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Carlo Francesco Nuvolone
(Milan, 1609 – 1662)

Venus and Cupid

oil on canvas, unlined
94.5 x 128 cm.;
37 1/4 x 50 3/8 in.

Provenance

Anonymous sale, London, Sotheby's, 9 December 1992, lot 250, where acquired by:
A distinguished Italian private collection.

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Carlo Francesco Nuvolone was a member of a dynasty of artists: his father, Panfilo, produced frescoes, altarpieces and still lifes (for which he is best known), and his younger brother, Giuseppe, was also a painter (fig. 1). After training with his father, Carlo Francesco studied at the Accademia Ambrosiana in Milan under Giovanni Battista Crespi (*il Cerano*). In that studio he would have encountered Daniele Crespi and Giulio Cesare Procaccini, both of whom significantly influenced his technique. Carlo Francesco later worked in Milan and its environs, becoming the leading painter in Lombardy in the mid-17th century. His style was perceived as close to that of Guido Reni, prompting him to be nicknamed *il Guido della Lombardia* (the Guido of Lombardy).

As a typical exponent of the Lombard style of painting, Carlo Francesco's works are often characterized by *chiaroscuro* and a distinctive sweetness in his figures, both of which are attested to by the present canvas. Venus and Cupid are dramatically illuminated by rays of light shining in from the left, while the background has been painted in comparatively darker tones, creating a powerful contrast. Venus' long blonde locks that cascade down her back are gently buffeted by the wind, causing them to float out into the left side of the composition. Individual, wispy strands of hair near her headpiece are highlighted by flickering brushwork, while flushes of pink on her cheeks, shoulder, elbow and hip bring a sense of warmth to her silhouette. Cupid, who can be noted in the lower right corner of the composition, stares up adoringly at his mother, the goddess of love, as he reaches out towards her. Such motifs have frequently prompted Nuvolone's work to be compared to that of the Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, in spite of the fact that there are no known links between the two painters.¹ The Italian art historian Roberto Longhi even went so far so as to consider Nuvolone a herald for nineteenth-century Romantic painting in Lombardy.²

Similarities can be drawn between the present painting and other works in Nuvolone's corpus; a comparison with his depictions of the Madonna and Child are particularly insightful, as these represent another instance in which Nuvolone portrays a mother-son relationship. There are obvious parallels with an example sold at Christie's in 1998 (fig. 2), particularly with regard to the facial types. The same applies to the picture in the Castello Sforzesco, Pinacoteca, Milan (fig. 3). The torso of Venus in the Colnaghi painting, with her

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arm drawn across her twisting body, is reminiscent of Nuvolone's treatment of the figure of Susanna in his *Susanna and the Elders* in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan (fig. 4).³

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Figure 1. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *The Artist and his Family*.
Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan.

Carlo Francesco Nuvolone and his brother Giuseppe can be noted on the left-hand side of the composition: Carlo is sketching and Giuseppe is playing the lute.

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Figure 2. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *The Madonna and Child*, c. 1645-50.
Sold at Christie's, London, 14 December 1998, lot 67.

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Figure 3. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *The Madonna and Child*, 1645-50.
Castello Sforzesco, Pinacoteca, Milan.

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Figure 4. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *Susanna and the Elders*.
Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan.

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Footnotes

¹ X. F. Salomon, 'Catalogue Entry', <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/441230>, 2011.

² Salomon 2011.

³ M. F. Ferro, *Nuvolone. Una famiglia di pittori nella Milano del '600*, Soncino 2003, p. 208.