

TRINITY FINE ART

Marcantonio Franceschini
(Bologna 1648 - 1729)

Pastoral Scene

oil on canvas, 125 x 152.3 cm



Stefano Conti's patronage has been an object of study ever since Francis Haskell published his crucial work on the topic¹. Discussing the painting with a *Pastoral Scene* in 1963, Haskell published a letter addressed by Franceschini to the Veronese painter Alessandro Marchesini, whom Conti had charged to negotiate with artists.

In February 1705 Stefano Conti had already commissioned a painting from Franceschini, although the subject matter had not yet been decided on. In his letter to Marchesini, Franceschini pointed out that the composition was to involve an unspecified "story or fable with two figures with *putti*".

¹ Haskell, see bibliography

Thus Franceschini proposed a variety of subjects before finally suggesting a “pastoral caprice”, in other words a composition not bound to any predetermined subject but simply translating Conti’s request for “two figures with *putti*” onto canvas. Before entering into a discussion of the subject matter, Franceschini accepted the figure of forty Spanish dubloons offered by Stefano Conti.



Fig. 1: Marcantonio Franceschini, *Pastoral Scene*, formerly in a private collection in Washington

He wrote on 17 February 1705 that: «Whilst I did not expect to hear of a cut in the kind request that I made for the picture mentioned, for all that, this being of little count, I am happy to take on the work for the forty Spanish dubloons offered me. Finding a story or fable with two figures with putti is a trifle difficult, wherefore I would be pleased if the gentleman in question were to suggest to me a subject to his liking [...]. More to my taste, however, would be a pastoral caprice with a shepherd, nymphs and two or three putti engaged in bizarre and curious acts, even though that

would require more labour than agreed on, and with regard to the supreme merit of the Cardinal and to the mediation of your good self, if it were pleasing to you I would very much like to do it². Addressing himself directly to Conti a week later, Franceschini explained that he had proposed a “pastoral caprice” because he had recently made just such a scene for an unspecified “Senator of Genoa”.



Fig. 2: Marcantonio Franceschini, *Pastoral Scene*, London, British Museum

Franceschini had written directly to Stefano Conti on 24 February 1705: “It is true that I said in my last letter to Master Marchesini that a pastoral scene would suit me well because, having recently made one for a Senator of Genoa, more to my taste than anything else, I thought that I might have the same good fortune in the service of your most illustrious Lordship with a similar subject, but for all that, if you are more inclined to want a story or a fable than that bizarre idea, you have but to tell me in all freedom because my greatest satisfaction is that of being able to meet your excellent taste [...]”³.

² Letter from Marcantonio Franceschini to Alessandro Marchesini dated 17 February 1705, Biblioteca Governativa, Lucca, ms. 3299, published in Haskell 1966, Italian translation 1985, Appendix III.

³ Biblioteca Estense di Modena, Autografoteca Campori collection, Letters from Marcantonio Franceschini to Stefano Conti, a collector from Lucca.

The painting was completed in December 1705, Franceschini writing to Stefano Conti on 2 December of that year that «your picture is finished, I have but to apply the varnish⁴», and it was «delivered in Bologna on 22 of that month⁵».



Fig. 3: After Marcantonio Franceschini, *Pastoral Scene*, Windsor Castle, Royal Collection

In June 1707 Stefano Conti asked Franceschini for a statement, which the painter sent him in July. «Given this day, 22 July 1707, in Bologna. I the undersigned state that I made last year for the most illustrious gentleman Stefano Conti of Lucca a painting of and with a shepherd seated beneath some trees in the act of wishing to play a flute, two nymphs lying on the grass looking at him, and one offers him a rose and three putti play with a goat, sheep etc. and in confirmation of that, this letter is done and signed by my own hand and sealed with my seal. Marco Ant.o Franceschini⁶».

In the monograph that Dwight Miller has devoted to the artist⁷, he identifies the initial version painted for the “Senator of Genoa” as a painting formerly in a private collection in Washington (see

⁴ Biblioteca Estense di Modena, Autografoteca Campori collection, Letters from Marcantonio Franceschini to Stefano Conti, a collector from Lucca, f. 95, 2 December 1705.

⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 97

⁶ Biblioteca Estense di Modena, Autografoteca Campori collection, Letters from Marcantonio Franceschini to Stefano Conti, a collector from Lucca, f. 104, 22 July 1707.

