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Bartolomeo Schedoni
The Beheading of St John the Baptist

TRINITY FINE ART

BARTOLOMEO SCHEDONI

(Modena, 1578 – Parma, 1615)

The Beheading of St John the Baptist

Oil on panel, 58 x 35 cm, 22⁷/₈ x 13³/₄ in

Inscribed on the reverse of the panel, pyrographed at the top, bottom and centre are the initials: «C.G.B.C.»; in pen, on a label glued on at the centre: «Decollazione di S. Giovanni / Tavola dipinta dallo Sghedone»; again in pen but very faded, on another label glued on at the top: «Conte G.B. Spalletti / Decollazione di / S. Giovanni Battista / Tavola di Sghedone».

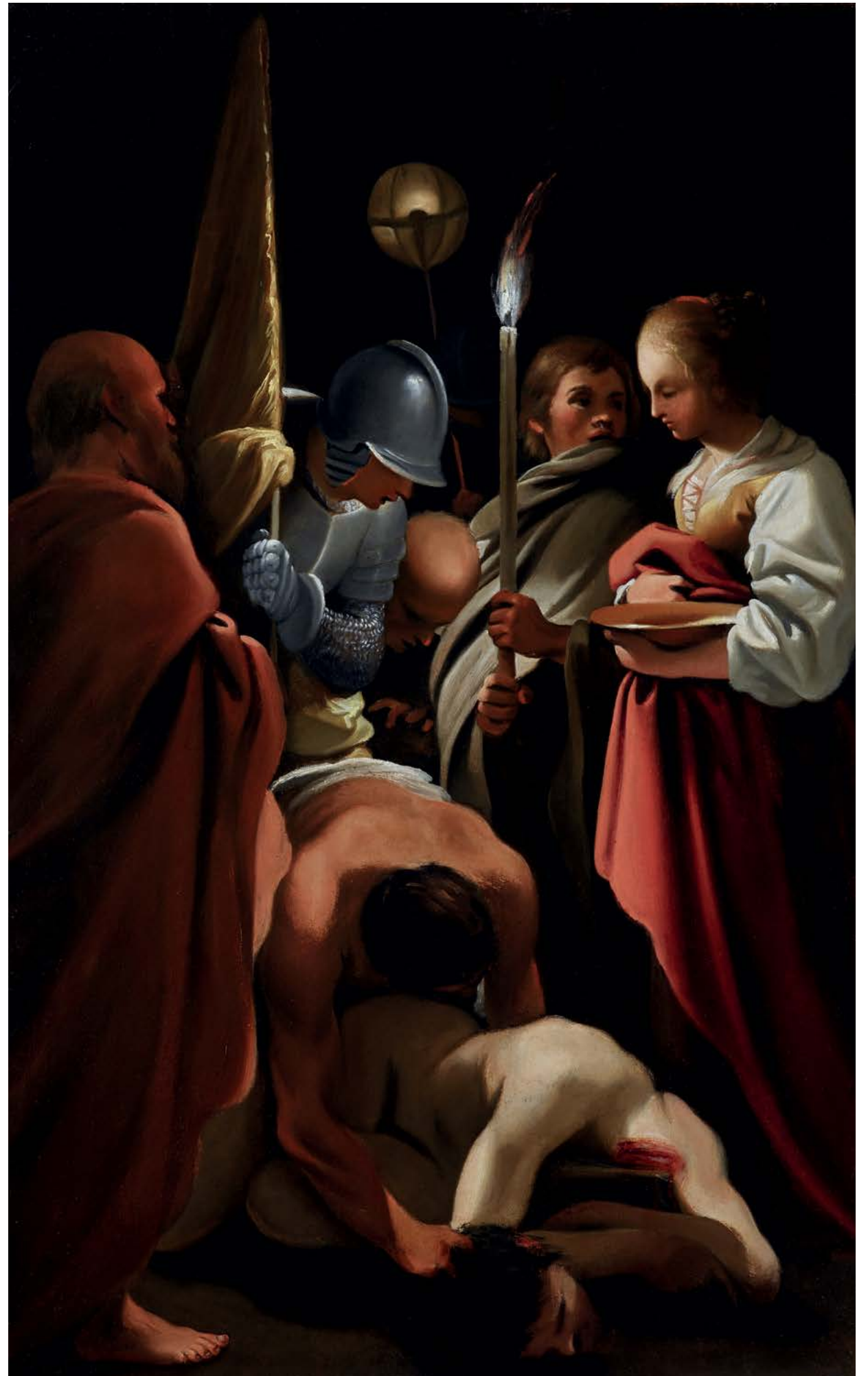
Provenance

Francesco Containi, Ferrara (before 1778);
Conte Giovanni Battista Costabili, Ferrara (before 1835-1873);
Giovanni Morelli (1873-?).

Literature

Pitture della Raccolta del Conte Gio Batta Costabili di Ferrara, Bologna, Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio, Ms A 1324 [before 1835], fol. 16r, no. 111; C. LADERCHI, *Descrizione dalla Quadreria Costabili, IV, Pittori d'altre Scuole*, Ferrara 1841, pp. 74-75, no. 517; [G. GIORDANI], *Catalogo de' quadri di varie scuole pittoriche nella Galleria Costabili in Ferrara (Collezione esposta in vendita)*, Bologna 1871, p. 17, no. 198; [G. GIORDANI], *Catalogo de' quadri di varie scuole pittoriche nella Galleria Costabili in Ferrara (Collezione esposta in vendita)*, Ferrara 1872, p. 14, no. 198; L. BENINI, *Descrizione della Quadreria Costabili*, in «Musei Ferraresi. Bollettino annuale», 7, 1977, pp. 83-84, 94, no. 97 (as lost); F. ROSSI, F. ZERI, *La raccolta Morelli nell'Accademia Carrara*, Bergamo 1986, pp. 34, 51, note 30 (as lost); E. MATTALIANO, *La Collezione Costabili*, ed. by G. AGOSTINI, Venice 1998, 149, no. 517 (as lost); F. DALLASTA, C. CECCHINELLI, *Bartolomeo Schedoni pittore emiliano. Modena 1578, Parma 1615*, Colorno 1999, p. 215 (as lost); E. NEGRO, N. ROIO, *Bartolomeo Schedoni pittore e scultore 1578 - 1615*, Modena 2000, p. 117, cat. no. 94P (as lost).
