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Carlo Francesco Nuvolone
(Milan 1608/9 - 1661)

Christ at the Column

c. 1630

oil on canvas

113.5 x 83 cm.;

44 3/4 x 32 5/8 in.

Provenance

Anonymous sale, Genoa, Wannenes, 21 March 2018, lot 644, where acquired by the present owner.

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This powerful and moving devotional picture shows Christ bound to the column following his Flagellation. His torturers have departed leaving behind their scourges and spots of blood are visible on his body, smearing the column and lying in streaks on the ground. On the right-hand side in the background is a great, centrally-planned polygonal building intended to represent Solomon's Temple but, with its lantern tower, which is very similar to Lombard churches of the sixteenth century. The portico visible on the lower part and the arcade which resembles a cloister are an allusion to the Praetorian Palace of Pontius Pilate, the scene where the Flagellation was traditionally set.¹

Of particular significance is the column of the Flagellation itself, which is considerably shorter than the other columns shown in the picture and which has an uncommon flared shape similar to the column of a balustrade (even if not round as in the column shown in the painting), and an unusual dark streaked marble colouring (fig. 1). This is not just a whimsical invention of the artist, but a clear reference to a famous Roman relic of Christ's column, 63 cm. high by 40 cm. wide at its base, which was kept in the Basilica of San Prassede in Rome where it had been an object of veneration since the beginning of the thirteenth century (fig. 2). Although the base of the relic in San Prassede is shaped differently to the column shown in our picture, its overall baluster profile and the colouring of the marble - dark with light streaks - is sufficiently similar to suggest that the artist must have had this in mind.

The strongly devotional character of the painting reflects the cultural climate of Counter-Reformation Milan during the period of San Carlo and Bishop Federico Borromeo. Our painting also reflects the influence of the work of Cerano and Giulio Cesare Procaccini, both of whom were singled out by the eighteenth-century historian Pellegrino Orlandi as models for the young artist during his formative years². If the concentrated severity of the scene and the lividness of the skin on the figure of Christ can be linked to Cerano, the strokes of golden light on his hair and his tearful face reflect the influence of Procaccini. This combination of characteristics provides good stylistic evidence for the attribution of the present unpublished work to the youthful Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, an important and prolific figure in the Lombard Baroque.

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The better-known paintings of Carlo Francesco's maturity are characterized by a sweet, vaporous style and largeness of form. Much less well known are his experimental works of his early years, around 1630, which were first published almost twenty-five years ago in article by the present author.³ Nuvolone's first period can be reconstructed by reference to certain fixed chronological points beginning with the *San Vincenzo* altarpiece (Varallo Pombia, Parish Church), datable to shortly after 1631, the *Pietà* of the Collegiate Church in Bormio (1631-34), and by the *Santa Marta Altarpiece* now in the Pinacoteca, Pavaia, of 1636. All of these pictures are painted with a rapid, almost throw-away style, characterized by sparkling light and bright expressiveness, which again reflect the influence of Cerano and Procaccini. By contrast with the sweeter tones seen in the paintings of the artist's maturity, his earlier works show the adherence of the young artist to the sombre spirit of Milanese painting in the early seventeenth century. This is evidenced most notably in the *Martyrdom of SS Vito and Modesto* (Milan, Diocesan Museum, fig. 3).

This same feeling can be detected in the present *Christ at the Column*, in which the diaphanous light which gives emphasis to the flesh of the Saviour and the graceful depiction of his anatomy finds a precise parallel in the figure of the naked martyr lying on the ground in the *Martyrdom of SS Vito and Modesto* (fig. 3), and also in the figure of the man who has been miraculously healed in the *Miracle of the Bishop Saint* (private collection, fig. 4), which is also attributable to Nuvolone's early years. In that painting the artist also reveals his technical facility, with the same misty painting of the domed architecture in the background and a similar precision and confidence combined with ease of execution also evident in the painting under discussion. Parallels can also be found by comparing the present picture with other paintings executed by Nuvolone for the private market such as the *Susanna and the Elders* in the Koelliker Collection, Milan (fig. 5) and *the Female Figure with a Turban (Martyr Saint)* from a private collection (fig. 6). In both cases, the sighing faces of the two women reveal some of the same physical characteristics which can be seen in the figure of Christ (figs. 7, 8 & 9) and the touches of golden light which can be seen shining in Susanna's hair (fig. 5) correspond to similar details in the present *Christ at the Column*.

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On the basis of the above, I do not believe that there can be any doubt over the identification of the present picture, dateable around or just after 1630, as another important work from the beginning years of Nuvolone's career which confirms his position as one of the founding fathers of the Lombard Seicento.

Francesco Frangi

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Figure 1. Detail of the present painting



Figure 2. Roman relic of Christ's column, 63 cm. high by 40 cm. wide at its base, kept in the Basilica of San Prassede, Rome

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Figure 3. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *Martyrdom of SS Vito and Modesto*. Diocesan Museum, Milan

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Figure 4. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *Miracle of the Bishop Saint*.
Private collection

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Figure 5. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *Susanna and the Elders*.
Koelliker Collection, Milan



Figure 6. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *Female Figure with a Turban (Martyr Saint)*.
Private collection

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Figure 7. Detail of the present painting



Figure 8. Detail of Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *Female Figure with a Turban (Martyr Saint)*.
Private collection

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Figure 9. Detail of Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *Susanna and the Elders*.
Koelliker Collection, Milan

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Footnotes

¹ For example in Piero della Francesca's famous *Flagellation of Christ* in the Pinacoteca Nazionale delle Marche, Palazzo Ducale, Urbino.

² P. A. Orlandi, *Abedecadario pittorico*, Naples 1753, p. 104.

³ F. Frangi, 'Una traccia per gli esordi di Carlo Francesco Nuvolone' in C. Acidini Luchinat, L. Bellosi, M. Boskovits, P. P. Donati and B. Santi (eds.), *Settanta Studiosi italiani: Scritti per l'Istituto Germanico di Storia dell'Arte di Firenze*, Florence 1997, pp. 401-410.