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ANTONIO MANCINI
1852 – 1930

THE SHELL COLLECTOR / A BOY WITH SHELLS / PEPPINO
c.1892-3

Oil on canvas, signed lower left: Roma Mancini
99 × 60 cm

PROVENANCE:
Private collection, USA.

EXIBITIONS:
Düsseldorf, *Internationale Ausstellung*, 1904;
Milan, *Mostra Nazionale (Sempione)*, 1906;
Palm Beach, *American International Fine Art & Antique Fair*, 2008.

LITERATURE:
Katalog der Internationalen Kunstausstellung Düsseldorf 1904 im Städtischen Kunstpalast: veranstaltet von dem Verein zur Veranstaltung von Kunstausstellungen; 1. Mai bis 23. Oktober. Düsseldorf: Verlag der Internationalen Kunstausstellung, 1904. p. 69, no. 1034 (*Ein Knabe mit Muscheln*);
L. Lucilio, "Le Belle Arti all'Esposizione di Milano," *Natura ed Arte*, anno XV, fasc. 18 (1906), pp. 377-378;
Inaugurazione del nuovo valico del Sempione. Esposizione di Milano 1906. Mostra Nazionale di Belle Arti. Catalogo illustrato. Milano, 1906, p. 120, n. 16 (entry title *Peppino*);
S. Ortolani; F. De Filippis (eds.), *Il paesaggio nella pittura napoletana dell'Ottocento* (exhibition catalogue, Naples, 1936), 1936, p. 31 (listed as *Un ragazzo con conchiglie*);
A. Schettini, *Antonio Mancini*, 1953, p. 239;
D. Maggiore, *Arte e artisti dell'Ottocento napoletano e Scuola di Posillipo: biografie di pittori, incisori, scultori e architetti con illustrazioni* (supplemento alla "Storia dell'Arte Italiana"), 1955, p. 110;
R. Caputo, *La pittura napoletana del II Ottocento*, Naples, 2017, p. 246;
C. Virno, *Antonio Mancini, Catalogo ragionato dell'opera*, Rome, 2019, vol.I, p.272, no.412 (illustrated)

Born in Rome in 1852, Antonio Mancini studied in Naples under Domenico Morelli and Filippo Palizzi, where he absorbed the lessons of the Neapolitan School of *Verismo* and its close observation of reality.

From the outset his work revealed an independent sensibility, a reluctance to align with any single current of modern painting. Encouraged by Mariano Fortuny, he travelled to Paris in 1875, encountering the Impressionists and developing friendships that included John Singer Sargent, who would later introduce him to London society and praise him as "the best living painter."

By the 1880s, settled in Rome, Mancini devoted himself to portraiture while refining a distinctive technique that relied on an experimental manipulation of pigment: dense impasto, visible brushwork, and – as in the case of the present canvas – the occasional addition of glass or metallic fragments that heightened the vibration of light on the surface.

The present painting belongs to Mancini's celebrated series devoted to the street children of Naples, the "scugnizzi", whom he rendered with both empathy and penetrating psychological immediacy. Entitled *Peppino* in the catalogue of the 1906 Milan exhibition, the work portrays a dark-haired boy, a familiar model in the artist's studio, shown half-length holding a large



spiny shell whose iridescent interior catches the light. The composition combines the direct realism of his early career with the technical bravura of his maturity: the face and hands are modelled in vigorous strokes that build relief from paint, while the shell gleams with the metallic accents characteristic of his later style.

Contemporary critics were quick to recognise the novelty of this handling. Writing in *Natura e Arte* after the 1906 Milan exhibition, Luigi Lucilio (op. cit.) described Mancini's "habit of mixing into the paint small metallic fragments, granules of lustrous matter, by which he attained prodigious notes of luminosity that the palette alone could not give." Lucilio then lamented that the canvas had been "gouged by a senseless and stupid vandal—or, perhaps, by the spite of an envious soul—who sought to tear away the small metallic fragment that drew from the shell its most vivid sparkle, a spurt of light of singular effect."

This act of vandalism was deplorable but luckily negligible in terms of damage to the work. Yet, it's particularly revealing as inadvertently documented the physical daring of Mancini's painting: his pigment, thickly encrusted with reflective particles, had become a three-dimensional substance that projected beyond representation itself.

A further account by Vincenzo Pica (op. cit.), also commenting on the 1906 exhibition, praised the picture's "vigorous realistic presence," inviting viewers to observe more closely "the half-length figure of a Neapolitan urchin with a large spiny shell in his hands." Both critics, in different tones, capture what makes this work exceptional: its synthesis of social observation and material innovation, of psychological truth and painterly experiment.

Seen today, *The Shell Collector* epitomises Mancini's mature vision, elevating the humble model of daily life into a luminous protagonist. The dense impasto, animated by the interplay of light and matter, achieves a tactile immediacy that seems almost to vibrate upon the canvas surface. In this work, as in his finest paintings, Mancini fuses tradition with innovation: he compels the viewer not merely to see but to sense the paint itself, a tactile, living substance that embodies both the material and the spiritual pulse of existence.