A. BROGI, *Un piccolo capolavoro di Bartolomeo Schedoni*, in «Prospettiva», n. 174, April 2019, pp. 95-102.

This small unpublished panel depicts an episode from the Gospels recounted by Mark and Matthew, and fairly common in painting throughout the modern period: the decapitation of St John the Baptist in the presence of Salome who waits, on the right, to collect the prophet's severed head in the basin she is carrying. The traditional attribution of this work to the great and ill-fated Modenese artist of the early 17th century, Bartolomeo Schedoni, is attested by a couple of labels attached to the reverse of the panel, which also bears the clearly legible initials «C.G.B.C.» burned on in capital letters separated by full stops (Figs. 1-2). These initials document a highly illustrious provenance, though not a particularly early one, from the valuable collection assembled between the late 18th and early 19th century by the Ferrarese count – later a marquis from 1836 – Giovanni Battista Costabili Containi (Ferrara, 1756 – 1841), dispersed in several stages by his descendants during the last third of the 19th century¹. The first certain mention of the work appears in the manuscript catalogue of the Costabili collection, dating to before 1835, now in the Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio in Bologna: «La decollazione di S. Giò. Batta. Bellissima tavola piccola in piedi di Bartolomeo Schidone. Era in casa» (“The decapitation of St John the Baptist. Very fine small standing panel by Bartolomeo Schidone. It was in the house²”). Though brief, this catalogue entry nonetheless makes it possible to suggest a preliminary identification with the small painting under discussion. The specification that it ‘was in the house’ indicates that it was part of the legacy of Giovanni Battista’s





