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LUCA CAMBIASO

Moneglia (Genoa) 1527 – 1585 El Escorial

FLAGELLATION OF CHRIST,
C. 1570-1575

oil on canvas

162 x 134 cm; 63 3/4 x 52 3/4 in.

Inscribed on the reverse: S. (or I?) + P.

Provenance

Massimiliano Spinola (1780–1857), by 1847, initially at his palace in Genoa;
Transferred to Castello Tassarolo;
Thence by descent to Paolo Spinola (1929–2005);
Acquired by the present owner in the late 1990s.

Literature

Federico Alizeri, *Guida Artistica per la Città di Genova*, 2 vols., Genoa, [1846–47] 1847, II/1, p. 777.
André-Absinthe Lavice, *Revue des Musées d'Italie. Catalogue raisonné des peintures et sculptures exposées dans les galeries publiques et dans les églises...*, Paris, 1862, p. 118.
Charles Blanc, *Histoire des peintres de toutes les Écoles*, Paris, 1883, vo. 14, p. 8.
Mario Labò, *Mostra centenaria di Luca Cambiaso*, exh. cat., Genoa, December 1927, p. 21.
Bertina Suida Manning – William Suida, *Luca Cambiaso, la vita e le opere*, Milan, 1958, p. 117.
Lauro Magnani, “Dopo la mostra di Milano”, in *Napoli, Genova, Milano. Scambi artistici e culturali tra città legate alla Spagna (1610–1640)*, proceedings of the conference Turin-Genoa, 13–15 September 2018, ed. L. Magnani, A. Morandotti, D. Sanguineti, G. Spione, L. Stagno, Milan, 2020, pp. 220–221, 227, fig. 12.

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This *Flagellation of Christ* joins a group of late and powerfully expressive naturalistic works by Luca Cambiaso, painted during his mature period in Genoa before his departure for the Escorial in 1583. Born the son of the minor local painter Giovanni Cambiaso (1495–1579), Luca Cambiaso from an early age assimilated multiple sources of inspiration: the grand monumentality of Michelangelo, the luminist innovations of Correggio and Parmigianino, and the achievements of Giulio Romano, Perino del Vaga, Beccafumi, and Pordenone - artists whose works he could study on Genoese commissions or during his probable stay in Rome (c. 1547–50). By the 1560s, Cambiaso was firmly established as the leading painter in Genoa, receiving altar and fresco commissions from the city's most illustrious patrician families. From around the 1570s, a distinct naturalistic and dramatic idiom began to emerge in his oeuvre. As Bertina Suida Manning observed, Cambiaso's late phase was marked by "an increasing contemplative serenity and monumental simplicity", qualities that resonate powerfully in this *Flagellation of Christ*.¹ Fluent as a draughtsman, Cambiaso refined a highly personal artistic language that would determine the course of painting in Genoa until the following century. The Maritime Republic was a notable beneficiary of the financial problems of the Spanish empire, and it was therefore not surprising that in 1583 Cambiaso was summoned by King Philip II to paint for his court.

In the present painting, a softly diffused light highlights the pallor of Christ's exposed torso. Bound to the column at centre, He appears with a profound calm and resignation, a stark counterpoint to the straining physiques and animated gestures of the four tormentors who throng around Him. The subtle glow unifies the composition, leaving the background in shadow and drawing attention to Christ's spiritually charged countenance. In contrast, the executioners' exaggerated faces, twisted in grimaces, embody the cruelty of evil, recalling the graphic, almost caricatural types seen in Cambiaso's *Christ before Caiaphas* (Genoa, Museum of Ligustica Accademy of Fine Arts, Fig. 1). Their theatrical poses underscore the intense physicality of the

¹ Bertina Suida Manning, "The nocturnes of Luca Cambiaso", *The Art Quarterly*, vol. XV, no. 3, 1952, p. 199.

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moment, while the subdued palette and controlled highlights - distinctive of Cambiaso's late painting - amplify the emotional resonance. Noteworthy, too, is the measured monumentality of this composition. Although the figures occupy most of the foreground, the cylindrical column around which Christ stands is depicted with pronounced simplicity, offering a sense of architectural solidity reminiscent of Cambiaso's earlier work on Genoese *palazzi*. The stark vertical axis of the column forms a powerful pivot between the luminous figure of Christ and the swirling violence of the soldiers, a compositional device that reinforces the painting's thematic focus: the humbly majestic serenity of the Saviour versus the convulsive brutality of His tormentors. In this wholly unadorned setting, the sense of depth is conveyed by the forward tilt of Christ's torso and right knee, achieving compositional balance through a skillful modulation of chiaroscuro, while His persecutors are arranged along parallel planes behind and in front of the central column.

