

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Mattia Preti

(Taverna (Calabria) 1613 – Valetta 1699)

The Return of the Prodigal Son

post 1653

oil on canvas

157 x 129 cm.;

61 3/4 x 50 3/4 in.

Provenance

Infante Sebastian Gabriel de Borbon;
His heirs by descent to the Duke of Hernani y Ansole;
The Dowager Duchess of Hernani;
The Dowager Marchioness of Borghetto, and thence by descent to the previous owner.

We are grateful to Dr Keith Sciberras for confirming the attribution of the present picture to Mattia Preti following first-hand inspection. Dr Sciberras dates it to the 1650s, after the artist's arrival in Naples in 1653.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

This beautifully executed, unpublished painting of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* is a significant addition to the known versions by Preti of a subject which was evidently dear to his heart, since he painted no fewer than 8 renditions ranging in date from the 1640s to the 1680s.

Preti's early treatments of the subject include the large, elaborate composition in the Musée Tessé in Le Mans, which John Spike dates to c. 1645.¹ That painting's inclusion of the Colosseum and Trajan's Column are clear topographical references to contemporary Rome, and the Caravaggesque figures are typical of Preti's early work. More or less contemporary in date and with a similar Caravaggesque chiaroscuro and handling of the figures, but very different in the treatment of the subject, is the painting in the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen in Munich,² where, as in our picture, Preti dispenses with all the elaborate scaffolding of the Le Mans painting to focus on the tender encounter between the Prodigal Son and his father.

Following his move to Naples in 1653, Preti's treatments of the subject seem to have become increasingly elaborate. Probably from around 1654-55 dates the exquisitely executed painting much admired by Longhi in the Palazzo Reale, Naples (fig. 1),³ where the combination of strong chiaroscuro and liquid brushwork perhaps reveal the influence of Guercino (1591 – 1666). Shortly afterwards, Preti painted his most elaborate treatment of the subject: the painting in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (fig. 2),⁴ where the classical portico of the father's palace provides a marvelously theatrical setting for the scene of reconciliation. This canvas, which is stylistically similar to the ceiling canvases painted between 1657-59 for San Pietro a Maiella, may be one of five paintings painted in 1656 for the Duke of Maddaloni.

The culmination of these more elaborate treatments of the subject - and the largest and most dramatic in character - is the canvas in the Museo Nazionale,⁵ dateable to the mid 1670s, where the upright format and the use of a column to frame the right-hand side of the composition are reminiscent of Veronese (1528 – 1588), but the dark tonality is typical of the works of the final two decades of Preti's career. In the 1680s, Preti returned to a more

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

intimate treatment of the subject focusing on the tender reconciliation between father and son in a much-copied composition, whose prime version was formerly with Semenzato.⁶

Both stylistically and in terms of the treatment of the subject, our painting is comparable with the version in Munich where the painting of the figure of the Prodigal Son is particularly similar. However, the liquid handling and glowing colouring, which recall the work of Guercino, suggest our picture may have been painted shortly after the artist's arrival in Naples in 1653, probably around the same date as the painting in the Palazzo Reale, Naples, of 1654-55, with which it shares some stylistic affinities.

Little is known of Preti's early life prior to his arrival in Rome where he moved to join his brother, Gregorio Preti, in 1630. There he completed his training and enjoyed his first successes. On his way to Rome, Preti may have studied briefly in Naples where he would have encountered the work of Caravaggio (1571 – 1610) and Ribera (1591 – 1652), the two artists who seem to have exercised the most formative influence on his early career. In 1633 he was listed, together with his brother Gregorio, at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome and, according to De Dominici, he enjoyed the support of Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi (later Pope Clement IX) and of Olimpia Aldobrandini, Princess of Rossano. Two early works, the *Concert* (St Petersburg, Hermitage) and *Draughtsplayers* (Oxford, Ashmolean) show the inspiration of Caravaggio and his followers Bartolomeo Manfredi (1582 – 1622) and Valentin de Boulogne (1591 – 1632). Other works of the 1630s, however, such as the *Flight from Troy* (Rome, Palazzo Corsini) and the altarpiece of the *Baptism of Saint Augustine* (L'Aquila, Museo Nazionale, Abruzzo) reveal the influence of Simon Vouet's *Scenes from the Life of Saint Francis* (1624, Rome, San Lorenzo in Lucina). Furthermore, paintings like his *Denial of Saint Peter* (Rome, Palazzo Corsini) show that Preti was receptive to the dramatic styles of Giovanni Lanfranco (1582 – 1647) and Guercino. Under the influence of these other masters, Preti developed a softened and more lyrical version of Caravaggism, combining the chiaroscuro of Caravaggio and Ribera with the liquid brushwork and soft lighting of Guercino.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