maternal uncle, Francesco Containi, who made his nephew the main heir to his substantial estate, including the already remarkable collection of antique paintings³. Definitive confirmation comes from the very accurate description provided by the historian Camillo Laderchi under number 517 of his *Quadreria Costabili*, 1841: “La decollazione di s. Gio. Battista in carcere, al lume di fiaccole: piccola tavola [...] Autore Bartolomeo Schedone. Anche lo Schedone amava i grandi contrasti di luce: ma non così fieri come quelli del Caravaggio: con più trasparenza e con certa vaghezza, che ricorda [...] il Correggio. Questa decollazione di s. Gio. Battista a lume di notte n’è uno splendido esempio: uno di que’ quadretti, che al dire di Lanzi son molto preziosi, e ricercati nelle gallerie. In una piccola tavola ha saputo disporre sette figure, di un fare grandioso, con movenze studiatissime; e vi stanno assai bene senza affollamento di sorta⁴” (“The decapitation of St John the Baptist in prison, by torchlight: a small panel painting [...] by Bartolomeo Schedone. Schedone also liked strong light contrasts: but not as sharp as those of Caravaggio; he has a greater transparency and a certain charm reminiscent of [...] Correggio. This artificially lit night scene of the decapitation of St John the Baptist is a splendid example: one of those little paintings that in Lanzi’s opinion are most exquisite and sought-after by galleries. He succeeded in arranging seven figures in a small panel, majestic in their rendering and with carefully studied attitudes; and they are very well-arranged, without being in any way crowded”). Laderchi mentions seven figures, but on closer examination there is an eighth not visible in the reproduction: a second soldier entirely in shadow holding the shaft of the second torch in his hand, shielded by a sphere of opaque glass – in other words a lantern. His head, encased in a metal helmet, can be seen slightly further back, between the other soldier and the young man holding a torch with an open flame. The presence of this figure evidently escaped the 19th-century historian and indeed it was difficult to see before the painting was cleaned. This in no way detracts from a description that is already a perceptive critical interpretation, only partially academic in style, that successfully encapsulates some fundamental features of the painter’s work and specifically of this fine invention. We will return to this issue after discussing the later material history of the painting, which in December 1873 was purchased, together with other paintings from the Costabili collection, by the great connoisseur Giovanni Morelli, thus

¹ On the collection and on Costabili see at least: L. BENINI, *Descrizione della Quadreria Costabili*, in «Musei Ferraresi. Bollettino annuale», 7, 1977, pp. 79-96; G. VENTURI, *Costabili Containi, Giovanni Battista*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 30, 1984; E. MATTALIANO, *La Collezione Costabili*, ed. by G. AGOSTINI, Venice 1998; A. UGOLINI, *Aggiornamenti sulla Collezione Costabili*, in «Ferrara. Voci di una città», 6, 2010, 32, pp. 24-30.

² *Pitture della Raccolta del Conte Gio Batta Costabili di Ferrara*, Bologna, Biblioteca Comunale dell’Archiginnasio, Ms A 1324 [ante 1835], fol. 16r, no. 111.



Figs. 1,2: Photograph of the reverse of the panel, with detail of the inscription

³With the estate the nephew also inherited the surname, which he subsequently used alongside his own. A post-mortem inventory of the Containi estate survives, dated 28 April 1778, in which we read the following entry: «altro quadretto, dipinto sopra il legno, con cornice gregia, rappresentante la decolazione di S. Giovanni Battista, si crede del Naselo» ("Another little painting, painted on wood, with a plain frame, depicting the decapitation of St John the Baptist, thought to be by Naselo"): *Quadri da stimarsi... Documenti per una storia del collezionismo d'arte a Ferrara nel Settecento*, ed. by A. FAORO and L. SCARDINO, Ferrara 1996, p. 191, no. 37. This might be the painting under consideration here, as has already been suggested: MATTALIANO, cit. (note 1), p. 149. However we would have to explain the strange, albeit hypothetical attribution to 'Naselo', in other words Francesco Naselli (Ferrara?, ca. 1570 - ?, post 1635), a modest painter in Ferrara during the early decades of the 17th century, influenced by the style of Carlo Bononi: E. RICCOMINI, *Il Seicento ferrarese*, Ferrara 1969; and B. GHELFI, *Pittura a Ferrara nel primo Seicento. Arte, committenza e spiritualità*, Ferrara 2001, pp. 217-221, who mentions (p. 219) the Containi Decapitation among the painter's lost works. On the artist, see also: S. L'OCCASO, *Naselli, Francesco*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 77, 2012.

