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Annibale Carracci
(Bologna 1560 – Rome 1609)

Head of a young Man (Self-portrait?)

c. 1587 - 1588

oil on paper, attached to canvas

42 x 30 cm.

16 1/2 x 11 3/4 in.

Literature

D. Benati, *Figure come il naturale: il ritratto a Bologna dai Carracci al Crespi*, Lausanne 2001, p. 18, fig. 4;

D. Benati & A. Riccòmini (eds.), *Annibale Carracci*, Milan 2006, entry II.11.

Reference Bibliography

D. Posner, *Annibale Carracci. A Study in the Reform of Italian Painting around 1590*, London 1971;

P. J. Cooney & G. Malafarina, *L'opera completa di Annibale Carracci*, Milan 1976;

C. Dempsey, *Annibale Carracci and the Beginnings of Baroque Style*, Glückstadt 1977;

M. Mena Marqués, 'Dibujos italianos del siglo XVII' in *Museo del Prado. Catálogo de dibujos*, Madrid 1983, vol. VI, pp. 52-54;

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A. E. Pérez Sánchez, 'Carracci, Annibale' in *Enciclopedia, Museo Nacional del Prado*, Madrid (consulted 28/04/2020);

N. Turner & J. M. Matilla, 'Dibujos italianos del siglo XVI' in *Museo del Prado. Catálogo de dibujos*, Madrid 2004, vol. V, p. 284.

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Annibale Carracci is considered one of the leading proponents of Seicento classicism which, as an alternative to the tenebrism propounded by Caravaggio (1571 - 1610), replaced Mannerist elegance. This refined tendency with its somewhat courtly air was also introduced by Agostino and Ludovico Carracci (the brother and cousin of Annibale), and would have a significant subsequent influence.

Annibale embarked on his artistic training as an engraver in the company of his brother. Around 1582, he entered the Accademia dei Desiderosi (later known as the Accademia degli Incamminati), where students were given both an artistic and a literary education. There was also a rigorous emphasis on study from life, which had been almost totally abandoned during the artificial cultivation of the *maniera*. Teaching at the Accademia insisted on the relevance of drawing from life as a preparation for final canvases.

It is thus not by chance that Annibale's *oeuvre* includes numerous studies of nudes of everyday figure types, and studies of animals and domestic objects that are surprising in their liveliness. The observations of Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez are both insightful and relevant here: 'The Carracci, particularly Annibale, were also the pioneers of the genre of caricature, which involves a careful observation of the most characteristic traits of individual human personality.'¹

Annibale's interest in observing real life undoubtedly found its fullest expression when he embarked on his career as an independent artist. Carracci formulated a highly individual language that embraced a powerful naturalism - also evident in the work of his contemporaries such as Bartolomeo Passerotti (1529 - 1592) - that is evident in the present masterly portrait.

The similarity between the physical appearance of this sitter and self-portraits by Annibale (see, for example, fig. 1) have led experts such as Daniele Benati to suggest that the present work is a self-portrait, executed in the late 1580s and painted with the help of a mirror.² Whether or not this is the case, the rigorous observation of the model, based on

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direct study from life, offers an interesting contrast with the excessive idealisation characteristic of the Mannerism that prevailed in Bologna during this period.

In addition, in his religious and mythological compositions Carracci's serenity of expression gave rise to a revival of the classical models of the Renaissance which, in Pérez Sánchez's words, he endowed 'with a grandeur that heralds the High Baroque'.³ Pérez Sánchez offers an interesting summary of Carracci's stylistic evolution: in the earlier stages of his career he executed works like *The Bean Eater*,⁴ c. 1580; between 1583 and 1584 he collaborated with his brother and their cousin on the decoration of the Palazzo Fava in Bologna, painting 'frescoes of enormous elegance and colouring of the Venetian type'.⁵

Such influences reached their pinnacle following Annibale's trip to Parma and Venice, where he became acquainted with the work of Correggio (1489 – 1534) and Titian (c. 1485 – 1576). It was during this phase that Carracci painted the two masterpieces now housed in the Museo del Prado: *Venus and Adonis*⁶ and *The Assumption of the Virgin*.⁷ As a consequence of the fame that Carracci acquired as a fresco painter in 1595, he was summoned to Rome by Cardinal Odoardo Farnese to decorate his palace. The ceiling that the artist painted in the Palazzo Farnese (based on Ovid and representing the loves of gods) is considered one of the greatest examples of this technique.

