

TRINITY FINE ART



Vincenzo Leonardi

(1589/90 – 1646)

Ray's Bream, Brama Brama

c.1633-1646

Watercolour and bodycolour heightened with silver and gold

321 x 544 mm; a section of later extension of the fish's tail (130 x 80 mm) conserved behind mount

Numbered in dark brown ink 375 under fish, laid down, in the George III mounting sheet with wash border

Provenance

Cassiano dal Pozzo - *Il Museo Cartaceo*

Pope Clemente XI (r. 1700-1721) Albani

King George III and by descent King Edward VII

With art dealer Jacob Mendelson (?)

Property from the Estate of James R. Herbert Boone, his sale, Sotheby's, New York, 16 September 1988, lot 127

Jonathan Harris, London

With Bob Haboltdt, New York

Private Collection, U.S.A.

Trinity Fine Art, London

Private Collection, Italy.

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This watercolour shows a Ray's bream, often known as an Atlantic pomfret, and is in fact the earliest known depiction of the species. It was first written about in 1686 by the natural historian John Ray, after whom the fish is now named, in his edition of Francis Willughby's *De historia piscium*.¹ The fish was subsequently illustrated much later in Pennant's *British Zoology* (1776)² and Yarrell's *A History of British Fishes* (1836),³ but the authors make no mention of this watercolour from Cassiano dal Pozzo's *Museo Cartaceo*. Even Pierre Joseph Bonnaterre, to whom the established name is attributed, seems unaware of it in his *Tableau encyclopédique et méthodique des trois regnes de la terre* (1788).⁴

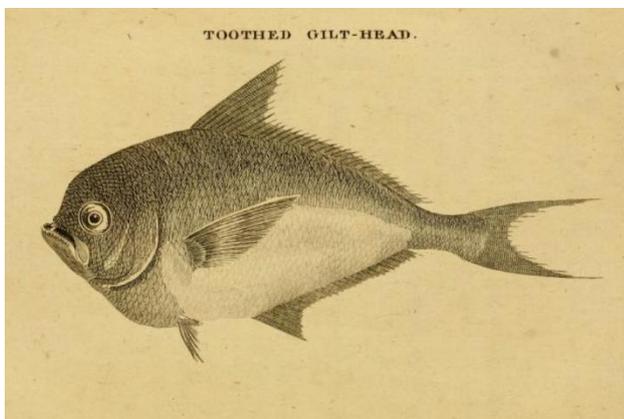


Fig. 1 – 'Toothed Gilt-Head' (later called Ray's Bream) in Thomas Pennant 1776, *British Zoology*, vol. III, p. 242.

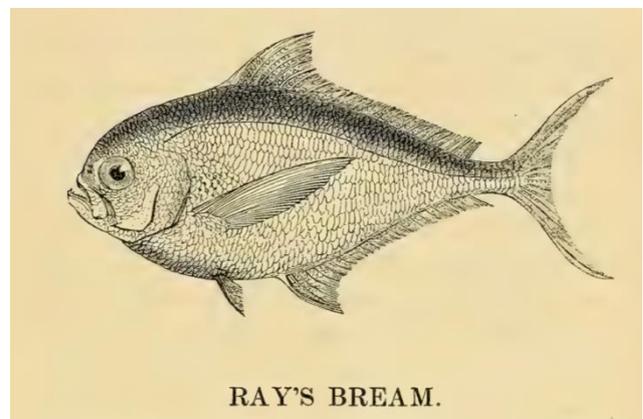


Fig. 2 – Ray's Bream in William Yarrell 1836, *A History of British Fishes*, vol. I, p. 117.

