



LULLO | PAMPOULIDES

LUCA CAMBIASO
(Moneglia 1527 – El Escorial 1585)

ACHILLES AMONG THE DAUGHTERS OF LYCOMEDES

Oil on poplar
73.50 x 40 cm

Within a solemn space, characterised by half-columns and arches that open onto the landscape in the background, the painting depicts six youths sumptuously dressed in “the ancient style” with bright colours and in various postures: in particular, two of them, on either side of the central figure, appear to be dressing her in a long veil.

It has been suggested that the subject of the hitherto unpublished painting, when it was recently put up for sale¹, is *Achilles among the daughters of Lycomedes*, an episode from the youth of the mythological Greek hero recounted by various classical authors. According to these sources, the sea nymph Thetis, the mother of Achilles, in a vain attempt to prevent him from taking part in the Trojan War where he would meet with his death, had hidden him in the *gynaecium* of Lycomedes, king of Skyros: here, in female attire, Achilles is supposed to have lived for a while together with the king's daughters². In these terms, the scene depicted in this work may correspond to the myth. On the one hand, it does not appear to have the specific elements that point to this interpretation, since no detail makes it possible to infer that the central figure is actually a man³ while, on the other hand, it would be an extremely rare iconography, given that over the last few centuries, artists had only depicted the final moment when Ulysses and Diomedes, in order to scupper Thetis' stratagem, had presented themselves to the daughters of Lycomedes, offering them not just jewellery and other feminine objects but also weapons which, when they caused a stir, Achilles swiftly grabbed, thus revealing his true masculine nature.

On the contrary, no doubt surrounds the certification of the autograph since the formal features, brushstrokes and palette indicate that the painting is one of the best works of Luca Cambiaso.

He trained with his father and initially adopted Michelangelo, whose work he may have only come across through engravings, as his model. After the mid-sixteenth century, the artist gradually softened his forms into a more Raphaelesque manner, partly as a result of the influence of the work done in Genoa by Giovanni Battista Castello known, due to his native city, as “il Bergamasco”. Castello was only a year older than Luca Cambiaso, but had a wider experience since he had had the opportunity to become familiar – probably not just through the mediation of his teacher Aurelio Busso – with the works painted in Mantua by Giulio Romano; subsequently, as described in the *Vite de' pittori* by Raffaello Soprani, Castello had stayed for some time in Rome with the aim of completing his training⁴.

The same source describes the close collaboration between the two artists, specifically as part of the fresco decoration, beginning with the vault of the central nave of the family church of San Matteo (c. 1558), and continuing on other commissions until they were “in competition with each other” in the reception room of the palace of Vincenzo Imperiale, where their respective parts appeared to be an integrated whole, even though the two painters, while working, had been separated by a wooden bulkhead⁵. Although their partnership unavoidably came to an end when “il Bergamasco” entered the service of Philip II of Spain but without having completed various projects in Genoa, the decision to commission Luca Cambiaso to finish the works that been interrupted was certainly not a fallback solution on the part of disappointed clients.

This long digression is necessary because recognising the painting under discussion as the one of

¹ Paris, Artcurial, Old Master & 19th Century Art, 22 March 2023, lot 68.

² Philostratus, *Ei kóves*, I; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 96, 124; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XII, 162-168; *Gesta Romanorum* 156.

³ In order to get a better understanding of the subject, it is worth noting that a sort of dome is outlined in shades of blue in the landscape framed by the right-hand arch, without a depiction of the building on top of which it must have stood: this anomalous presence may provide a clue to deciphering the iconography.

⁴ R. Soprani, *Le vite de' Pittori, Scoltori, et Architetti Genovesi, e de' Forastieri, che in Genova operarono con alcuni Ritratti de gli stessi. Opera postuma ... Aggiuntavi la vita dell'Autore per opera di Gio. Nicolo Cavana*, Genoa 1674, p. 289.

