



GIULIO CESARE PROCACCINI
(Bologna 1574 - Milan 1625)

The Holy Family with the young John the Baptist and an Angel
circa 1620/1625

Oil on canvas- 61 x 50³/₈ in (155 x 128 cm)

Provenance:
Lucca, private collection

Literature :
H. Brigstocke, O. D'Albo, *Giulio Cesare Procaccini. Life and Work with a catalogue of his paintings*, Turin 2020, p. 386, no. 166.

This beautiful panel, drawn to Hugh Brigstocke's attention in January 2018 and studied at first hand by the present author in the autumn of the same year, comes from a collection in Lucca, but its previous history remains unknown¹. As far as provenance research is concerned, not even the existence of a slightly larger early copy in the Capodimonte Museum, Naples, is helpful, as its history cannot be traced beyond the 1930s².

The Virgin, seated in the centre of the composition, turns her face towards the viewer and gazes upwards, while Saint Joseph, behind her, leans forward and looks at her tenderly. The Child, standing between his mother's knees, tries to attract her attention by pulling at her dress, as if seeking her breast, while the Madonna reassures him by caressing his chin with her fingers with a sweet, spontaneous gesture. An Angel, absorbed in carrying a basket of fruit, looks on, and the little Saint John the Baptist, kneeling on the right, observes the Virgin in admiration and offers the Christ Child an apple, the symbol of his future Passion.

First published in the recent monograph on Giulio Cesare Procaccini by Hugh Brigstocke and the present writer³, this painting can be securely placed within the artist's oeuvre.

The grandiloquent composition, the earth tonalities of the palette and the potently incisive figures indicate a date after *Constantine with the relics of the Passion* in the Castello Sforzesco, Milan, signed and dated 1620⁴, which launched the late phase of the painter's career. The shift towards a greater attention to draughtsmanship and a more sober chromatic range no doubt reflect Procaccini's response to the change in Milanese taste influenced by the opening of Cardinal Federico Borromeo's Accademia Ambrosiana, which also took place in 1620. In addition to these external circumstances, it should be noted that in his last five years Giulio Cesare returned to sculpture, which he had largely abandoned at the beginning of the 1600s, to complete the *Saint John the Evangelist* and *Saint Matthew* in Cremona Cathedral, commissioned in 1597 and delivered, after lengthy setbacks, shortly before his death in 1625⁵. This helps to explain the powerfully three-dimensional and sculptural character of the figures found in his late work, and in this context the *Holy Family with the young Baptist and an Angel* offers highly effective points of reference.

The figures in this painting almost break out of the dark background, and their compression into a narrow space enhances the emphatic gestures and postures. Their elegant features and surging, well-rounded bodies increase the refinement and energy of the whole composition.

Recent conservation has revealed the excellent condition of the picture surface, bringing to light the freshness of the artist's rapid handling, especially in the figures' light, curly hair, and one can almost sense their soft consistency. Swift, loose brushstrokes define the splendid white fabric that falls from the Virgin's lap to the foreground, brightening the whole scene. The superbly confident handling of this passage brings to mind the "bozze" and "macchie" (splodges of brushwork) for which Procaccini was much celebrated by those who collected his work, and which he continued to paint even in his very last years, for example in the *Mysteries of the Rosary* surrounding the main figures in the altarpiece of San Pietro al Rosario in Novara, carried out between 1620 and 1625⁶. The emphatic expression of the Madonna, with her elaborately-arranged brown hair, recurs in the Virgin of the *Annunciation* in the Brera Gallery

¹ H. Brigstocke, O. D'Albo, *Giulio Cesare Procaccini. Life and Work with a catalogue of his paintings*, Turin 2020, p. 386, no. 166.

² P. Leone De Castris in *Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte. Dipinti dal XIII al XVI secolo. Le collezioni borboniche e post-unitarie*, ed. by P. Leone De Castris and N. Spinosa, Naples 1999, p. 203; Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p.386.

³ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 386, no. 166.

⁴ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 372, no. 134.

⁵ H. Brigstocke, "Giulio Cesare Procaccini: His Life and Work", in Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 15.

⁶ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, pp. 400-401, no. 197.

in Milan⁷ and in the *Susanna and the Elders* at Christ Church, Oxford⁸, both datable to between 1620 and 1625. In their dramatic emergence from the shadows, the powerful features and bold attitude of Saint Joseph closely resemble the *Saint Simon* (or *Saint Jude*) in the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa,⁹ part of the series of *Apostles* painted by Procaccini between 1620 and 1625 for the Genoese patrician Giovan Carlo Doria.

In addition to the works mentioned above, the present painting offers an effective parallel to other examples of similar date and iconography now in prestigious European collections, such as the *Holy Family* in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden¹⁰ and the one in the British Royal Collection at Hampton Court¹¹, while in Italy it may be compared with two works housed in Milan, respectively at the Castello Sforzesco¹² and in the Saibene collection¹³.

In each of these compositions and our *Holy Family*, while always varying the theme, Procaccini manifests his extraordinary ability to convey the grace and amiability of the interaction between the Virgin and Child, with the figures of Saint Joseph and Angels revolving around them.

The Virgin's gesture in the centre of our canvas is especially splendid, as she holds the Child's face in one hand between thumb and forefinger with true naturalism and at the same time an almost domestic quality. The infant Jesus responds to this affectionate caress by moving his solid little legs, as if he wanted to climb onto the Virgin's lap, while establishing a subtle dialogue with the young Baptist, who is presented with a delicate, expressive profile.

Works such as this *Holy Family* shed light on Procaccini's connection with the painting of Correggio and Parmigianino, of whom he was considered an inheritor since the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is thanks to Girolamo Borsieri, the author of a 1621 letter to Scipione Toso – the patron of the so-called “three hands” picture in the Brera Gallery, painted by the artist together with Cerano and Morazzone – that we know that Giulio Cesare “having passed from sculpting to painting, was able in a very short time to practice art in the manner of Parmigiano and Correggio”¹⁴. His grafting the emphasis and grandeur of Rubens onto this great Emilian heritage led him to carry out some truly majestic creations.

These characteristics of style, combined with the fact that Procaccini was originally Bolognese and that Malvasia included his biography in the *Felsina Pittrice* of 1678, gives us a better understanding of the widespread presence – already by the end of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries – of his paintings in numerous European collections¹⁵.

Odette d'Albo

(translated from Italian)

⁷ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 388, no. 170.

⁸ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 379, no. 152.

⁹ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, pp. 376-377, no. 144

¹⁰ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 382, no. 159.

¹¹ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 383, no. 160.

¹² Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 386, no. 167.

¹³ Brigstocke, D'Albo 2020, p. 385, no. 164.

¹⁴ In P. Vanoli, *Il “Libro di lettere” di Girolamo Borsieri: arte antica e moderna nella Lombardia di primo Seicento*, Milan 2015, p. 207.

¹⁵ On this subject see O. D'Albo, “Sulla fama del ‘Correggio Insubre’. Un primo sguardo alla fortuna di Giulio Cesare Procaccini nelle collezioni europee tra Seicento e Ottocento”, in *Lombardia ed Europa. Incroci di storia e cultura*, ed. by D. Zardin, Milan 2014, pp. 189-217.