⁴C. LADERCHI, *Descrizione dalla Quadreria Costabili, IV, Pittori d'altre Scuole*, Ferrara 1841, pp. 74-75, no. 517.

coming to form part of his highly selective personal collection⁵. This adds a further element of prestige to the more recent collecting history of the work, which was evidently alienated at some point by Morelli, since it was not among the works donated, in a publicly spirited gesture, to the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo⁶. Whilst there are thus no doubts about the painting's history during the past two and a half centuries, its earlier history remains unknown as the older sources do not appear to mention it. This is not particularly surprising since we are clearly dealing, as suggested by its small size, with an object intended for private



Fig. 3: Bartolomeo Schedoni, *Holy Family*, London, National Gallery

use. The same fate was shared by many of Schedoni's small and exquisite cabinet paintings, much appreciated and, as we saw above, "most exquisite and sought-after by galleries" as Luigi Lanzi remarked in the late 18th century. Only one painting by Bartolomeo Schedoni on this subject is mentioned in the early sources, specifically that in the Farnese collection in Parma in 1737, the same year in which the famous collection was moved to Naples. But, as more recent studies have shown, this painting, tracked down in Palermo (Museo Diocesano), in fact depicts a *Martyrdom of St Paul*, who was also decapitated,



⁵ BENINI, cit. (note 1), pp. 83-85, 94, no. 97: this information can be found in the *Carteggio Costabili* (1842-1910), Ferrara, Direzione dei Musei Civici di Arte Antica, Archivio Medri, cont. 1, *Galleria Costabili e sua vendita*. See also: F. ROSSI, F. ZERI, *La raccolta Morelli nell'Accademia Carrara*, Bergamo 1986, pp. 34, 51, note 30. Immediately beforehand, the painting appears in both sales catalogues of the collection edited by Gaetano Giordani: *Catalogo de' quadri di varie scuole pittoriche nella Galleria Costabili in Ferrara (Collezione esposta in vendita)*, Bologna 1871, p. 17, no. 198; and *Catalogo de' quadri di varie scuole pittoriche nella Galleria Costabili in Ferrara (Collezione esposta in vendita)*, Ferrara 1872, p. 14, no. 198.

⁶ It cannot be ruled out that the small panel passed directly from the Morelli collection, without further changes in ownership, into the hands of the family of the most recent owners. This would seem to be confirmed by the second label on the verso of the panel which, however, is barely legible due to the restoration of the wooden support.

⁷ C. CECCHINELLI, *L'opera di Bartolomeo Schedoni pittore di Ranuccio I Farnese per il convento dei Cappuccini di Fontevivo*, in «Aurea Parma», I, 1999, pp. 67-90 (*speciatim*, pp. 79-81); and for the discovery of the canvas in Palermo: F. DALLASTA, *Aggiornamenti su Bartolomeo Schedoni*, in «Aurea Parma», 2004, I, pp. 3-32 (*speciatim*, pp. 14-17, Fig. 8); and finally on the monastery: C. CECCHINELLI, F. DALLASTA, *Il Convento dei Cappuccini di Fontevivo* (Parma), Rome 2005.

one of the series of canvases executed by the artist over the space of a few years for the Franciscan monastery of Fontevivo, near Parma, which Duke Ranuccio I Farnese was attempting to turn into a sort of personal Escorial⁷.



