

A detailed close-up of a Baroque oil painting, likely by Jusepe de Ribera, depicting the face of an elderly woman. The painting is characterized by its dramatic use of light and shadow, with the right side of the face (viewer's right) being brightly lit, revealing the texture of the skin and the details of the eye and nose. The left side of the face and the background are in deep shadow. The brushwork is visible, showing a sense of movement and texture. The woman's expression is contemplative, with a slight smile. The overall color palette is dominated by warm, earthy tones like browns, tans, and oranges, with some darker, cooler tones in the shadows.

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Jusepe de Ribera,
An Elderly Woman with a Tambourine
(*The Sense of Hearing*), ca. 1637

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JUSEPE DE RIBERA

(Xàtiva 1591 – 1652 Naples)

AN ELDERLY WOMAN WITH A TAMBOURINE (THE SENSE OF HEARING), ca. 1637

Oil on canvas

48 x 40 cm; 18 7/8 x 15 3/4 in.

Partial signature, on the left, on the tambourine: *Ribera*

Provenance

Carlo Gottardo, Count of Firmian (1718–1782), Milan;

From whose collection, acquired by Giacomo Melzi (1721–1802) on 27 March 1784;

From whom acquired by Luigi Koelliker, Milan (inv.LK0312);

From whom acquired.

Literature

Giulio Melzi d'Eril, *La Galleria Melzi d'Eril e il collezionismo milanese del tardo Settecento*, Milano 1973, pp. 137-138, tav. 10.

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The painting comes from the vast art collection of Carlo Gottardo, Count of Firmian (Trento, 1718 – Milan, 1782), who, among other appointments, served as Imperial Plenipotentiary Minister in Naples from 1752 (though he had already settled there in 1754) until 1758. More specifically, it belonged to the group of sixty paintings acquired between 1782 and 1789 through the various sales of the Giacomo Melzi collection. This corpus was later dispersed among different branches of the same Lombard family and subsequently into other private collections in Milan and in various Italian cities.¹

In particular, the work under examination is to be identified with the «testa con busto di una vecchia con cembalo in mano di Giuseppe Ribera detto lo Spagnoletto, alta braccia 1 once ¹¹/₂, largo [sic] braccia 1 con cornice intagliata, dorata», recorded in the Catalogue of the paintings and sculptures of the estate of the late most excellent Count Carlo de Firmian, compiled and signed in 1782 by Giuliano Traballesi, Martin Knoller, Giuseppe Franchi, and Carlo Bianconi-leading figures of the Brera Academy. In this inventory, the painting appears under no. A41, where the “letter A indicates the finest paintings.”² The reduction of the canvas to an oval format dates to its subsequent transfer into the Melzi collection, carried out in order to adapt it to the format of a substantial group of heads of varied cultural origin preserved in that collection.

Surprisingly overlooked in the various monographs on Ribera, the invention of this elderly woman is closely connected to the well-known *Girl with a Tambourine* - in reality an *Allegory of Hearing* - one of the painter's most representative images, recently exhibited in the major retrospective on the Spanish master held in Paris at the Petit Palais (fig.1).³ In the present example as well, the old woman's face, with its slightly foolish, smiling expression, seems to distil - with ethnographic precision - the most authentic and expressive features of the Neapolitan lower classes, anticipating by more than two centuries the gallery of *popolane and scugnizzi* later popularized by Vincenzo Gemito and Antonio Mancini.

Here too, the presence of the musical instrument, which clearly evokes Hearing, suggests that the canvas may have formed part of a series depicting the Five Senses. Indeed, considering the physiognomy and age of the sitter, one may wonder whether, alongside the equally truthful portrait of a *Drinker* (an *Allegory of Taste*), signed by

¹ Stefano Ferrari, *Anatomia di una collezione d'arte: i dipinti e le sculture del conte Carlo Firmian*, in «Studi Trentini Arte», 91, 2012, pp. 93 -140, particularly, pp. 100, 118; Giulio Melzi d'Eril, *La Galleria Melzi d'Eril e il collezionismo milanese del tardo Settecento*, Milan 1973, pp. 137-138.

² S. Ferrari, *Anatomia di una collezione d'arte*, cit., p. 116.

³ Giuseppe Porzio, in *Ribera. Ténèbres et lumière*, exh. cat. (Parigi, musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, Petit Palais, 5 November 2024 - 23 February 2025), ed. by Annick Lemoine and Maïté Metz, Paris 2024, pp. 184-185, no. 42.

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Ribera in 1637 and formerly in the Spanish royal collections, now in the Masaveu Collection⁴ (fig. 2), the former Firmian canvas might function more convincingly than the already mentioned *Girl with a Tambourine*, which is generally associated with the *Drinker*.⁵

In any case, the stylistic moment appears to be the same, that is, around 1637; in light of the surviving fragment of the Spanish artist's signature - which, to my knowledge, has not previously been noted and which, in this phase of intense production, serves to certify autograph works - it is likely that the canvas was originally also dated. Some twenty years after the first cycle of the Five Senses, executed between Rome and Naples, in which the naturalistic component had already become predominant over allegorical content, Ribera here probes even more deeply into the humanity of his models, in a ferocious manner-sparing nothing of the wretched reality of their lives - yet at the same time empathetic and compassionate (or at least so it appears to us today).

Scholars have repeatedly emphasised the points of contact between the laughter of these beggars and the ironic attitude toward existence of the protagonists of Spanish picaresque literature.⁶

An early replica, on panel, which appeared at Dorotheum on 25 April 2017 (lot 73) as a work of the seventeenth-century Hispano-Neapolitan school, documents the composition in its original format.

Giuseppe Porzio.

Naples, 29 November 2025

⁴ Nicola Spinosa, *Ribera. L'opera completa*, Napoli 2006, p. 334, no. 203.

⁵ It is also worth noting the recent appearance at auction (Segre Subastas, Madrid, 16–18 September 2025, lot 112) of a copy of the *Masaveu Drinker*, accompanied by another allegory of *Hearing* derived from Ribera (cf. Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. P000880, as Esteban March, though possibly an autograph work by the Spanish artist).

⁶ Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, *Peinture picaresque*, in «L'oeil», 84, 1961, pp. 52-61.

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Fig. 1. Jusepe de Ribera, *Girl with a Tamburine (Allegory of Hearing)*, 1637, private collection

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Fig. 2. Jusepe de Ribera, *Drinker (Allegory of Taste)*, 1637, Masaveu Collection

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