Oil painting - Cavalry Engagements

Object: Oil painting

Place of origin: Naples (possibly, painted)
Rome (possibly)

Date: early 18th century (painted)

Artist/Maker: Graziani, Pietro (artist)
Courtois, Jacques, born 1621 - died 1676

Materials and Techniques: Oil on copper

Credit Line: Bequeathed by John M. Parsons

Museum number: 574A-1870

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

Pietro Graziani (active early 18th century) was a Neapolitan painter, active in both Naples and Rome, and first recorded by Bernardo De Dominici in his Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani (1742, III, p. 175). He is known as a battle painter and is sometimes confused with Francesco Graziani called 'Ciccio Napoletano' who was also recorded as a battle painter and to whom he may be related.

This small oil on copper appears to be characteristic of Pietro Graziani's output, which has been rediscovered over the last few decades. The painting depicts an unidentified battle scene in which a tangle of intertwined bodies of horses and men. This painting is a good example of the small battle scenes produced during the 18th century in a much sketchier manner than the realistic scenes depicted in the previous century.

Descriptive line

Oil Painting, 'Cavalry Engagements', attributed to Pietro Graziani, early 18th century

Physical description

In an oval format, a battle scene involving horsemen with guns' smoke in the mid distance, a dead soldier and a dead horse in the foreground and mountains in the background.

Dimensions

Height: 12.9 cm approx., Width: 10.6 cm approx.

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Object history note

Bequeathed by John M. Parsons, 1870

John Meeson Parsons (1798-1870), art collector, was born in Newport, Shropshire. He later settled in London, and became a member of the stock exchange. His interest in railways led to his election as an associate of the Institution of Civil Engineers in 1839, and he was director or chairman of two railway companies between 1843 and 1848. Much of his time however was spent collecting pictures and works of art. In his will he offered his collection of mostly German and Dutch schools to the National Gallery (which selected only three works) and to the Department of Science and Art at South Kensington, later the Victoria and Albert Museum. The South Kensington Museum acquired ninety-two oil paintings and forty-seven watercolours. A number of engravings were also left to the British Museum.

Historical significance: Although this painting was formerly attributed to Salvator Rosa and successively to Francesco Guardi (1712-1793) and Jacques Courtois (1621-1676) (Kauffmann, 1973), it was most likely executed at a much later date by Pietro Graziani (active early 18th century) whose oeuvre has been rediscovered over the last decades.

This small oil on copper represents a cavalry engagement with horsemen depicted in a very rapid and sketchy manner thanks to a quite fluid impasto. The forms are only suggested rather than clearly defined and the scenery is evoked by rapid and dry brushstrokes. This technique is quite typical of the so-called 'Graziani group' (Chiarini, 1989) and can be compared with a group of small oil on copper from the Medici collection and the Feroni collection in Florence.

This type of battle scenes can be called, following F. Saxl, 'battle scene without a hero', a genre that started with Aniello Falcone's oeuvre as no proper battle can be identified. The painter focused on the rendering of the fight through the depiction of a tangle of bodies, in which animal and men tend to be confounded and even blended in with some blurry scenery. This painting forms an ensemble with 574-1870.

Aniello Falcone was a Neapolitan painter, who taught Salvator Rosa for some time, and fostered somehow the taste for battle scenes in which there is no place for individual hero.

Historical context note

In Italy the classical tradition of battles scenes goes back to the Roman low-relieves and mosaics such as the Victory of Alexander the Great on Darius in Pompeii, and persisted in medieval miniatures, in the 14th and 15th centuries' frescoes and in decorations on the Renaissance cassoni (i.e. wedding chests) up to such works as Pietro da Cortona's Victory of Alexander over Darius, 1635, Museo Capitolino, Rome, and
Salvator Rosa's Battle Scene, 1652, Louvre, Paris). In the 17th century however, Aniello Falcone, perhaps the first Italian battle specialist, introduced a new category of small battle, the battle scene 'without a hero' (F. Saxl) and usually without a specific topic beyond a generalized study of cavalry skirmishes between generic Christians and exotically clad Saracens or Turks. This speciality was developed by Neapolitan artists such as Carlo Coppola, Andrea di Lione and Salvator Rosa and in Florence by Giacomo Cortese. In the Netherlands, following the recent episodes of war that marked the progressive independence of the Low Countries (Eighty Years' War 1568-1648), Philips Wouwerman painted generic skirmishes and ambushes (using northern settings, clothing and weapons) and he concentrated on genre scenes of crowded camp life. Tapestries also allowed this genre to develop and were now used as official military art and formed high-class mass production. In Rome, the Bamboccianti, i.e. Netherlandish followers of Pieter van Laer nicknamed Bamboccio, were particularly interested in this genre.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O125459/cavalry-engagements-oil-painting-graziani-pietro/