As suggested by its common name, the normal habitat of this fish is the Atlantic, and only rarely are individuals found in the Mediterranean. Ray's bream live at a depth of 100-400m but have been found up to 1000m deep.⁵ At the time when this was drawn, therefore, acquiring the fish would not have been a particularly simple task. Some of the details, such as its bluish hue and the uneven appearance of its belly, would suggest that the fish was either beginning to rot or to dehydrate, and that therefore some time had passed between its death and the artist having the opportunity to reproduce its likeness.⁶

¹ Francis Willughby & John Wray 1686, *De historia piscium*, vol. 4, app. p. 17.

² Thomas Pennant 1776, *British Zoology*, vol. III, p. 242.

³ William Yarrell 1836, *A History of British Fishes*, vol. I, pp. 117-20.

⁴ Pierre Joseph Bonnaterre 1788, *Tableau encyclopédique et méthodique des trois regnes de la terre*, vol. IV, p. 104.

⁵ Rainer Froese & Daniel Pauly (eds), *Brama Brama* on FishBase [accessed 23-01-26: https://www.fishbase.org/summary/Brama_brama.html].

⁶ Henrietta McBurney et al. (eds) 2017, *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo: Birds, Other Animals and Natural Curiosities*, Series B, vol. II, p. 548.

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When compared with the two later illustrations above, Cassiano's *Brama Brama* stands out for its incredible realism and quality. The scales are beautifully rendered, the fins almost feathery and the eye is shown exactly as it is when a mesopelagic (deep-water) fish is out of water. No detail was missed, including the little protrusions from the lower jaw, believed to be the first documented case of fish parasitism.⁷ Despite its extreme usefulness as an ichthyological record, this picture is no simple natural historical tool, a boring flat image to be used for reference purposes only. Of course, Cassiano's endeavours did contribute much to the scientific community of his time, but the *Museo Cartaceo* had an additional aim, an artistic one. It is no coincidence that he asked many of the greatest contemporary artists in Rome to collaborate with him on his various projects. He sought to unite art and science in his encyclopaedic endeavours. It is important to note, however, that in the *Museo Cartaceo*, the names of the artists involved are very rarely known, suggesting that the subject-matter was more significant than the draughtsman himself.⁸ In the whole *corpus*, only one drawing is signed, that of a sparrow by Vincenzo Leonardi.

Unfortunately, not much is known about Leonardi, to whom we owe the present drawing, other than his work with Cassiano, having even been called his "disegnatore 'di casa.'"⁹ He is, however, considered to be Cassiano's "finest natural illustrator,"¹⁰ and is the only artist whose name can be attached with certainty to the natural history drawings.¹¹ He is thought to have been Tuscan, perhaps specifically Sienese.¹² He travelled with Cassiano to France when he accompanied Cardinal Francesco Barberini there in 1625.¹³ The two collaborated on a number of projects, namely the *Uccelliera* and *Hesperides*. The latter was authored by Giovanni Battista Ferrari with much help from Cassiano, including the provision of a draughtsman – Leonardi. In his book, Ferrari sung the praise of his illustrator, writing that "the same things

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Rea Alexandratos 2008, "With the true eye of a lynx": The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo', in David Attenborough *et al.*, *Amazing Things: The Art of Natural History in the Age of Discovery*, p.77.

⁹ Francesco Solinas (ed.) 2000, *I Segreti di un collezionista: Le straordinarie raccolte di Cassiano dal Pozzo 1588-1657*, exh. cat. Palazzo Barberini, Sep.-Nov. 2000, p. 4.

¹⁰ McBurney 2017, p. 548.

¹¹ Alexandratos 2008, p. 77.

¹² David Freedberg 2002, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, his Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History*, p. 54.

¹³ Francis Haskell 1993, 'Introduction', in *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo*, exh. cat. British Museum, May-Aug. 1993, p. 4; Alexandratos 2008, p. 77.