⁷ Miller 2001, see bibliography.

fig. 1), also arguing that this was the picture mentioned by Ratti in 1790 as belonging to the Balbi collection and recorded thus: «Palazzo of Mr. Francesco Balbi, above the door is Franceschini's pastoral picture».⁸ He confirms the identification by citing Franceschini's words, for as we have seen the artist wrote to Conti in 1705, telling him that he had painted a pastoral scene for a "Senator of Genoa" only a short time before.

There exists a drawing of the former Balbi painting by Fragonard (fig. 2) who copied Franceschini's *Pastoral Scene* while staying in Genoa from 21 August to 10 September 1760. That drawing is now in the British Museum in London.

As Anna Orlando⁹ points out, however, Fragonard's drawings are invariably faithful to the original composition, whereas in this case not only is the format different (more horizontal and thus better suited to a position above a door, where Ratti places it in his description of the Balbi collection), but the figure playing the flute (standing rather than sitting) and the landscape are also different and the *putto* holding a stick is missing altogether. It is therefore obvious that the picture formerly in Washington cannot be identified as the former Balbi version, the first version of the subject - as Franceschini himself describes it - whose whereabouts are still unknown.

Miller also mentions a drawing (fig. 3), now in Windsor Castle, calling it a preparatory sketch for the painting formerly in Washington. In reality, the drawing appears to be more of a derivation than a preparatory sketch, and the composition differs from the painting formerly in Washington in its landscape which, on the other hand, is identical to the picture commissioned by Stefano Conti.

The clear difference in style between the figures and the landscape also suggests that the landscape is by the hand of the artist's brother-in-law, Luigi Quaini, as is so often the case with Franceschini's paintings.

Stefano Conti was born into a family of merchants in 1564 and dealt in fabrics, proving to be a shrewd businessman. He began to collect paintings almost from one day to the next in late 1704, after a trip to Bologna and Venice, and indeed his collecting interests focused chiefly on the work of Bolognese and Venetian artists.

He was doggedly determined in his choices, without allowing excessive enthusiasm to run away with him. He used a local architect to build a well-lit gallery to house his paintings and he invariably

⁸ C.G. Ratti, *Istruzione di Quano Può Versi di Più Bello in Genova...*, Genoa 1780, p. 189.

⁹ Verbal communication

refused to sell any of them, in fact he even specified in his will that the collection should remain intact. He was a generous patron but always refused to pay more for a picture than he thought it was worth. As we have seen with the *Pastoral Scene*, he allowed complete freedom of choice where subject matter was concerned but he was a stickler for compliance with his size specifications.

In Venice and Bologna, which he visited on several occasions, he would go directly to the workshops of the painters from whom he had commissioned his pictures.

It was in Venice that he met the Veronese painter Alessandro Marchesini, from whom he commissioned several paintings and who was to become his agent

His collection was more or less complete by 1707. He only bought three pictures between 1707 and 1725, yet in the latter year his collector's enthusiasm was rekindled when he commissioned his first paintings from Canaletto, then from Marco Ricci, from Rosalba Carriera and from Giuseppe Maria Crespi.

He died in Lucca in 1739.

Provenance:

Stefano Conti (1654 - 1739), Lucca, commissioned in 1705;

Carlo Conti (? - 1794);

Conti Sardi, Lucca;

Contessa Maria Adelaide Sardi Giustiniani (1928 - 2020)

Sources and Bibliography:

Note of works in Lucca, Lucca State Archive, *Guinigi Archive*, ms. 295 [1768?], f. 113: «In 1707 Marco Antonio Franceschini resident in# Venice# Bologna made a picture with half life-size figures of a shepherd seated beneath some trees in the act of wishing to play a flute, two nymphs lying on the grass looking at him, and one offers him a rose and three putti play with a goat, 40 Spanish dubloons».

F. Haskell, *Stefano Conti, patron of Canaletto and others*, in «The Burlington Magazine», 98, 1956, pp. 296-300;

F. Haskell, *Patrons and painters. A study in the relations between Italian art and society in the age of the Baroque*, London 1963 (Italian translation: *Mecenati e pittori. Studio sui rapporti tra arte e società italiana nell'età barocca*, Florence 1966, pp. 350-354);

F. Zava Boccazzi, *I veneti della Galleria Conti di Lucca (1704-1707)*, in «Saggi e memorie di storia dell'arte», 17, 1990, pp. 122-123;

D.C. Miller, *Marcantonio Franceschini*, presentation by A. Cottino, Turin 2001, pp. 34-38;

E. Pellegrini (ed.), *Descrivere Lucca, Viaggio tra note, inventari e guide dal XVII al XIX secolo*, Pisa 2009, p. 255.