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Niccolò Cassana

(Venice 1659 – 1713 London)

*Portrait of John III Sobieski
(1629–1696), King of Poland*

oil on canvas

229 x 162 cm.; 90 1/8 x 63 3/4 in.

Provenance

Possibly Ferdinando de' Medici, Grand Prince of Tuscany (1663–1713);
Private Noble European collection;
Whence acquired.

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This grand and imposing life-size portrait clearly depicts a figure of great importance, whose stance and gesture reflect his dominance over the scene beyond, which shows an equestrian battle raging before a walled city. The man is presumed to be Jan III Sobieski, King of Poland, who led a decisive victory over the Ottoman forces at the Battle of Vienna in 1683, thereby putting an end to the Ottoman Empire's ambitions to expand across Europe. He wears a hat in the 'Polish style', a blue sash typical of the Polish army, and his shield rests on a leopard skin, likewise an emblem of Poland; he gestures with a royal sceptre, and visible in the *mêlée* beyond are fleeing soldiers wearing turbans, while other combatants, lower right, wield turbaned heads on pikes. The victory over the Ottomans in 1683 was celebrated throughout Europe, including in Florence, which held two days of festivities and processions.¹ This commemorative portrait was very possibly painted for the Medici, the erstwhile rulers of Tuscany and preeminent patrons of the arts, whose family had connections with Sobieski, and for whom the Venetian artist Niccolò Cassana worked from the 1690s.

Niccolò Cassana was born in Venice and trained with his father, Giovanni Francesco Cassana (1611–1690), who was originally from Genoa, and had been a pupil of Bernardo Strozzi (1581–1644). Cassana perpetuated the tenebrist style and use of distinctly free brushwork in his prolific output as a portraitist. Though few of his early portraits for the Venetian nobility survive, his early *Self Portrait* of 1683 is preserved at the Uffizi, Florence (Fig. 1), where it has been housed since the young artist sent it to Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici (1642–1723) in the hope of finding favour following the death of their official painter, Justus Sustermans (1597–1681).² Although that portrait did not achieve its desired effect (it was apparently consigned to storage), only five years later Cassana would meet Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici (1663–1713) during the latter's visit to Venice in 1688, and the two came to form a genuine and long-lasting friendship, documented through an extensive and frequent correspondence (today held at the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana), which resulted in numerous commissions for the Medici court. These include portraits of Cosimo III, his daughter Anna Maria Luisa, Ferdinando himself, and his wife Violante Beatrice of Bavaria, as well as more informal portraits of cooks, and Ferdinando's gamekeepers, Alberto Tortelli and Giuliano Baldassarini, along with their animals (all in the Uffizi, Florence). Cassana also acted as an agent for Ferdinando, acquiring works of art for the Medici collections, as well as restoring and copying paintings, some of which are now known only today through his work.³

Professor Mauro Lucco, who first proposed the attribution of the present painting to Cassana, compares it particularly with the *Portrait of a German soldier*, in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence (Fig. 2),⁴ which was purchased directly from the artist in 1691 by Grand

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Prince Ferdinando. Though of smaller dimensions, the *Portrait of a German soldier* shares not only a similar format to this work, but more significantly, very comparable bravura brushwork, modelling, and dark palette, leading Professor Lucco to date the present painting to around the same time, *circa* 1691 or slightly later. Both likenesses reflect the description of Cassana written by his biographer, Carlo Giuseppe Ratti, as '*Pittore d'indole attiva, briosa, e tutta fuoco*' ('a painter of an active, lively and fiery nature'), who, if the portrait he was working on, or the colours he was using, were not as animated as he desired, would fly almost into a state of delirium, shouting: '*Ci voglio dello spirito in quella figura: voglio, che parli, a che si muova; e voglio, che per quelle carni vi circoli il sangue*' ('I want some spirit in that figure; I want it to speak, to move; and I want blood to circulate through that flesh').⁵

Like his other portraits, these works also demonstrate the way in which Cassana appears to have delighted in incorporating other genres into his paintings, such as still life in the aforementioned likenesses of the gamekeepers, or landscape and battle scenes, as here. The background and sky are painted with immense freedom and loose brushwork, while sacrificing none of the clarity necessary to discern the details; Cassana has clearly also paid minute attention to the description of the rich fabrics worn by the protagonist, and the fur of the leopard skin on the ground. A later painting by Cassana of 1707, which depicts Angiola Biondi, a court dwarf in the service of Princess Violante of Bavaria, likewise amalgamates landscape, animal painting, and portraiture, though it is painted with far less impasto and is of a much lighter tonality, clearly heralding the style and tastes of the eighteenth century (the animals may even be the work of Niccolò's brother, Giovanni Agostino).⁶