The lack of early mentions, however, does not compromise the reliability of the painting's traditional attribution. It is confirmed by the extremely high quality of the execution and of the invention, both of which present the quintessential traits of this painter, whose career was short but meteoric, and



Fig. 4: Bartolomeo Schedoni, *Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist*, London, Saint Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum

whose life turbulent, punctuated by numerous violent episodes and the resulting difficulties with the law⁸. His was a career spent, effectively, between Modena and Parma over the course of fifteen years or so. All of his known production dates to after 1600, though documents attest for his presence at Parma with his father already in 1594 and immediately afterwards in Rome, where he was sent to study by Duke Ranuccio at the Accademia del Disegno, then directed by Federico Zuccari. The extant works of his prolific Modenese period (1600-

1607), only some of which survive, still appear to be influenced in some of their formal choices by his late Mannerist training; more unusually, they already show an evident and highly contemporary interest in the 'affectionate' genius of Correggio, reinterpreted through the works of the young Annibale Carracci in Parma and Reggio Emilia. After his definitive move to Parma in December 1607 to work exclusively for Ranuccio Farnese, Schedoni made exponential advances. Purified of any remaining Mannerist features, his style softened to become warm and tender, affectionately human in its sentiment, pervaded by



a modern treatment of light that sometimes seems almost to illuminate the forms from within, thanks to the use of increasingly rich and porous paints, in time accompanied by a painting technique capable of increasing license, but still refined and subtle. By the height of his mature phase, interrupted by his premature death from illness in 1615, he had achieved an expressive formula of great power and originality, characterized by the concision of both form and lighting, with almost metaphysical effects. This style reaches its apex, to mention

⁸ The literature on the artist is fairly extensive; his true importance emerged largely with the historic exhibition in Bologna of 1959: G.C. CAVALLI, in *Maestri della pittura del Seicento emiliano*, catalogue ed. by F. ARCANGELI, M. CALVESI, G.C. CAVALLI, A. EMILIANI, C. VOLPE, Bologna 1959, pp. 204-213. In addition to that already mentioned, it is worth citing at least the three monographs, containing large quantities of data: F. DALLASTA, C. CECCHINELLI, *Bartolomeo Schedoni pittore emiliano, Modena 1578, Parma 1615*, Parma 1999; E. NEGRO, N. ROIO, *Bartolomeo Schedoni pittore e scultore 1578 – 1615*, Modena 2000; F. DALLASTA, C. CECCHINELLI, *Bartolomeo Schedoni a Parma. Pittura e Controriforma alla Corte di Ranuccio I Farnese*, Colorno 2003.

Fig. 5: Bartolomeo Schedoni, *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, formerly private collection, Germany

just the most important instances, in the large canvases now in Parma, Galleria Nazionale, with the *Deposition of Christ* and the *Maries at the Tomb*, executed for Ranuccio and destined for the church of the monastery at Fontevivo, and in some other late works, all from the Farnese collection, such as the *Meeting of Anne and Joachim at the Golden Gate*, *St Elizabeth of Hungary Giving Alms* (Fig. 6), the *St Joseph Comforted by the Angel* and the unfinished *St Sebastian Tended by the Pious Women* (Fig. 7) all in Naples, the first at Palazzo Reale, the others at Capodimonte.



Fig. 6: Bartolomeo Schedoni, *St Elizabeth of Hungary Giving Alms*, Naples, Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte

Returning to the small painting under consideration, the types of figures, the draping of the garments, the treatment of the light and the application of the paint have direct parallels, as we have seen, with Schedoni's certain works, and specifically those of his mature period. The closest analogies are those with the artist's production following his move to the service of Duke Ranuccio in Parma, which took place, as we have said, in 1607, but to an even





greater extent with the works finished after 1610. Before going on to offer some more detailed considerations, though, it should be said that the invention was known through at least one other work, identical in its composition and also painted on panel. Noted years ago by Emilio Negro in a private collection in Columbus (United States, Ohio⁹), but without any indication of its measurements, the painting, described as ‘small’ in another later publication¹⁰, was connected by the author with that documented in the Costabili collection. Whilst the latter is without a shadow of doubt the painting discussed here,

⁹ E. NEGRO, in *Ducato di Modena & Reggio 1598 – 1859. Lo stato, la corte, le arti*, ed. by P.V. FERRARI, Modena 2007, p. 223, Fig. 12. Unfortunately, all attempts to at least find a legible reproduction of the painting failed.

