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Matthias Stom
The Mocking of Christ

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MATTHIAS STOM

(Flanders, c. 1600 - After 1650, Italy)

THE MOCKING OF CHRIST

Oil on canvas

135 × 90 cm.; 53 1/8 x 35 1/2 in.

Provenance

European private collection.

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The composition is dominated by the striking figure of Christ, crowned with thorns and wrapped in a scarlet cloak. Seated on a small wooden bench, he is mocked by a mercenary who crouches beside him and offers a bamboo cane. Christ's sorrowful, contemplative face is defined by his upward gaze, while a shaft of light bathes his body, isolating him within the scene.

As for when this hitherto unpublished painting entered the present collection, the only secure fact is that it was acquired on the art market; no further information is available regarding date or place of purchase. At this stage, therefore, the work can only be approached through stylistic analysis.

The painting bears unmistakable hallmarks of one of the most original practitioners of northern European naturalism, Matthias Stom. Although his surviving oeuvre is large - around 250 paintings - biographical evidence remains scant. Even his birthplace and date are uncertain, though it was probably in Flanders around 1600, since historical documents consistently describe him as “fiamengo”, that is, Flemish.¹

Stom's artistic training took shape in the cultural centres of northern Europe, likely between Utrecht and Antwerp. He is securely documented in Rome in 1630, when he was about thirty. His surname, long read as “Stomer”, has been correctly established as “Stom” on the basis of the artist's own signatures on four works (*Tobias and the Angel*, Museum Bredius, The Hague; *Supper at Emmaus*, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; *Miracle of St Isidore Agricola*, cathedral church of Caccamo, dated 1641; and the lost *Martyrdom of St Cecilia*, formerly in the Cappuccini church in Messina, signed in Latin as “Stomus”), as well as in contemporary archival sources. The painter is certainly recorded in Rome (1630–1632), Naples (1635–1638), and Palermo from January 1640. Between 1643 and 1645 he is known to have been in Venice; thereafter, despite suggestions of a move to Lombardy, all trace of him disappears. Concerning this supposed Lombard period, it should be noted that a masterpiece by Stom is preserved in the parish church of Santa Maria dell'Assunta in Chiuduno, in the province of Bergamo, but was probably sent there from Rome after 1650.²

In compositional structure, typology, and above all lighting, the present work finds close analogies with other paintings attributed to Stom. His production throughout reveals the influence of the Utrecht school: artists who, after spending time in Rome and encountering Caravaggio's art at first hand, adopted the Lombard master's idiom and reinterpreted it personally, disseminating this Caravaggesque manner on their return to Flanders and Holland. Among these painters (Gerrit van Honthorst, Dirk van Baburen, Hendrick ter Brugghen), the one nearest to Stom is Honthorst, known in Italy as Gherardo

¹ For a recent summary of the documents related to Stom, see M. Osnabrugge, *The Neapolitan lives and careers of Netherlandish Immigrant Painters (1575-1655)*, Amsterdam 2019, pp 175-219.

² A. Zalapi, in *Dipinti caravaggeschi nelle raccolte bergamasche*, exhibition catalogue (Bergamo, Accademia Carrara), E. De Pascale and F. Rossi (eds), Bergamo 2000, pp 48-79, 83-88.

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delle Notti. From Honthorst, Stom drew especially the use of chiaroscuro, a predilection for nocturnal scenes animated by artificial light - frequently candlelight - and the taste for certain subjects. Honthorst himself painted several versions of the Crowning with Thorns or Christ Mocked, one of Stom's most recurrent themes, and the present work stands as an important and original example within that tradition.

Among Stom's many treatments of this Evangelical subject, three are securely connected with Naples and one probably with Catania. In compositional terms, however, these are more elaborate than the painting discussed here.³ In seeking to identify an early provenance, inventories from Neapolitan and Catanese contexts were examined, but without significant results: the only Stom-like work of comparable theme recorded in an important Neapolitan collection - the inventory of Pompeo D'Anna (1676) - depicts the Crowning with Thorns with multiple figures.⁴

Benedict Nicolson, among the first scholars to investigate Stom's œuvre systematically, lists several paintings titled Christ Mocked. Almost all are horizontal in format, except for one of particular relevance here, since it treats a closely related subject, though with more figures (Fig. 1).⁵ Even when compared to Stom's horizontal compositions, the present work appears a markedly simplified meditation on the theme, likely intended for private devotion. The comparison with the Madrid painting reproduced by Nicolson further underscores the concentrated, contemplative force of the picture under consideration.

Stom adapts from Honthorst the motif of Christ seated on a small bench and illuminated by a focused light, confronted by a kneeling mocking soldier (Fig. 2). Yet where Gherardo's figure carries a torch, Stom replaces it - wholly originally, and in a manner that feels decisively more modern - with a bamboo cane. This alteration signals the degree to which Stom personalised Flemish Caravaggism: the torches in Honthorst's versions contribute to a theatrical display of lighting that Stom no longer deemed necessary. His language develops in an almost Baroque direction and, beyond Caravaggism, clearly registers the impact of another great Flemish traveller to Italy, Peter Paul Rubens. It is precisely this synthesis - Rubensian vitality allied to the Utrecht school's Caravaggesque inheritance - that emerges with surprising clarity in the present canvas. The work therefore plausibly belongs to the later phase of Stom's career, standing as an remarkable example of northern naturalism shaped between Italy and northern Europe.

³ Osnabrugge 2019, pp 188-190.

⁴ Osnabrugge 2019, pp 188 believes that it is a *Christ mocked*. However, the inventory published by Labrot 1992, inv. 25, and available on the site of the Getty Provenance Index, states, "Un Quadro con l'Incoronazione di spine di Monsù Matteo Stoma".

⁵ Nicolson published this picture two years after his major anthology of Caravaggesque painting, noting its presence in an anonymous private collection in Madrid. B. Nicolson, *The International Caravaggesque Movement*, Oxford 1979, p.177.

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Fig. 1. Matthias Stom, *Mocking of Christ*, oil on canvas. Madrid, Private Collection.

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Fig. 2 Gerrit Van Honthorst, *The Mocking of Christ*, c. 1617, oil on canvas.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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