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Annibale Carracci,
Portrait of a Man in Black with a White Ruff

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ANNIBALE CARRACCI
(Bologna 1560 – 1609 Rome)

PORTRAIT OF A MAN IN BLACK WITH A WHITE RUFF

Oil on canvas
47 x 37 cm; 18 1/2 x 14 5/8 in.

Provenance

The Bonnemains family, Chalet Marguerite, Thonon (Haute-Savoie);
Art market, France;
Private collection, Belgium.

Expertises by Daniele Benati, 2026 (below) and Massimo Pulini, 2026 on request.
We are also grateful to Dr Keith Christiansen for having verbally confirmed the attribution.

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With an air of studied nonchalance, the young bearded man raises his right hand to his shoulder while at the same time directing an alert and penetrating gaze towards the viewer. He wears a black garment buttoned across the chest, from which emerges the immaculate white ruff encircling his neck. The considerable freedom with which the latter is handled and, more generally, the deftly abbreviated brushwork lend the image extraordinary vitality, making it clear that, rather than lingering over detail, the painter is concerned with the existential truth of the sitter, whose haughty and wary character is captured with consummate skill.

It is precisely this ability to convey the immediacy of expression through rapid, apparently careless painting that identifies the present work as by Annibale Carracci, whose youthful activity seems programmatically directed towards excluding from his stylistic language any vestige of Mannerist fastidiousness, so as to engage directly with the real, or with the 'living' model, as he himself would later prefer to write in one of the annotations entered in the margins of a copy of Vasari's *Lives*.¹ The rendering of the human face thus becomes the privileged field for an investigation that Annibale appears to have pursued on his own account, outside the context of specific commissions. Despite the aristocratic character imparted by the sitter's dress, this may perhaps also have been the case with the present painting, since it is difficult to imagine that the man portrayed here would have consented to being unmasked in his most intimate impulses. We are, in other words, in a sphere in which the practice of portraiture, generally entrusted to specialist painters, gives way to the 'testa di carattere': that is, a kind of exercise aimed at rendering emotions and useful to the artist in preparation for works of greater ambition.

Although such experimentation finds no precise counterpart in the sources, where this type of practice appears instead to have been associated principally with drawing, modern scholarship following Donald Posner's fundamental monograph² has substantially enriched Annibale's catalogue in this respect as well, bringing to attention numerous paintings, sometimes in oil on paper or, as in the present case, on canvas, whose exceptionally high quality can only be assigned to his hand. Despite the inevitable divergence among the opinions expressed by individual scholars, a corpus of images has consequently taken shape from which one may infer that, in his search for a personal vocabulary, the artist gradually moved beyond the simple head study, whether in profile or frontally posed, in favour of wider framings capable of lending greater expressiveness to the model and of suggesting even the slightest degree of 'action'. By prompting a turn of the head, the oblique positioning of the torso, for example, allows a more direct interaction with the beholder, towards whom the sitter seems suddenly to turn, and creates a state of suspension and expectancy that heightens the immediacy of the naturalistic transcription. This was already apparent in the oil-on-paper *Young Man*

¹ D. Benati, 'Annibale Carracci e il vero', in *Annibale Carracci*, exhibition catalogue (Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico – Rome, Chiostro del Bramante), ed. D. Benati and E. Riccòmini, Milan, Electa, 2006, pp. 18-37; idem, 'Sull'idea del "vero" in Annibale Carracci', *ARTItaly*, 22, 2016, pp. 6-15.

² D. Posner, *Annibale Carracci. A Study in the Reform of Italian Painting around 1590*, London, Phaidon, 1971.

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Laughing in a private collection (fig 1),³ which bears on the reverse a study possibly related to the fragmentary *Jole* formerly in the Grassi collection⁴ and seems to belong to an early date, around 1584–85. Annibale would, however, make more frequent use of this device after his stay in Venice at the end of 1587 had afforded him first-hand knowledge of the great models of Venetian painting. The most mature outcome of this development is to be found in the admirable *Self-Portrait with Figures in the Mirror* (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera, fig. 2),⁵ in which the casual way in which the figures enter the rectangle of the canvas underscores the instantaneous character of the vision, which painting alone makes it possible to arrest and, in some sense, eternalise. The canvas under examination operates in the same vein; here, however, confirming the continual scrutiny to which Annibale subjected his expressive means, a freedom of execution of Titianesque derivation is combined with a deliberate chromatic simplification, effectively reduced to gradations from white to black and from ivory to pink, apart from the use of a touch of red lake on the lips.

A comparable investigation also characterises the *Head of a Smiling Man* formerly in the Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection (Sotheby's, London, 8 July 2009, lot 21, fig. 3), or the other example formerly in the Nelson Shanks Collection in New York (Sotheby's, New York, 27 January 2022, lot 148, fig. 4), which, through a slight shift in the inflection of the eyebrows and mouth, reverses the expressive register of the *Head of an Angry Man* in the Galleria Palatina, Florence (fig. 5).⁶ In the present case, however, very slight wear to the surface, which brings the numerous revisions into relief, also contributes to an effect in which such a carefully contrived economy of means makes the result resemble a drawing in coloured pencils, thereby lending it an even greater degree of modernity - to the point that, through the chromatic juxtapositions described above, it even calls Édouard Manet to mind.

This example likewise confirms the experimental character of Annibale Carracci's early production, and I shall make it my concern to bring it to scholarly attention as soon as possible. For Annibale, engagement with the real was not an achievement already secured, but rather a long-term project pursued consistently, though with continual adjustments.

