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Fede Galizia

(Milan, 1578? – 1630)

*Still life of peaches, pears, figs
with butterflies and a bumblebee*

oil on panel

34 x 51.5 cm.;

13 3/8 x 20 1/4 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Europe.

Literature

F. M. Ferro, 'Il lume interiore di Fede Galizia: riflessioni in margine ad una nuova natura morta, a due tavolette poco note e ad un'altra inedita', in *Valori Tattili*, 10/11, 2017-2018, pp. 74-84.

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This small and fascinating panel, with its sweet-scented archaic character, was recently published by Filippo Maria Ferro as the work of Fede Galizia,¹ in a dense essay full of interesting suggestions. The panel depicts pears, peaches and figs resting on a table; on the left we can observe a butterfly (*Papilio podalirius*) on the wing, irresistibly attracted by the light, and another on the right (*Vanessa atalanta*), delicately poised on the peach twig. Great attention to naturalistic detail is displayed in the depiction of both insects.

Although no fruit bowl is represented in this painting, it retains the same feel as the 'composed' still-lives that were characteristic of the work of the Lombard painter and of an archaic period in still-life painting, as the fruit is arranged in an orderly manner and assembled into small groups. The silent and contemplative atmosphere that dominates - despite the flight of the butterfly on the left, which enlivens the scene - brings to mind the idea of the contemplation of nature as a mirror of creation, as advocated by Cardinal Federico Borromeo. X-radiography of the panel has revealed the presence of several pentiments, the most significant of which is the erasure of an open window that was positioned top left.

A butterfly hovering over a table with fruit and a fruit bowl is also represented in a panel by Panfilo Nuvolone in a private collection in Bergamo, which was exhibited years ago in an exhibition devoted to Lombard still-life painting. A delicately painted panel in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana (inv. 149) – now attributed to an unknown 17th-century Italian painter but which has already been ascribed to Fede Galizia, and was probably present in the 1618 inventory of Federico Borromeo's collection – depicts a butterfly in flight positioned in an identical manner above a slant of light that strikes the wall, with further similarities in the construction of the image that are perhaps not incidental, though which are not compelling stylistically (fig. 1).² These are elements that might indicate the existence of an important prototype, which could be the painting we are studying here.

The present panel cannot be defined as a characteristic work by Fede Galizia. The few still-life paintings which have so far been attributed to her with certainty solely represent small glass or chiselled metal stands (*alzate*), or fruit-filled majolica dishes from Faenza with other

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pieces of fruit scattered on a table. In one example (Museo Ala Ponzzone, Cremona, with various versions) a wicker basket is filled with chestnuts. We are, however, certain that Fede Galizia painted other still-life paintings with '*frutti diversi*', therefore not arranged in a fruit bowl, because four small panels with this subject are referred to in the inventory of Cardinal Cesare Monti (1650), which were later dispersed. They are described as '*quadreti bislonghi*', which the present writer has linked to the panel formerly owned by the Infante of Spain Don Sebastián Gabriel de Borbón, exhibited and studied in the present exhibition (fig. 2). For the moment, no other documentary references have emerged, but this nevertheless bears witness to the fact that Fede Galizia did also paint other types of subject matter in addition to those for which she is famous today.

The quality of the present work is remarkable and, even taking into consideration the compositional differences, the similarity with details from accepted works by the Lombard painter appears - in my opinion - to be convincing (fig. 3). This is also true of the similarities with the panel referred to above formerly owned by the Infante of Spain - evidently a much later work, in that it is more articulate in terms of the distribution of the objects in space - but in which the fruit is painted with the same palette of colours and certain details, such as the pears, are so similar that they could easily be transferred from one painting to the other (see figs. 2 & 3). The visible presence of insects on the fruit is an additional detail that links these two panels.

