The painting is a half-bust portrait of a young gentleman aged about thirty and sporting a reddish beard. The bust is framed by a mock painted trompe-l’œil frame with an oval window finely decorated à cartouche in tones of pink and green.

The stylistic features are easy to identify, the picture displaying a series of elements typical of the figurative culture of the Po Valley midway between Lombardy and Emilia, with a careful eye cannily trained on northern European portraiture. These clues inevitably point us in the direction of Cremona, the “small Antwerp” of Lombard 16th century art, as Roberto Longhi so aptly defined it. This superb picture is likely to have been painted in Cremona either in, or shortly after, the middle of the century, according to the time frame suggested by the style of the clothes worn by the gentleman. Yet the uncertainty surrounding the picture’s attribution that has dogged it throughout its history is understandable because a style developed in Cremona, particularly in the field of portraiture, that managed to avoid taking notice of the situation in neighbouring cities and to develop its own autonomous and unique artistic vocabulary.

The painting is by the hand of Antonio Campi, as we can tell from a comparison with a number of portraits that have been added to the corpus of his works, starting with the Portrait of a Prelate in the Galleria Spada in Rome (inv. 182, fig. 1), which shares with our sitter not only certain salient stylistic features and details but also the open, contrite gaze and the magnificent green background.
– the very same background, in fact, that we also find in an intense Portrait of an Ageing Gentleman now in a private collection in Piacenza (fig. 2).\(^2\)

The attempt to reconstruct a corpus of portraits by Antonio Campi is a recent operation to which it is worth devoting a word or two. There were no known portraits per se by Antonio, while of those built into his religious works it was possible to afford consideration only to the donor in his youthful Holy Family with St. Jerome and a Devout Donor (Guidobaldo Possevino) dated 1546 and now in the church of Sant’Ilario.\(^3\) Yet the sources inform us that the painter worked as a portrait artist. Alessandro Lamo mentions a portrait which Antonio painted of Danese Filiodoni, one of the most influential figures in Spanish

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\(^2\) M. Tanzi, Antonio Campi: Il Ritratto di prelato n. 182 della Galleria Spada, in Studi di Storia dell’arte op. cit., pp. 81-87, figs. 1-2, plates vi-vi. This certainly is not the place to address the incongruous attribution to Caravaggio (F. Moro, Caravaggio sconosciuto. Le origini del Merisi, eccellente disegnatore, maestro di ritratti e di cose naturali, Turin 2016) of several works that I have attributed to Antonio Campi.

\(^3\) Fig. 1: Antonio Campi, Portrait of a Gentleman, Galleria Spada, Rome
Lombardy, a podestà of Cremona, a Senator and Grand Chancellor of the State of Milan. And there are also the models for the engravings for *Cremona fedelissima*, of which Campi himself often tells us that they were «based on a drawing of mine from life» or words to that effect; and in one instance, for the portrait of Buoso da Dovara, he says that it was: «taken from a portrait of said Bosio, which is to be found in my workshop». And finally, portraits and self-portraits attributed to Antonio are mentioned in collection inventories, for which one has but to read Federico Sacchi’s report.  

The attribution to Antonio Campi of the two portraits mentioned above, in Rome and Piacenza, is borne out by a series of formal prerogatives and small but characteristic details which constantly crop up in his artistic output, almost like signatures.

There are various other portraits given to Antonio Campi which, on account of their stylistic features and of their technique – and despite the difference in their sizes – can be compared with our elegant gentleman with his thick reddish beard. If we but observe the shape of the head in the three-quarter pose or the concentrated gaze turned towards the observer, as determined as it is gentle,

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*A. Campo, Cremona fedelissima città et nobilissima colonia de’ Romani rappresentata in disegno col suo contado, et illustrata d’una breve historia delle cose più notabili appartenenti ad essa, Cremona 1585, p. 57; D. Di Gioia, Le stampe dei Carracci con i disegni, le casse et dipinti corrispondenti. Catalogo critico, Italian edition revised, augmented, translated and edited by A. Boschetto, Bologna 1984, pp. 103-120, nos. 55-94.*

*F. Sacchi, Notizie pittoresche cremonesi, Cremona 1872, pp. 55, 56, 58.*

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*Fig. 2: Antonio Campi, Portrait of a Gentleman, private collection, Piacenza.*

