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Louis Cretey
Lyon, c.1635 - after 1702

Resurrection of Christ
c.1670s

Oil on canvas
168 x 120 cm

Provenance:
Finarte Milan, April 2003, sale 1202, lot 74 (as circle of piazzetta);
Private collection, United Kingdom

Literature and exhibited:
Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, *Louis Cretey. Un visionnaire entre Lyon et Rome*, 22 Oct. 2010-24 Jan. 2011, P.
Rosenberg ed, cat.no. P.13, pp.98-99 (ill.)

Comparative literature:
P.Rosenberg, L.Galactéros de Boissier, C.Chomer, 'Pierre-Louis Cretey: le plus grand peintre lyonnais de son siècle?,' in *Revue de l'Art*, 82, 1988, pp.19-38

Louis Cretey is a highly individual exponent of one of the most anticlassical, non-conformist and eccentric expressions of Baroque painting. Yet, it might be surprising to learn that such a talented and distinctive painter was only recently rediscovered: the first noteworthy publication dedicated to him only dates from 1988 (Rosenberg, *op.cit.*).

However, a re-evaluation that would interest a wider public - beyond the narrow circle of art historians and specialists - would not come until 2010, when the first monographic exhibition was devoted to the artist in the city of his birth. On that occasion, the present *Resurrection* - already recognised as being by the hand of the artist by Erich Schleier (oral communication) - was exhibited and published for the first time (*Louis Cretey, op.cit.*).

Multiple explanations can be given for the fact that Cretey ended up being overlooked by art history. On the one hand, there was the historical and geographical aspect: the painter was never part of established Parisian artistic circles and did not have contacts with the leading patrons in the capital. He left Lyon and travelled to Italy, choosing secondary centres such as Modena and Parma - as well as Rome - and once back in France he always remained in Lyon. Notoriously, in the chronicles of the hyper-centralised French *Ancien régime*, there was no room for artists working outside Paris. Cretey shared this sort of *damnatio memoriae* with another French 17th century genius who spent most of his life outside of Paris: the Lorenese painter, Georges de la Tour - another extremely original exponent who was also long forgotten and only rediscovered in the 20th century.

Another aspect that contributed to this paradox was style and, extending this further, temperament. Cretey was a loose cannon in the panorama of the European Baroque and he approached painting in a totally individual way, unlike any other artist. Stylistic accents he adopted from other painters such as Pier Francesco Mola, Johann Lyss and Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione - with whom he has sometimes been confused - were re-elaborated in a totally personal way.

Cretey was born in Lyon in around 1635 and first trained as a painter under his father. He then spent much of his life between Lyon and Italy: documented in Rome between 1661 and 1663, he returned to Lyon in 1667. He then travelled back to Italy (this time to Parma) by 1669, and once again found himself in Rome between 1671 and 1682. During this period, he secured the important patronage of Giovanni Simone Boscoli, lieutenant general of the Artillery of the Duke of Parma, and Cardinal Imperiali in Rome, among others. The last documentary references to the painter record a final trip to Rome between 1700 and 1702.

Upon his return to Lyon in 1683, Cretey was commissioned to paint the vast decorative scheme for the refectory of the royal Benedictine monastery of Saint-Pierre (now the Museum of Fine Arts), marking the beginning of an intense period of activity and undeniable local success. From this commission, which is the best-documented in his *oeuvre*, five works have survived to testify to the ambitions of the project.



Almost certainly executed as an altarpiece, the present *Resurrection* was painted by Cretey in Italy, and it stands as one of the highpoints in his career, both in terms of its quality and originality. When Aude Henry-Gobet published it in 2010 (*Louis Cretey, op.cit.*) she underlined its similarities with paintings dating from the first Italian stay (1669-82), such as the *Saint Peter*, formerly in Dresden and now lost; the *Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* in Palazzo Barberini, Rome; the *Christ after the Flagellation* in Marseille (fig.1), also because of the recurrent motif of the soldiers, with their gleaming armour and sharp-edged helmets; and the *Temptation of Saint Anthony* in Narbonne (fig.2). Henry-Gobet observed that the *Resurrection* shared with these works: the composition, reduced to a few, simply articulated groups; the sketched physiognomies; and the subtle contrasts in the palette between the bright blue sky (for the *Temptation*) and the white of the drapery.

Precisely because of the exceptionally original output of his work, it is also possible to highlight compelling similarities with works that are traditionally dated to slightly later in his career. We can find similarly broad zig-zagging drapery, rhetorical gestures of outstretched arms and open hands, faces in ecstasy and the large, distorted eyes turned to the sky in the *Vision of Saint Bruno* (private collection; fig.3); as well as in, albeit in darker tones, the *Saints Mark* (fig. 4) and *Matthias* in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, works which are considered to be more mature; and even with aspects of the *Crucifixion* formerly with Rob Smeets (fig.5), painted during his last Italian trip after 1700.

The *Resurrection* is indeed a manifesto of Cretey's style and perhaps, for this very reason, difficult to date precisely. References to the manner of Pier Francesco Mola, to the compositions of the Carraccis, and to the virtuoso Venetian colourism - that anticipate aspects of Rococo painting - are almost constant features in his *corpus*.

In this picture, Cretey stages a Christ who, wrapped in glowing-white drapery, seems caught in the act of springing out of his sarcophagus like a semi-nude athlete, silhouetted against an exceptional dawning blue sky. Beneath, a soldier looks out in astonishment. More than a visual narrative device, he conceived a pretext to further emphasise the emotional power of the scene and an opportunity to display passages of painterly bravura, in the gleaming metal and the vaporous feathers of the helmet.

Cretey was not interested in adhering to the norm: he was not interested in constructing a coherent, perspective space, nor was he interested in following the figurative tendencies of his contemporaries. As in the case of the present canvas, he freed it of narrative elements, to the point of transforming the subject into an iconic, timeless image. This aspect recalls earlier, equally iconic examples such as the celebrated and dynamic resurrected Christ in Titian's *Averoldi Polyptych* (fig.6), and perhaps the most original and bewildering representation of the *Resurrection* in Western art: that of Matthias Grünewald (fig.7).



Fig.1

Louis Cretey, *Christ after the Flagellation*, c.1670s
Oil on canvas, Musée des beaux-arts de Marseille



Fig.2

Louis Cretey, *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, c.1670s
Oil on canvas, Collection Motais de Narbonne



Fig.3 Louis Cretey, *Vision of Saint Bruno*, c.1680s
Oil on canvas, private collection, Michael Descours



Fig.4 Louis Cretey, *Saint Mark*, c.1680-90
Oil on canvas, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm



Fig.5

Louis Cretey, *Crucifixion*, c.1700

Oil on canvas, Private collection, formerly with Rob Smeets



Fig.6
Titian, *Resurrection of Christ* (detail), 1520-22
Polittico Averoldi, Brescia



Fig.7
Matthias Grünewald, *Resurrection of Christ*, c.1515
(detail)
Unterlinden Museum, Colmar