Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, called Batistello
(Naples, 1578 – 1635)

Portrait of a noblewoman
oil on canvas
170 x 126 cm
66 7/8 x 49 5/8 in.

Provenance

Anonymous sale, Monaco, Christie's, 19 June 1994, lot 39 (as circle of Carlo Ceresa);
Geo Poletti (1926 – 2012), Milan;
Thence by descent.

Literature

G. Porzio, *Carlo Sellitto. 1580-1614*, Naples 2019, p. 202, under cat. no. A9, reproduced p. 126, fig. 106;
G. Porzio, in *Geo Poletti. Collezionista e pittore*, exh. cat. (Como, Pinacoteca Civica, 20 October 2023 - 3 March 2024), P. Vanoli (ed.), Milan 2023, pp. 78-79, cat. no. 24, reproduced.

We are thankful to Dr Giuseppe Porzio for his help in cataloguing this previously unpublished Portrait of a noblewoman by Caracciolo.

This impressive and commanding portrait is a significant addition to the *œuvre* of Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, called Battistello, the most important Neapolitan-born artist of the early seventeenth century. Although he trained with Belisario Corenzio (1558–1643), who worked in the late-Mannerist style, Caracciolo appears to have seen the work of Caravaggio firsthand at a young age, possibly accompanying Corenzio to Rome in *circa* 1600. Thereafter, Caracciolo became the first proponent of Caravaggism in Naples, alongside Carlo Sellitto (1581–1614), and the development of his style was further influenced by Caravaggio's visits to the younger artist's native city in 1606–7 and 1610. Caracciolo adopted the direct and naturalistic manner in which Caravaggio described his subjects, defined by dramatic *chiaroscuro* and a dark palette. He is best known today for the way in which he used Caravaggio's novel approach to painting as a point of departure for his own innovations in the depiction of religious subjects, at full- or half-length, but he is also recorded as a prolific portraitist, painting the likenesses of Cosimo II de' Medici, and his wife Maria Maddalena of Austria, among other Florentine, Neapolitan and Genoese patrons.[1]

Surviving portraits firmly given to Caracciolo are scarce, however – indeed, there is a dearth of early seventeenth-century Neapolitan portraits altogether. This lacuna in Caracciolo's catalogue therefore grants the present painting particular importance, especially since the attribution to Caracciolo has been made independently, and years apart, first by Maurizio Marini in a letter to the then-owner in 1996, and more recently by Giuseppe Porzio, who dates the work to *circa* 1618. Porzio makes convincing comparisons between this portrait and Caracciolo's Caravaggesque style. He points out the way, for instance, in which the cool light that illuminates the figure defines the smooth forms typical of Caracciolo's work, seen not only in the softly undulating forms of the embroidered silk sleeves, but also in the woman's rather sculptural face and hands, which he likens to those of *Saint Lawrence*, in the Certosa di San Martino (fig. 1).[2] A similar tonality and unblemished complexion is also found in the figure of Potiphar's wife, in *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, likewise dated to 1618, in the Rau collection (fig. 2).[3] Comparing the portrait with these religious works feels more instructive than seeking similarities with the few other painted known today: the portrait of the sculptor Pietro Bernini, in a private collection, is securely attributed to Caracciolo but is of a very different sort, bust-length, and comparatively informal (fig.

3);[4] an engraving of 1641 by Nicolas Perrey records a lost portrait by Caracciolo of Giovan Battista Basile;[5] and a *Portrait of a gentleman* in the Koelliker collection has also been attributed to the artist, but is again of bust-length.[6]

By contrast, the present work follows contemporary conventions of international court portraiture, which probably speaks to the stipulations of a specific commission, to which Caracciolo adapted his practice. The lady rests one hand on the chair and holds a handkerchief with the other – this was a type employed by artists from the second half of the sixteenth century by the likes of Robert Peake the Elder (1551–1619) or Paul van Somer (1577–1621) in England, to Juan Pantoja de la Cruz (1553–1608), in Spain, and was perpetuated well into the seventeenth-century in works by artists including Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and Diego Velázquez (1599–1660).