*Fig. 3: Antonio Campi, Portrait of an Old Man with a Letter and Gloves, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland.*
we can find a number of significant comparisons such as the incisive Portrait of an Old Man with a Letter and Gloves donated to the Cleveland Museum of Art (inv. 1916.794, fig. 3) by Mrs. Liberty E. Holden in 1916 and attributed at the time to the Venetian school of the 16th century, «very much in the manner of Tintoretto», but reassigned to Giulio Campi by Bernard Berenson in 1932. 7 A comparison between the two faces, leaving aside the obvious difference in the sitters’ ages, appears to be extremely cogent not only on account of the formal similarities mentioned above but also for the watery depth of the gaze, slightly askew, which forges a direct and close bond with the observer. There are also other portraits painted in the early part of Antonio’s career. In connection with the rapport between Cremona and Flanders, there is a Portrait of a Young Gentleman of the Piperari Family dated 1556 (fig. 4), now with Agnew’s but sold on the London market more than once with an attribution to Jorge de la Rúa, a Spanish painter of Flemish origin, or to Willem Key from Brabant, but in my view definitely by the hand of Antonio Campi. 8 We should emphasise certain details – the typical shell-like conformation of young Piperari’s eyes, or the precise relationship between the strong nose and the arched eyebrows – which are echoed in our own painting, not to mention the way in which
the brilliant white collar stands out against the black and grey velvet. The volumes are modelled by a soft and delicate *chiaroscuro*, and it is worth stressing the construction of the face through the harmonious juxtaposition of colour in the combination of pinks, whites, greys and umber, with rapid, gleaming highlights imparting a transparent feel to the skin, highlighting the delicate contrast with the subtly defined red lips, beard and moustache. Other half-bust portraits can help to support the attribution of our painting to Antonio Campi thanks to the same compositional and stylistic features as those described above, first and foremost a *Gentleman* in the Borromeo collection on the Isola Bella, but also a *Young Lady* in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna (inv. 4, fig. 5).9 The Isola Bella figure could well be the brother of our reddish sitter but with a very black beard and hair, his gaze possibly a little more determined though certainly not haughty – possessed, rather, of a certain thoughtful intensity – but his face is built in exactly the same way, including the hair receding slightly at the temples.

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Fig. 6 (opposite): Reverse of the panel with *Minerva Threatening Cupid*

Fig. 7: Antonio Campi, *The Three Marys at the Tomb*, Gemäldegalerie, Stiftung Preussische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, Potsdam
We are assisted in defining the painting’s stylistic context and likely date, in addition to confirming the lofty quality of the work, by the picture on the back of the small panel. The subject is extremely rare: Cupid is usually intent on shooting arrows, rather than receiving them as he is doing here.10 Thus the presence of the painting on the back prompts us to suggest that the picture is likely to have been a nuptial gift from the groom to his future bride, with his portrait on one side and an allegory of a subject relating to love on the other: in this instance, as we shall see below, we are looking at the mythological sublimation of marital love, chaste rather than lustful, as a pledge of faithfulness. A passion for the Classical world and mythology and a decorative and illusionistic taste underpin the illustration of the two sides of our small panel, closely linked to the devices of Torre Pallavicina and of Cadignano; but the same mood also pervades a curious painting depicting Parnassus, whose whereabouts are unknown but which I attributed to Antonio Campi a number of years ago (fig. 8).11 The portrait is set in a frame with «cartouches adorned with garlands and large masks» like the Loves of the Gods, while Minerva and Cupid are immersed in an extraordinary vision of a landscape reminiscent of the episode of Leda and the Swan frescoed in the room on the ground floor, with the hills sloping down to the lake lapped by the rosy light of Aurora, the dawn. The presence of this typical imaginative landscape is a constant characteristic, like in The Three Marys at the Tomb, now in Potsdam (fig. 7). It is worth noting the remarkable qualitative features, in this instance, of the small mythological scene on the reverse of the panel: the extreme sophistication of the composition with the figures in a clearing in the woods and the dabbed brushwork used to impart precious highlights to the meadow and the shrubs, with the shifting variety of greens in the contrast between light and shade. Behind the goddess, the diaphanous depiction of Aurora’s chariot and its reflection projected onto the water in golden strands, flooding the branches and leaves of the small tree on the far left. And what of the shimmering moiré effect of Minerva’s tunic as it slides seamlessly from blue to plum to pink to golden yellow? Here we have an extremely delicate and virtuoso exercise which indelibly marks Antonio Campi’s best work in the Fontainbleau style towards the middle of the 16th century.

