

BERNARDO CAVALLINO

(Naples 1616-1656?)

Cavallino's biography, as written by De Dominici, is entirely novelettish. Nothing is known for certain about his life other than his baptism, and the record of a large picture of an unspecified subject painted in 1649 for the principe di Cardito. There is one painting that is signed and dated, a St. Cecilia of 1645 from S. Antonello delle Monache in Naples (sketch in the Museo di Capodimonte), which had the bizarre distinction of being acquired by Hitler in 1941, and has since remained with the Delegazione per la Restituzioni in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, and this has perforce had to serve as the pivot in the dating of the artist's reconstituted oeuvre. To the period before the St. Cecilia belong the larger, more emphatically Caravaggesque paintings chiefly indebted to Stanzione, but also to the godfather of one of his brothers, Battistello Caracciolo, as well as to Artemesia Gentileschi and Simon Vouet: the Martyrdom of St. Bartolomeo (Naples, Capodimonte), the Expulsion of the Moneychangers (London, Nat. Gall) and the Adoration of the Magi (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum). Around the St. Cecilia itself are groupable a number of evocative female half-lengths, such as the Singer in Capodimonte, the initialled Judith at Stockholm, the St. Catherine in the Barber Institute in Birmingham, and the St. Agatha at Detroit. Finally, in his last years after the St. Cecilia, Cavallino appears to have concentrated on painting for private collectors smaller pictures (such as he had already begun to paint earlier, under the influence of Sweerts and the Bamboccianti) either of literary themes, or of biblical episodes treated with the psychological approach of literature, e.g. the Finding of Moses and David and Abigail (Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Brunswick), the two tondi of Erminia in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, and the Esther and Ahasuerus in the Uffizi. His last, and most poetic production of all, is taken to be the Adoration of the Shepherds at Cleveland.

David Harping before Saul

Oil on canvas

76 x 103 cm.

This previously unpublished painting by Cavallino is one of the most subtly painted and atmospheric of his works. The theme was a favourite one of his, that he had painted on at least two earlier occasions; in a picture now in the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum (cf. Old Paintings 1400-1900: illustrations, Rotterdam 1972,

cat. no. 115, pp. 141 & 207), and in another now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. The former is in Cavallino's earlier, more markedly Caravaggesque manner - with solid space-displacing figures and dramatic lighting - but the latter is in his later more nuanced vein. It is of very similar size (65 x 105 cm) to the present painting, and when it was in the Harrach collection in Vienna, it was paired with a similarly treated Esther before Ahasuerus, then known as The Queen of Sheba before Solomon (cf. Hermann Ritschl, Katalog der Erlaucht Gräfllich Harrach'schen Gemälde Galerie in Wien, 1926, nos. 229 & 248), and was one of a group of four Cavallinos acquired by Graf Alois Thomas Raimund Harrach when he was Viceroy in Naples, 1728-1733 (cf. Adolfo Venturi, "Bernardo Cavallino nella Galleria Nazionale di Stoccolma e nella raccolta Harrach di Vienna," L'Arte XXIV (1921) pp. 212-214).

The two above-mentioned Harrach paintings, and the present picture, clearly belong to the mature phase of Cavallino's career, when he had begun, under the influence of Sweerts and the Bamboccianti, to paint more luminous gallery- and cabinet-pictures for the new breed of collectors that had grown up pari passu with Caravaggesque painting in Naples in the first half of the 17th century (cf. Oreste Ferrari, sub voce Cavallino, in Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani vol. 22 (1979), pp. 787-89). The present picture indeed takes the composition of the ex-Harrach painting as its starting point, but corrects it in detail, both to make it accord more closely with the biblical story (I Samuel xvi, vv. 14-23) and to intensify the psychological atmosphere. Thus David is more plausibly shown as a young man plucking a harp, rather than as a boy playing a lute, and looks mysteriously out of the picture at the spectator, whilst Saul is shown crowned as an older and visibly troubled man. There are comparable variations in the placing and character of all the other participants. The greatest difference of all, however, resides in the paintwork itself, which here has an economy and allusiveness beyond any of Cavallino's other works, strongly pointing towards the final flowering of his style.

Professor Ferrari has suggested (oral communication, November 1981) that the figure looking out of the picture on the left is a self-portrait of the artist, and this suggestion has been taken up by Professor Causa, who enumerates four other pictures in which the artist's self-portrait occurs (cf. exh. cat. Painting in Naples from Caravaggio to Giordano, Royal Academy, London, 1982, no. 37, p. 147). Most closely comparable is the man, very close in age but wearing a turban, found in an identical position in the Mucius Scaevola that has recently been acquired by the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, which is dated to around 1650 (cf Edmund Pillsbury, 'Recent Painting Acquisitions', supplement to The Burlington Magazine, January 1982, p.v. & fig. 5; exh. cat. Painting in Naples, loc. cit.).

Exh: Bernardo Cavallino of Naples, 1616 - 1657, The Cleveland Museum of Art and The Kimbell Art Museum, 1984-5, cat. no.20, p.89 illus.