COLNAGHI



Attributed to Giovan Battista Caracciolo, called Battistello
***Study of a Male Head*, ca. 1620-1625**

ATTRIBUTED TO GIOVAN BATTISTA CARACCIOLO, CALLED BATTISTELLO
(Naples 1578 – 1635)

STUDY OF A MALE HEAD, ca. 1620–1625

Oil on paper, laid down on canvas
33 x 30 cm; 14 x 11 ¾ in.

Provenance

Aste Boetto, Genoa, Asta di Antiquariato, 5 March 2024, lot 24, as “Scuola emiliana sec. XVII, Ritratto virile”, with an old attribution to Morazzone. Private collection.

Literature

Unpublished



.

When the present oil study reappeared on the art market, it retained an old attribution to Morazzone, recorded on a label attached to its twentieth-century frame. At that time the work was heavily soiled, while the corners had been painted black to create the appearance of an oval around the sitter's head. This intervention emphasized the devotional character of the image but also obscured its original appearance and, to some extent, its pictorial quality. Subsequent cleaning, together with the identification of the original support as paper later laid down on canvas, considerably altered the understanding of the work. Freed from the later additions, the painting revealed a notably high level of execution and, at the same time, a less finished character more consistent with that of an *abbozzo*. The neutral ground, the economical indication of the clothing, and the concentration of the paint around the illuminated areas of the face all suggest a study conceived principally through light and chiaroscuro. The head itself is developed with considerable precision, while the remainder is reduced to what is strictly necessary to sustain its pictorial effect.

An initial localization within seventeenth-century Neapolitan painting can be tentatively narrowed more specifically towards Giovan Battista Caracciolo, called Battistello.[1] One of the leading protagonists of early Neapolitan naturalism, Battistello developed from an exceptionally close engagement with Caravaggio into a painter of increasing stylistic range, while retaining throughout his career an unusually concentrated treatment of light, physiognomy, and the isolated human figure.[2] The attribution proposed here is supported by a series of comparisons extending across different moments of his career.

An early point of reference is the striking *Head of Saint Januarius* in the Pinacoteca di Brera, in which a disembodied head emerges from darkness through a similarly concentrated orchestration of light and shadow. The work, which bears Battistello's monogram, belongs to the artist's early Caravaggesque production. A closer comparison, however, may be found in the *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* in the Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Museum (inv. 1924.31), generally dated around 1625. The affinities extend beyond the broadly comparable inclination of the head. Particularly close are the half-open mouth, the elongated eyes directed upwards, the abrupt passages of shadow across the upper face, and the cool, almost livid tonality of the flesh. More significant still is the character of the paint itself: in both works it is relatively lean and selectively applied, gathering density chiefly around the passages most exposed to light rather than constructing the flesh through uniformly substantial layers.

[1] The author is grateful to Professor Stefano Causa for having responded favourably to the proposed attribution to Battistello on the basis of a photograph.

[2] Bologna 1991; Causa 2000; Causa 2022.

.



Fig. 1. Giovan Battista Caracciolo, called Battistello, *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, c. 1625, oil on canvas, 202.3 × 113.9 cm, Cambridge, MA, Harvard Art Museums /Fogg Museum, inv. 1924.31.

COLNAGHI

COLNAGHI
London

26 BURY STREET, LONDON SW1Y 6AL
UNITED KINGDOM

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM–6PM

+44 (0)20 7491 7408

contact@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI
Madrid

CALLE GENERAL CASTAÑOS 9
PLANTA BAJA, DCHA.
28004 MADRID

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
BY APPOINTMENT

spain@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI
New York

23 EAST 67TH STREET, FOURTH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10065
USA

MONDAY TO FRIDAY
10AM–6PM

+1 (917) 388-3825

newyork@colnaghi.com

COLNAGHI
Brussels

RUE JACQUES JORDAENS 30
1000 BRUXELLES
BELGIUM

BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

brussels@colnaghi.com

© COLNAGHI 2026. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.