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Ridolfo Cunio
The burning of Troy

RIDOLFO CUNIO

(Milan, first half of the 17th century)

THE BURNING OF TROY

Oil on poplar panel

46 x 71 cm; 18 1/8 x 28 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Rome;

Sale, Babuino Auction House, Rome, 7 May 2025, lot 99 (as 'Flemish School 17th Century').

Reference Literature

Z. Dobos, "New Additions to the Oeuvre of Ridolfo Cunio", *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts*, 2023, pp. 175-184.



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We are grateful to Zsuzsanna Dobos, curator of Italian paintings at the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts, for having confirmed the attribution of the present painting to Ridolfo Cunio.

This panel belongs to a striking and exceptionally rare strand of Italian Seicento landscape painting: the cityscape-nocturne immersed in fire, in which the subject functions largely as a pretext for such a marvellous pictorial invention. As Zsuzsanna Dobos has recently shown in her study devoted to the rehabilitation and enlargement of Ridolfo Cunio's oeuvre, such works operate as "paintings of disasters" in which the catastrophe itself - flame, smoke, collapse - constitutes the true protagonist, while the literary theme (here the Trojan cycle) is subordinated to the overall atmosphere.¹

The painting presents a stage-like construction. In the foreground, the viewer is positioned amongst shattered masonry and scorched architectural fragments; at right, rises a classical façade articulated by columns, its plane catching intermittent firelight before dissolving into darkness. Next to it, in the lower centre, stands the Horse, isolated and emphatically placed on the composition's vertical axis. Dobos notes that in the Budapest *Flight of Aeneas from Burning Troy* (fig. 1) the Trojan Horse is similarly stressed, with attendant soldiers indicated only summarily; here, by contrast, Cunio suppresses human presence altogether, lending the emblematic Horse the role of a solitary, accusatory sign within the devastated urban theatre. On both sides, jagged silhouettes of ruins and burning timbers (the city walls?) erupts into the sky, the flames rendered in rapid, gestural strokes of red, ochre, yellow and near-white.

Between these flanking "wings", the middle ground opens onto the smouldering city, described through thin, pale outlines of roofs and chimneys that emerge and recede through haze. In the distance, monumental, classicizing buildings evoke an antique city. Most prominent is the circular, domed building set against the central glow, akin to the "round temple" Dobos compares to the Temple of Jerusalem in the Budapest panel.

The sky above is the painting's most audacious invention: smoke and fire form a dome-like canopy over the city, a luminous vault that shifts from blinding yellow-white at the centre to bruised oranges and deep browns at the edges. This "mysterious glow", produced by the reflections and diffusion of light through smoke, is precisely the kind of painterly challenge celebrated in early modern commentary on northern fire scenes (Dobos cites Giulio Mancini's admiration for Brueghel's ability to handle *reflexi dei lumi*), and it is central to Cunio's effect. Dobos contextualises

¹ Z. Dobos, "New Additions to the Oeuvre of Ridolfo Cunio", *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts*, 2023, pp. 175-184.

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Cunio's work within a broader, predominantly Netherlandish pictorial tradition. From the sixteenth century onward, Flemish artists developed independent cityscapes and their subtypes - night pieces (*nachtstukken*) and fire scenes (*branden*) - and such paintings were avidly collected in Italy. The present cabinet nocturne exemplifies this cross-cultural northern character noted by Dobos in relation to the Budapest painting, whose attribution history oscillated between Flemish and Italian schools before being securely linked to Cunio.

Ridolfo Cunio remains a shadowed figure. Dobos summarises the scant documentary record: he is cited among recognised Milanese painters; Carlo Torre describes him as a pupil of Giovanni Battista Crespi, called Il Cerano, and praises him specifically for *incendij e notturni* deemed worthy ornaments for private cabinets and galleries.² Later writers repeat the association with Cerano and the speciality in fire and night scenes, while inventories from seventeenth-century Milan record works by Ridolfo consistent with such production.

In terms of attribution, the panel aligns closely with the group of works Dobos associates with Cunio: above all the Budapest *Flight of Aeneas from Burning Troy* (Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest), and the related market pictures of burning cities (see, for example, fig. 2), including several variants with the *Flight of Lot and his Daughters from Burning Sodom*. The relevant consistencies include: the stage-like landscape structure; the centralised emblem; the distant city drawn in faint, whitish linear accents; the dome-like canopy of smoke lit from within; and the loosely brushed flames in red, yellow and white, spilling across the scene and staining the nocturnal sky. Equally characteristic is the visionary, almost phantasmal treatment of architecture - an effect Dobos relates to the architectural fantasies of François de Nomé and Didier Barra - here echoed in the way the colonnaded façade and the rotunda appear simultaneously solid and evanescent, revealed and consumed by light. The use of a similarly sized wooden support is another remarkable similarity.

While Cunio's landscapes cannot yet be dated securely and his artistic context demands further research, the present *Burning of Troy* is a compelling addition to this rare and sophisticated corpus.

² C. Torre, *Il ritratto di Milano diviso in tre libri*, Milan 1674, 239.



Fig. 1. Ridolfo Cunio, *Flight of Aeneas from Burning Troy*, oil on polar, 52.5 x 74.5 cm.
Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts.



Fig. 2. Ridolfo Cunio, *Scena di incendio - L'incendio di Troia*, oil on panel, 41.5 x 64 cm.
Sale, Porro & C., Milan, 21 November 2007, lot 190.

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