As classical in subject matter as it is innovative in concept, in its own day Carracci's ceiling was considered 'the ideal model of beauty and harmony [...] which combines the most idyllic interpretation of the literary account with a precise observation of nature, and which provided a source of inspiration not only for his numerous followers (Albani, Domenichino, Lanfranco, etc) but also for Rubens'.⁸ This fact undoubtedly reflects the enormous influence of the artist on future generations and it is not by chance that Annibale is recognised as 'one of the founders of modern art to no less a degree than Caravaggio, from whom he so differed but like whom he was similarly opposed to the 'caprices' of Mannerism'.⁹

An essential text for the study of the present work is Daniele Benati's entries, reproduced below:

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'Ignored in the literature, with the exception of its first publication by the present author in my monograph *Figure come il naturale* (2001, p. 18, fig. 4), it has now been possible to examine this portrait first hand for the first time. The painting has an old attribution to Giovanni Battista Moroni but this can be rejected in favour of the youngest of the Carracci family and with a dating to the late 1580s.

Particularly striking is the painter's ability to convey the sitter's decided, concentrated expression through the fixed, direct gaze that is further emphasised by the arched right eyebrow. Also notable is the use of the technique of oil on paper, which is more fluid and has a more immediate preparation than canvas as it allows for rapid sketches from life. For this reason the work can easily be associated with the typology of '*testa di carattere*'.

This typology reflects an artistic exercise devised to study the expressions of the face. As always with the Carracci, it reveals that the boundary between portrait and 'character head' was a fine one. In this case, there is further tension in drawing this distinction owing to the way in which the image was likely captured: the bust length pose in three-quarter profile and the direction of the gaze suggest that the artist made use of his own face in order to study the severe, frowning expression, making use of a mirror in line with his habitual practice.

The features of the face largely correspond to those seen in the precocious *Self-portrait as a Gardener* (present location unknown, fig. 1) and the slightly later *Self-portrait with three figures before a Mirror* (Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan). In those works the viewpoint, with the sitter seen slightly from below, accentuates the breadth of the nose which is slightly narrower in the present work. In comparison to the relaxed image of the artist as a gardener, engaged in nothing more than satisfying the basic requirements of life, here the artist studies himself in order to take on a more ambitious expression and intent, aware of his own moral superiority and with even a hint of disdain.

This is probably a more artificial rather than profoundly felt type of presentation but the result nonetheless has remarkable force, which is also due to the rapid handling of the brushstroke with its Venetian impasto that perfectly conveys the dark mass of the hair, the beard and the froth of the pale-toned collar while carefully defining the eyes with their scrutinising gaze.

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Due to these characteristics a date between 1587 and 1588 - immediately after the artist's crucial Venetian experiences at the end of the initial phase of his career which allowed him to develop a more immediate and fluid type of painting - is, in my opinion, the most likely'.¹⁰

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Figure 1. Annibale Carracci, *Self-portrait as a Gardener*.
Present location unknown

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Footnotes

¹ A. E. Pérez Sánchez, 'Carracci, Annibale' in *Enciclopedia*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (consulted 28/04/2020).

² D. Benati & A. Riccòmini (eds.), *Annibale Carracci*, Milan 2006, entry II.11.

³ A. E. Pérez Sánchez, 'Carracci, Annibale' in *Enciclopedia*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (consulted 28/04/2020).

⁴ Galleria Colonna, Rome, no. 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Museo Nacional del Prado, Inv. no.: P002631.

⁷ Museo Nacional del Prado, Inv. no.: P000075.

⁸ A. E. Pérez Sánchez, 'Carracci, Annibale' in *Enciclopedia*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid (consulted 28/04/2020).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ D. Benati & A. Riccòmini (eds.), *Annibale Carracci*, Milan 2006, entry II.11.