

# COLNAGHI



ANGELO CAROSELLI  
(Rome 1585 - 1652)

## *VANITAS*

Oil on canvas  
71 x 60 cm; 27 x 23 5/8 in.

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Provenance

European Private Collection.

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Angelo Caroselli, born in Rome in 1585, was a self-taught and experimental artist whose eclectic style was heavily influenced by Caravaggio's use of strong contrasts and shadows, as well as by the Bamboccianti, the "low-life" painters in Rome. His body of work stands out for its unique compositions, featuring allegories, necromancers, musicians, and both religious and historical themes. Caroselli's mastery of *chiaroscuro* earned him notable commissions in Rome, such as at Palazzo Borghese and Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, as well as in Florence, where he worked for Cosimo II de' Medici. A member of the Accademia di San Luca from 1608 to 1636, Caroselli had close relationships with significant artists of the time, particularly Pietro Paolini (1603-1681), who joined his studio around 1619. He also gained recognition as a successful copyist of masters like Titian and Poussin.

A standout piece by Caroselli's, this *Vanitas* captures an exquisite moment of introspection and elegance, deeply rooted in the experimental art scene of the time. This relatively small canvas is meticulously detailed and exemplifies Caroselli's artistic mastery: a young woman, shown from behind, dons a sumptuous golden ochre silk dress, her sleeves puffed to perfection. She sits gracefully in a plush red velvet chair, with her neatly tied hair adorned with an orange ribbon, cascading into a carnation. The woman reaches up to affix a pearl earring, while her piercing reflection gazes back at us through the mirror - serious, unwavering, and unexpectedly captivating. Her gaze both unsettles and catches the viewer off guard, scolding us for the intrusion but, at the same time, inviting them to take part in an elegant and mischievous game of seduction.

Caroselli's attraction to the vanitas theme - a recurring motif in his oeuvre - allowed him to explore both the concept of human frailty whilst also giving him a rich canvas for both symbolic and sensual expression. It also clearly echoes the Counter-Reformation debate around the luxury of women's attire - was it a symbol of vanity, or could it instead align with spiritual contemplation and purity, much like the depictions of Mary Magdalene preparing herself for reflection? This ambiguity is masterfully explored in Caroselli's work, inviting the viewer to engage with the complexity of the subject.

Through its tight framing, this image strikes us with a directness rarely seen, capturing the timeless gesture of a woman adjusting her earring. The brilliance of Caroselli's composition lies in the dual perspective: the woman is both present from behind and before us, as her reflection meets our gaze through the mirror. Traditionally, a mirror may symbolise vanity, yet here it becomes the artist's tool, creating a dynamic 'picture within a picture', compelling the viewer to oscillate between the delicate elegance of the woman's neck and the arresting seriousness of her face. This interplay of perspectives foreshadows depictions such as

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Velázquez's iconic *Rokeby Venus* while also paying homage to the rich tradition of Venetian paintings showing women at their toilet pioneered by Giorgione and Titian.

Caroselli, influenced by the naturalism of Caravaggio, often sought rare iconographies or unique ways of presenting them. His handling of light and the tactile quality of the materials - particularly the crisp silk fabric and velvety textures - brings to life the physicality of the painting. Every fold of the fabric, every glint of the pearl earring, and every shadow adds layers of material richness to the composition. The vibrant palette of ochres, browns, and oranges plays a key role in creating the depth and intimacy that characterises his style.

Caroselli's unique twist on the vanitas motif can also be found in his other works, including the *Vanitas* at the Longhi Foundation in Florence (Fig. 1) and the Corsini Gallery's *Vanitas* in Rome, where a woman observes her aged self in the mirror (Fig. 2). His student Pietro Paolini also painted his own version (Fig. 3); while similar in dimension, it features notable differences - such as the woman's smiling reflection in the mirror and the absence of the chair's backrest.

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Fig. 1. Angelo Caroselli, *Allegory of Vanitas*, c. 1620.  
Oil on canvas, 68 x 62.5 cm.  
Fondazione Longhi, Florence

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Fig. 2. Angelo Caroselli, *Vanitas*, 17th Century.  
Oil on canvas, 55 x 68 cm.  
Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini, Rome

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Fig. 3: Pietro Paolini, *Vanitas*, c. 1625.  
Oil on canvas, 79 × 63,5 cm.  
Private collection