

Nicola Spinosa

# Grazia e tenerezza in posa

Bernardo Cavallino e il suo tempo (1616-1656)

‘If for the short life of Girolamo Santacroce we mourned as a nation, having lost one our most excellent sculptors, for the very brevity of Bernardo Cavallino’s we wept for the loss of as much ornament and honour one could ever hope for from a rarely perceptive and accomplished professor of painting. If we review the careful perfection of his drawing or the excellence in his manner of combining parts, accompanied by his noble and brilliant use of colour, it seems almost impossible that any other renowned painter of our times (which in truth are scarce of great artists) could ever equal him.’ This is how, De Domenicis, in his celebrated *Vite de’ pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani*, published in the mid-eighteenth century, begins to weave with truth and fantasy, the life of Bernardo Cavallino, the refined painter of sacred and profane stories, almost all executed for private patrons and collectors. Born at Naples in 1616, and realistically still active after 1650, according to his biographer Mattia Preti formed his compositional approach, his formal elegance and the light tones of this ‘Poussin of the Neapolitan’s’ advanced production.

As is the case with other Neapolitan artists whose lives De Dominici traced, Bernardo Cavallino’s has also revealed itself largely imprecise, unfounded and fantastical. Nevertheless, today some of his critical observations on paintings he could have seen in Neapolitan collections remain appropriate, astute and to the point. As for example, when to describe the painter’s style he observes how: ‘Therefore uniting to that [of Rubens], Massimo [Stanzione’s] style, he came to create his own beautiful and erudite manner, which seems simultaneously sweet, gentle and delicate, but with great artifice of chiaro-scuro and great contrast of light and shade, grave and robust, using a single light source that in the main divides centrally, he was able to create unspeakable gravity and decorum, beyond natural grace in distribution, at which Cavallino was singular...’

‘Beautiful and erudite manner’, accomplished use of light and shade to create solidity and truth in his painted images without depriving them of ‘natural grace’ – even in the delicacy of the layers of colour: these are the qualities identified and noted in Cavallino’s work by the modern critics. The first critical contributions in the early twentieth century of Voss and Hermanin, followed, although with differing points of view and

theories, by De Rimaldis, Longhi and Ortolani, lead with increasingly accurate and precise readings of his life and work to the nineteen fifties. Subsequently, despite a persistent lack of documented certainties, Ferdinando Bologna and Raffaello Causa's studies have led to new approaches founded on increased contextual knowledge of the period.

As a result of these studies, a monographic exhibition on the painter was held in 1984-1985 that opened at the Museum of Art, Cleveland (Ohio) and continued to the Museo Pignatelli, Naples. The exhibition was curated by Ann Tzeuschler Lurie, Ann Percy and Nicola Spinosa and included works by artists stylistically close to Cavallino.

On that occasion the realist style of the artist's beginnings, were sufficiently documented to be fixed in the mid-1630s. His subsequent developments towards an elegant classicism, influenced by Artemisia Gentileschi's Neapolitan works and those of Massimo Stanzione followed. In the early 40s he adopted more pictorially ornate solutions informed by 'neo-Venetian' currents prevalent in the Mediterranean area (with specific reference to Giovan Benedetto Castiglione's productions of around 1630). In his final phase, from after 1645 (the year inscribed on his canvas at the Museo di Capodimonte of *The Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia*, at present Cavallino's only known dated work) to the years immediately following 1650, his studied compositions reveal a sustained formal and compositional elegance of sumptuous chromatic intensity, with whitened light and coloured shadow deployed to render tender sentiment and studied expressive grace. His cultured painting appealed to worldly private patrons with refined courtly tastes; it seems almost to anticipate the stylistically cultivated sensibilities of the early eighteenth century and the restrained, rarefied emotionality of the various protagonists of Pietro Metastasio's antiheroic melodramatic theatre.

Over twenty-five years on from the Cleveland and Naples exhibitions, which were followed by other anthological exhibitions on Neapolitan painting in the early years of the seventeenth century and the Baroque age, Nicola Spinosa, advancing his studies on this subject, returns to Bernardo Cavallino with a monographic contribution on the painter. In this context he presents a rereading of the artist's production, about which, in the meantime, our knowledge has broadened and grown, thanks to additions to his catalogue of known works, identified in Italian and foreign private collections and rediscovered in recent years at auction on the international art market.

Nicola Spinosa's contribution on Bernardo Cavallino, with an essay on the painter and his connection to his immediate environment follows from his formative years in the realist tradition, in contact with Jusepe de Ribara, the Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds and Aniello Falcone, through to his full maturity which reflects the trends of certain French artists active in Rome (from Simon Vouet to Nicolas Poussin). The volume is completed by catalogue entries on Cavallino's works from each successive phase of his development, and it extends to examine the production of certain painters active at Naples in the same period, from Andrea Vaccaro to Antonio De Bellis, whose works reveal how they favoured and embraced his aesthetic and stylistic choices to such an extent that they have on occasion been confused with Cavallino's.

In addition to Nicola Spinosa's examination of Cavallino's production, and that of his presumed 'circle', the volume, which includes... colour and ...black and white reproductions, is further enriched by a critical study of Cavallino's drawings by the noted student of Italian Baroque graphic art, Cristiana Romalli.