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Jacopo Vignali

Head studies of a Bearded Old Man Seen from Three Angles, ca. 1630

JACOPO VIGNALI
(Pratovecchio, Arezzo, 1592 – Florence, 1664)

HEAD STUDIES OF A BEARDED OLD MAN SEEN FROM THREE ANGLES, ca. 1630

Oil on paper laid down on panel
Each of the three studies:
40.5 x 29 cm; 16 x 11 3/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, London.

Literature

Unpublished.



Hitherto unpublished and unknown to scholars, the present *Head Studies of a Bearded Old Man seen from Three Angles*, each on a separate piece of paper executed in oil, and laid down on panel, are an important addition to the oeuvre of the Florentine artist Jacopo Vignali (1592-1664), one of the major representatives of the *Seicento Fiorentino*. Only a small group of oil sketches by Vignali are known and they not only testify to the influences Vignali absorbed during his formative years, but also provide a first-hand insight into his working method.

Highly finished and in close-up view these observant studies strike a chord, with their immediacy, emotional intensity, warmth and gravitas. The heads radiate a luminosity achieved with a dramatic use of the *chiaroscuro*, the play of light and shadow, by contrasting the reflections on the high forehead with the shimmering white beard and the accentuated grey tinges of the receding hair, all set against a dark monochrome background.

Oil sketches on paper were a quick and efficient studio material, cheaper than canvas or panel, commonly used by the Carracci Academy starting from the late sixteenth century, and also taken up by the Florentine school. According to each commission, be it a single figure or group ensemble, the artist could easily resort to his portfolio of sketches and choose a suitable *modello* for the final painting. It is easily imaginable that the artist would have chosen such a dignified old man as an ideal sitter, his face later to be used for the depiction of a saint or apostle, deep in thought and visually transmitting his devotion to his religious cause.

In fact, the central head, seen frontally, facing down, can be related to Jacopo Vignali's painting of *Saint Anthony Abbot*, formerly with Clovis Whitfield Fine Art, London, and which was later gifted by Isabel and Alfred Bader to the Milwaukee Art Museum, Wisconsin (fig. 1).[1] On closer examination of the painting and the oil sketch the resemblance of the sitter and handling of the paint is more than reassuring and adds additional weight to the attribution.[2] Probably the same model can also be identified with the figure to the left of Vignali's *Death of Saint Anthony Abbot* in the Canonica of San Martino a Montughi, Florence.[3]

In the first decade of the seventeenth century, Vignali had joined the workshop of Matteo Rosselli (1578-1650),[4] whose "school, like that of the Carracci, produced as many different styles as he had pupils" and who subsequently defined the course of

[1] Francesca Baldassari, letter of 28 November 2010, endorsing the attribution of the Milwaukee painting to Jacopo Vignali; cited in Vilsmeier 2019, p. 3, n. 1.

[2] The comparison was based on high-resolution photographs supplied to Sonja Vilsmeier by Clovis Whitfield Fine Art, London, and Tanya Paul, Milwaukee Art Museum (Vilsmeier 2019, p. 3, n. 2).

[3] The proposed identification is based on a black-and-white photograph published by Atsushi Sakamoto, Kobe University, 2011, cited in Vilsmeier 2019, p. 3, n. 3: http://www.lib.kobe-u.ac.jp/repository/81010416.pdf (accessed 14 June 2019 in the original factsheet).

[4] Contini et al. 1986, p. 183.

Florentine art.[5] Vignali was hugely indebted to the narrative realism and tender pictorial execution of his master and it is therefore not surprising that the head studies, in particular the ones in profile, recall the works by Matteo Rosselli.[6] See for example the head facing right in comparison with Rosselli's *Saint Jerome*, which once appeared on the Roman art market and is in a private collection today. A sitter, not unlike the present old man, appears also in another work by Rosselli, the *Holy Family with Saint Francis*, Santa Maria Maggiore, Florence.

Vignali's Rossellian influence is undeniable, as Francesca Baldassari points out "In my opinion the heads are by Jacopo Vignali. The tender rendering of the features and the subtle treatment of the curls are entirely characteristic of Vignali, who trained with Rosselli and was strongly influenced by him. The head in profile is the most Rossellian, but it is painted in the same manner as the others and is therefore also by Vignali."[7]

In addition, it is worth highlighting that Matteo Rosselli in turn could have been influenced by the Carracci Academy during his Roman sojourn while working under Domenico Passignano (1559-1638). Luigi Lanzi in his *History of Painting in Italy* explicitly notes that Rosselli "excels in dignity of character; some of the heads of his apostles so strongly resemble the works of the Carracci, that connoisseurs are sometimes deceived."[8] Consequently, these influences converge in Vignali's work, as the present head studies share the introspective realism also visible in many of the figures in the Carracci artistic circle, albeit in a softer painterly execution.[9] A compelling comparison is provided by some of the drawings by Domenichino in the Teylers Museum, Haarlem (object numbers: C 053 and I 038), but most notably the *Head of a Bearded Man in Full Face* in the Royal Collection Trust, London.

