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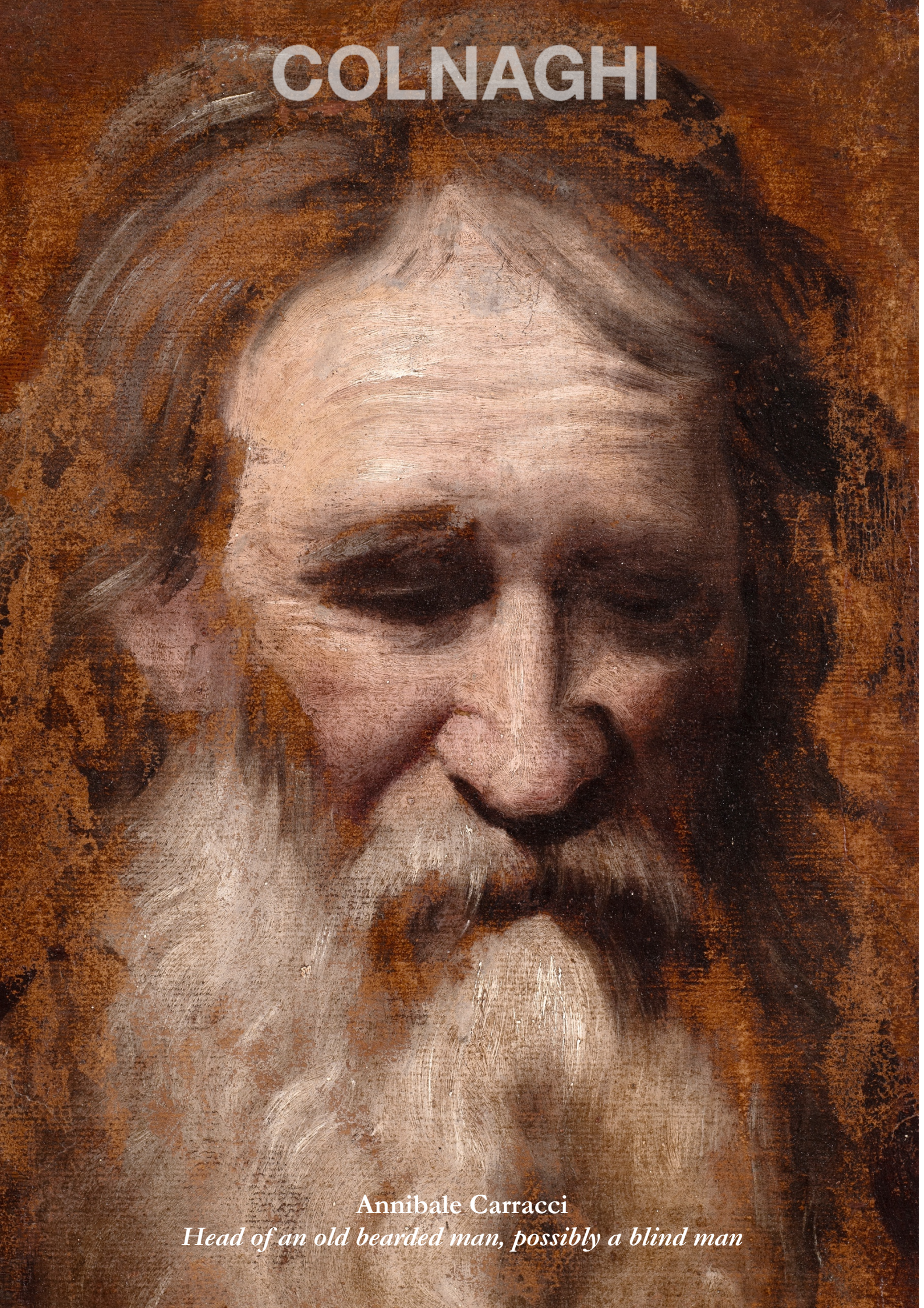


Annibale Carracci

Head of an old bearded man, possibly a blind man

ANNIBALE CARRACCI
(Bologna 1560 – Rome 1609)

HEAD OF AN OLD BEARDED MAN, POSSIBLY A BLIND MAN

Oil on paper, laid down on canvas
38.5 x 25 cm; 15 1/8 x 9 7/8 in.