The very choice of this particular portrait type already signals the sitter's elevated social rank, which is of course corroborated by the elaborate dress, ruff and cuffs that she wears, not to mention the pearls in her hair and earrings. Her gown, fashioned from an expensive, densely-dyed black—a hue reserved in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries for those who could afford the prodigious quantities of mordant and high-quality wool required to achieve so saturated a tone—should not be construed as mourning attire. Rather, black functioned in courtly milieux as a chromatic emblem of dignity and nobility. Against this sombre richness the artist sets the crisp whiteness of cartwheel ruff and matching démi-manchettes. Pearls, meticulously painted as hair-ornaments and pendent drops, further articulate chastity and worldly status. The scarlet carnation tucked into her coiffure recalls the long-standing association of that flower with betrothal and conjugal affection, while the small lap-dog at her feet evokes *fides*, the classical and Christian personification of fidelity. Equally telling is the fine linen handkerchief she holds poised to slip from her grasp. Contemporary conduct manuals record the convention whereby an unwed gentlewoman might allow such a kerchief to fall, thereby granting a favoured admirer the opportunity to retrieve it and so inaugurate formal courtship; thus the accessory discreetly proclaims her unmarried state.

A technical detail of dress construction merits particular attention: the pronounced horizontal break encircling the lower circumference of her conical farthingale. Beneath this fold lies a concealed cord, which the wearer could release when seated, allowing an additional panel of fabric to descend and preserve the propriety of fully covered feet.

Though the sitter remains unidentified, the lady's dress may provide some clue as to where she came from and where the portrait was painted. She is dressed in the Spanish courtly style, a fashion that was adopted by the nobility throughout Europe in the decades around 1600, in large part due to the spread of the Habsburg dynasty. This vogue was perpetuated longer in Genoa than anywhere else, and indeed features such as the flat-front style farthingale with wide hips, the high neckline, the triangular bodice with a very low and flattened V-bodice, the high, sheer ruff, pickadils on the shoulders, and the distinctive geometric lace edging of the dress, may be seen in other Genoese portraits dating to as late as the 1620s and 30s, such as the *Portrait of Caterina Balbi Durazzo* by Anthony van Dyck, of 1624 (fig. 4), when fashion elsewhere in Europe had begun to move on.[8] The style of dress and the frontal pose of the lady in this portrait, however, suggest a slightly earlier date – compare, for example, the *Portrait of Margarita Aldobrandini, Duchess of Parma*, by Bartolomé González y Serrano, *circa* 1610–20 (fig. 5).[9] This dating and potential location of the portrait tally with Caracciolo's biography. The artist worked for several patrons in Genoa and visited the city several times between 1618 and 1624, notably in the service of Marcantonio Doria, who had been a patron of Caravaggio when he was working in Naples, for whom Caracciolo painted frescoes in the loggia of the country villa Sampierdarena, for which there are bills of payment.[10]

A painting with an identical composition, which must derive from the present painting and consequently hints at its importance, was sold at Christie's, New York, 16 January 1992, lot 15, as attributed to Juan Pantoja de la Cruz, and more recently at Blanchet & Associés, Paris, 18 November 2009, lot 29, attributed to a follower of the same artist.

Note on Provenance

Ruggero Poletti, better known as Geo (1926–2012), was an art historian and connoisseur, a painter and collector who was famous for his keen eye and unerring judgement. He began assembling his collection in the fifties, when Italian museums were undergoing radical changes and Poletti was able to acquire deaccessioned works. He had a particular interest in 17th- and 18th-century still lifes and, thanks to his close friend the scholar Roberto Longhi, in the art of Caravaggio and the Caravaggisti, so it is unsurprising that this portrait should have appealed to him.

Fig. 1 Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, called Batistello, *Saint Lawrence*. Certosa e Museo di San Martino, Naples.

Fig. 2 Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, called Batistello, *Joseph and Potiphar's Wife*, 1618. Rau collection.