The light that falls diagonally across the present composition and the arrangement of the fruit into small groups are certainly an indication of the archaic quality of this painting, and its undoubted earlier execution in comparison to the panel formerly owned by the Infante of Spain.³ In my opinion, more than a couple of decades may have elapsed between the two works, suggesting a slow but perceptible stylistic and formal evolution in the painter's still-life paintings, hitherto not identified in the scholarship, but which appears absolutely logical and plausible. Comparison with the details of the fruit in the painting formerly in Amsterdam in the Anholt collection, dated 1602 (and in the variant from a private collection in Bassano displayed in the exhibition in Trento, here fig. 4), as well as in the painting of the fruit bowl auctioned at Koller, Zurich, 19 July 2020, lot 3018 (fig. 5), also probably dateable to the early

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years of Fede Galizia's career, in which two almost identical pears appear, would seem to confirm an early date of execution.⁴

The fall of light in the present composition, which generates a dense shadow on the left side of the background wall, cannot fail to remind us of the famous examples by Caravaggio. The possible relationship between Fede Galizia, still-life painting more generally in Lombardy, and Caravaggio, is a fundamental question that is yet to be resolved, but which is in this case unavoidable. At the very least, we have here an instance of the autonomous elaboration of shared cultural concepts, but not necessarily the fruit of direct acquaintance. It is evident, even if not in this case, that for Fede Galizia as for Orsola Maddalena Caccia (the other great representative of still-life painting in the early decades of the 17th century), the question arises of their possible first-hand knowledge of Caravaggio's *Basket of Fruit* (*Canestra*) now in the collection of the Ambrosiana, but then owned by Federico Borromeo. However, the actual accessibility of Caravaggio's masterpiece at that time is still shrouded in mystery.

Alberto Cottino

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Figure 1. Early 17th-century painter, *Still life with pears, flowers and a butterfly.*
Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan



Figure 2. Fede Galizia, *Still life of apples, pears, cucumbers, figs and a melon,* c. 1625 –
1630. Colnaghi, London

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Figure 3. Details of the present work; of the *Alzata with plums, pears and a rose*, Private collection, Bassano; and of the *Still life of apples, pears, cucumbers, figs and a melon* formerly in the collection of the Infante of Spain, Don Sebastiàn Gabriel de Borbón



Figure 4. Fede Galizia, *Alzata with plums, pears and a rose*. Private collection, Bassano

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Figure 5. Fede Galizia, *Still life of fruits with grapes in a white ceramic bowl, with pomegranate and pears on a stone plinth*. Koller, Zurich, 19 July 2020, lot 3018

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Footnotes

¹ F. M. Ferro, 'Il lume interiore di Fede Galizia: riflessioni in margine ad una nuova natura morta, a due tavolette poco note e ad un'altra inedita', in *Valori Tattili*, 10/11, 2017-2018, pp. 74-84.

² *Natura morta lombarda*, exh. cat., (eds.) F. Caroli & A. Veca, Milan 1999, pp. 86-87, n. 12; M. Rossi & A. Rovetta, *La Pinacoteca Ambrosiana*, Milan 1997, p. 190.

³ This is not a unique example in the painter's *œuvre*: there is even a double diagonal cut of light in the *Still life of a stand with figs and flowers* (private collection), which appeared in an exhibition at the Galleria Lorenzelli in Bergamo and was subsequently published several times: P. Lorenzelli & A. Veca (eds.), *Forma vera. Contributi a una storia della natura morta italiana*, Bergamo 1985, p. 143, plate 28; F. Porzio (ed.) & F. Zeri (scientific direction), *La natura morta in Italia*, Milan 1989, vol. I, p. 222; F. Caroli, *Fede Galizia*, Turin 1989, p. 92, n. 49; M. Di Veroli (ed.), *In Proscenio III. Nature morte europee tra Seicento e Settecento*, exh. cat., Rome 1991.

⁴ The variant of the Anholt panel presented at the exhibition *Fede Galizia mirabile pittoressa*, edited by G. Agosti, L. Giacomelli and J. Stoppa is illustrated in the catalogue, no. 39, pp. 304-309, catalogue entry by G. Agosti & J. Stoppa (here fig. 4).