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Bolognese School
Head of a Styr

BOLOGNESE SCHOOL
(Early Seventeenth Century)

HEAD OF A SATYR

Oil on paper
51 x 40.5 cm; 20 1/8 x 16 in.

Provenance

Private collection.

Literature

Unpublished.



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Occupying almost the entire surface of a relatively large sheet, this lively half–length portrayal of a satyr captures the figure in a fleeting moment of reverie. The satyr's slightly pointed ears, suggestive of his caprine nature, together with his disproportionately prominent aquiline nose, furrowed brow and fleshy lips, accentuate the wild, sensual and transgressive character traditionally associated with such creatures and with the pleasures of love, feasting, music, dance and, inevitably, wine – the latter evoked by the abundant bunches of grapes cascading from the wreath of vine leaves that crowns his head. Yet rather than appearing aggressive or fearsome, the satyr wears a gentle, contented expression, as though pleasantly intoxicated and slightly dazed by the effects of wine.

Such works find important precedents in the art of Bartolomeo Passerotti, among the earliest Bolognese painters to explore the genre through paintings and drawings of eccentric, grotesque and distorted figures, conceived as autonomous *divertissements* intended as unusual gifts for fellow artists, friends or patrons.[1] Increasingly fashionable in Italy, and particularly in Bologna, towards the end of the sixteenth century, these playful works were intended to amuse their viewers through light-hearted, unconventional and often comic subjects, such as the present satyr with his air of bemused detachment.

The present *Head of a Satyr*, however, stands apart from Passerotti's work in its distinctly more modern pictorial idiom, which points to the hand of a later artist and reflects a profound debt to the innovations of the Carracci. A compelling comparison may be drawn with the *Head of a Satyr* in the Galleria Borghese (Fig. 1),[2] by Pietro Paolo Bonzi, known as Il Gobbo dei Carracci, one of the closest followers of the three Bolognese masters. Similarly painted in oil on paper, the Borghese Satyr shares with the present work not only its subject but also the striking immediacy of a figure brought close to the picture plane and arrested at a fleeting moment. It differs markedly, however, in its freer brushwork and the particular care lavished on the vine leaves and grapes, which reflects Bonzi's celebrated skill as a painter of still lifes.

While the available evidence does not permit the oil sketch to be dated with certainty, it may plausibly have been executed at around the same time as the Borghese picture, between the mid-1620s and the mid-1630s. Such a chronology accords with its vigorous pictorial manner: dense impasto and broad, sweeping brushstrokes lend

[1] Passerotti's experiments with grotesque and caricatural physiognomy are exemplified by *An Old Man and an Old Woman Embracing* (formerly Mentana, Federico Zeri Collection; see Ghirardi 1990, pp. 229-230, no. 60) and drawings such as the *Laughing Old Woman* (two sheets depicting this subject are in the Galleria Estense, Modena, inv. nos. 948 and 977; see *Da Parmigianino a Piazzetta* 2011, pp. 62-63, no. 12), *Beast-Man* (Graphische Sammlung, Stuttgart, inv. no. 6259) and *Heads of a Nymph and a Satyr* (Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence, inv. no. 4066s; see Ghirardi 1990, p. 72).

[2] *M ostra dei Carracci 1956*, pp. 116-117.

the figure a striking immediacy and tactile presence. Emerging from the dark background, the satyr's jovial face is caught by a brilliant shaft of light falling from above across the vine wreath, forehead and lips, where swift yet precisely placed touches of white create flickering highlights. Longer, sinuous strokes describe the subtle torsion of the head and its graceful, almost feminine turn, tempering the figure's grotesque physiognomy and investing this familiar Bacchic type with an unexpected warmth and charm.



Fig. 1. Pietro Paolo Bonzi, *Satyr's Head Crowned with Vine*, first half of the seventeenth century, oil on paper laid down on canvas, 44.5 × 30 cm. Rome, Galleria Borghese, inv. 160.

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