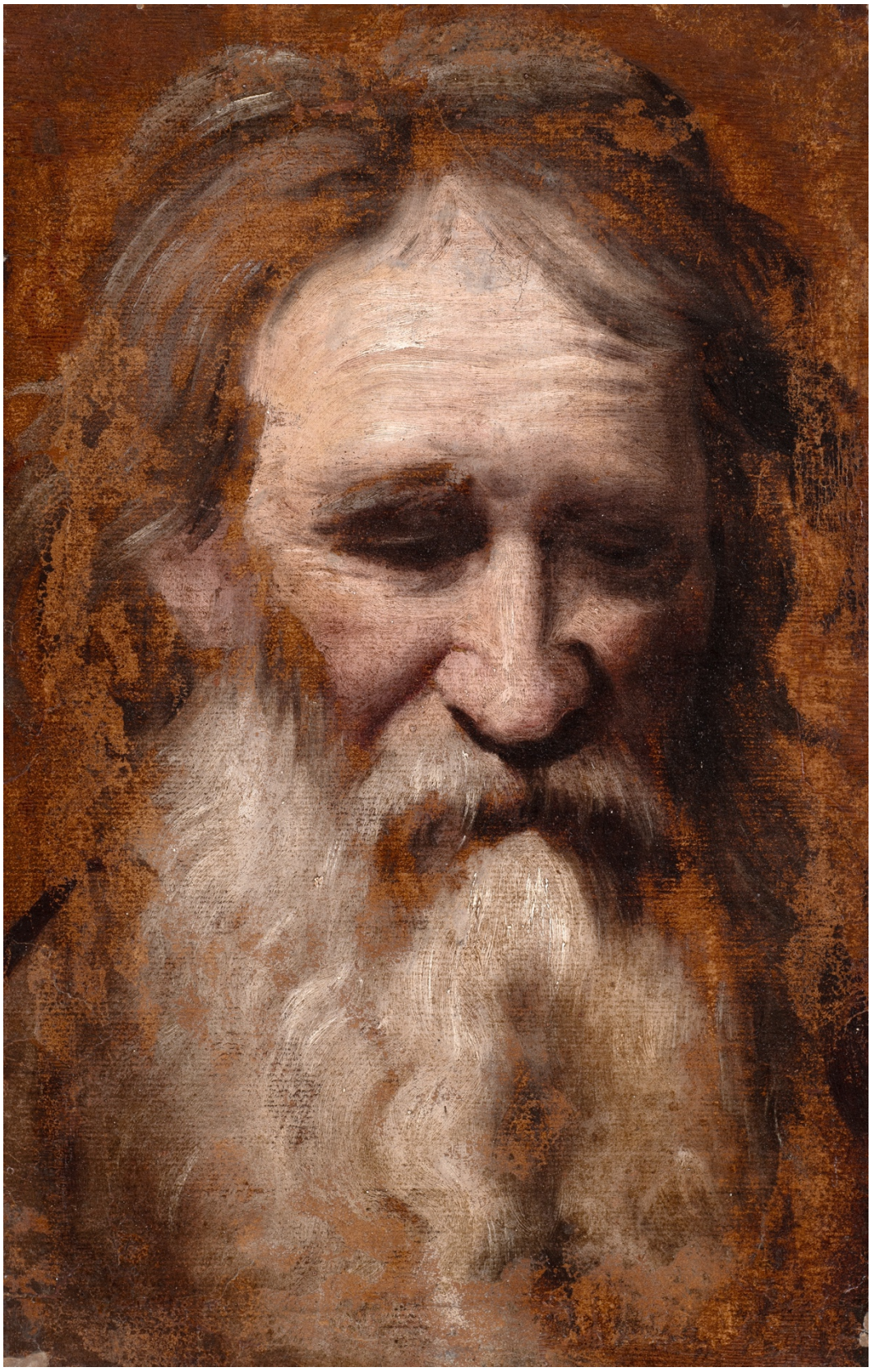
Old inscriptions in brown ink on the stretcher, almost illegible: “Ca..”.

Provenance

Cambi Casa d’Aste, Genoa, *Dipinti antichi*, 16 June 2021, lot 184, as Emilian School, seventeenth century, *Portrait of a Blind Man*.