Daniele Benati

Bologna, 24 April 2026

³ Christie's, London, 10 July 2001, lot 52. See D. Benati, 'Il ritratto e lo studio delle espressioni dai Carracci al Crespi', in *Figure come il naturale. Il ritratto a Bologna dai Carracci al Crespi*, exhibition catalogue (Dozza, Castello Malvezzi-Campeggi), ed. D. Benati, Milan, Skira, 2001, reproduced p. 14.

⁴ A. Brogi, 'Considerazioni sul giovane Annibale Carracci e qualche aggiunta', *Paragone*, 413, 1984, p. 39.

⁵ D. Posner, *Annibale Carracci*, op. cit., II, p. 13, no. 25; D. Benati, in *Annibale Carracci*, op. cit., p. 76, no. I.1.

⁶ D. Benati, in *Annibale Carracci*, op. cit., pp. 118–19, no. II.13; idem, 'Sull'idea del "vero"', op. cit., figs. 6–7.

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Fig. 1. Annibale Carracci, *Young Man Laughing* (also *A Smiling Youth*), c. 1584–85, on paper; private collection; Christie's, London, 10 July 2001, lot 52.

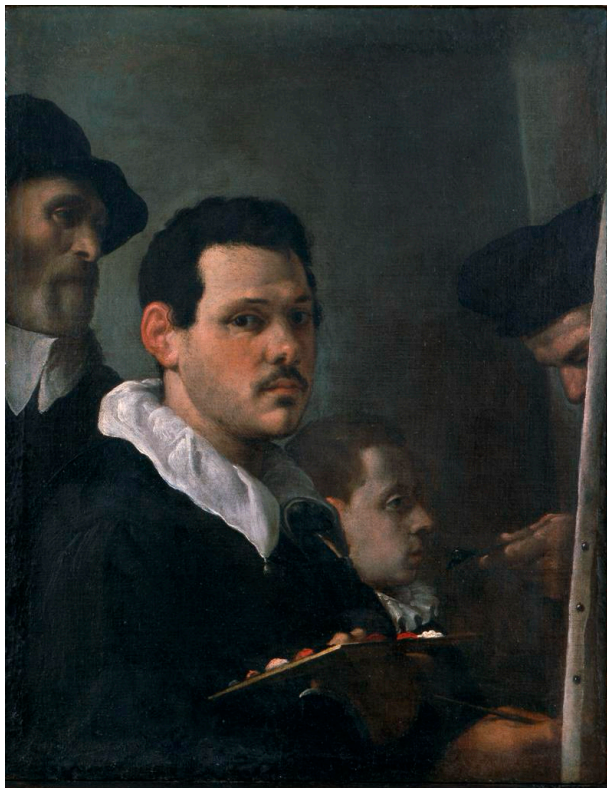


Fig. 2. Annibale Carracci, *Self-Portrait with Figures in the Mirror* (official Brera title: *Self-Portrait with Other Figures*), c. 1593, oil on canvas, 60 × 48 cm, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, inv. 310.

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Fig. 3. Annibale Carracci, *Head of a Smiling Man*, 1580s, oil on canvas, 50.2 × 43.2 cm; formerly Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection; Sotheby's, London, 8 July 2009, lot 21; subsequently private collection.

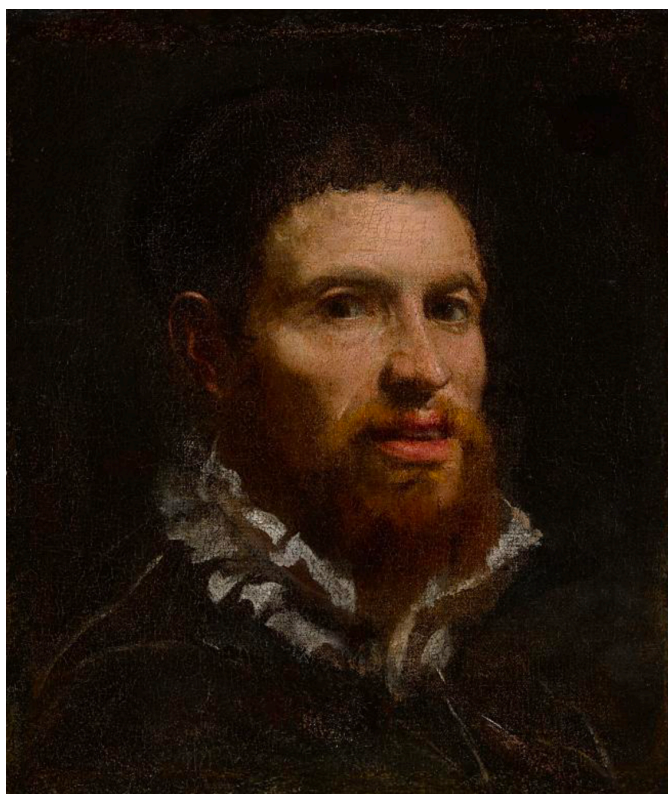


Fig. 4. Annibale Carracci, *Head of a Smiling Man*; alternatively *Portrait of a Man, Bust-Length, in a Ruff*, c. 1588, oil on canvas, 43.2 × 35.9 cm; formerly Nelson Shanks Collection; Sotheby's, New York, 27 January 2022, lot 148.

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Fig. 5. Annibale Carracci, *Head of an Angry Man* (also *Head of a Man with an Angry Expression* / *Study for a Male Portrait*), oil on paper, 40 × 33 cm, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, inv. 1912 no. 310.

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