

# COLNAGHI



GIOVANNI MARTINELLI  
(Montevarchi 1600-1659 Florence)

*DEATH COMES TO THE  
TABLE OF THE MISER*

oil on canvas  
102 x 126 cm; 40 ¼ x 49 ½ in.

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Provenance

Monsignor Lorenzo Corsi (1601-1656), Florence;  
Corsi Salviati Collection, Florence.

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Bibliography:

Baldinotti, A., Santi, B., and Spinelli, R., *Giovanni Martinelli pittore di Montevarchi. Maestro del Seicento fiorentino*, Florence 2011, pp. 26-27, reproduced figs. 5-6, 64 and 98-101, cat. no. 1.4.

Pegazzano, D., 'Corsi in *Quadriere e committenza nobiliare a Firenze nel Seicento e nel Settecento*, vol. I, Pisa 2015, pp. 95-96, reproduced fig. 6.

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Exhibited:

*Giovanni Martinelli pittore di Montevarchi. Maestro del Seicento fiorentino*, Montevarchi, Auditorium Comunale, 19 March – 19 July 2011.

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Unknown before the 2011 exhibition, it was thanks to Domenica Pegazzano's archival research that this striking painting was definitively linked to the Corsi family, whose palace on the via Tornabuoni housed one of the most significant collections assembled in seventeenth-century Florence. The Corsi accounts for 1638 record a payment of seventy *lire* made on 24 March to Giovanni Martinelli and subsequent payments on 26 July and 20 August for '*diversi lavori fatti e da farsi*' on behalf of monsignor Lorenzo Corsi.<sup>1</sup> This, combined with three later references to a painting in the Corsi inventories matching the subject of the present work, signifies that the painting likely formed part of the '*diversi lavori*' carried out for Lorenzo Corsi in 1638.<sup>2</sup>

Lorenzo Corsi, papal vice-legate in Avignon between 1645 and 1653, lived between Florence and Rome when in Italy, maintaining close connections with the Medici and Barberini families in each city respectively, with Ferdinando II de' Medici entrusting him with two important legations to France, the latter at the death of Marie de' Medici in 1642. Lorenzo was particularly close to Carlo and Gian Carlo Medici, both of whom were cardinals, and all three held passions for music, theatre, rare flowers and landscaping, as well as sharing artistic tastes. Indeed, their closely connected patronage is demonstrated by archival records indicating that by 1637 Giovan Carlo owned a painting by Martinelli entitled *Death Comes to the Banquet Table*, probably the version in the New Orleans Museum of Art depicting a skeleton approaching a table of richly dressed youths (fig. 1).

The subject of the painting is an innovative take on the closely related and classic themes of the *memento mori* and *vanitas*. The former can be considered a meditation on the transience of life and the certainty of death, while the latter is more akin to a reminder of the futility of the possession of worldly goods and an exhortation to the viewer to live morally. Within the cultured and courtly world of Medicean Florence these were popular themes, discussed during the philosophical debates held at the various academies of the city. The subject was clearly significant to Martinelli, testified by the five known versions by his hand which, as well as the present picture and aforementioned canvas in New Orleans, include an autograph reproduction of the New Orleans picture in the Etro collection, the painting at the North Carolina Museum of Art (fig. 2) and finally a version whose present whereabouts are unknown (fig. 3), though which was formerly with Colnaghi in 1959.

The Corsi picture distinguishes itself from the other versions in its reduced composition and, most importantly, in the presence of the old miser, who replaces the festive group of youths. As a stunned boy looks on, an open-mouthed Death, in the form of a skeleton, grips the hand of an old miser counting his pile of coins, determined to hold onto his gains even though his

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<sup>1</sup> Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Guicciardini Corsi Salviati, Libri di amministrazione 492, cc. 92v, 101v, 107r).

<sup>2</sup> The references are: '*Une avaro*' (1747), '*Un vecchio avaro con la morte* (1816) and *Un giocatore con la morte* (1894). The inventories can be found in *Archivio di Stato di Firenze*, Guicciardini Corsi Salviati, Versamento 1992, nos. 5, 1017 and 1249.