⁵ Unfortunately, it has long been impossible to share “l'esquisitezza di quest'opera” mentioned by Soprani, given that the part of the vault with frescoes by il Bergamasco were lost following the bombardment by the French fleet in May 1684, and the part decorated by Cambiaso was destroyed by the British aerial bombings of October 1942.



the most accomplished works of Cambiaso at the time of the working relationship established with Giovanni Battista Castello is important for establishing convincing parallels that can support the dating. In this regard, it is necessary to bring up the personifications of four paintings of the *Liberal Arts* – *Music*, *Geometry*, *Astronomy* and *Arithmetic* – all in a private collection, but displayed in Genoa in 2007⁶ which, attributed in the past even to Parmigianino, have, since 1952, been attributed to Cambiaso by Ferdinando Bologna, followed subsequently by all scholars working in the field of critical historiography. The small figures of the four *Arts* have a lot of features in common with the presumed daughters of Lycomedes in the painting under consideration: these include the clothing in the classical style, the elaborate hairstyles, the range of colours and the individual gestures. The parallel is so evident that they also can be plausibly dated to the same period, considered to be the years 1555-1560.

While the four *Arts*, partly due to the curvature, must have constituted a whole work for a commission that remains a matter of conjecture, the painting in question, as a result of the wooden support and the elongated rectangular form, which tend to exclude the possibility that it was a “quadro da stanza” (cabinet painting) and, all the more considering the subject, which could not have been isolated, must have formed part of a whole, of which it is currently the only known element. However, this observation suggests that it is worth focusing on the fact that, yet again, Raffaele Soprani underlines that “[fino] a nostri giorni, nel palazzo del Signor Duca Grimaldi era una picciola stanza, ò sia studiolo, nel quale oltre le bellissime pitture ad oglio [sic] di Luca Cambiaso, & alcuni finissimi lavori di tarsia, erano di mano di Gasparo [Forzani o Forlani] certe cornici & altri lavori di noce sottilmente intagliati: ma con occasione di far servire questo sito ad altr’uso, non è gran tempo che ella fu demolita”⁷. The duke in question can be recognised as Battista Grimaldi, and his residence was a building, which still stands in Genoa, correctly identified with the nickname of “palazzo della Meridiana”. While the seventeenth century historian had already described the dismantling of the *studiolo* (cabinet of curiosities), of which the painting under examination may have been an exceptional exhibit, it is another Genoese scholar Federigo Alizeri, writing in the nineteenth century, who provides important information on the matter, when he found the document related to the preparation of the last finishing touches to the room⁸. It concerns the commission of twelve carved elements to be placed beneath and above the six “nicchj” (niches) which opened along a sort of *boiserie* and six panels “de prospettiva”, in all likelihood wooden inlay, given that the contract regards a carver (not Gaspare Forzani, as indicated on the basis of family memory by Soprani, but his brother Giuseppe). Although the document does not refer to painted parts, the evidence provided by Soprani shows that, even in the Genoese case, as had already occurred in the superlative fifteenth century examples in Urbino, Mantua, and subsequently in Florence, wooden parts alternated with painted parts.

However, there are other more interesting aspects of this document.

Firstly, the palace in question is a residence where Luca Cambiaso himself was asked to paint what is now considered the masterpiece of his fresco painting: *Ulysses killing the suitors*, but above all the commission to Forzani was given on 28 March 1560, and this year is completely consistent with the dating suggested for the painting on the basis of the stylistic evidence.

Everything therefore leads to the conclusion that both the painting under discussion and the four *Arts* were part of this decoration or, rather, that they are the only surviving elements and that they were done during the months close to the drafting of the document.

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⁶ See the entry by V. Damian in *Luca Cambiaso un maestro del Cinquecento europeo*, exhibition catalogue (Genoa, Palazzo Ducale, 3 marzo – 8 luglio 2007) P. Boccardo, F. Boggero, C. Di Fabio and L. Magnani (eds), Milan 2007, pp. 244-245.

⁷ Soprani 1674, p. 283.

⁸ F. Alizeri, *Notizie dei professori del disegno in Liguria dalle origini al secolo XVI*, V, 1877, pp. 115-117. The scholar offered a first account of the information that had been tracked down in F. Alizeri, *Guida illustrativa del cittadino e del forastiero per la città di Genova e le sue adiacenze*, Genoa 1875, p. 149.