge Luca Giustiniani in 1654. Orlando places this activity in the context of Castiglione's encounter with Roman portraiture, particularly the examples of Bernini and Velázquez, and his practice of recording individual physiognomies from life, whether in drawings or oil sketches, for subsequent incorporation into larger compositions.

The present *Bust of the Infant Saint John the Baptist* belongs to this broader interest in the study of heads, although the figure has yet to be connected with any known painting. The saint is identified by the thin wooden cross and the scroll wound around it, partially visible at the right, together with the lamb skin covering his shoulders. His youthful features, long, loosely falling hair and lowered gaze recall the physiognomic types that recur among the shepherds and attendants in Castiglione's pastoral compositions. The face is carefully modelled through modulations of warm flesh tones, while the woolly skin is rendered in broader passages of white and grey, leaving much of the brown ground exposed.

Particularly close comparisons are offered by two *Studies for Figures of African Men*, published by Giuseppe Porzio and dated to around the middle of the seventeenth century (figs. 1–2).[2] Executed in oil on canvas, each measuring 53 × 48 cm, they are comparable in scale and share a remarkably similar approach to the treatment of the head against a largely exposed, warm brown ground. The concentrated modelling of the facial features, the accents of light and the abbreviated treatment of the shoulders suggest closely related working procedures. Porzio, whose attribution was independently supported by Sylvain Laveissière, identified the first figure in Castiglione's *Scene of Sacrifice*, while recognising the second in *Christ Driving the Merchants from the Temple* at Bowdoin College and *Abraham's Journey* in the Durazzo Pallavicini collection. Such correspondences demonstrate the Castglione's practice of preserving and reusing physiognomic studies across different compositions.

A further comparison may be drawn with the etched *Young man looking down to right* and *Young Man with a Trumpet Facing Left,* from the *Small Heads in Oriental Headdress*, dated circa 1645–50 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, figs. 3-4). Beyond the

[1] Anna Orlando, 'Castiglione e il ritratto', in *Gio. Benedetto Castiglione Genovese. Il Grechetto a Roma. Committenza e opere*, ed. Anna Orlando and Francesco Rotatori, Genoa 2023, pp. 54-75.
[2] Giuseppe Porzio, 'Études pour deux figures de Maures', in *Prima idea. Études et esquisses du XVIIe au XIXe siècle*, ed. Chiara Stefani, Rome 2013, cat. nos. 1-2, pp. 10-13

shared interest in likeness and individual character, the youthful face framed by long hair offers a pertinent physiognomic parallel.

Regarding the oil on paper technique, as Timothy J. Standring and Martin Clayton explained, Castiglione worked chiefly on unprimed sheets, adjusting the proportion of pigment to oil and the pressure of his brush to obtain effects ranging from translucent staining to incisive, almost dry strokes.[3] A limited palette of earth colours could be enlivened by opaque passages of white, permitting a rapid transition between drawing and painting. His production encompassed studies of individual figures and animals alongside substantial, fully developed compositions, such as *The Nativity with God the Father* (Royal Collection) and *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (National Gallery of Art, Washington).

[3] Timothy J. Standring and Martin Clayton, *Castiglione: Lost Genius: Masterworks on Paper from the Royal Collection*, London 2013, pp. 29-30.



Figs. 1-2. Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, *Studies for Figures of African Men*, oil on canvas, each 53 × 48 cm. Private collection, Rome.



Fig. 3-4. Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, *Young man looking down to right* and *Young Man with a Trumpet Facing Left*, from the *Small Heads in Oriental Headdress*, circa 1645-50, etching, both sheets 11 × 8 cm.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. 17.50.17-71 and -76.

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