

Exhibitions

The last Caravaggio

Milan

by HUGH BRIGSTOCKE

FOLLOWING THE HIGHLY popular Caravaggio exhibition at the Palazzo Reale, Milan (closed 28th January),¹ the artist's intensely dramatic but sadly damaged painting of the *Martyrdom of St Ursula* was moved to the [Gallerie d'Italia](#), Piazza Scala, Milan (to 10th April), where it is now the centre-piece of the exhibition *L'ultimo Caravaggio: eredi e nuovi maestri*. Focused on Genoa and the patronage of Marcantonio Doria and his brother Giovan Carlo Doria, the exhibition was conceived by the curator Alessandro Morandotti as a homage to Giorgio Fulco, who discovered the Giovan Carlo Doria archives (later fully and authoritatively published by Viviana Farina in 2002).² It intriguingly suggests that one might tell the history of art in seventeenth-century Italy, especially in Genoa and Milan, without the overwhelming presence of Caravaggio. Displayed beside the *Martyrdom of St Ursula* (1610; [Gallerie d'Italia](#), [Palazzo Zevallos Stigliano](#), Naples; cat. no.1) are works commissioned by Marcantonio by two artists much favoured by Giovan Carlo: Giulio Cesare Procaccini, born in Bologna, active



2. *Christ carrying the Cross*, by Giovanni Battista Caracciolo. 1614. Canvas, 133 by 183.5 cm. (Università degli Studi, Turin; exh. [Gallerie d'Italia](#), Piazza Scala, Milan).

in Milan, and Bernardo Strozzi, who began his career in Genoa before moving to Venice. These two artists each produced a painting of the *Martyrdom of St Ursula*, both obviously based on knowledge of Caravaggio's version, but without any indication that they had understood what Caravaggio's style was intended to achieve. Strozzi's painting (no.2; Fig.3) has an exotic quality more suggestive of a Salome than a saint, while Procaccini (1620–25; private collection; no.3), produced one of the least successful pictures of his entire career, with a void at

its vanishing point, roughly handled (and subsequently damaged) figures and drapery, redeemed only by the well-painted head of the saint at the moment of her execution, all suggesting the artist may have been more distracted than inspired by the prototype.

Following this initial confrontation of the three painters, the exhibition displays work by other Caravaggesque artists who found their way to Genoa, mainly through the patronage and collecting of Marcantonio. Among these is Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, whose *Christ carrying the Cross* (no.5; Fig.2) must have inspired, albeit superficially, both the design of Procaccini's *Return of the Prodigal Son* (Fig.1; ex-catalogue) and Orazio Gentileschi's decoration of Marcantonio's villa at Sampierdarena. Caracciolo is if anything over-represented with some pictures having no obvious Genoese connection, whereas Gentileschi, whose designs certainly influenced Procaccini, is not represented here at all.³ The exhibition next moves on to Simon Vouet, who was in touch with Giovan Carlo and painted his portrait (1621; Musée du Louvre, Paris) as well as a *St Sebastian* (1622; private collection; no.19), and visited Procaccini in Milan around 1620–21, apparently at his patron's suggestion. Finally there are several pictures by Matthias Stom and a discussion of his influence on the Genoese.

At the end of his life Procaccini broke away from his often rather self-conscious and performance-related art to produce some reticent, severe, deeply devotional, but still painterly and realistic works, such as the recently cleaned *Return of the Prodigal Son*, alas not exhibited, but illustrated here, that strike this reviewer as very close in spirit to Ribera. These paintings could be seen as



1. *Return of the Prodigal Son*, by Giulio Cesare Procaccini. 1618–20. Canvas, 142 by 191 cm. (Private collection).

precursors to those of Daniele Crespi, who is unfortunately excluded from this exhibition, perhaps because his work is based on a wider range of influences than Genoa and Milan, although that applies equally to Procaccini. It is difficult to know precisely which Ribera pictures Procaccini might have known, although the *Dead Christ* with a Marcantonio Doria provenance (c.1623; National Gallery, London; p.55) might be a good starting point in this debate. In any case it is less-studied influences, such as that of Ribera, far more than Caravaggio or Caracciolo, that surely animated the Lombard artist.

