

45 The vision of Saint Jerome

Inventory no. 1960, image page 198

1609 (Marini) or 1st quarter of 17th century, oil on canvas, 73.2 x 97.5cm. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass. Austin S. Garver Fund,

Attribution

Marini (2005) considers this painting as an original by Caravaggio. He published it as a late work from 1609 by the artist.

Longhi disagrees and suggests Johann Ulrich Loth as the artist. Since 1971 Marini has insisted on the Caravaggio attribution on a regular basis.

In his opinion this painting refers to one of two Jerome pictures described by Francesco Susinno for the duke Adonnino in Messina in 1724.

“(in Messina) appresso al conte Adonnino sonovi dello stesso pittore (Caravaggio) due mezze figure in tele d'imperadori, rappresentanti amendue S. Gerolamo, uno del buon gusto che sta in atto die scivere con la penna in mano, in profile assai natural (...).”

Among scholars the attribution remains controversial; Spears (1971) assigns the painting to an unknown Caravaggisti. He rejects the Caravaggio attribution as it painting does not feature a fast brushstroke and extraordinary plasticity typical for the late work of Caravaggio

Borea (1972) attributes it to the circle of Sicilian Caravaggist Alonzo Rodriguez. Teiz (1968), Davis (1974) and Moir (1976) suggest that the painting was executed by a north alpine painter.

Cinotti (1983) does not record it among the paintings by the artist's own hand and describes it as 'attributed to Carravaggio', Spike (2001) includes it in the list of original works by the artist in the exhibition catalogue *The Final Years* (Naples/London 2005) and notes the controversial attribution situation.

Sciberras (2006) excludes the execution by Caravaggio and suggests the date of origin between 1610 and 1620; Marini (2005) and Röttgen (2006) hold on to the attribution to the master.

Provenance

The painting was acquired in 1960 by the New York art dealer Julius Weitzner from art dealer Giuliano Briganti and conservator Pico Cellini in Rome for the Worcester Art Museum. According to Cellini the painting originates from Malta¹.

On the contrary Marini supports the theory that the painting was from Messina. According to this art historian the painting was brought from Messina to Naples and became later part of the collection La Marca in Roma.²

Condition

Pico Cellini executed the first recorded conservation treatment in 1958; an extensive conservation treatment and technical examination was carried on in Worcester in 2006.

Yellowed varnish and large areas of overpaint were removed. The x-ray examination proves the cutting of the original canvas on all four sides

Literature

Teiz in *Wichita* 1968, page 34, Nr. 16; Marini 1971, S. 56 – 57; Spear 1971, page 192, no. 76; Borea 1972, page 161; Davies 1974, page 330; Moir 1976, page 114, comment 256; Cinotti 1983, page 566, no. 91; Palermo 2001, page 10 – 11; Spike 2001, page 349 – 350, no. 98

Neapel/London 2005, page 181; Marini 2005, page. 328, 555 – 557, Nr. 100; Sciberras 2006, page 121 – 122.

Comment

The vision of Saint Jerome in the Worcester Art Museum is among the most interesting paintings that originates in the circle of Michelangelo Merisi.

Considering the controversial attribution, the unusual iconography of the vision and last but not least the outstanding painting quality should certainly warrant further research.

Since the painting was acquired for the collection in 1960 the attribution has been discussed. Art historians have not come to a consensus as overpaint was disfiguring the original substance.

¹ Davies 1974, page 330

² Sciberras 2006, page 124, comment 24

Large areas of the painting were overpainted and made an attribution very difficult.

However, whenever this painting was compared with original works by Caravaggio it was tempting to include St. Jerome in his oeuvre.

Comparing the facial expression of Jerome with Caravaggio's *David* in the Villa Borghese (page 186) or with the faces in *Raising of Lazarus* in Messina similarities become apparent.

Furthermore the execution of the still life associates with the painting technique of the vanitas symbols in Caravaggio's Saint Jerome in La Valletta.

Maurizio Marini³ and Herwarth Röttgen⁴ still consider this painting as an original work by Caravaggio. According to Marini the painting originates from Messina, executed in 1609.

Other authors like Keith Sciberras⁵ doubt the attribution to Carravagio. He and others argue that the paint technique is very precise in general and the still life accentuated. For these reasons the painting cannot be included in the master's late works.

Excluding Caravaggio as the artist one has to find a painter who has carefully studied Caravaggio's paintings in Malta and Sicily.

However, past and current research couldn't name a master from these regions who could come up to the quality of Caravaggio as well as the master of this painting.

This is challenge for future research to find an anonymous artist from South Italy who was capable to boldly imitate the perspective with the unusual foreshortening and the chiaroscuro in the style of Caravaggio.

Hieronymus is among the most frequent painted saints in the baroque epoch. He is of significance as he transliterated Greek and Hebrew original text into Latin – the so called Vulgata.

Furthermore the church father Hieronymus was known for his attraction to pagan literature.

³ Marini 2001, page 328

⁴ Oral information, May 2006

⁵ Sciberras 2006, page 122

According to his own statements the experience of the vision was a turning point in his life.⁶

This vision is the theme of the exhibited painting. The saint is terrified and shies away from the light of the vision, raising his right arm up.

The vanitas still life is also involved in the events.

The skull before held in Jerome's hands is broken and the burning candle extinguished due to the saint's sudden movement.

The motif is in no accordance with the traditional iconography of the Jerome's vision. In contemporary paintings by for instance Ribera, Domenichino or Guercino there is always an angel or trumpets, the signs of the last judgment.⁷

The vision of saint Jerome was cut on all four sides and mounted onto a linen support at an unknown point in time.

For this reason there was the assumption that part of an original composition has been removed. However, x-ray examination could prove that the original format was only reduced by a few centimeters.

This examination revealed the existence of cusping. The partial deformation of the canvas derives from the stretching process. The tension by the stretching from nail to nail results in permanent deformed lines that are close to the tacking edge.

At the present time it is uncertain, if the letter N on the book is a later addition.⁸

In any case the three digit inventory number on the book case should be of interest as it could lead to some clues regarding the provenance.

There are also a few pentimenti documenting minimal changes in the composition. They are visible on the left index finger and on the right skull piece.

The painting was treated by many hands in the past.

Pico Cellini had carried out the last conservation treatment before the painting came to Worcester and was examined and treated in 2006.

⁶ Jerome (342/7 – 420) describes this event in a letter to Saint Eustochium in 384 in a letter to Saint Eustochium (letter 22, paragraph 30); dt.: Des heiligen Kirchenvaters Eusebius Hieronymus ausgewählte Schriften, Bd. II (1. Briefband), München 1936m /s, 100 – 101.

⁷ These motifs are not mentioned in Saint Jerome's description of the vision.

⁸ For discussion of the letter see Davis 1974, page 332 – 333.

After the removal of the yellowed varnish and many layers of overpaint the quality of the painting was revealed.

The fact that the painting was heavily overpainted might have been the reason that it wasn't included in Caravaggio/Cavavaggisti exhibition and remained disregarded in the latest literature.

Maybe the exhibition in Düsseldorf can lead to an answer for the attribution questions.