¹⁰ N. ROIO, *Bartolomeo Schedoni e Leonello Spada: alcune opere sconosciute di due ‘caravaggisti’ padani*, in «Valori Tattili», 1, 2013, p. 53, Fig. 7.



given the initials on the back of the support, it is more difficult to determine the attribution of the American version, since we can judge only from the small illustrations. These nonetheless suggest it was of good quality. In any case, instances of autograph replicas of small paintings such as this, often on panel, are not lacking from the artist’s catalogue and there is therefore no reason, in principle, to doubt the originality of the version in the United States. There is no question as to the originality of our painting, given the skill and

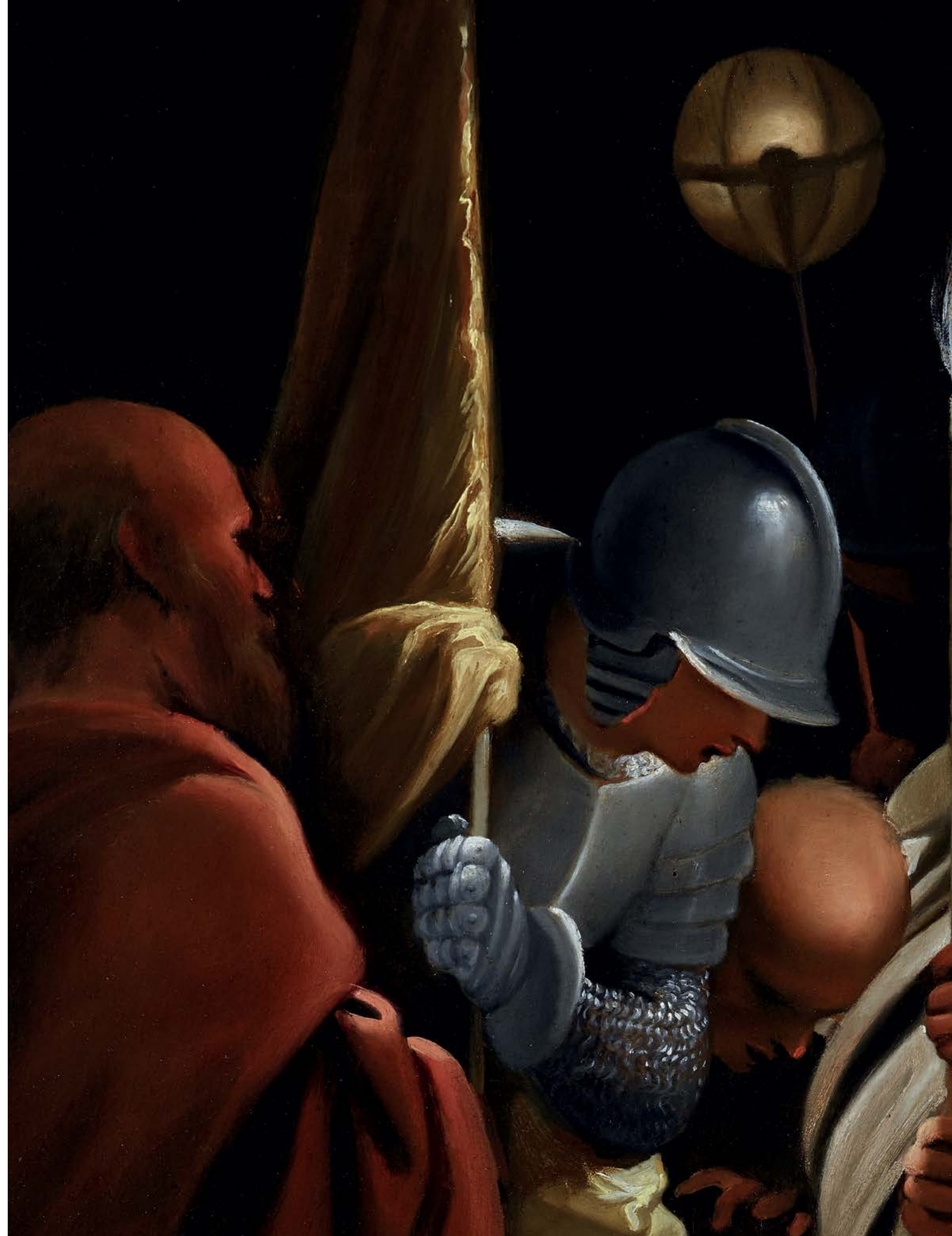
Fig. 7: Bartolomeo Schedoni, *St Sebastian Tended by the Pious Women*, Naples, Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte

¹¹ The painting presented only a slight yellowing of the antique varnish and the loss of tiny pointed flakes of paint here and there. The careful and delicate cleaning undertaken by Studio Giangrossi in Milan in September 2019 brought out the sheen of the light and of the colours, revealing a rich and absolutely intact paint surface.

¹² Both oil paintings on panel, the first of which, that in Naples, was formerly signed, measuring 47.5 x 38.5 cm and 48 x 39 cm respectively. The compositional variants are minimal: the rotation of the head of the little angel, the arrangement of St Joseph's hands, that of the clouds. On the panel formerly in a private collection in Germany: NEGRO, ROIO, cit. (note 8), p. 101, cat. no. 47.2. The latter has in the meantime appeared on the American market (Sotheby's, New York, 26 January 2012, lot no. 36), and an exact replica of it, certainly by the artist himself, has been published, also on panel and of a similar size (47 x 39.5 cm); the latter appeared on the British market: A. CRISPO, *Nuovi dipinti per il primo Seicento parmense: Schedoni, Amidano, Badalocchio*, in «Aurea Parma», 2016, I, p. 216, Fig. 3.

¹³ Oil on canvas, 180 x 128 cm, dated to 1611 by documentary evidence: NEGRO, ROIO, cit. (note 8), pp. 90-91.

confidence of the execution, the often very rich creamy luminosity of the paints used, and the subtle and unusual play of chiaroscuro effects that characterize this beautiful painting; all of these are enhanced by an excellent state of preservation¹¹. As confirmation, it suffices to compare it with works of the artist's final phase, whose highly original style had by now reached full maturity and thanks to which Schedoni can for a brief period be counted as one of the greatest artists of early 17th-century Italy. To mention just his paintings of small format, we can already see parallels with the *Holy Family* formerly in the Mahon collection (now in London, National Gallery), probably dating to before 1613 and once owned by the painter's wife (Fig. 3); unlike our *Decapitation*, however, the latter still presents a strong Correggesque component. Perhaps more helpful is the comparison with the *Holy Family with the Young St John the Baptist*, formerly on panel, in the Hermitage in St Petersburg (Fig. 4), of around 1613, given the typologies of the figures, the consistency of the paint, the treatment of light that similarly throws the forms out sharply against a completely dark background. We could also mention the two almost identical versions of the *Rest on the Flight Into Egypt* (Naples, Galleria Nazionale di Capodimonte; formerly in Germany in a private collection), where, particularly in the version previously in Germany¹² (Fig. 5), we find an identical construction of the forms (see the deep pleats on the sleeves of Mary and Salome respectively); the solid colour, which at times dissolves in unexpected liberties, here in the lowered face of Joseph, there in that of the young man with a torch in his hand; or the arrangement of the figures, orchestrated with extraordinary skill, their heads creating a sparing geometrical dialogue of emotions based on a refined intellectual game of projections and rotations: in profile, from one side, from the other, full face, oblique. The same arrangement, fixing those involved in the story in a vaguely metaphysical dimension, can be seen slightly earlier, in 1611, in the superb *St Elizabeth of Hungary Giving Alms*, one of the artist's masterpieces¹³ (Fig. 6); the latter, despite the difference in scale (the canvas in Naples is almost two metres high), perfectly parallels our *Decapitation*, even in its palette with its dusty and highly refined tones. Equally, the naked curled-up body of the Baptist on the ground, though largely swallowed up by the shadows, strongly resembles – particularly in the foreshortened arrangement of the bent legs (almost the same posture in reverse) – that of the protagonist in the *St Sebastian Tended by the Pious Women* also in Naples (Fig. 7), a large