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end is imminent. At the left of the composition a diabolical figure, his red flesh alluding to the fires of hell, sticks his tongue out in a manic grin and waits in anticipation to seize the soul of the old sinner.

The painting clearly references two very different artists: Jacopo Ligozzi and Pietro Paolini. The impact of Ligozzi, Martinelli's teacher in Florence, is visible in both the subject and the figure of the skeleton. The painting finds a close counterpart in Ligozzi's *Allegory of Avarice* (fig. 4), now in Washington. The work on paper, dated to 1590, is a study for the fragment in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 5), and shows an old man seated at a table, writing in his account book, with sacks of coins on the floor. He is surrounded by three skeletons, a flying demon and a young woman resting her head on her right arm and holding a sack of coins in her left.

The influence of Paolini, whom Martinelli may have known during his purported roman period towards the end of the 1620s, manifests itself in several ways. A point of reference for Martinelli may have been a canvas like Paolini's *Achilles among the daughters of Lycomedes* (fig. 6), circa 1625-30, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum. Parallels can be drawn between both pictures in their use of a muted palette, enlivened by the rich flashes of red used in the fabrics. Compositionally there are also similarities, most noticeably in the arrangement of the figures, seen at half-length and placed around a table. There is also a physiognomic closeness, as can be seen by a comparison of the head of the old miser with that of Lycomedes. Indeed, Martinelli's *Death comes to the banqueting table*, previously with Colnaghi, was thought to be by Paolini when it was sold at Sotheby's in 1961.<sup>3</sup>

Martinelli was born in Montevarchi, a Tuscan town in the province of Arezzo, moving to Florence in late adolescence to study and live with Jacopo Ligozzi, remaining there until 1625. There is no documented trace of Martinelli for the next decade, though it is very likely he enjoyed an extended stay in Rome, profiting from the study of the caravaggesque painting he would have encountered there. Martinelli returned to Tuscany by at least 1632, the date at which he painted the *Miracle of the mule* for the church of San Francesco in Peschia, near Pistoia, before settling again in Florence, where he enrolled in the *Accademia del Disegno* in 1636, living there for the remainder of his career.

Long neglected, it was not until 2011, that the importance of Martinelli to Seicento Italian painting was widely recognised, with the publication of the first monographic volume dedicated to the artist and the Montevarchi exhibition organized by the Uffizi (fig. 7) proving to be key turning points. His allegorical representations, in harmony with the intense philosophical climate of the Florentine academies and the Medicean circle, are amongst the most accomplished and innovative of the period, with his half-length representations of

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<sup>3</sup> See Nicolson, B., *Caravaggism in Europe*, Turin 1989, vol. I, p. 104, and vol. II, fig. 365.

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female figures and his series on Death, of which the present painting constitutes a significant example, being the most celebrated of these.

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Fig. 1. Giovanni Martinelli, *Death comes to the banquet table*, oil on canvas, 121 x 174 cm, New Orleans Museum of Art



Fig. 2. Giovanni Martinelli, *Death comes to the banquet table*, oil on canvas, 114 x 158 cm, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh

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Fig. 3. Giovanni Martinelli, *Death comes to the banquet table*, oil on canvas, 76 x 99 cm, present whereabouts unknown.

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Fig. 4. Jacopo Ligozzi, *Allegory of Avarice*, pen and ink with brown wash highlighted with gold, 31 x 20 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington



Fig. 5. Jacopo Ligozzi, *Allegory of Avarice*, oil on canvas, 139 x 86 cm, Metropolitan Museum, New York



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Fig. 6. Pietro Paolini, *Achilles among the daughters of Lycomedes*, oil on canvas, 127 x 201 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

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Fig. 7. Image from the exhibition *Giovanni Martinelli pittore di Montevarchi, Montevarchi, Auditorium Comunale*, 19 March – 19 July 2011, showing *Death comes to the table of the old miser* and the *Miracle of the mule*