The subject of the *Flagellation of Christ* features prominently among Cambiaso's larger-scale religious nocturnes, which typically depict episodes from the Passion - from the already mentioned *Christ before Caiaphas* in Genoa to the *Christ Disrobed by his Tormentors*, formerly with Canesso gallery (Fig. 2), and the Blanton Museum's *Ecce Homo* (Fig. 3), or other scenes of the New Testament. A similar simplified version of the Colnaghi painting is the *Christ at the Column*, now at Palazzo Bianco in Genoa, formerly in the collection of Maquis Ambrogio Doria (Fig. 4). Scholars have linked the development of this naturalistic and dramatic manner to contemporary Counter-Reformation aesthetics, which prized directness of emotional appeal and clarity of theological message. A date of around 1570 has been proposed for our version, coinciding with the period in which Cambiaso heightened his interest in dramatic chiaroscuro. Testifying to the success and consequent diffusion of the present composition, a related woodcut of this work - though lacking the leftmost figure in the background and adding rays of light around Christ's head - is recorded in several impressions, including an example at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA, inv. no. M.88.91.212, Fig. 5). A preparatory drawing for the print can be

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found in the Albertina collection: with the great compositional synthesis typical of Cambiaso's graphic idiom, fast, broken, darting lines carve out the figures' volumes, while parallel pen strokes, reinforced by a brown wash, define their shading (Fig. 6). As in the painting, the light source comes from the right.

Documentary evidence indicates that the painting was in the possession of the distinguished Genoese entomologist Massimiliano Spinola by at least 1847, when the art historian Federico Alizeri noted a *Cristo alla colonna del Cambiaso* in Spinola's palace in Genoa.² Subsequent private family archives (c. 1850) mention a "*Flagellazione di Nostro Signore – del Cambiaso*," locating it definitively at Castello Tassarolo after the 1847 sale of the Palazzo Doria-Spinola.³ By the mid-twentieth century, the painting was again cited in private family documents concerning inheritances within the Spinola line, before eventually leaving the castle in the late 1990s to enter its present ownership. The inscription on the reverse, "S. (or I?) + P.," has not been conclusively deciphered, and any direct connection to the Spinola lineage remains speculative.

² Federico Alizeri, *Guida Artistica per la Città di Genova*, Genoa, [1846–47] 1847, II/1, p. 777. See also Marie Luce Repetto, *Gli Spinola conti di Tassarolo: committenza e collezionismo tra XVI e XIX secolo*, 2021 (Università degli Studi di Genova). In the private archives of the Spinola family of Tassarolo (APSTas), which the author consulted, she found in a "Nota dei dipinti di Massimiliano IV Spinola" (dating to around 1850, according to her) a reference to a "*Flagellazione di Nostro Signore – del Cambiaso*." Then, around the mid-twentieth century, the painting is still cited as being in the castle in a private document pertaining to the inheritance divisions of living family members.

³ See *Palazzo Doria Spinola. Architettura e arredi di una dimora aristocratica genovese da un inventario del 1727*, ed. Roberto Santamaria, Provincia di Genova, 2011, p. 69.

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Fig. 1. Luca Cambiaso, *Christ before Caiaphas*, c. 1575.
Oil on canvas, 188 x 138 cm.
Genoa, Museum of Ligustica Accademy of Fine Arts.

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Fig. 2. Luca Cambiaso, *Christ before Caiaphas*, late 1570s.
Oil on canvas, 184 x 133 cm.
Formerly with Galerie Canesso, Paris.

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Fig. 3. Luca Cambiaso, *Ecce Homo*, 1570s.
Oil on canvas, 108 x 98 cm.
Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin.

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Fig. 4. Luca Cambiaso, *Christ at the Column*, c. 1570-1575.
Oil on canvas, 171 x 130 cm.
Genoa, Musei di Strada Nuova - Palazzo Bianco.

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Fig. 5. Luca Cambiaso, *The Flagellation of Christ*, c.1570-1580.
Woodcut. Sheet: 33.66 × 25.08 cm, image: 33.34 × 24.77 cm.
LACMA | Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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Fig. 6. Luca Cambiaso, *The Flagellation of Christ*.
Pen and ink with wash on paper, 32,4 x 24,2 cm.
Vienna, Albertina.