Rather than exploring this realistic aspect of Lombard and Genoese painting, and apart from a brief digression on the influence of Stom on the Genoese painters Gioacchino Assereto and Orazio de Ferrari, Morandotti's exhibition stresses that Strozzi was strongly influenced by the vast number of pictures and oil sketches painted by Procaccini for his principal patron, Giovan Carlo, from around 1610 until his

death in 1625.⁴ This tradition of freely painted proto-Baroque painting leads on to Valerio Castello (c.1645; private collection; no.37) and then, outside the scope of the exhibition, to Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione. Procaccini is particularly well represented, starting with the *Transfiguration* (1607–08; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan; no.11), originally in S. Celso, Milan, and commissioned by the Genoese Cesare Marino, a friend of the artist's first Milanese patron, Visconti Borromeo; the *Beheading of the Baptist* (private collection; no.18), commissioned by Giovan Carlo, dating perhaps from an early stage of their relationship around 1611; and the *Ecstasy of the Magdalene* (c.1618–20; National Gallery of Art, Washington; no.26), which is almost certainly identifiable in an inventory of the Doria archives and reflects the influence of Gentileschi on the Sauli family. Strozzi in his turn is represented by a fine *Madonna with Christ Child and St John* from the Brignole Sale family in Genoa (1620–22; Palazzo Rosso, Genoa; no.25) and a *Salome* (c.1627–

28; Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; no.21). However, for an exhibition whose catalogue places so much emphasis on the Procaccini–Strozzi axis, the Genoese master is somewhat under represented.

The next section of the exhibition offers an opportunity to savour Procaccini's freely painted oil sketches. To judge from the published inventories, this was a mode actively encouraged by his Genoese patron. Works on view include the Corregesque *Flight into Egypt* (c.1606–07; Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna; no.31); the justly celebrated but rarely seen Parmigianesque *Madonna and Child with a bishop saint* (1605–06; private collection; no.30), first published by Giovanni Testori in 1955; and the bozzetto (1618; Palazzo Spinola, Genoa; no.33) for the vast canvas of the *Last Supper* in the church of the Annunciazione, Genoa. This section loses much of its impact, however, through the absence of comparable sketches by Strozzi apart from the *Vision of S. Domenico* (1621–22; Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti, Genoa;



3. *The martyrdom of St Ursula*, by Bernardo Strozzi. 1615–18. Canvas, 104 by 130 cm. (Private collection; exh. [Gallerie d'Italia](#), Piazza Scala, Milan).

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no.34) associated with his work in the church of S. Domenico.

The exhibition closes with a section that includes versions of Rubens's *Apostles* series (1613–20; Galleria Pallavicini, Rome; nos.39 and 40) that surely inspired Procaccini's late series of *Apostles* from the Doria collection (1621–22; Palazzo Rosso, Genoa; nos.42–45). Rubens's altarpieces in Genoa certainly invigorated Procaccini during these years and never more so than in the *Last Supper* (1618; Santissima Annunziata, Genoa; no.38), which has recently been relined and refreshed following an unsuccessful restoration twenty years ago. This masterpiece brings the exhibition to a proper and triumphant conclusion, vindicating Morandotti's thesis concerning artistic life in Lombardy and Liguria without Caravaggio.

The catalogue contains an excellent introduction by Morandotti, and credit is also due to Piero Boccardo for his essay on Doria patronage (pp.43–67). The individual catalogue entries have mostly been delegated to a competent team of young scholars. If there is a criticism it is that too many of the entries, although fine as stand-alone cataloguing, fail to focus sufficiently on the themes of the exhibition and the reasons for the inclusion of particular works. This lack of editorial control occasionally extends to the selection of individual works: there are pictures on panel by Procaccini such as the *Holy Family* (private collection; no.24) and the *Holy Family with St John* (Galerie Canesso, Paris; no.22) that have a backwards-looking style, reminiscent of Florentine Renaissance masters, and other panel paintings from c.1620 that reflect the academic ideology of Federico Borromeo's academy in Milan. In this Genoese-orientated exhibition they are a distraction. The same goes for Procaccini's *Judgment of Paris* (1620–25; private collection; no.36). Recorded in the artist's will, it is not, as implied, an oil sketch but an erotic oil painting that, as Odette D'Albo in an imaginative catalogue entry explains (pp.188–89), regresses back to the spirit of Fabio Visconti Borromeo's patronage at Lainate near Milan some twenty years earlier.

¹ See the review by John Gash in this Magazine, 159 (2017), pp.1015–16.

² V. Farina: *Giovane Carlo Doria: promotore delle arti a Genova nel primo Seicento*, Florence 2002; see also the earlier article by the present author: 'Giulio Cesare Procaccini: ses attachés génoises', *Revue de l'art* 85 (1989), pp.45–60, which also acknowledges Fulco.

³ For Gentileschi's influence on Procaccini, see H. Brigstocke: exh. cat. *Procaccini in America*, New York (Hall & Knight) 2002, pp.100 and 108.

⁴ Catalogue: *L'ultimo Caravaggio: eredi e nuovi maestri: Napoli, Genova e Milano a confronto (1610–1640)*. Edited by Alessandro Marandotti. 246 pp. incl. 153 col. ills. (Skira, Milan, 2017), €38. ISBN 978-88-572-3680-3. For Marandotti's essay, 'Da Procaccini a Strozzi. L'alternativa a Caravaggio lungo l'asse Milano-Genova', see pp.13–19.