In comparison with other oil studies by Vignali, parallels can be observed with *Portrait of a Young Man*, discussed by Francesca Baldassari in the Moretti Fine Art exhibition catalogue from 2012.[10] Although the sitter in this example is directly gazing out at the viewer, the realism and tendency towards introspection are similar, as is the paint handling and format.[11] Baldassari proposes a date for the Moretti sketch at the

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5 Lanzi 1847, vol. 1, p. 220.

6 Francesca Baldassari, letter of 28 November 2010; cited in Vilsmeier 2019, p. 4, n. 6.

7 Francesca Baldassari, email to Sonja Vilsmeier, 7 June 2019, based on photographs; quoted in Vilsmeier 2019, p. 4, n. 7. Original text: "Le teste sono a mio parere di Jacopo Vignali. Il modo intenerito di rendere i lineamenti e le sfumature dei riccioli dei capelli rientrano perfettamente nello stile di Vignali che, com'è noto, si formò alla scuola di Rosselli e ne fu fortemente influenzato. La testa più rosselliana è quella di profilo, ma è dipinta nello stesso modo delle altre e quindi anche questa è di Vignali."

8 Lanzi 1847, vol. 1, p. 220.

9 Vignali's possible travels in Italy and Rome in 1617-1619 remain unconfirmed: Contini et al. 1986, p. 184.

10 Baldassari 2012, pp. 48-51, cat. 4, ill. p. 49. Baldassari relates the tendency towards introspection to the example of Cristofano Allori.

11 The comparison is based on the illustration in Baldassari 2012, p. 49, cat. 4.

beginning of the 1630s, a date she would also apply for the present *Three Heads of a Bearded Old Man*.[12]

Besides the rarity of Vignali's oil sketches, it is highly unusual to find a set of three head studies of the same sitter preserved, even more so given the fragile medium of oil on paper. Few triple portraits of the same person are known, often quoted in conjunction with the *paragone* discussion as to whether painting or sculpture was the superior art. Traditionally mentioned in this context is Lorenzo Lotto's (1480-1557) masterpiece of *A Goldsmith seen from Three Sides*, most likely depicting Lotto's friend Bartolomeo Carpan, a Venetian jeweller. Józef Grabski (1981), who interpreted the painting as depicting three different sitters (the Carpan brothers), offers an alternative angle of interpretation, suggesting the painting was a visual play on words on Carpan's hometown, Treviso, read as a pun on *tre visi* ("three faces").[13] Louisa Vertova (1981) on the other hand favours the more practical assumption that the triple portrait served as a preparatory model for a sculpture.[14] The latter proposal leads to another famous example, Anthony van Dyck's (1599-1641) carefully executed portrait of the British monarch, *Charles I*, a painting that the artist probably began in the second half of 1635 and which was in fact intended as a model for a marble bust to be made by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), but the sculpture was later destroyed in the fire at Whitehall Palace in 1698. Intriguingly, Van Dyck could have encountered Lotto's *Goldsmith seen from Three Sides*, when it entered the Royal Collection by the early 1630s as part of the Gonzaga collection.[15] Peter Humfrey (1998) generally favours the idea that Lotto, portraying a jeweller, playfully alludes to the *paragone* debate with a twinkle in his eyes amongst his sculptor friends and colleagues, and in addition proposes that Lotto could have seen and been inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's (1452-1519) *Three Head Studies of a Bearded Man (Cesare Borgia?)*, a drawing in red chalk (today preserved in the Biblioteca Reale, Turin) while Leonardo was residing in Venice.[16]

In contrast to the triple portrait paintings by Lotto and van Dyck, Vignali's *Three Head Studies* differ in two important aspects: firstly, they are painted on separate sheets of paper and secondly, the eye level and viewpoint from the viewer's perspective vary, making it therefore unlikely that they were used as a preparatory model for a

[12] Francesca Baldassari, email to Sonja Vilsmeier, 7 June 2019; cited in Vilsmeier 2019, p. 4, n. 12. The factsheet accordingly suggests a possible later date for the Milwaukee painting, which the museum currently dates c. 1625.

[13] Grabski 1981, pp. 385-387.

