

LEANDRO DA PONTE, called LEANDRO BASSANO

(Bassano 1557 - Venice 1622)

The third of four painter-sons of Jacopo Bassano. Leandro received his training from his father, and began by collaborating in the family atelier, but was, of all the family, the one who most forged his own style thereafter. His earliest recorded independent works are the Portrait of Andrea Frizier, painted in Venice in 1581 (Padua, Museo Civico), and the Circumcision of 1582 in the parish church of Rosà. In 1588 he moved from Bassano to Venice, where he was incised in the Fraglia de' pittori until the end of his life. Venice was already the home of his older brother Francesco, whose commission for a huge painting of The Encounter of Pope Alexander III and Doge Ziani in the Sala del Consiglio degli Dieci in the Palazzo Ducale Leandro took over after he had died by falling from a window in 1592, as he also took over his commission for The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes for Montecassino (destroyed). Such was the reputation of Leandro's portraits that Doge Marino Grimani had himself and his wife painted by him (1595/6, Dresden), and gave evidence of his satisfaction by knighting him. Not only did Leandro proudly sign himself eques thereafter, but Ridolfi also relates that he would go out attended by a couple of pupils, one of whom bore the gilded sword and the other the letter-patent of his knighthood before him - signs of the same mental imbalance that led to his insistence that his pupils should taste his food for poison. In the early years of the 17th century Leandro's art took on a new vigour, particularly in his portraits, which is seen to especial advantage in those that he inserted into Pope Honorius III confirming the Dominican Rule, which he painted for S. Giovanni e Paolo in 1606.

Portrait of an Olivetan monk

Oil on canvas.

92 x 71.5 cm.

Signed upper left: [L]EANDER BASS[ANENS]IS

Portraiture, for which, of all his family, Leandro with his painstaking, sober approach was the best suited, forms the most considerable part of his output. In it he escaped from the stereotyped formulae that afflicted the later Bassanos in their religious and genre pictures, to present each sitter in fresh terms, emphasizing their dignity but avoiding flattery, and suggesting life by unemphatic manipulation of pose and gesture.

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The present portrait is exceptional not only in Leandro's oeuvre, but for the period, in that it does not confront us with the sitter's gaze; it might therefore be less a commissioned portrait than a study, possibly with some spiritual significance. Leandro Bassano's oeuvre indeed includes true portraits of various friars, as well as two portraits of Premonstratensian canons in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Ludwig Zottmann, Zur Kunst der Bassani, Strassburg 1908, figs. 33 & 34; Edoardo Arslan, I Bassano, Milan 1960, vol. I p. 274), but none of these was from cloistered orders, and would not therefore have been restrained from displaying their individuality to the world.

The present picture is not dated (though the absence of eques from the signature means that it must antedate 1596). Though perhaps rougher in facture, it has the greatest affinity with such early examples of Leandro's maturity as a portraitist as the Portrait of a man with three books in the Galleria Spada and the Portrait of a man with a book and a crucifix in the Prado, which Arslan dates to the late 1580s (op. cit., vol. I, pp. 238, 264 & 268, and vol. II, figs. 291 & 292). It shares with them a greater sense of arrested movement and of filling the space in which it is situated. Arslan (op. cit., vol. I, p. 264) mentions, but does not illustrate, a Portrait of a monk that was in the Dotta collection Milan in 1926, which may have been our own portrait before the signature was brought to light. The two drawings of bearded ecclesiastics, one of them in white, listed but not illustrated by the Tietzes (c.f. The Drawings of the Venetian painters, New York, 1944, nos. 225 & 237, pp. 57 & 58) sound more like canons than monks.