The subject of this painting is identified as John III Sobieski, who was King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1674 until his death in 1696. He is widely credited as having restored the fortunes of the kingdom after almost half a century of constant war. Sobieski was a soldier and commander in his youth. He led numerous campaigns, including against the Cossacks, but it was in the wars against the Ottomans that his military prowess was most celebrated. Having served as an envoy in a diplomatic mission to the Ottoman Empire in 1653, during which time he learned the Tatar and Turkish languages and studied Ottoman military traditions and tactics, Sobieski later achieved major victories against the Turks, such as the Battle of Khotyn in 1673 – the result of which was his election as monarch of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, following the unexpected death of King Michael I (1640–1673).

Over the following years Sobieski continued to exact his abilities as a military leader during his reign, leading a number of campaigns to recover lost territories and strengthen the state. In 1676 he even achieved a peace treaty with the Ottomans,

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which granted the country valuable time to recover and reform their army, but by the spring of 1683, royal spies had reported that an Ottoman military campaign was brewing again. Having shifted away from an alliance with France, Sobieski instead formed an alliance on 1 April 1683 with the Hapsburg Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I, and on 12 September of that same year, Sobieski – because he had the highest rank of all the military leaders – commanded the combined Polish, Austrian and German troops against the Ottoman army, who were close to breaching the walls of Vienna. By the end of the afternoon, Sobieski's European army, which numbered only about half of the 140,000 or so Turkish forces, had defeated the Ottoman battle line. For the rest of his reign, southeastern Poland also remained free from the threat of Ottoman and Tatar attack. Facially, this portrait corresponds with other likenesses of the King – see, for example, the earlier portrait now in the National Museum in Warsaw, dated to 1676 (fig. 3)⁷ – though his figure is undoubtedly idealised, as is the fanciful costume.

Although this portrait does not appear in the inventory of Ferdinando de' Medici's collection of 1714,⁸ it seems more than likely that the painting was produced while Cassana was working for the Grand Duke in Florence during the last decade of the seventeenth century, like the *Portrait of a German soldier*, not least due to its subject. In 1683, Cosimo III had also entered into the alliance between Sobieski and the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I, along with the Venetian Republic and, as mentioned above, following Sobieski's triumph over the Turks at Vienna, celebrations were held in Florence over two days. Furthermore, in 1691, Cosimo's daughter and Ferdinando's sister, Anna Maria Luisa (1667–1743), became the sister-in-law of Sobieski's son, Jakub Ludwik, when she married Johann Wilhelm van der Pfalz, Elector Palatine of Düsseldorf (whose sister, Edvige Elisabeth Amalia of Neuberg, was married in the same year to Jakub Ludwik). Taking into account these political and family connections, along with Ferdinando's patronage of Cassana, the encyclopaedic nature of the Medici collections and its representation of notable historical and contemporary figures, and the scale and quality of this work, this earliest provenance for the painting would appear to be highly possible.

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Fig. 1 Niccolò Cassana, *Self Portrait*, 1683. Le Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence.

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Fig. 2 Niccolò Cassana, *Portrait of a German soldier*, 1691. Galleria Palatina ed Appartamenti Reali, Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

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Fig. 3 Workshop of Daniel Schultz, *Portrait of John III Sobieski with the Order of the Holy Spirit*, circa 1676. National Museum, Warsaw.

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Footnotes

¹ See G. Conti, *Firenze dai Medici ai Lorena. Storia – cronaca aneddotica – costume [1670–1737]*, Florence 1909, pp. 73–76.

² Oil on canvas, 99.5 x 83.5 cm. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, inv. no. 9612 - 1890.

³ For example, Salvator Rosa's untraced *Oath of Catiline*, Cassana's copy of which is in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence, inv. no. 111 - 1912, or Titian's destroyed *St Peter Martyr*, which was replaced in the church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Venice, by Cassana's copy.

⁴ Oil on canvas, 136 x 98 cm. Palazzo Pitti, Florence, inv. no. 218 - 1912.

⁵ C.G. Ratti, *Delle Vite di pittori, scultori ed architetti genovesi*, vol. II, Genoa 1769, p. 16.

⁶ Oil on canvas, 154 x 118 cm. Palazzo Pitti, Florence, inv. no. 5140 - 1890.

⁷ Oil on canvas, 104 x 62 cm. National Museum in Warsaw, inv. no. A234.

⁸ See M. Chiarini, 'I quadri della collezione del Principe Ferdinando di Toscana', in *Paragone*, vol. 301, 1975, pp. 57–98.