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are born on these pages as in the soil” and that “what he painted for this volume had brought forth real fruit.” Fortunately for posterity, Ferrari did name Leonardi in the margin.¹⁴ Stylistic comparisons of these drawings and the signed sparrow with others in Cassiano’s collection has allowed many more of them to be attributed to Leonardi, including three others of the known fish included in the recent *Museo Cartaceo* catalogue.¹⁵

The *Museo Cartaceo* was perhaps one of the greatest encyclopaedic projects ever attempted, let alone by a private citizen. Born in Turin,¹⁶ Cassiano dal Pozzo was educated in Pisa at the time when the botanic gardens attached to the university were being expanded and reorganised, and the exotic plants were being drawn by talented artists commissioned to record the collections.¹⁷ Perhaps this did not serve as direct influence on Cassiano, but it certainly contributed to the cultivated framework and developing scientific context in which he then worked. In 1612, he moved to Rome and by 1623, thanks to his friendship with Francesco Barberini, by this time Cardinal Nipote, he came into the orbit of the papacy upon the ascendancy of Urban VIII, Maffeo Barberini.¹⁸ In 1625 and 1626, Cassiano undertook two trips with the papal legation led by the cardinal, one to France and the other to Spain. These were both pivotal events in terms of his later activities. In France, he met Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, with whom he maintained a life-long correspondence, and in Spain he saw the collection of drawings that came to be known as the *Tesoro Messicano*, which he eventually published many years later. During his travels abroad and on the Italian peninsula, Cassiano met and got to know some of the most renowned figures of the day, including Ferrante Imperato, Athanasius Kircher, Manfredo Settala (who were celebrated for their ‘cabinets of curiosities’ and ventures into natural history), Leonardo Agostini (future antiquarian to Urban

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 53-4.

¹⁵ Other than the Ray’s bream (cat. no. 231), these are the tompot blenny (238), the wide-eyed flounder (242) and the common guitarfish (243). The Ray’s Bream is the only firm attribution, the others are more tentative. Only one other fish has an artist’s name associated to it, the cuckoo wrasse (234), tentatively attributed to Giovanna Garzoni. See McBurney 2017.

¹⁶ There is some debate as to the year of his birth. According to Carlo Dati, his first biographer, Cassiano was born in 1583. Giacomo Lumbroso, his 18th-century biographer, gives the date as 1589/90. Francis Haskell and Sheila Rinehart have suggested 1588. Archival family papers say 1595. Dati was also responsible for Cassiano’s memorial oration, and given the timeline of his life, perhaps this date is the most likely.

¹⁷ Haskell 1993, p. 2.

¹⁸ Donatella L. Sparti 1992, *Le collezioni dal Pozzo: Storia di una famiglia e del suo museo nella Roma seicentesca*, pp. 42-5.

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VIII), Fabio Chigi (future Pope Alexander VII) and Galileo.¹⁹ Galileo was especially important and in fact, he would not have been able to publish his *Assayer* and the idea that the earth revolves around the sun had it not been for the help of Cassiano and his fellow *Lincei*.²⁰ Cassiano joined the *Accademia dei Lincei* in 1623 upon presenting the aforementioned *Uccelliera*. Cassiano's most important connection within the *Accademia* was one of the founding members, Federico Cesi. A "passionate scholar of natural sciences," Cesi founded the *Lincei* in 1603 and the academy was emblematic of the shifting scientific tides of the time. Its members both respected the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic traditions of the past and involved themselves in the developments of the present and future.²¹ In 1611, Galileo joined their ranks, and it was with his fellow academicians that he worked on his new microscope and his theories about the solar system.²² In 1630, Cesi died and Cassiano arranged the purchase of his entire collection of books and works on paper, which included Paolo Giovio's *De Pesci*, from his widow, acquiring it in 1633. Up until this point, the *Museo Cartaceo* had focussed mainly on antiquities and the architectural remains of Ancient Rome, and it was upon integrating Cesi's collection into his own that he turned to the commissioning of natural history illustrations for himself, rather than to aid others in their endeavours,²³ so it is likely that the *Ray's Bream* dates to between 1633 and 1646, when Leonardi is thought to have stopped working with Cassiano.

