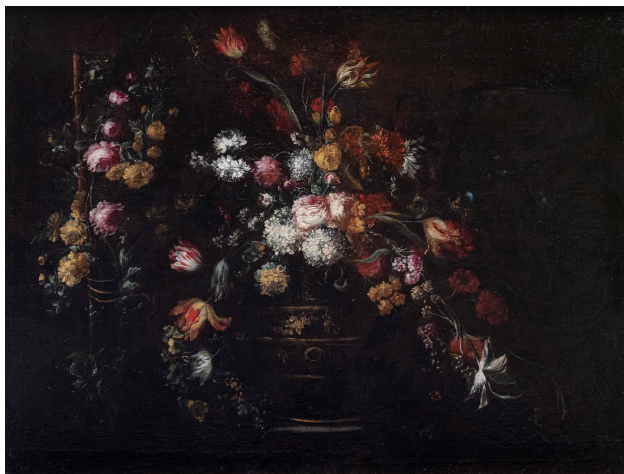


COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Elisabetta Marchioni

(Rovigo, active between the second half of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century)

A pair of still lifes of flowers

both oil on canvas

each 109.5 x 143 cm.;

each 43 1/8 x 56 1/4 in.



Provenance

Private collection, Milan.

LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



LONDON

NEW YORK

MADRID

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

These unpublished pendants of notable quality depict two metal vases full of flowers and laid down on stone plinths: roses, anemones, tulips, carnations, and boules-de-neige, among others. It is a baroque triumph of the best wild and garden flowers. Next to these vases one can see other yellow and pink plants, which are tied to cane sticks. The quality of the paintings is very high: the brushstrokes are quick and purposefully approximative in some parts (see, for instance, how the light glimmers on the vases emphasising chiseled decorations), while being denser and clotted in others, like the petals and the leaves. The flowers in the foreground especially demonstrate a thick and aggregated paint layer and hence pursue an evocative rather than a naturalist dimension: a chromatic and bright result, rather than a miniaturist effort. In works such as these, which are dated towards the very end of the 17th century rather than the beginning of the 18th century, the naturalistic attributes that had defined the most archaic phase of the still life genre have obviously been overcome: here the vision is primarily linked to an idea of decoration and not to a silent contemplation, as in the *stilleben* of Northern Europe and Italy at the beginning of the 17th century. Moreover, the complex symbolism of the flowers and fruits have also gone. The artist's interest is simply in the juxtaposition of colours and the vibrant and creamy flow of the brushstroke on the painted surface (in this case ochre-brown, pink, red and some bright yellow tones prevail). The paint appears fluid, bright, and light, in this way anticipating the style of the rococo. I believe that these works can be considered some of the most meaningful and important that Elisabetta Marchioni ever realised.

Even today, signed works by Marchioni are not known. Comparisons with those attributed to her hand are nevertheless extremely convincing. For instance, take the *Frontal altar with vases of flowers and angels*, today conserved at the Accademia dei Concordi in Rovigo (fig. 1). This canvas is referred to by Francesco Bartoli (the only biographer of Elisabetta) as the one on the altarpiece in the Capuchin Church and is therefore the only securely documented work by the artist. It is thus a crucial milestone in reconstructing her corpus.

The present paintings can be compared to the Accademia dei Concordi painting in terms of their technique, quality and the compositional arrangement of the vases, whereby the flowers are arranged in a radial pattern as if moved by a gust of wind. These qualities certify

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

the attribution to Elisabetta Marchioni. We can recognise in our paintings the same semi-fluid pictorial matter, that 'fast, nervous and frayed brushstroke',¹ as well as the analogous morphological solutions (like the typology of the roses, which represent almost a leitmotif or signature) that characterise her whole artistic production. Throughout her entire career and without going through any particular stylistic evolution, Elisabetta employed these pictorial codices because they could ensure her success. To make even more convincing comparisons with other attributed works, we can recall the pair sold at San Marco Auctioneers, 13 December 2009, lot 61; at Christie's Rome, 15 June 2015, lot 662; and finally the canvas sold at Cambi Genoa, 29 October 2015, lot 152 (fig. 2). These are all examples where the composition is highly comparable to those of the present paintings and where the formal and pictorial solutions are almost identical.

From a historical point of view, Elisabetta Marchioni is still a very mysterious figure: studies do not yet exist which could highlight her undoubted talent and the stylistic relationship between her works and those of Margherita Voló Caffi. Margherita Caffi was active between Milan and Piacenza though her works were also present in the Veneto, and especially in important Venetian collections; she is sometimes confused with Elisabetta. The oldest group of paintings to originate from this artistic milieu, which were ascribed to the so-called Master of the Guardi flowers (a downgrading of a reiterated attempt to attribute a series of Venetian flower paintings to Francesco Guardi), also relate to Marchioni: I refer here to a series of interesting paintings that are stylistically close to Marchioni and are therefore inextricably linked to her, but that are by a different hand. Can we say that these paintings were maybe realised by the mysterious Madama Duramana? Zani refers to her as a painter and the mother of Francesco Duramano. She was most likely the author - as I have written many times - of the most recent group of works said to be by the Master of the Guardi flowers (specifically, this group of paintings is indeed closer to the way Francesco Guardi would have painted them).² I therefore suggest that the production of the Master of the Guardi flowers should be divided into at least two subgroups, which are similar but not identical to each other. We cannot be completely sure, but nevertheless the magic triangle of Caffi-Marchioni-Duramana could lead to fascinating conclusions around the topic of still life

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

paintings by female artists who were active in the late-baroque period, and whose works would soon find rococo counterparts in Milan and Venice that deserve further study.

