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Ursula Maddalena Caccia
(Moncalvo, 1596 - 1676)

*A ceramic bowl of fruits with a
red partridge*

oil on canvas
41.5 x 51.5 cm.;
16 3/8 x 20 1/4 in.

Provenance

With Berry-Hill Galleries, New York;
Private collection, Milan.

Literature

G. Godi (ed.), *Fasto e rigore. La Natura Morta nell'Italia settentrionale dal XVI al XVIII secolo*, exh. cat., Milan 2000, p. 42, fig. 7;
M. Corgnati (ed.), *Le immagini affamate: donne e cibo nell'arte; dalla natura morta ai disordini alimentari*, exh. cat., Aosta 2005, p. 177;
P. Caretta & D. Magnetti, *Orsola Maddalena Caccia*, exh. cat., Savigliano 2012, pp. 88-89.

Exhibited

Aosta, Museo Archeologico, *Le immagini affamate: donne e cibo nell'arte; dalla natura morta ai disordini alimentari*, 1 December 2005 – 7 May 2006;
San Secondo di Pinerolo, Castello di Miradolo, *Orsola Maddalena Caccia*, 3 March – 29 July 2012.

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This beautiful painting, a dense and concentrated image full of symbolic meanings, depicts a ceramic bowl of prunes, figs and peaches. A large red partridge (it could also be a rock partridge, but the differences are negligible) settles to peck at a peach.

The work was first attributed to Ursula Maddalena Caccia by Franco Moro. It was then published by Alessandro Morandotti who wrote about it when it was with Berry-Hill Galleries in New York, and finally by me on the occasion of a monographic exhibition on Ursula in 2012.¹

The presence of the bowl of fruit (*'alzatina'*) is testament to the painting's strong relationship with the composed still lifes (*'natura composta'*) of Fede Galizia and Panfilo Nuvolone. It is likely that the painters knew each other in person, although we do not know how: Ursula probably travelled to Milan since, in the role of Mother Abbess, she was allowed to leave the walls of the convent from time to time. Our painting is light and delicate, indeed close to the three *Vases of Flowers* conserved at the Museo Civico di Moncalvo, and therefore chronologically approximate to them (probably around 1620-1630, but the dates are uncertain).²

The quality of both her religious paintings and her wonderful still lifes place Ursula among the European female protagonists of these art genres. Their characteristic quality is a deep Christian symbolism, which is linked to the thoughts of Federico Borromeo. Since the predicaments of St. Ambrose, the partridge has been a symbol of *lust*. This is probably its meaning in the St. Jerome by Antonello da Messina (National Gallery, London), where we see it in the foreground on the left, and it has an analogous meaning in our painting. The bird is pecking at a piece of fruit, perhaps a peach, and this alludes to *sin* (a pommel, connected to the fruit of Adam and Eve and hence to the symbols of the apple, the pear, the figs: in Madonna with Child compositions, the Child often holds it in his hands, hence it assumes the meaning of salvation and redemption).

In the *Iconology* of Cesare Ripa (consulted edition, Padua 1618), the partridge is considered a symbol of lust because *'bene spesso é da tanta rabbia agitata, pel coito, & accesa da*

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tanta intemperanza di libidine, che alle volte il maschio rompe l'uova, che la femmina cova, essendo ella nel covare ritenuta, & impedita dal congiungersi seco' ('it is often so upset out of rage and coition and so flamed by the intemperance of the libido that it can happen that the male breaks the eggs brooded by the female because if she is hatching she cannot unite with him'). Nevertheless, in the present painting we should notice that the peach still remains attached to the leaves and this is not a random choice: in ancient times, the image of the peach with a leaf attached to the petiole symbolically represented the heart and the Word. Moreover in the Renaissance, this meaning was extended to symbolise the Truth. The fig (both the tree and the fruit) is also cited in the Bible (forty-four times): its meanings are heterogeneous and linked to the theme of fertility, such as the 'Parable of the infertile Fig' in the *Gospel of Luke*, where the fig symbolises Israel and the sterile inability to recognise the value of the Word of God.

Jesus uses the metaphor of the leafless fig to mobilise the people toward redemption from sin (Mt 21, 18-22; Mc 11, 12-14.20-25; Lc 13, 6-9). Moreover in apocryphal texts like *The Book of Adam and Eve*, the fig is the tree from which the Progenitors ate the fruits, hence it is the tree of sin. The purple plum is also, according to the Catholic tradition, a symbol of Passion and Christ's death. In our painting the partridge (lust, sin) tries to pick at the peach (Truth), but is unable to scratch it: the peach is intact. As such, it is likely that the highly peculiar subject of this painting can be considered a refined metaphor of the Triumph of Truth (the truth of the Word of God) over sin (lust, but also original sin and the death of Christ on the cross). Thus more generally, it is an allegory of Redemption and eternal life.

