

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Paolo Porpora  
(Naples 1617 – 1673 Rome)

*Still life of flowers surrounded  
by a stream, mushrooms,  
frogs and snails*

no later than 1660

oil on canvas

210 x 141 cm.;

82 5/8 x 55 1/2 in.

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Expertise

N. Spinosa, 13 November 2016;

A. Cottino, 20 November 2016.

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We still have relatively little information on the life of Paolo Porpora, but a contract is known that describes him as a pupil of Giacomo Recco in 1632, aged 15. He followed Recco in becoming a specialist in still-lives of fruit and flower subjects. According to Dominici, he also assisted in Aniello Falcone's workshop.

While archival documents concerning Porpora have provided significant biographical data, only one known painting bears his signature, so the reconstruction of his artistic career is still fairly nebulous. The artist belongs to the generation of great still life painters, and in this genre he certainly excelled from the beginning of his career as confirmed again by De Dominici: 'Porpora painted with a better manner and more beautiful compositions than Luca Forte'. The same biographer also provides a list of the objects Porpora most enjoyed depicting in his works: 'fish, oysters, snails, whelks and other sea creatures, and more lizards, pigeons and kitchen items'.

In 1654 Porpora left Naples to go to Rome, where he attended the Academy of San Luca from 1655 to 1670, then joining the Congregation of the Virtuosi al Pantheon in 1666. Here he decided to marry Anna d'Amico, sister of Giovanna, who would marry the painter Niccolò Codazzi instead. He began to attend the Accademia di San Luca more and more assiduously, which upon his death in 1673 took it upon itself to pay the suffrage masses for his soul. At the academy he came into contact with painters from northern Europe such as Otto Marseus van Schrieck (c. 1613 – 1678) and Matthias Withoos (1627 – 1703), from whom he acquired an interest in portraying natural environments such as woodlands and their undergrowth. For Paolo Porpora, the undergrowth or *sottobosco* became – as it did for his Flemish counterparts - an attractive and mysterious world, where life struggles against death and in which Porpora proved to be an artistic expert.

Porpora quickly became accomplished in his knowledge of the most unusual zoological and entomological specialties. With regard to depicting the undergrowth, this new genus is detectable in the painting in the Pignatelli Museum, Naples, and in that exhibited at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff (fig. 1). In his more traditional still lifes, he clearly

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excels in those at the Capodimonte Museum, Naples, and in the one present in the Chigi collection in Rome, as well as in various paintings in museums in Stockholm and Valencia.

In such works, Porpora demonstrates a naturalistic interest in the luminous rendering of the elements, evidencing a vivid imagination and compositional delicacy, which scholars attribute to what was likely a Caravaggesque inspiration. The chromatic effects are very full-bodied and typical of Neapolitan painting of that century. The completely unique features in the pictorial rendering of his paintings are obtained by the artist through the representation of a contrasting and very lively light. In his canvases, the flowers occupy almost all of the available space, anticipating floral feasts that would be typical of the Baroque style in the following century.

The present painting depicts a stained bronze vase, decorated with reliefs portraying a bacchanal with satyrs and a drunken Silenus. It is filled with pink, orange and white flowers, among which roses, two large sunflowers, anemones, and convolvulus stand out. The vase is placed in a landscape that is filled with blue-gray shades to the right, which hint that it is meant to be dusk. In the bottom right there is a stream from which two frogs have jumped out, standing at the foot of the vase, while a little further to the left one can observe snails and a butterfly.

Our painting, which seems to celebrate nature as a manifestation of the divine, recalls the canvas of the Chigi Albani collection in Rome, as already suggested by A. Cottino.

Nicola Spinosa dates this work to a period between the end of Porpora's Neapolitan activity and the late sixth decade of the century, in any case no later than 1660.

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**Figure 1.** Paolo Porpora, *Still life with a snake, frogs, tortoise and a lizard.*  
National Museum of Wales, Cardiff