The subsequent life of the so-called Paper Museum is an interesting one. When Cassiano died in 1657 without any descendants, his collections and library went to his brother Carlo Antonio who had been involved with many of the projects himself. They were then passed on to his son Gabriele, and then his grandson Cosimo Antonio.²⁴ Despite some odd works or volumes being sold off in times of need, Cassiano's project survived relatively intact. In 1703, the *Museo Cartaceo* left dal Pozzo hands and was sold to Pope Clement XI. It was subsequently inherited by Cardinal Alessandro Albani who, through Robert and James Adam, sold the majority of it

¹⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 43, 47, 83.

²⁰ Andrew Graham-Dixon 1996, *Paper Museum*, p. 105.

²¹ Accademia dei Lincei website [last accessed 28-01-26: <https://www.lincei.it/it/storia>].

²² Jay Stephen Gould 2000, *The Lying Stones of Marrakech: Penultimate Reflections in Natural History*, p. 36.

²³ Sparti 1992, pp. 127-8.

²⁴ Henrietta McBurney 1993, 'The "Fortuna" of Cassiano dal Pozzo's Paper Museum,' in *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo*, exh. cat. British Museum, May-Aug. 1993, p. 261.

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to George III.²⁵ The King's librarian, Richard Dalton, in order to reorganise and homogenise the collection, unfortunately trimmed many of the drawings which may have led to numbers, inscriptions and even signatures disappearing.²⁶ This may be why the *Ray's Bream's* tail had to be extended at a later date. Its mounting is from this time. In 1823, George IV gave most of his father's library to the nation. This mistakenly included some volumes of Cassiano's drawings, now at the British Museum. A large proportion remained, and does to this day, in the Royal Collection, now housed at Windsor. After the First World War, Sir John Fortescue, then Royal Librarian, deemed many of the natural history volumes "unimportant" and "uninteresting" and so he sold them off. It was probably at this time that the present drawing was separated from the main collection. A great number of them went to the dealer Jacob Mendelson who was responsible for cutting up the volumes and marketing the pages as individual works of art. Here, many were damaged by a wartime bomb dropped on his King's Road shop and the subsequent rescue operations of the fire brigade. James R. Herbert Boone, an important American collector, bought 107 drawings from him, most likely including this one.²⁷ The provenance history of the Paper Museum is an astonishing one, featuring the names of some of the greatest collectors. It is also amazing that so much of the collection stayed together for the centuries that it did, and that the timeline of its movements is so relatively intact. In the 1950's, Anthony Blunt, Surveyor of Pictures to the Queen, began to attempt to trace and photograph as many of the 'lost' drawings as possible.²⁸ The Royal Collection Trust, in collaboration with the Warburg since 2000, has spent the last four decades working on a *catalogue raisonnée* of the Paper Museum, resulting in an exhibition (British Museum, 1993), four collections of studies (1989-93) and thirty-seven volumes representing the c.10,000 drawings, watercolours and prints that Cassiano dal Pozzo collected and commissioned in his ambitious attempt to represent the whole of human knowledge on paper.²⁹

²⁵ Olimpia Theodoli 2000, 'Gli album inglesi,' in *I Segreti di un collezionista: Le straordinarie raccolte di Cassiano dal Pozzo 1588-1657*, exh. cat. Palazzo Barberini, Sep.-Nov. 2000, p. 173.

²⁶ McBurney 1993, p. 264.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 265.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Cassiano Project webpages. Royal Collection Trust: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/stories/highlights-from-the-print-collection/the-paper-museum-of-cassiano-dal-pozzo>. Warburg: <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/research-fellowships/research-projects/archived-research-projects/paper-museum-cassiano-dal-pozzo-1588-1657> & <https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/research-fellowships/research-projects/archived-research-projects/catalogue-raisonne-project> [all accessed 28-01-26].