* P. F. Pizzetti, in Collezione Borromeo. La Galleria dei Quadri dell’Isola Bella, ed. A. Malvezzi and M. Nencini, Cinisello Balsamo 2011, pps. 190-191, n. 37, as Lombard Painter, third quarter of the 16th century; A. Graci, in Fratresce Nazionale di Bologna: Catalogo generale. 2. Da Raffaello ai Carracci. Venezia 2006, n. 212, p. 322, as Bartolomeo Cesi, but with a more correct inscription on the stretcher frame: «Antonio Campi fecit». This group also seems to include a Portrait of a Gentleman, identified as Ambrogio Spinola by an inscription on the back of the canvas, which was put up for auction at Antiquitäten Barany in Grossgensdorf in Austria on 28 January 2016, lot no. 59.

** 10 In continuity with the sources – for example Paris da Ceresara – in my text I use both Greek and Latin names for the divinities: Pallas-Minerva, Eros-Cupid-Amor, hoping not to trigger any confusion.

** 11 M. Terci, Misto Cremona, 1, in Kronos, 9, 2005, p. 127, fig. 11.
Antonio Campi, a brief biography

Born in Cremona between 1522 and 1523, Antonio Campi is likely to have trained under his elder brother Giulio, with whom he was to work on several occasions in the course of his career. His early work betrays an interest primarily in the models of Parmigianino, from which he took his inspiration for a series of engravings, as well as in those of his elder brother and of Camillo Bocaccino, as we can see from his first altarpiece for Cremona, signed and dated 1546 and now in the church of Sant’Ilario. In c. 1547 he worked with Giulio on the fresco decoration of the vault in the church of Santa Margherita, and in 1549 on a series of eight canvases with Stories of Justice for the Palazzo della Loggia in Brescia. In the 1550s he decorated a number of rooms in Adalberto Pallavicino’s villa in Torre Pallavicina and in the Palazzo Maggi in Cadignano. Starting in 1560 he began to work partly in Milan, where he painted a monumental Resurrection of Christ for the church of Santa Maria presso San Celso in 1560, marking the start on an interest in naturalist illusionism of Roman inspiration; then in 1564 he frescoed the chancel of the public church of San Paolo Converso with Stories from the Life of St. Paul. It was in these years that Antonio Campi’s art began to acquire the dramatic and spectacular tone which was to win him the patronage of Archbishop Charles Borromeo, whose favourite painter he was eventually to become.

Subsequently, for the same church, Borromeo commissioned him to paint a complex painting with Stories from the Passion of Christ, dated 1569 and now in the Louvre. Antonio also painted a Pietà for Cremona Cathedral in 1566, while the following decade was remarkable for a series of altarpieces in which he experimented with different expressive registers ranging from Mannerism to painting from life. In Milan he painted a Beheading of St. John the Baptist in 1571 and a Martyrdom of St. Lawrence in 1581 for San Paolo Converso; a triptych betraying northern European influence and motifs after Savoldo for the Cusani Chapel in the church of San Marco in 1577; and the altarpiece for the high altar in the church of San Maurizio al Monastero Maggiore in 1580. In the meantime, in Cremona, he frescoed the remarkable Supper in the House of the Pharisees in the Chapel of St. John the Baptist in the church of San Sigismondo in 1577, followed by a depiction of the biblical episode of Christ and the Centurion in the apse of the Cathedral in 1582. In 1585 he published a volume entitled Cremona fedelissima containing the history of his native city, which earned him a number of privileges. In his final years he continued to play a leading role in figurative art in Milan, where he produced works of particular importance such as two large canvases with Stories from the Life of St. Catherine for the eponymous chapel in the church of Sant’Angelo in 1583–4 with further very meticulous experiments in light and, in 1586, the Presentation in the Temple for the church of San Marco, now in the church of San Francesco di Paola in Naples. Campi died in January 1587 while engaged in designing and partly painting the illusionistic decoration of the vault of San Paolo Converso, a commission subsequently completed by his younger brother Vincenzo.

With Antonio Campi, Lombard painting acquired a new vitality made of naturalistic echoes and skilled luminism, the very characteristics of his art which Roberto Longhi argued were to form the core of Caravaggio’s style during his formative years in Lombardy.

**Fig. 9: Antonio Campi, Self Portrait, engraving from Cremona fedelissima**