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Ippolito Scarsella,
called Scarsellino
(Ferrara, c. 1550 – 1620)

The Adoration of the Magi

1590 – 1600

oil on canvas

118 x 107 cm.;

46 1/2 x 42 1/8 in.

Provenance

Anonymous sale, Rome, Finarte, 29 November 2022, lot 126 (as Venetian School, late 16th century – early 17th century), where acquired by the present owners.

Comparative Literature

M. A. Novelli, *Scarsellino*, Milan 2008.

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This beautiful *Adoration of the Magi*, set in a vast landscape bathed in dusky light and filled with figures and animals, immediately recalls the compositions conceived in the second half of the 16th century by Jacopo Bassano, and popularised by his son Francesco and their prolific workshop.

A closer look, however, reveals how the canvas, although reminiscent of the Venetian and Bassanesque imprint, can be considered a high point in the career of the artist Ippolito Scarsella, known by the sobriquet of *Scarsellino*: the most representative and successful painter of the late 16th – early 17th century in Ferrara.

After training with his father Sigismondo, a painter and architect known as Mondino, documents also record his apprenticeship with the Carracci in Bologna and, finally, a crucial period of training in Venice with Paolo Veronese. While the Bolognese sojourn is to be excluded, the period spent in the lagoon is evident in paintings such as the present one, in which Ippolito combines the lessons of Veronese, with his colourful palette, with the study of the other Venetian masters: Titian, Tintoretto and Bassano.

The Adoration of the Magi is one of the most recurrent subjects in Scarsellino's corpus: in fact, about ten variants of the subject are known, modulated according to a recurring layout, but always varying in the landscape, the pose of the characters, the clothing, and the richness of the details.

The present canvas is therefore a significant rediscovery, standing out as one of the most ambitious and successful versions. The most famous of the *Adorations* painted by the artist is probably the one executed for the Oratorio della Scala in Ferrara, unfortunately lost, but nevertheless known thanks to Giovanni David's (1743 – 1790) engraving.

The present canvas, unpublished, shows numerous similarities with some of the *Adorations* painted by Scarsellino in the last quarter of the 16th century: note for instance the proximity to two works in the Capitoline Museums in Rome (figs. 1 & 2),¹ in which we can recognise similarities in the crowded scenes, and in the agitation of the animals and bystanders. There

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are similarities even in the more minute details, such as the almost affectionate interaction between the Moorish King Balthasar with his page in the smaller Capitoline painting, as well as the detail of the elderly King prostrate at the feet of the Virgin in the larger one, with the young attendant holding his cloak: a detail that also returns, again with variation, in the Walters Art Museum version (fig. 3).

Finally, whereas in the preceding examples Scarsellino opts for a sky populated by angels, in the present painting he only depicts the comet star, expanding the horizon, as in the painting at Casa Martelli in Florence (fig. 4).

In the present painting, the landscape takes on an even more significant role than in the previous examples: the nocturnal setting exalts the splendour of the star of the comet, announcing and guiding the Magi, and at the same time emphasises the vivid colours of the robes of the three kings; the jewels, crowns and gifts offered as homage to Jesus's divine nature.

It is this attention to the expanded and lyrical landscape that could shift the dating slightly later, close to the 17th century. This is also suggested by the consonance with the *Conversion of the Nigersol* canvases (fig. 5), which convey a courtly fable designed to emphasise the noble origins of the Ferrarese Nigrisoli family: according to the legend, this family had African origins originating from a noble child, Nigersol, who fled from Timbuktu to take refuge in Ferrara.²

We are grateful to Professor Peter Humfrey for endorsing the attribution to Scarsellino.

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Figure 1. Ippolito Scarsella, called Scarsellino, *The Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1580, oil on panel, 68 x 55 cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome

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Figure 2. Ippolito Scarsella, called Scarsellino, *The Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1580, oil on canvas, 112.5 x 124 cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome

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Figure 3. Ippolito Scarsella, called Scarsellino, *The Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1600, oil on canvas, 93 x 64 cm. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

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Figure 4. Ippolito Scarsella, called Scarsellino, *The Adoration of the Magi*, 1580-90, oil on canvas, 70 x 54 cm. Casa Martelli, Florence

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Figure 5. Ippolito Scarsella, called Scarsellino, *Conversion of Nigersol*, 1600-10, oil on canvas, 104 x 77 cm. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Ferrara

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Footnotes

¹ Inv. PC 26, 124 x 112.5 cm., M. A. Novelli, *Scarsellino*, Milan 2008, p. 314, cat. no. 152 and inv. PC 25, 68 x 55 cm., Scarsellino 2008, p. 314, cat. no. 153.

² Scarsellino 2008, pp. 297-298, cat. nos. 45-46; p. 308, cat. nos. 112-114; p. 322, cat. no. 210.