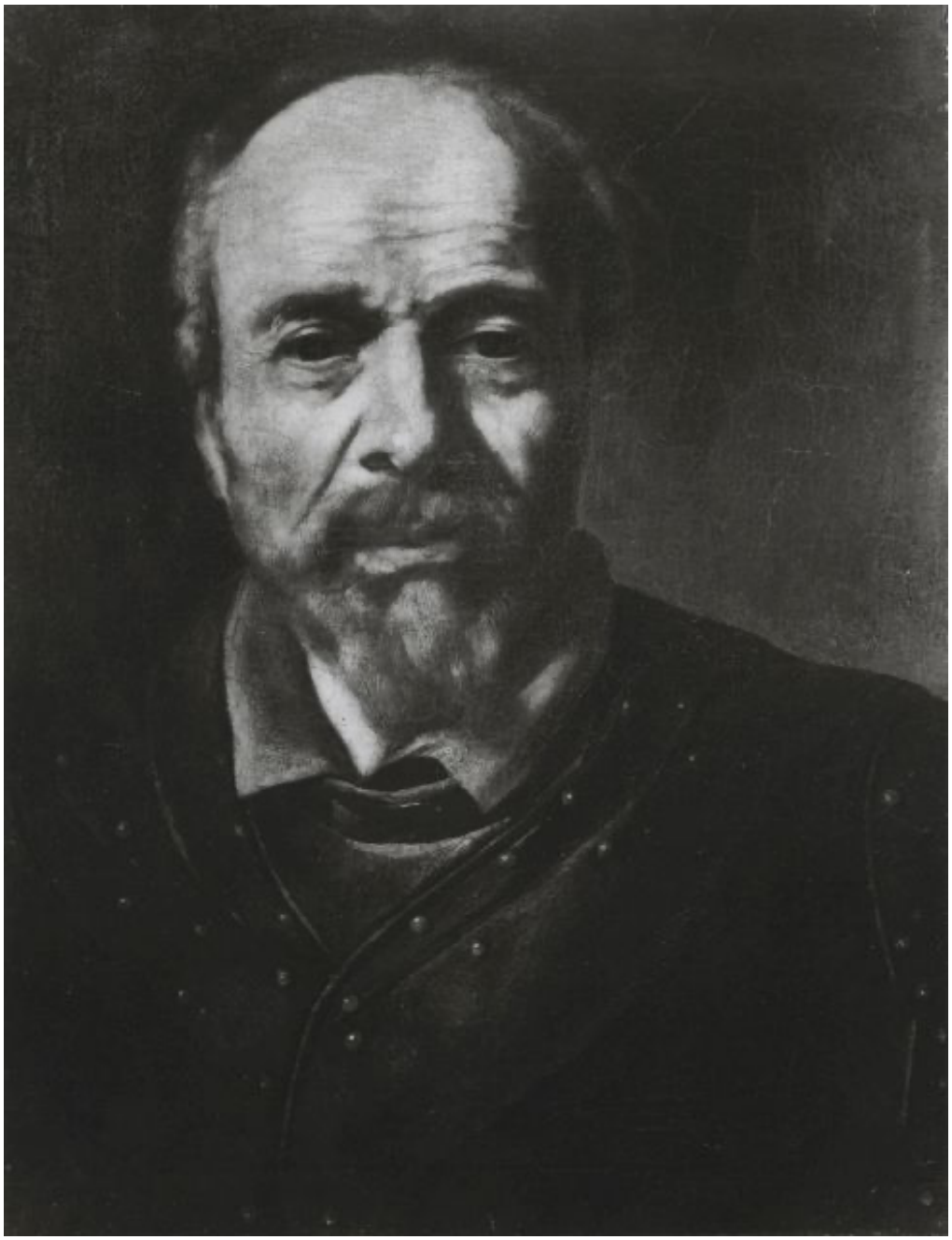

Fig. 3 Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, called Batistello, *Portrait of Pietro Bernini*, 1619–20. Private collection, Turin.

Fig. 4 Anthony van Dyck, *Portrait of Caterina Balbi Durazzo*, 1624. Palazzo Reale di Genova, Genoa.

Fig. 5 Bartolomé González y Serrano, *Portrait of Margarita Aldobrandini, Duchess of Parma*, *circa* 1610–20. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Footnotes

[1] See ‘Opere Perdute’, in S. Causa, *Battistello Caracciolo. L’opera complete*, Naples 2000, p. 341ff.
[2] Oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm. Certosa e Museo di San Martino, Naples.
[3] Oil on canvas, 118.5 x 151.5 cm. Rau collection.
[4] Oil on canvas, 46 x 35 cm. Private collection.
[5] See Causa 2000, p. 341, cat. no. P2, reproduced fig. 370.
[6] See G. Papi, in *La “schola” del Caravaggio. Dipinti dalla Collezione Koelliker*, exh. cat., Milan 2006, pp. 284–85, cat. no. 87, reproduced.
[7] Such a detail may be found in other seventeenth-century portraits, such as *Lady with a scorpion*, *circa* 1630, by Carlo Ceresa (to whom, incidentally, the present portrait was previously connected), Palazzo Accursio, Bologna; see L. Vertova, ‘Additions to Carlo Ceresa’, in *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 137, no. 1110, September 1995, p. 606, reproduced fig. 31.
[8] Oil on canvas, 220.2 x 149 cm. Palazzo Reale di Genova, Genoa, inv. no. 802.
[9] Oil on canvas, 154.5 x 111.5 cm. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, inv. no. ГЭ-2721.
[10] V. Pacelli, ‘1. Le evidenze documentarie (e i rapporti artistici fra Napoli e Genova agli inizi del Seicento)’, in V. Pacelli and F. Bologna, *Caravaggio, 1610: la “Sant’Orsola confitta dal Tiranno” per Marcantonio Doria*, in *Prospettiva*, vol. 23, 1980, p. 27.