



CESARE FRACANZANO

Bisceglie, 1605 – Barletta, 1651

Liberation of Saint Peter

Oil on canvas

153 x 227 cm

120030920

Study by Riccardo Lattuada

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Cesare Fracanzano, together with his brother Francesco, probably received his first training from his father Alessandro (Verona, 1567 -?), a late Mannerist painter originally from Verona. In 1929 a commission of the canon Pizzella would document the presence of the young artists in Naples, where Cesare and Francesco studied in the workshop of José Ribera, the Spagnoletto.

Numerous public and private commissions help us to conceive Cesare as an itinerant artist, attached to his hometown but eager to grand prestigious commissions in Rome and Naples. These stays, albeit sporadic, define a turning point in the painter's style, marking a definitive detachment from the late Mannerist style of his father. Forged in his youth by the great Spanish master, Cesare shows a great interest in the styles of Massimo Stanzione and Giovanni Lanfranco, which lead him to naturalism. Among Fracanzano's known works are *Saint Helen* (Barletta, Church of Santa Maria di Nazareth), the *Flagellated Christ consoled by the Angels* (Naples, Quadreria dei Gerolamini), and the *Immaculate Conception* (Naples, Santa Maria della Speranza). In 1639-40 he executed the frescoes in the choir of Santa Maria della Sapienza (Naples). In the payments he is referred to as "valente artista". In 1641 he delivered *Saint Francis Xavier baptizing* (Naples, Church of the Gesù Vecchio). The *Saint John the Baptist* (Naples, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte), the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Pozzuoli, Cathedral), and the *Flagellated Christ consoled by the Angels* (Naples, Quadreria dei Gerolamini), show an individualised combination of the style of Guido Reni and the Italian works of Antoon Van Dyck. Around 1640-45 he executed the *Wrestlers* (Madrid, Prado). After the death of Paolo Finoglio (1645), Cesare Fracanzano was commissioned to complete the decoration (frescoes) of the Church of the Saints Cosmas and Damian in Conversano (Apulia).

In spite of the state of oblivion and his lack of reputation in 20th Century Art History studies, in his times Cesare Fracanzano was considered a first rank master. He received commissions from such prominent patrons as Maffeo Barberini, Gian Girolamo Acquaviva d'Aragona, Ascanio Filomarino, Giovan Battista Cicinelli Prince of Cursi, and others.¹

The composition of the present painting seems to have been modelled upon Jusepe de Ribera's *Liberation of Saint Peter* of 1639 (Madrid, Museo del Prado), whose measurements are even similar (cm 177 x 232). The figure of Saint Peter lying on the prison's floor has been clearly reused, reversed, by Fracanzano. Also, the palette of his work is close to that adopted by Ribera during the fourth and the fifth decades of the 17th Century: the white silky tunic of the angel is a mark for Fracanzano, and it is reminiscent of the clothes of *Mary Magdalen* (Naples, Church of San Domenico Maggiore). A close comparison is possible with the *Flagellated Christ consoled by the Angels* (Naples, Quadreria dei Gerolamini), especially for the use of smooth contours of the figures and the soft handling of the skin's details.

¹ On Cesare Fracanzano see e.g. M. Bugli, *Cesare Fracanzano: nuovi documenti e alcuni dipinti inediti*, in 'Kronos', 3, 2001, 73-84; M. Romano, *Fracanzano, Cesare*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 49, ad vocem, Rome, 1997; S. Schütze, in 'Jahrbuch des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien', 4/5.2002/03 (2004), pp. 164-189; V. Farina, *Artemisia e i pittori del Conte. La collezione di Giangirolamo II Acquaviva d'Aragona a Conversano*, exhibition catalogue, Cava de' Tirreni, 2018, passim, with previous bibliography.



José de Ribera, *Liberation of Saint Peter*, 1639. Museo del Prado

The figure of the sleeping jailer in profile, wearing a breastplate and holding a sword, is a reference to a shepherd's figure in the right corner of Jacopo Bassano's famous print of the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, replicated countless times by his workshop and also by Leandro and Francesco Bassano. The same detail reappears with variants in many works by the Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds, currently identified with Bartolomeo Bassante.

A dating of around 1640 is made credible bearing in mind the closeness with Ribera's *Liberation of Saint Peter* of 1639 and with the *Flagellated Christ consoled by the Angels* by the same Fracanzano, when he was at the peak of his artistic career.