[14] Vertova 1981, pp. 401-414; for an English summary, see Dal Pozzolo and Falomir 2018, pp. 292-294, cat. 32.

[15] Royal Collection Trust, "Charles I (1600-1649)," online collection catalogue, RCIN 404420, https://www.rct.uk/collection/404420/charles-i-1600-1649 (accessed 12 June 2019 in the original factsheet).

[16] Humfrey 1998, pp. 175-177, cat. 33.

sculptor.[17] It also remains highly speculative whether Vignali ever saw the Lotto painting in the Gonzaga collection in Mantua as a source of inspiration, even if he did travel in Italy.[18]

This leaves the more utilitarian function as the most plausible prime driver for the artist's motivation, i.e. to produce sketches as a preparatory means to or reference for future painterly projects. The panel support for preservation of the sheets could reinforce this argument, but it is unclear at what stage the sketches were conserved that way. Nonetheless, keeping this rather economical and practical use in mind, it is indeed extraordinary that this set of oil sketches has survived for nearly four hundred years. Moreover, it is proof that they must have been possessions valued not only in his workshop during the artist's lifetime, but also treasured by the subsequent owners.

[17] The studies are on separate sheets; Vilsmeier 2019, p. 5, n. 17, also discusses their dimensions in relation to historical paper formats.

[18] Contini et al. 1986, p. 184.

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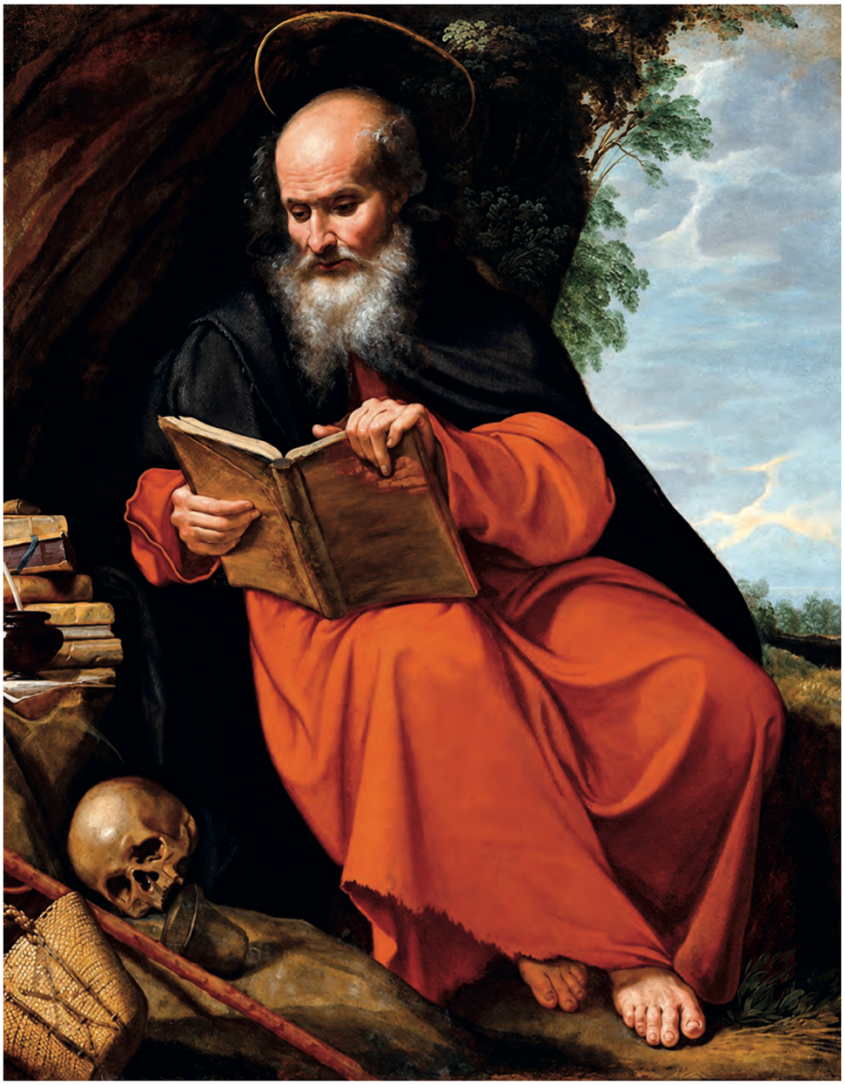

Fig. 1. Jacopo Vignali, *Saint Anthony Abbot,* c. 1625, oil on canvas, 146 x 117 cm. Milwaukee, Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Isabel and Alfred Bader.

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