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LUCA GIORDANO

(Naples 1634-1705)

AN ASTROLOGER

oil on canvas

122.6 x 96.2 cm.; 48 1/4 x 37 7/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, 1950s-2011;
Anonymous sale, Sotheby's New York, 9 June 2011, lot 22;
Private collection, Belgium.

Literature

Scavizzi, Giuseppe and Giuseppe de Vito, *Luca Giordano giovane, 1650-1664*. Naples 2012, 95-96.

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Luca Giordano, one of the most important artists of the second half of the seventeenth century, painted several depictions of philosophers and scientists in the early years of his career. Among these, this powerful picture of an Astrologer stands out as the pinnacle of both Giordano's pictorial prowess and his intellectual might.

Painted with remarkable confidence, the astrologer makes deep and enduring eye contact with the viewer. His frank, specific, and disarming gaze strongly suggests that this is a portrait taken directly from life. Though his clothes-- all variations of buff and brown-- are humble, his elegantly draped cloak, along with an *accorgimento* of bright white light behind his head, gives him an air of studied monumentality. As the sitter holds an astrological diagram to his chest (on which more later), he supports a large, worn tome with his muscley left arm.

In the first part of his long career, Giordano was influenced principally by the Spanish-born Caravaggesque master Jusepe de Ribera, who was the leading artist in Naples in the 1620s and 30s. Ribera painted a number of Philosophers in two series (1630 and 1637) which were to inspire Giordano in the 1650s and 60s.

Giordano painted many of these single figures depicting philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians. Generally portrayed three-quarter-length, they number about 40 in total, although not all can be easily identified with a specific historical figure. Exhibitions¹ and studies² on the young Giordano over the past twenty-five years have led to a greater understanding of this phase of the artist's career and his production of works of this type, even if there is not universal agreement on the dating of such works.

Giordano executed his depictions of these men of learning in two phases, the first in the second half of the 1650s, when he closely follows Ribera's series of 1630 with its dry and vigorous handling (see his *Democritus*, **Fig. 1**): this is best illustrated in the *Socrates* in the Baratti Collection, Milan (**Fig. 2**). The second period comes in the 1660s, when Giordano looked to Ribera's second series of 1637, paintings which are notable for the richer, more painterly treatment of the work's surface (see **Fig. 3**). At this stage, Giordano treated these prototypes as mere starting points in the pursuit of his own artistic goals. Giving freer rein to his imagination than in his works of the 1650s, he created a series of works that reveal an overriding interest in the individuality of his subjects – both physical and psychological. The present work, with its incredible presence and freer handling is right at home in this second series.

Giordano's pictorial brilliance can be underlined by comparing the same subject by Ribera in The Royal Collection (**Fig. 4**). While both works feature astrological charts, books, and humble, yet dignified astrologers, Giordano's figure illustrates the strides he took to evolve the genre of

¹ See *Luca Giordano, eine Ausstellung des Kunsthistorischen Museums Wien*, edited by Wilfried Seipel. Exh. cat. Naples, Vienna, Los Angeles (Castel Sant'Elmo, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art), 2001-2.

² See, for example, Scavizzi and de Vito 2012.

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philosopher portraits-- the contrast of light and dark, rather than just a visual experiment, is honed to fill the work with energy. Indeed, as Scavizzi observes, Ribera was always a painter firmly rooted in the naturalist tradition, whereas Giordano was more interested in the dramatic possibilities of his subject.³ Thus, where the Spanish master portrayed his philosophers almost uniformly as sober, stoical heroic types, the younger artist presented his figures as real, emotionally expressive individuals. As Oreste Ferrari wrote in 1992, in Giordano's portraits of this nature there is a "strong emphasis on the expressive qualities of the faces and [...] a greater dramatization in their depiction [than in Ribera]."⁴

If the painting's artistic debts and innovations are clear, the purpose of this painting is an intriguing mystery. In this respect, the chart that the astrologer exhibits to the viewer is of paramount importance. Looking at a detailed view of the sheet (Fig.5), it is clear that this is a chart known as "the twelve houses", a type of birth chart used to predict all things from personality, interests, and even future disabilities (Fig. 6). The date of April 1645 inscribed at the centre of the chart -- too early to be the date of production of the work, as Giordano's earliest dated paintings can be traced to 1653⁵ -- likely represents the birthdate of the person for whom the astrologer has made the chart. As Monica Azzolini has observed, in Early Modern Italy astrological readings were often taken before embarking on portentous life events, and especially marriage, to ensure a favorable outcome.⁶ It may be the case, then, that the astrologer is presenting the viewer the birth chart of a potential match. The tentative stylistic dating of the work to the early to mid-1660s would place the subject anywhere from fifteen to twenty years old, the prime age for betrothal.

³ Scavizzi and de Vito 2012, 97.

⁴ Una "vigorosa sottolineatura dei caratteri espressivi dei volti e [...] una più scoperta drammaticità della rappresentazione [che in Ribera]." Giuseppe Scavizzi and Oreste Ferrari, *Luca Giordano. L'opera completa*, 2 vols. Naples, 1992, I:10.

⁵ Scavizzi and Ferrari 1992, I:9.

⁶ See Monica Azzolini, "Are the Stars Aligned? Matchmaking and Astrology in Early Modern Italy". *Isis* 12, no. 4 (2021): 766-75.

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Fig. 1. Jusepe De Ribera, also called Lo Spagnoletto, *Democritus*, 1630.
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado,

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Fig. 2. Luca Giordano, *Socrates*, latter half of the 1650s.
Milan, Baratti Collection.

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Fig. 3. Jusepe De Ribera, also called Lo Spagnoletto, *Protagoras*, 1637.
Hartford, CT, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.

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Fig. 4. Jusepe De Ribera, also called Lo Spagnoletto, *An Astrologer*.
Windsor, Royal Collection.

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Fig. 5. Detail of the present work.

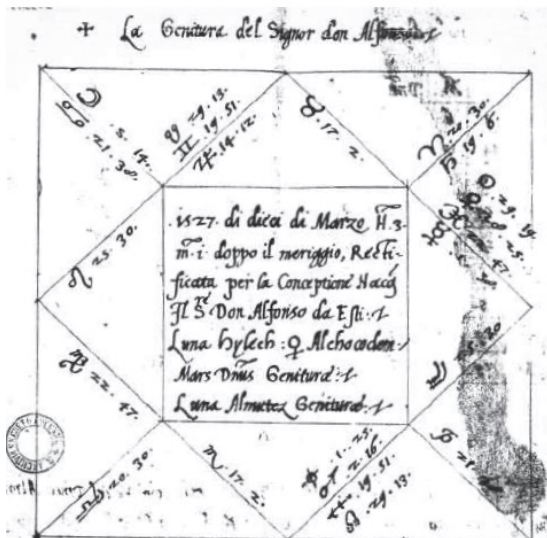


Fig. 6. Example of a twelve houses chart from Early Modern Italy, (Alfonso d'Este)