During the 1630s Preti seems to have moved peripatetically between Bologna, Parma, Modena and Venice to further his artistic studies, and this, in part, accounts for the range of influences discernible in his early work. By 1640 he was back in Rome and then between 1644 and 1650 he moved to Modena, where he painted the vault and cupola of the choir of San Biagio. In 1650, Preti won the prestigious commission to fresco three scenes from the *Life of Saint Andrew* in the Church of San Andrea della Valle - which was designed by Bernini (1598 – 1680) and was already celebrated for Lanfranco's Baroque fresco in the dome (completed 1651), as well as Domenichino's pendentive scenes from the *Life of Saint Andrew* (1624-8) - but his work received considerable hostile criticism. Preti's last Roman work was the overdoor fresco of *San Carlo Borromeo Distributing Alms* (1652) for the church of San Carlo Catinari.

In 1653 Preti left Rome for Naples, perhaps spurred by the opportunity of obtaining lucrative local commissions and filling the vacancy provided by the recent death of Ribera, though these plans were to be somewhat thwarted by the rivalry of Luca Giordano (1634 – 1705). Nevertheless, by the mid-1650s, Preti had secured some important Neapolitan patrons including the collectors Gaspar Roomer and Diomedes Carafa, Duke of Maddaloni. Through Roomer, Preti also secured important commissions from Roomer's compatriot Ferdinand van den Einden for whom he painted the great Riberesque *Feast of Herod*, now in the Toledo Museum. This was one of several banquet scenes where Preti united Caravaggesque chiaroscuro with a Venetian bravura. During this period in Naples, Preti also enjoyed the patronage of the Knights of Malta. His last years (1661-99) was spent in Malta, where he carried out some ambitious decorations of the vault, apse and side arches of the Church of Saint John in Valetta, with scenes from the *Life of Saint John the Baptist*. Although Preti was to complain that the financial compensation received for this huge commission was meagre, the patronage of the Knights of Malta and the prestige which the Order conferred on him when, in 1662, they promoted him to the rank of Knight of Justice, gave him both status and financial stability during the last phase of his career and ensured him a steady flow of commissions. Preti's final work was in the cathedral of Saint Paul, Valetta, where he painted an altarpiece (1682) and frescoed several scenes from the life of Saint Paul.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Figure 1. Mattia Preti, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, oil on canvas, 202 x 285 cm.
Palazzo Reale, Naples



Figure 2. Mattia Preti, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, oil on canvas, 255 x 368 cm.
Museo di Capodimonte, Naples

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

Footnotes

- ¹ John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti, Catalogo Ragionato dei Dipinti*, Florence 1999, cat. no. 61.
- ² John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti, Catalogo Ragionato dei Dipinti*, Florence 1999, cat. no. 110.
- ³ John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti, Catalogo Ragionato dei Dipinti*, Florence 1999, cat. no. 125.
- ⁴ John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti, Catalogo Ragionato dei Dipinti*, Florence 1999, cat. no. 119.
- ⁵ John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti, Catalogo Ragionato dei Dipinti*, Florence 1999, cat. no. 172.
- ⁶ John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti, Catalogo Ragionato dei Dipinti*, Florence 1999, cat. no. 438.