

LUCA GIORDANO
(Naples 1634 - 1705)

A Philosopher

Oil on canvas

124 x 100.5 cm

Unhesitatingly accepted by Dr. Nicola Spinosa as an early work by Giordano, this painting is typical of his style from about 1650 until his first visit to Venice which is supposed to have taken place in late 1653; a period characterized by adhesion not only to the style, but also to the iconographic themes of Ribera, including the half-length figures of philosophers. These ranged from imaginary portraits of real philosophers such as Democritus, Archimedes and Diogenes to the more idealized figures of "beggar-philosophers" or "scientist-philosophers". Giordano rapidly developed the strong expressive content implicit in the idea of the "beggar-philosopher", which is purely dramatic in the present work, but which he carried almost to the point of the grotesque in paintings such as the Democritus (Kunsthalle, Hamburg), the two Philosophers (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and a third Philosopher (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires) (cf. A. Ferrari and G. Scavizzi, Luca Giordano, Naples, 1966, vol. II, pp. 26-7, vol. III, figs. 33, 36, 38 and 40). The pictorial treatment of the face and strong chiaroscuro effect in the present Philosopher can be compared with the series exhibited by the Heim Gallery in Summer 1975, nos. 1-4, in which a similar, genuinely natural appearance is produced.

Giordano took a great interest in this type of painting to the extent that he depicted himself in the rôle of a "Philosopher" at least twice; firstly in the picture in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (no. 492, pendant to another Philosopher in which he portrayed his father) and the second time in the so-called Alchemist in the Brera, Milan.

Evidently in all these works he intended not only to deepen his study of human characteristics, but also to give direct expression to the intellectual environment of Naples in the middle of the Seicento,

dominated as it was by scientific and rational interests and still influenced by Giovan Battista della Porta, whose treatise La Fisionomia dell'Homme et la Celeste (Padua, 1632) had had wide circulation amongst the artistic community.

The iconographic interpretation of these "philosopher" paintings will be greatly clarified by the work of Professor Oreste Ferrari who is at present working on the patrons who originally commissioned them, and the composition of the various series of figures. Besides the many emblematic pairs of Heraclitus and Democritus (like those in the Pinacoteca Tosio-Martinengo, Brescia, and in the Pinacoteca Querini-Stampalia, Venice) there are other and larger groups of Philosophers, however, research in archives and inventories has hitherto produced no result regarding the patrons. The originally best known series (those of the Carvalho collection at Villandry and the Maroto collection at Palma de Majorca) have been dispersed and no complete photographic documentation of them exists.

Coll: Richard Pritchard