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Pier Francesco Mola
Head of an Old Man Looking Down

PIER FRANCESCO MOLA
(Coldrerio 1612 – Rome 1666)

HEAD OF AN OLD MAN LOOKING DOWN

Oil on laid paper, laid down on canvas
42.5 x 31 cm; 16 3/4 x 12 1/5 in.

Provenance

Nagel Auctions, Stuttgart, 9 – 10 October 2013, as Italian School, seventeenth century, Portrait of a Prophet; private collection.

Literature

Unpublished



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Recently rediscovered, this remarkable *Head of an Old Man Looking Down* is attributed here to Pier Francesco Mola, one of the most distinctive painters active in seventeenth-century Rome. Born at Coldrerio in 1612, Mola worked chiefly in Rome, while periods spent in northern Italy contributed to the formation of a highly personal style in which Roman classicism, Venetian colour, Emilian naturalism, and an increasingly free handling of paint were brought into close relation.[1] He was elected to the Accademia di San Luca in 1655 and served as its *Principe* in 1662-1663.

The present work belongs naturally within Mola's production of *teste di carattere*, one of the most distinctive strands of his mature practice. Rather than pointing to a single prototype, a group of related heads helps define the context in which it should be understood. The two *Heads of Old Men* in the Accademia Nazionale di San Luca, dated c. 1650-1660 and recorded as originals by Mola in the Fabio Rosa bequest of 1753, share the same broad, material handling, particularly in the broken description of beard and hair and in the way the face emerges from a dark ground. The *Portrait of a Bearded Man, Possibly the Artist's Father*, now in a private collection, offers a further comparison in the transformation of an aged physiognomy into an exercise in expressive character (fig. 1).[2] Closest in attitude, however, is *An Old Man by a Brazier* at Burghley House (fig. 2), where the head is similarly inclined downwards and the features are partly absorbed by shadow. Although the Burghley painting is larger and has been interpreted as an allegory of winter or old age, its combination of bowed pose, strongly modelled brow, and freely painted beard provides a particularly telling parallel.

A further, particularly compelling comparison is provided by the *Philosopher Reading* (fig. 3), which shares the present work's interest in the unusual inclination of the head, as well as closely comparable handling of the facial features and beard.[3]

These comparisons also reflect a broader aspect of Mola's practice. Physiognomic observation could become an autonomous field of invention, and he repeatedly returned to related figures and subjects, varying pose, expression, and handling rather than reproducing them mechanically. Agnes Czobor stressed precisely this capacity for continual reinvention in her discussion of the numerous variants and preparatory studies associated with Mola's late works, showing how the same theme could be reconsidered without becoming a mechanical repetition.[4]

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[1] Kahn-Rossi 1989; Petrucci 2012.

[2] Petrucci 2012, p. 261, cat. A29.

[3] Petrucci 2012, pp. 275-276, cat. A25. We are grateful to Arch. Francesco Petrucci for suggesting this comparison for the work discussed here.

[4] Czobor 1968, pp. 565-571.

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One feature nevertheless gives the present head a particularly enigmatic character: the sitter's eyes cannot be distinguished with certainty. This may simply result from the downward inclination of the head and from Mola's decision to subordinate the eyes to the shadowed structure of the face. A more speculative possibility, which must remain hypothetical, is that the figure was intended as blind. If so, the work might move beyond the category of the *testa di carattere* towards the representation of an ancient poet or philosopher – most obviously Homer – or towards an allegorical personification. This possibility is especially suggestive in the context of Mola's repeated treatment of Homer during his later career. The celebrated *Homer* in the Galleria Corsini, Rome, dated to about 1660-1666, similarly transforms blindness and old age into vehicles of inward concentration and psychological intensity.

The support provides a further point of interest. Oil on paper is less common in Mola's surviving oeuvre than oil on canvas, but its use by the artist is securely documented. The *Coastal Landscape with Tower* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 2009.400.88, dated about 1651-1652, is executed in oil over red chalk on paper, demonstrating Mola's familiarity with paper as a support for highly pictorial experimentation.[5]

[5] Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. 2009.400.88. See also a Head of an Old Man, sold at Christie's in 2013 as Circle of Pier Francesco Mola, likewise executed in oil on paper laid down on canvas, suggesting the presence of this combination of medium and subject within Mola's immediate artistic orbit (Christie's, Old Master Paintings Part II, New York, 31 January 2013, lot 238).



Fig. 1. Pier Francesco Mola, *Portrait of a Bearded Man, Possibly the Artist's Father*, c. 1660–1665, oil on canvas, 62.2 x 47.6 cm. Private collection.