From the historical reconstruction of the life and activity of Elisabetta Marchioni, we only know from her biographer Francesco Bartoli (1793) that she was from Rovigo, married a goldsmith jeweler called Sante Marchioni (we hence do not know her maiden name), and died in old age 'around 1700'. Bartoli praised her activity, stating that she deserved the celebrity status she obtained and that 'almost all Rovigo's households have four, six, eight pieces by this Painter'.³ A few years later, Abbot Luigi Lanzi briefly referred to her as '*la Marchioni rodigina*' in *Storia pittorica della Italia* (1809).

We do not know anything else. This is not surprising: it was common for still life painters at that time not to enjoy the same reputation as the '*pittori di storia*', women even more so: their works were mainly realised for private clients and therefore we do not have the contracts documenting the commissioning of altarpieces, nor pastoral visits to the town churches. As such, we don't have records of the usual documents which are fundamental for reconstructing the life and work of figurative painters.⁴ The corpus of Marchioni is nevertheless today beginning to become more consistent, and this is coinciding with a new awareness of the value and quality of her work, as Bartoli and modern scholars have already highlighted.

Alberto Cottino

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Figure 1. Elisabetta Marchioni, *Frontal altar with flowers and angels*.
Accademia dei Concordi, Rovigo



Figure 2. Elisabetta Marchioni, *Still life of flowers*.
Cambi Auctioneers Genoa, 29 October 2015, lot 152

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760

Footnotes

¹ E. Safarik - F. Bottari, 'Elisabetta Marchioni', in *La Natura Morta in Italia*, (eds.) F. Zeri - F. Porzio, Milan 1989, vol. I, p. 329.

² P. Zani, *Enciclopedia metodica critico-ragionata delle Belle Arti*, Parma 1817-1824 (1821), VIII, p. 30. Zani refers to her as a Venetian painter; nevertheless the word 'Madama' could indicate a non-Italian origin. The dispute about the 'Guardi flowers' started in 1950, when Giuseppe Fiocco proposed an attribution to Francesco Guardi for some paintings of *Vases of Flowers* conserved at the Tridentine Museo Diocesano: these were delicate and rococo in style. Throughout the years, the corpus of similar works considerably and disorderly grew and the Guardi attribution was conserved - this happened until the 80s-90s when a group of art historians, Egidio Martini and Giuseppe Pavanello for instance, contested the reasons behind these attributions and condemned the issue to anonymity. As discussed, I believe that the oldest group of these paintings, which are the closest to the style of Elisabetta Marchioni, could belong to the mysterious 'Madama Duramana' while the other group, more rococo and 'guardesco' in style, to the son Francesco, without considering even more collaborators and imitators. For the dispute around the 'Guardi flowers', see the historical-critical resume by E. Safarik - F. Bottari, *Le decorazioni floreali in ambito guardesco*, in *La Natura Morta in Italia*, (eds.) F. Zeri - F. Porzio, Milan 1989, vol. I, pp. 342-348.

³ F. Bartoli, *Le pitture sculture architetture della città di Rovigo*, Venice 1793, pp. 318-319. '*La Marchioni celebre Pittrice da Fiori merita di essere annoverata nella nostra serie. Grazioso pennello ella ebbe, e cercò d'imitar la natura. L'occhio dell'osservatore resta talmente appagato nel vedere ne ' suoi dipinti freschezza, e verità che mai non si staccherebbe da ' di lei Quadri. Moltissimi essa ne fece, e quasi tutte le Case di Rovigo hanno quattro, sei, otto pezzi di questa Pittrice(...).Bellissimi vasi si veggono da essa dipinti, sopra quali s'innalzano piramidi de' suoi fiori con tanta varietà che propriamente allettano*'. ('Elisabetta Marchioni, an acclaimed female painter of flower still lifes, deserves to be counted among our series of the most famous painters. The eye of the viewer gets so satisfied in front of her paintings due to their freshness and truthfulness that will never depart from them. She realised many of them and most Rovigo households have four, six, eight pieces by this painter [...]. Beautiful are the vases she painted, where she placed pyramids of various and different tantalising flowers.')

⁴ On this theme see A. Cottino (ed.), *La donna nella pittura italiana del Seicento e Settecento. Il genio e la grazia*, exh. cat., Turin 2003. This is today still the only international exhibition devoted to this specific period, with a focus on female artists as well as on the role of women in the artistic milieu of the time. On Elisabetta, see also *Opuscoli letterarii editi ed inediti del dott. Vincenzo de Vit ora per la prima volta riuniti in un solo volume*, Milan 1888, p. 9, n. 5.