unfinished work found in the workshop on the artist's death and thus plausibly dating to around 1615¹⁴. Even the treatment of the milky complexion of both nudes and the formal rationale underlying the foreshortened outline of the shoulders of Sebastian and the Baptist seem identical. This suggests a date for the small painting discussed here between the 1610-1611 of the *St Elizabeth* and the 1615 of the *St Sebastian*, with a degree of preference for the later date¹⁵. The strong similarities with paintings of much larger format, with compositions consisting of numerous figures, lead us to reflect on a salient feature of our painting: its monumental vocation, despite the small size of the support. «Di un fare grandioso» “majestic in their rendering”, as Laderchi had already noted in the early 19th century, very different from the more delicate and, one might say, more minute, style of other small paintings of similar format intended for private devotion, whose enormous success is attested by the countless early replicas and copies. Also distant from such works is the highly dramatic subject, which probably led the artist to this solemn and measured composition, that also in part characterizes the aforementioned *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*, itself a small painting. The concise rendering of the form similarly appears to confirm a late date; this succinctness reaches its apex in the large canvases now in Parma, originally executed for Fontevivo.



By the light of a torch that strikes the protagonists with vivid clarity, the gory event that has just taken place is shown in real time and from fairly close up. Yet, despite the violence of the occurrence, all is still and silent. Only the young man with the torch, almost stunned by the gratuitous ferocity of the execution, his shocked gaze turned to one side, seems to call out with his half-open mouth to a witness outside the frame, whilst Salome, deep in thought and without the customary assistance of the elderly maidservant, waits patiently, ingenuous and thus sinister, for the outcome of her request and simultaneously the object of her desires. The concision, as we have said, is not just compositional and formal: the garments of the protagonist present no superfluous ornaments, and only the metallic gleam of light on the helmet and breastplate of the soldier at the centre, with the chainmail sleeve, and the rich clumps of straw-yellow on the drapery wrapped around the pike, just barely enliven, without disturbing it, the arrangement of smooth and compact surfaces over which the light plays almost tranquilly, rendered in an equally essential way. Despite this, the treatment of

¹⁴ Oil on canvas, 185 x 125 cm: NEGRO, ROIO, cit. (note 8), pp. 106-107, cat. no. 52; and F. DALLASTA, C. CECCHINELLI, *Gli ultimi anni e il testamento di Bartolomeo Schedoni (1610-1615)*, in «Aurea Parma», 2011, I, pp. 3-20. On the works from the Farnese collection now in Naples and cited here see also: P.L. LEONE DE CASTRIS, M. UTILI, in *La Collezione Farnese. La Scuola emiliana: i dipinti. I disegni*, Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples 1994, pp. 236-237, 247-252.

¹⁵ A similar date is also proposed for the painting in the United States: ROIO, cit. (note 9).

the light is neither schematic nor lacking in harmony: remarkable are the bald head, lowered and round, almost a pure volume, of the curious onlooker who appears at the centre, the orange reflections from Salome's dress on the nose, lips and edge of the metal band protecting the ear of the soldier at the centre, or the majestic elderly figure standing on the left, outlined by the reflections from the torch, whose head, entirely in shadow, has the stark purity of an Italian La Tour, before La Tour. Finally, equally remarkable is the idea of a second light source, the lantern at the centre back; but this is a muted light that floats in the darkness and emits a very weak glow, opaque, attenuated, without any effect on things, like a dim moon just before it sets, making the dark space in which the action unfolds even more mysterious, silent and sorrowfully isolated from the world. At this point we should ask if, accepting a late date for this magnificent little painting, we should not seriously consider the hypothesis, recently advanced by critics, that the artist spent a second period in Rome in 1614 (his first visit, as we have seen, is attested by documents in 1595¹⁶). Such an artfully skilled handling of light, this ability to capture the banal truth of the event might have benefitted from renewed contact with the experiments in painting artificially lit night scenes of Caravaggio and his followers, on the altars of Rome and elsewhere. Yet the transposition of this truth onto a level of highly personal, suspended, almost metaphysical formal transfiguration remains the sole province of the great Modenese artist.

¹⁶ DALLASTA, CECCHINELLI, 2003, cit. (note 8), pp. 72-73.