Fig. 2. Pier Francesco Mola, *An Old Man by a Brazier,* oil on canvas, 95 x 76 cm. Stamford, Burghley House, ref. PIC318

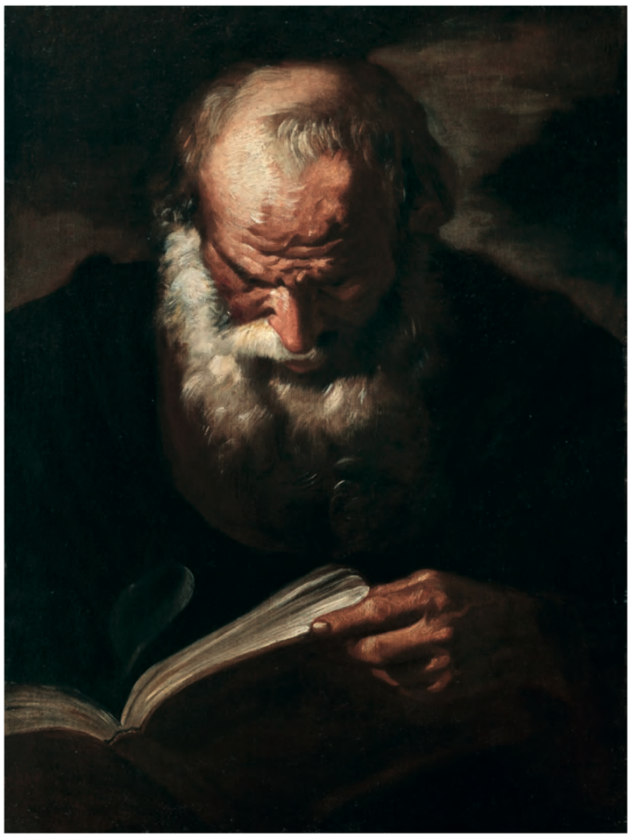


Fig. 3. Pier Francesco Mola, *Philosopher reading*, oil on canvas.

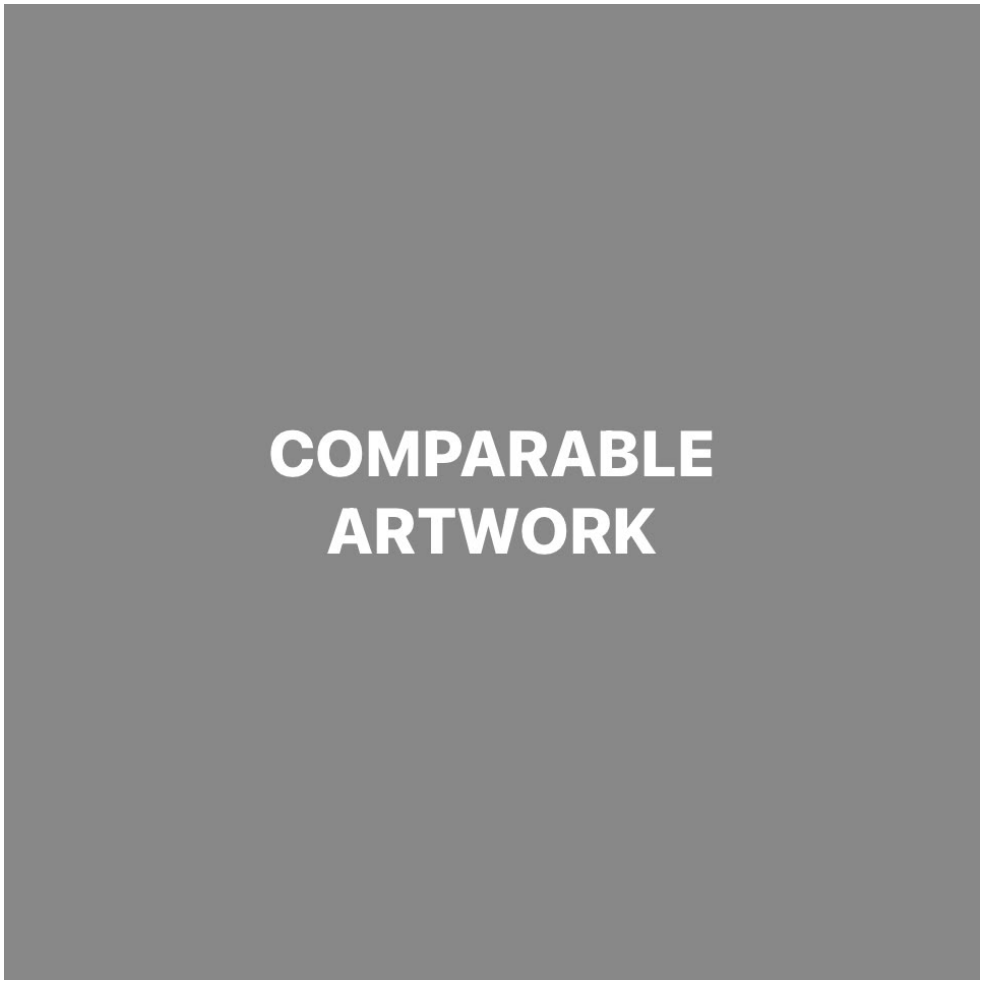


Fig. 1. Name of the artist, *Title*, year, medium, dimensions in cm. City, collection/institution.

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