

SIMON VOUET
(Paris 1590 - 1649)

Taught to paint by his father, after travelling to London, Constantinople and Venice, where he studied the works of Veronese, Vouet arrived in Rome in the winter of 1613/14. Apart from a period working for the Dorias in Genoa, he remained settled there for thirteen years, became the recognised head of the French colony, and was elected President of the Academy of St. Luke in 1624. He was at first much influenced by Caravaggio and Borgianni, but later by the more classical styles of Domenichino and Guido Reni. Recalled to France by Louis XIII in 1627, he was given extensive commissions for altarpieces and for large decorative projects. Vouet became one of the leading painters in Paris and through his pupils, Le Sueur, Perrier, Mignard, and particularly Lebrun, exercised an important influence on the subsequent development of French painting.

Madonna adoring the Christ Child

Canvas

118 x 132 cms.

This picture was first published by Richard E. Spear ('Unknown pictures by the Caravaggisti (with notes on "Caravaggio and his Followers")', in Storia dell'arte, no. 14, 1972, pp. 150-1, fig. 1) as an early Simon Vouet from his Roman period, dating from ca. 1624. Spear rejected the previously suggested attribution to a Neapolitan artist, Paolo Finiglio, and convincingly demonstrated its affinities with Vouet's art of the mid-1620s. Particularly telling in his view were the analogies with the Circumcision formerly in S. Angelo a Segno in Naples and now in Capodimonte (cf. William Crelly, The Painting of Simon Vouet, New Haven 1952, no. 79, fig. 15; exh. cat. Paintings in Naples 1606-1705, London, Royal Academy, 1982, no. 164) dated 1622, which includes "a Virgin and Child who are so similar in morphology to the figures in (our) painting that a common model could be postulated to have existed". Spear notes the compositional use of the void in both works and the presence of simple architectural planes as backgrounds. The similarity in both paintings of the pleated white fabrics and broadly-folded, more Caravaggesque robes is also evident.

The Christ-Child reappears in Vouet's St Bruno receiving the Rule of his Order in the Chapter House of the Certosa di San Martino in Naples (Crelly, ibid., no. 78, fig. 9), whose date has been variously read as 1620 or 1626, though scholarly opinion now inclines towards the later date, because of its more evenly-lit, blonder tone, and the marked influence of Bolognese Baroque Classicism.

The Circumcision and the St. Bruno, though often referred to as the artist's "Neapolitan" works, were from their signatures evidently painted in Rome and sent to Naples, nonetheless, as Spear observed the emergence of the present Madonna adoring the Christ Child supplies additional reason for investigating Vouet's influence on Neapolitan painting.

In terms of colour, Spear found the closest parallels between the present work and Vouet's two canvases of 1623-4 in the Alaleoni Chapel in S. Lorenzo in Lucina, Rome: the Temptation of St. Francis (Crelly, no. 128-B, figs. 18, 20) and the Vestment of St. Francis (ibid., no. 128-A, fig. 17, 19). In the latter, he compared "the white fabric held out behind the kneeling Saint with that of the woman seated in the right foreground of the Alaleoni painting". Professor Crelly is in broad agreement with Richard Spear on the date of this work, suggesting that it was executed ca. 1623-4.

As Thomas Lee has further pointed out, our painting shares with the Holy Family with the Infant St. John, painted for Cardinal Francesco Barberini and now in The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, along with the Time Vanquished and the Holy Family in the Prado, the classical inflection that was to characterise Vouet's art after his return to France.

Bibl: Richard E. Spear, 'Unknown Pictures by the Caravaggisti (with notes on "Caravaggio and his Followers")', in Storia dell'arte no. 14 (1972), pp. 150-1, fig. 3.

Valentin et les Caravagesques Français, exhibition catalogue, Grand Palais, Paris 1974, p. 255, listed (Londres, coll. part.)

Thomas P. Lee, "Recently acquired French paintings", Apollo, March 1980, p. 214.

Exh: Heim Gallery, Summer Exhibition 1974, cat. no. 1.