

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



## MASTER OF THE ANNUNCIATION TO THE SHEPHERDS

(active Naples, early 17th century)

### *ADORATION OF THE MAGI*

oil on canvas

103 x 135 cm; 53 1/8 x 39 3/8 in.

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#### Provenance

Franco Febbraio, Naples;

Private collection, Naples, for at least 10 years.

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#### Literature

Nicola Spinosa, *Ritorno al Barocco: da Caravaggio a Vanvitelli*, Naples 2009, p. 103, cat. no. 1.32, reproduced;

Nicola Spinosa, *Il Maestro degli Annucci ai Pastori e i pittori dal "tremendo impasto" (Napoli 1625-1650)*, Rome 2021, p. 94, cat no. A26, reproduced.

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#### Exhibited

Naples, Castel Sant'Elmo, Museo Pigantelli and Palazzo Reale, *Ritorno al Barocco: da Caravaggio a Vanvitelli*, 12 December 2009 - 11 April 2010, no. 1.32

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LONDON

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This captivating painting depicting an Adoration to the Magi was created by an anonymous artist known as the Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds (more on that below) and is dated to shortly before or immediately after 1630. Positioned on the right are the Holy Family sitting at the base of two large, draped columns, with Caspar, the eldest of the three kings, at the composition's heart, kneeling and kissing the feet of the Christ child; behind him, within a gathering of onlookers, a boy holds his crown. To the right, the kings Melchior and Balthasar are depicted, with the latter, distinguished by his striking red cloak, turned away from the viewer. Adding to the scene's depth, a camel appears in the background with hills in the distance. The *pastosità*, refined colouristic sensibility and atmospheric concern in this work, enhanced through the interplay between light and shadow, are typical of the artist.

The Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds was a major figure within the Neapolitan art scene of the early seventeenth century, emerging in the wake of Caravaggio's profound influence. This enigmatic artist, whose identity remains elusive, was closely connected to the stylistic circle of Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652), indicating his operation within the vibrant artistic milieu of Naples. Despite various scholarly attempts to pinpoint his identity, linking him to figures such as Juan (or Giovanni) Dò (c.1614-?1656), a Valencian artist active in Naples during the 1620s and Bartolomeo Passante (1618-1648)<sup>1</sup>, no theory has gained universal support. The Master's *oeuvre* is distinguished by a pronounced use of *chiaroscuro* and encompasses a high quality and cohesive collection of works, including mythological scenes, single figure studies, and multiple renditions of the Annunciation, from which his moniker is derived - most notably illustrated by the acclaimed *Annunciation to the Shepherds* in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery dated to *circa* 1630-31, a piece once attributed to Velázquez (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

His artistic signature is further characterised by a keen interest in the human form, as evidenced by the studied poses and expressive naturalism in his portrayals – here it is seen in the array of poses filling the different levels and planes of the compositional space. It is also characterised by a meticulous attention to textural details, especially in the depiction of rough fabrics and still-life elements, for example in the drapery of the three foreground figures, as well as in the beautifully ornate and shimmering crowns and ointment jar. The quest to uncover this artist's identity extends beyond academic curiosity, aiming to shed light on an artist of exceptional calibre who is one of the most interesting and individual artists working in Naples in the first half of the seventeenth century. Initially identified through the aforementioned pivotal work today in Birmingham, the artist's portfolio has expanded over time, with Ferdinando Bologna in 1958 proposing to name him after this signature piece. Despite the intriguing proposition to associate him with Juan Dò or to discern Genoese influences in his technique, possibly linking him to Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, the artist's origins - whether Spanish or Italian - remain speculative.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bartolomeo Passante is a documented artist who is the author of a signed picture in the Prado Museum, Madrid

<sup>2</sup> The attribution of this painting was first questioned by August Mayer in 1923.

<sup>3</sup> For the most recent summary of the debates surrounding the artist's identity, see N. Spínosa, *Pittura del seicento a Napoli: da Caravaggio a Massimo Stanzione*, Naples, 2010, pp. 326-68.

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The Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds revisited this theme multiple times throughout his career. Variations of the subject, differing in details and dimensions, can be found in the Ruffo della Scaletta collection in Rome, in the San Tommaso church in Valencia, and in the Museo de Bellas Artes in Valencia.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, one version was previously with Matthiesen Gallery, London, and another was sold at Sotheby's New York on 4 January 1994, lot 47.<sup>5</sup> The painting which sold at Sotheby's is the closest in composition to the work in question and is also dated to *circa* 1630. Some of these versions were painted in pendant with an Adoration of the Shepherds, another subject the artist frequently explored.

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<sup>4</sup> Spinosa 2021, cat. nos A30, A28b and A27

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, cat. nos A29b and A25



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**Fig. 1.** Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds, *Annunciation to the Shepherds*, 180.5 x 127.5cm.  
Birmingham Museums Trust.