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GIOVANNI BATTISTA SALVI, known as SASSOFERRATO  
1609-1685

*SALVATOR MUNDI*

Oil on canvas  
75 x 62 cm

## PROVENANCE

Rob Smeets gallery, where purchased by the present owner at TEFAF 2024

A barely perceptible inclination of the head toward the right and an even subtler rotation of the torso, which casts the left shoulder into shadow, prevent this *Salvator Mundi* from achieving perfect symmetry. The bust of the Risen Christ, who blesses with one hand and supports the globe with the other, is characterised by a rarefied expressiveness that combines the hieratic intent of the divine icon with a subtle melancholy, conveyed through the contemplative gaze and slightly parted lips.

He wears a broad, undecorated red tunic, fastened beneath the chest by a strap of sky blue — the same colour as the mantle, which rests on his shoulder and appears to wrap around the elbow. His hair, moustache, and beard are long, covering the trapezius and chin, with clearly defined partings combed toward either side of the head. The face is broad and regular, marked only by a faint suggestion of furrowing in the brows. The head is crowned by a quadrilobed halo, within which a metallic surface seems to inscribe an imagined cross.

Behind Christ's shoulders the background is uniformly dark, though not fully black. The light source, coming from the left, leaves the stigma at the centre of the raised hand in shadow.

Serenity and restraint define both the idealised figure and the artist himself, who addresses an archaic iconographic theme, renewing it with great modernity, perhaps achieved unconsciously. This quality brings the image close to works produced two centuries later, when the Pre-Raphaelites and the Nazarenes returned to meditating upon the purity of sacred representation.

For this reason, in 2009, on the occasion of an exhibition I curated to mark the fourth centenary of Giovanni Battista Salvi's birth, I chose the title: *Il Sassoferrato. Un preraffaellita tra i puristi del Seicento* (Cesena 2009, Medusa).

The exceptional quality of the painting leaves no doubt as to its autograph status. Although unpublished, this example must be regarded as a work of primary importance. I have previously examined other versions that adopt a closer and somewhat different compositional approach. The theme of the blessing Redeemer holding the symbolic globe, however, remains rare within the artist's extensive production.

The version formerly in the Altomani & Sons Gallery, Pesaro–Milan (fig. 2), presents a slightly younger Christ, with a shorter beard and an almost smiling expression, lacking both the furrowed brow and the wound in the hand. The quadrilobed halo is replaced by a radiant nimbus that illuminates the background. A related version appeared on the art market on 6 July 2005, with minor variations and evident workshop participation (fig. 3). A different compositional conception is documented in a work in the Musée de Grenoble (fig. 4), likewise with workshop intervention and featuring an unusual garment opened at the chest.

Of a different inventive character is a considerably younger *Salvator Mundi* in a private collection (fig. 5), executed by Sassoferrato but derived from a model by Guercino, which I have identified with a composition by Benedetto Gennari in the Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Munich (fig. 6). The pose in this latter composition provides a useful comparison, clarifying that the present work was conceived directly by Sassoferrato himself, even if it may appear the most archaic among the variants mentioned. I also recall a *Head of a Young Christ* (fig.



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7), unrelated to the *Salvator Mundi* iconography, which I included in the 2009 exhibition and which belongs to the Koelliker Collection in Milan.

Returning to the present painting, its hieratic character suspends it in an undefined temporal dimension, detached from any specific historical moment. The quadrilobed halo, with its metallic aspect, lends the bust an affinity with ancient sculpture. The modelling of the folds of the tunic, the natural flow of the beard, and the subtle suggestion of the world within the globe are executed with remarkable finesse. It is almost impossible to propose a precise dating, given the artist's striking stylistic consistency. One may only suggest that this work occupies a central position within his production, representing a fully mature and entirely autograph achievement.

Massimo Pulini  
Montiano, 21 May 2020



Fig. 2 Sassoferrato, *Salvator Mundi*, formerly at Altomani & Sons Gallery, Pesaro, Milan



Fig 3. Sassoferrato and workshop, *Salvator Mundi*, art market on July 6th 2005



Fig. 4 Sassoferato and workshop, *Salvator Mundi*, Grenoble Museum, inv. MG 42



Fig. 5 Sassoferrato, *Salvator Mundi*, private collection



Fig. 6 Benedetto Gennari, *Salvator Mundi*, Staatgalerie, Monaco, 457



Fig. 7 Sassoferrato, *Testa di Redentore*, Collezione Luigi Koelliker, Milan