Literature

Unpublished



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Recently rediscovered on the art market, this striking Head of an Old Bearded Man constitutes an important addition to the group of head studies executed in oil on paper associated with Annibale Carracci and his immediate circle. The attribution to Annibale himself is proposed here on the basis of the exceptional quality of the execution and a series of close correspondences with head studies traditionally associated with the artist. Some caution nevertheless remains necessary: no direct relationship with a figure in one of Annibale's finished compositions has yet been identified, and the intrinsically rapid and experimental character of such works can make the distinction between the master and artists working in his immediate orbit particularly difficult.

Studies of heads from life, and especially of elderly sitters whose faces offered an unusually rich field for the observation of physiognomy, formed a distinctive strand within the Carracci practice. Oil on paper was especially appropriate for such exercises. Less costly and less cumbersome than a conventional painting support, paper permitted a rapid, direct application of colour and was therefore particularly well suited to recording a living model before the pose or expression changed. The resulting works occupy an intermediate territory between drawing and painting: abbreviated in execution and apparently informal in purpose, yet capable of an extraordinary degree of pictorial and psychological concentration. This practice belongs to the broader culture of working dal vivo that became fundamental to the Carracci reform in Bologna.[1]

The most compelling comparison for the present work is the celebrated Head of an Old Man in the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London (inv. DPG286), generally dated to about 1590-1592.[2] Its relevance to the present head is heightened by a technical discovery made during the recent restoration: formerly described as an oil on canvas, the Dulwich work was found to have been painted on paper subsequently laid down on canvas.[3]

An additional and particularly important element is the probable condition of the sitter. The appearance of the eyes strongly suggests that the man may have been blind, although such an interpretation cannot be established with absolute certainty from the image alone. If correct, this reading places the work in relation to one of the most distinctive groups of studies from life associated with Annibale and his circle: the

[1] Malvasia 1967, p. 277.

[2] Although the Gallery currently maintains the cautious designation "Attributed to Annibale Carracci", the painting has long served in the literature as one of the principal benchmarks for Annibale's studies of heads from life and was included as such in the 2012 exhibition *Painting from Life: Carracci Freud*: Bray and Ordovas 2012, p. 68.

[3] Sotheby's, *Old Masters Evening Sale*, London, 5 July 2017, lot 30, "Annibale Carracci, Portrait of a Bearded Man", catalogue note.

portraits of blind men and women first examined systematically by Anna Ottani Cavina in 1987.[4] Subsequent discussion has broadly preserved the distinction between a small autograph nucleus and a larger group attributed to Annibale or his workshop. The series is remarkably coherent in dimensions, technique, and approach, suggesting a common context of production rather than the accidental recurrence of a particular physiognomic type (fig. 1).

Ottani Cavina tentatively connected these portraits with the Compagnia dei Ciechi, a charitable confraternity established in Bologna by Cardinal Paleotti within the wider religious and philanthropic culture of the Catholic Reform. She suggested that the paintings might have been made to preserve the likenesses of individual members of the institution, perhaps during sessions in which painters associated with the Carracci studio worked directly before the models.[5] The painter deliberately avoided the exaggerated signs of disability that would later become conventional in seventeenth-century representations of blind beggars, instead recording the model with an unsentimental directness that Ottani Cavina described in terms of "lay realism".[6] The hypothesis remains necessarily unproven, but it provides an unusually precise historical context for the recurrence of blind sitters within Bolognese naturalistic painting around 1590.

The present head seems particularly at home within this context. Nothing in the image transforms the sitter into a generic beggar, an allegory, or a conventional embodiment of infirmity. Instead, the painter concentrates upon an individual physiognomy: the narrow face, high forehead, prominent nose, sunken eyes, and long beard are observed without caricature or sentimental emphasis. If the identification of the man as blind is correct, the very restraint with which his condition is represented provides one of the strongest conceptual links with the group reconstructed by Ottani Cavina. At the same time, the absence of a direct connection with one of Annibale's documented compositions means that the attribution must ultimately rest upon comparison and quality. Within the inherently problematic field of Carracci oil studies, these criteria should not be treated as absolute; nevertheless, the assured construction of the head, the remarkably economical description of the beard, the handling of light across the flesh, and the work's close relationship with established examples all support the attribution to Annibale proposed here.

[4] Ottani Cavina 1987, pp. 89-99.
[5] Ottani Cavina 1989, p. 27.
[6] Ottani Cavina 1989, p. 28.



Fig. 1. Annibale Carracci, *Portrait of a Blind Woman*, c. 1590, oil on canvas, 24 x 17.5 cm. Bologna, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio in Bologna, inv. F32455

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