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Est. 1760



Jusepe de Ribera
(Játiva 1591 – 1652 Naples)

Saint John the Baptist

c. 1635 - 40

oil on canvas

180 x 124 cm.;

70 7/8 x 48 7/8 in.

Provenance

Romano Avezzano collection, Eboli;
Private collection, Florence.

Literature

P. Leone de Castris, in *Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*, exh. cat., I, Naples 1984, p. 480, no. 2257 (as Massimo Stanzione);

P. Leone de Castris, in *La Quadreria dei Girolamini*, (eds.) P. Leone de Castris and R. Middione, Naples 1986, p. 158 (as Massimo Stanzione);

S. Schütze, in *Massimo Stanzione. L'opera completa*, (eds.) S. Schütze & Th. Willette, Naples 1992, pp. 246, no. B3, and 398 (as Massimo Stanzione, under 'Works of Dubious Attribution');

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

G. Porzio, in *Sollevando il velo del tempo. Dipinti del Cinque e Seicento*, (ed.) G. Porzio, exh. cat., Naples 2015, pp. 40 – 47, no. 6;

G. Porzio, in *Old Masters in Naples: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Paintings*, (ed.) G. Porzio, exh. cat., Naples 2019, pp. 26 – 35, no. 3.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



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Est. 1760

This beautifully painted and arresting *Saint John the Baptist* is an important recent addition to the *oeuvre* of the great Spanish and Neapolitan master, Jusepe de Ribera. The painting was previously known only from a photograph¹ taken in January 1963 when the canvas, not yet attributed, was still in the Romano Avezzano collection in Eboli. This collection, which was particularly rich thanks to the heirlooms inherited from the Angri branch of the Doria family, also included Caravaggio's *Martyrdom of St Ursula* (fig. 1), a painting which is now well known to scholars but which was during the 1960s, like this *Saint John the Baptist*, then unattributed.²

Working on the basis of this photograph, Pierluigi Leone de Castris initially attributed our painting to Massimo Stanzione, regarding it as a typical work by that artist of the 1630s. This attribution, however, did not find much favour with scholars and our *Saint John the Baptist* was therefore relegated to the 'doubtful attributions' section in the monograph on Stanzione published by Schütze and Willette.³ What perhaps made the attribution to Stanzione unconvincing was the more compelling affinity, noted at the time by Sebastian Schütze, with certain paintings which are essentially variations on the same theme by Jusepe de Ribera. Particularly notable are the strong similarities between the present picture and a signed and dated version of the same subject of 1638 which is now in a private collection in Barcelona (fig. 2).⁴ In both pictures the lamb places its hooves affectionately on the saint's lap and stretches its head upwards towards Saint John, providing a strong emotional connection between the two figures which is not present in some other, more detached renderings of the subject.⁵

The similarities to Ribera's known works which were already discernible from the old photograph became more evident following the inspection of the painting itself, when the characteristic use of colour and thickness of the brush strokes confirmed that our painting must be an autograph work from the hand of the master. This attribution was independently confirmed by Nicola Spinosa in a separate communication with the painting's owner. The traces of *pentimenti* near the front hooves of the lamb further confirm that this is an autograph work (as opposed to a copy after a now-lost composition); one can imagine Ribera working out the animal's correct positioning as he went along. The present canvas is

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

now considered to be an entirely original composition - albeit one that has close affinities with other known treatments of the subject - of which there are currently no known replicas or variants in Ribera's *oeuvre*.

Our painting is comparable to many of the pictures of hermits that Ribera painted throughout his career, particularly in the rendering of the melancholic landscape surrounding Saint John. There are also some compelling similarities with the *Assumption of the Madonna of 1636*⁶ (Real Academia de San Fernando, Madrid, fig. 3), both in terms of stance of the saint, which is close to that of The Virgin in the San Fernando painting, and his ephobic adolescent features, which are similar to those shown in the female figures in many other of Ribera's paintings.

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Figure 1. Michelangelo Merisi (Caravaggio), *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*.
Intesa Sanpaolo Collection. Gallerie d'Italia, Palazzo Zevallos di Stigliano, Naples

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Figure 2. Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint John the Baptist* (detail).
Private collection, Barcelona

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Figure 3. Jusepe de Ribera, *Assumption of the Madonna*, 1636.
Real Academia de San Fernando, Madrid

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

Footnotes

¹ Photographic archive of the Polo Museale della Campania, negative no. 33362.

² Although it is plausible that this *Saint John the Baptist* came from the Doria family too, there is no mention of it in the inventories that have been published to date.

³ S. Schütze, in S. Schütze & T. Willette, *Massimo Stanzione. L'opera completa*, Naples 1992, pp. 246, no. B3, and 398.

⁴ P. Leone de Castris, in *Civiltà del Seicento a Napoli*, exh. cat., Naples 1984–1985, I, Naples 1984, p.480, no.2.257; *idem*, in *La Quadreria dei Girolamini*, (eds.) P. Leone de Castris & R. Middione, Naples 1986, p. 158. See also, more recently, N. Spinosa, *Ribera, opera completa*, 2006 p.345 A239 and *ibid* *Ribera. La obra completa*, Madrid 2008, p. 433, no. A260.

⁵ See for example the *Saint John* in a private collection, Madrid, published by N. Spinosa, *Ribera: L'Opera Completa*, Naples 2006, p. 345, no. A238.

⁶ Inv. no. 636. *Ibid.*, p. 407, no. A196.