

ANTONIO RASIO

(Active in Brescia from 1677 to c. 1695)

*Anthropomorphic Figure with Game, Charcuterie and Poultry*

Oil on canvas, 116 x 94 cm

This bizarre and astonishing picture, which has come down to us in good condition, is in iconographical terms very much one of its kind in the panorama of Italian Baroque still-life painting. We know of various works in the style of Arcimboldo with fruit, vegetables and flowers made by painters working in Rome in the second half of the 17th century – the first to spring to mind are the series of four paintings with allegories of the seasons by Giovanni Stanchi (Figs. 1-4) and by Giovanni Paolo Castelli known as Spadino (Figs. 5-8) – but none, to my knowledge, depicts an anthropomorphic figure that is the product of a brilliant assembly of pieces of meat, charcuterie, game and poultry.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

**Figs. 1 – 4 :** Giovanni Stanchi, *Allegories of the Seasons*, oil on canvas

**Figs 5 – 8 :** Giovanni Paolo Castelli (known as Spadino), *Allegories of the Seasons*, oil on canvas

# TRINITY FINE ART

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Looking at the picture in greater detail, we see how our “meat man’s” face is made up of an assortment of offal – some of it rolled up to form his eyes and cheeks – while a small chicken forms his nose and eyebrows, two thrushes, their stomachs plucked, suggest a chin, and his mouth consists of two pieces of dark red meat, possibly liver. The idea of using a hare with its soft, thick fur conjuring up the image of a person’s hair or a warm winter hat is also extremely witty.

Moving downwards, we notice that the figure’s neck consists of two slices of raw ham; his left shoulder of a pheasant and a mallard, and his right shoulder of two birds that are difficult to identify; his arms, of pieces of pinkish meat (veal?) with the nerves well defined; and his fingers, of sausages. To make our “meat man” even richer – and more succulent! – the painter has embellished the bizarre figure with a necklace consisting of charcuterie and a long string of chipolatas around his neck, while his hips sport a belt consisting of a long, thin sausage held at the stomach by a clasp comprising a rock partridge and a woodcock.

Lastly, it is almost impossible to miss the spit with a chicken skewered on it that the figure is holding with both hands, or the beaten copper dripping pan whose job was to catch the fat as it dripped off the meat while cooking. I believe that these two details reveal that the painting was not conceived merely as a somewhat bizarre and outlandish painterly *divertissement* in the style of Arcimboldo but also with the specific intention of extolling the age-old culinary tradition rooted in Lombard gastronomic culture, particularly in the region of Brescia.

That tradition involved preparing meat on the spit by allowing it cook slowly for hours and hours over the heat emanating from the hot coals beneath it, using an ingenious systems of weights and counterweights linked to ropes and pulleys that allowed the spit to turn slowly and independently without the need for a turnspit (a late 18th century example of this mechanism can be seen today by the side of the huge Botticino marble fireplace in the kitchen of Villa Lechi in Montirone).

The anthropomorphic figure stands out in hieratic majesty against a background of sky furrowed with threatening clouds that get lighter, acquiring a warmer, golden hue, in the bottom part of the picture where our gaze is free to roam in depth, following the landscape stretching from the tree and extending as far as the distant blueish silhouette of a mountain. In the right foreground, on the other hand, the powerful moulded stone plinth serves as a support both for the “meat man’s” left arm and for a plucked bird (a guinea fowl or a peacock?) with its twisted neck pointing downwards.

An analysis of the painting’s stylistic and formal features prompted me, the moment I laid eyes on it, to suggest that the artist in question must be Antonio Rasio, an elusive and eccentric artist

about whom sources of the period tell us next to nothing but whom we know to have been active in Brescia in the last quarter of the 17th century. The reconstruction of his small corpus of works began with his only known signed and dated work (1677), a *Still-life with Virginal, Plumed Helmet, Flowers and Celestial Globe* now in the Pinacoteca Tosio-Martinengo in Brescia (fig. 9), which entered the Musei Civici collections in 1929 as part of the legacy of Anna Ferioli Mignani.



**Fig. 9 :** Antonio Rasio, *Still-life with Virginal, Plumed Helmet, Flowers and Celestial Globe*, Brescia, Pinacoteca Tosio-Martinengo.