The order of the Orsolines, to which Ursula belonged, was the protégé of Federico Borromeo. It is therefore probable that the young nun made a trip (maybe the only trip throughout her life) to Milan, having been invited by the Cardinal. That trip would have been truly formative for Ursula: she would have come into contact with the external world and seen the works of artists she only knew through engravings. It must have been life-changing for a woman who entered the convent when she was still an adolescent accepting the will of her father, Guglielmo Caccia (known as *Il Moncalvo*), an artist and very devoted to the Lord. In Milan she is likely to have seen the collection of Cardinal Borromeo, which was rich in still

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lives, and thus she would have been impressed by the works of the inimitable Jan Brueghel the Elder, which would exert a long-lasting influence not only on her subsequent few still life paintings, but also on the landscapes in the background of her religious scenes.³

Perhaps it is during her meditation on the lessons of Federico (for instance those of the *Sacri Holy Arguments*, the *Laudes* and *The three books of the pleasures of the Christian mind*) and those of St. Francis of Sales and St. Ignatius of Loyola, that Ursula conceived the specific functions of her still lifes through a complex process of translation of the holy image in flowers and fruits: *‘Sì come un dipintore, riguardando fiso in una imagine e quella diligentemente osservando, un’altra assai somigliante a quella primiera con l’opera sua ne viene ad esprimere, così noi per la via del contemplare una certa somiglianza di Dio veniamo noi stessi a formare’* (‘Just like a painter, who stares at an observed image and comes to express yet another image, which is very close to the first, so we do: by means of contemplation, we can give shape to an image that bears a certain resemblance to God’).

We could also make a further reflection on Ursula’s precocious interest in naturalistic representation, as is evident in some of her religious paintings such as *St. Luke in the study* in the Church of St. Francis, Moncalvo. This translates in her works in ‘the meaning of the object’ and in the abundance of descriptive signs (from books to objects and flowers: that is to say, *naturalia* and *artificialia* in the very ‘Paleottian’ sense of the word).⁴ As a true specialist of the still life genre, she adopted a radically modern *qualitative* way of looking at things (in contrast with her father), that placed her at the very limit of the overcoming of mannerism in the footsteps of the greatest Flemish still life painters and in light of new naturalistic interests, which were widespread in Europe from the beginning of the second half of the 16th century.

Sister Ursula Maddalena Caccia was born in Moncalvo in December 1596, the second-born of the nine children of the painter Guglielmo Caccia and Laura Oliva: her certificate of baptism is dated December 4th. Her first name was Theodora, which changed after taking the vows to Ursula Maddalena. She stayed in the convent of Bianzé (whose building is today the town hall) until 1625, the year of her father's death. Straight afterwards, she came back

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to Moncalvo, where she lived for the rest of her life in the convent founded for her and her sisters by their father Guglielmo (today the headquarters of the town hall and civic museum). Contemporaneous documents state: *'possi godere delle fatiche di sor Orsola Madalena una di dette figliuole istruita nella pittura senza impedimenti però delli soliti esercitij spirituali'* ('may one of those sisters, who has the gift of painting, enjoy this activity as long as it doesn't distract from the usual spiritual exercises'). It is clear that the painter could therefore enjoy a certain degree of freedom compared to the other cloistered nuns. After a long career, during which she painted dozens of altarpieces throughout the Monferrato, Alessandria, Vercelli, Lomellina and Mantua areas, Ursula died an octogenarian in Moncalvo in 1676.

Alberto Cottino

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Footnotes

¹ A. Morandotti, in *Fasto e rigore*, exh. cat., curated by G. Godi, Milan 2000, p. 42; A. Cottino, in *Orsola Maddalena Caccia*, exh. cat., curated by P. Caretta & D. Magnetti, Savigliano 2012, pp. 88-89.

² On the Moncalvo paintings, see A. Cottino, in *Orsola Maddalena Caccia*, exh. cat., curated by P. Caretta & D. Magnetti, Savigliano 2012, pp. 78-79.

³ On the still lifes of Ursula and their symbolic components, see A. Cottino, 'Metafore dipinte: le nature morte 'devote' di Orsola Maddalena Caccia', *ibid.*, pp. 37-46.

⁴ F. Borromeo, *Sacri Ragionamenti*, Milan 1632, VII, *Ragionamento VI*, p. 178. See M. Giuliani, 'Lo "spirituale ammaestramento" di Federico Borromeo alla città di Milano: la questione antropologica', in *Memorandum*, 6, 2004, pp. 89-113.