As Angelo Loda has rightly pointed out (in D. Dotti, *Il Cibo nell'Arte dal Seicento a Warhol*, catalogue of an exhibition held at Palazzo Martinengo in Brescia, 2015, p. 96), the painting does not so much display Lombard characteristics from the Bergamo area (Bartolomeo Bettera) as similarities both in its composition and in its iconographical repertoire – the small dog resting on a cushion embroidered with gold thread, the Turkish carpet sliding off the base, the medal display case and the celestial globe – with the work of certain artists such as Antonio Tibaldi and Carlo Manieri who were painting in Rome from the 1660s in the footsteps of Benedetto Fioravanti and Francesco Noletti known as Il Maltese.



It is therefore highly likely that before Rasio settled in Brescia – where he painted, among other things, a small altarpiece with a cheerful garland of flowers with St. Anthony and the Child Jesus (by a different, anonymous hand) in the centre, for the church of San Francesco where it can still be admired today – he dwelt for a time in the papal capital. While there, he clearly had the time to study both the still-lives produced in Noletti's circle and the revisitations of Arcimboldo in a Baroque vein – not in a half-figure pose like the great Milanese master's originals but in a three-quarter figure pose on a larger canvas – being produced by Giovanni Stanchi and his workshop. Angelo Dalerba has recently expanded the catalogue of Rasio's works (*Da Raffaello a Ceruti: capolavori della pittura della Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo* 2004, pp. 204-213) to include four splendid paintings depicting allegories of the seasons, hanging in the Pinacoteca Tosio-Martinengo (Figs.10-13) still in their original frames made in Brescia and richly carved with coils and plants. Previously attributed to an anonymous follower of Arcimboldo (Boselli 1953), to the master himself (Geiger 1954) and to Francesco Zucchi (Legrand and Sluys 1954), the paintings were sold to the Musei Civici in 1952 by the Fabbriceria della Basilica in Verolanuova, where they are first mentioned as hanging in the sacristy in 1907.



**Figs. 10 - 13:** Antonio Rasio, *Allegories of the Seasons*, Brescia, Pinacoteca Tosio-Martinengo.

Dalerba has also attributed to Rasio a second series of allegories of the four seasons –very similar to the Brescia series in the handling of the figures, aside from *Autumn* – currently divided between the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford (Figs. 14-15) and West Dean House (Edward James Foundation) in Chichester, West Sussex (Figs. 16-17).



**Figs. 14 - 15 :** Antonio Rasio, *Allegory of Spring* and *Allegory of Summer*, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art



**Figs. 16 - 17 :** Antonio Rasio, *Allegory of Autumn* and *Allegory of Winter*, Chichester, West Dean House

He has also quite rightly identified in the landscapes and in the skies in the background the clear influence of the work of Pieter Mulier, known as Il Cavalier Tempesta, a celebrated Dutch landscape painter who worked in Italy, particularly in Lombardy and in the Veneto, in the last quarter of the 17th century, old inventories of the collections held by the aristocracy of Brescia listing numerous works by his hand.

But to return to our “meat man”, my contention that Rasio is unquestionably the artist who painted it is borne out not only by stylistic and formal considerations – the frank, robust brush strokes heavy with oily matter with which he depicts the irregular, gnarled surfaces of the fruit, vegetables, flowers and, in our case, the poultry skin and offal that make up the figure’s face – but also by the unmistakable manner in which he delineates the puffy, “creamy” clouds with their



pinkish beige hue lit by the sun's rays and overlaid with other iron-grey cirrus clouds. The breaks in the thick cloud cover revealing glimpses of turquoise sky also play a role in this vibrant play of contrasting colour and light in which the artist repeats an absolutely similar pattern found in his *Allegory of Spring* and *Allegory of Summer* in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford (Figs. 18-19).



**Fig. 18**

Antonio Rasio, *Anthropomorphic Figure with Game* (detail)  
Milan, Galleria Carlo Orsi



**Fig. 19**

Antonio Rasio, *Allegorical Figure of Summer* (detail)  
Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

As far as establishing a date for the picture is concerned, I would argue that it was painted some time after the *Still-life with Virginal, Plumed Helmet, Flowers and Celestial Globe* dated 1677 in the Pinacoteca Tosio-Martinengo in Brescia, thus it is likely to have been painted at the turn of the 1680s and thus to be very close in date to the series of allegories of the four seasons now split between the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum and the Edward James Foundation.

What is absolutely not open to question is the fact that the discovery of this astonishing still-life, a masterpiece of the Lombard Baroque, makes a very valuable addition to the small catalogue of works by the rare and mysterious painter Antonio Rasio, helping significantly to put his multifaceted and eccentric artistic personality into focus.

Davide Dotti

