



Pier Francesco Mola
(Coldrerio 1612 – 1666 Rome)

*Portrait of a man wearing a
turban, probably from
North Africa*

c. 1650 – 1655

oil on canvas

56.5 x 45 cm.;

22 1/4 x 17 3/4 in.

Provenance

Anonymous sale, Paris, Tajan, 22 July 2006, lot 6;

Koelliker collection, Milan;

Sale, New York, Christie's, 20 October 2020, lot 84, where acquired by the present owners.

Literature

F. Petrucci, "Il Mercante di Venezia" e altri dipinti del Mola', *Studi di Storia dell'Arte*, no. 18, 2007, pp. 293-294, fig. 3;

F. Petrucci, *Pittura di Ritratto a Roma. Il Seicento*, Rome 2008, vol. III, p. 675, fig. 482, reproduced in black and white;

F. Petrucci, *Pier Francesco Mola (1612 – 1666): Materia e colore nella pittura del'600*, Rome 2012, pp. 160-161, fig. 109, reproduced in colour, p. 245, cat. no. A15, reproduced in black and white.

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The present painting portrays a young, beardless man wearing a turban, set against a dramatically overcast sky, in a manner consonant with Venetian painting. The man's unusual, turned posture gives the figure a strong but informal presence, while the intensity of his expression echoes the 17th-century Roman portraiture of Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

The canvas was first published in 2007 by Francesco Petrucci (see *Literature*), who correctly attributed the work to the Swiss-born painter Pier Francesco Mola.

Born in Coldrerio, near Lugano, Mola moved to Rome with his family at a young age. Aside from two extended periods from 1633-40 and 1641-47, which he spent traveling in northern Italy, including extended sojourns in Venice and Bologna, he remained in Rome for the rest of his life. Mola combined his mature style with sophisticated elements of the 17th-century Roman *gran maniera*, the beautiful *colore* of Venetian art, and the attentive draftsmanship of the Bolognese masters, especially Guercino.

Petrucci (2007, see *Literature*) suggested that the figure in the present painting is meant to represent the Arab philosopher Averroës (1126 – 1198): court physician to the Berber kings in Marrakesh and famous in Western Europe for his commentaries on Aristotle. Petrucci argued that the book that can be noted in the lower right of the composition signals the erudition of the man depicted, while the *tagelmust* – the wrapping cloth intended to cover the entire face apart from the eyes, but here pulled down to reveal the sitter's whole visage – and the *abernus* – the hooded cloak made of coarse wool – were typical elements of Berber costume, noting that such attire would not have been worn, for example, by Persian philosophers such as Avicenna and Al-Ghazali.

There is no doubt that in 17th-century Europe, both North and South of the Alps, there was a widespread fashion for depicting idealized turbaned elderlies and philosophers, or bearded figures in Oriental costumes. Philosophers were common motifs in mid-seventeenth-century Italian art, often commissioned in sets or series, and painters like Jusepe de Ribera, Salvator Rosa, Nicolas Poussin, Pietro Testa, Domenico Fetti, Castiglione and Mola himself created many idealized portraits of the ancient thinkers and epic history paintings with

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events from their lives. Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione's etchings depicting exoticized heads in oriental costumes, for example, were of course inspired by Rembrandt's, who had etched many similar heads during the 1630s. Castiglione was also likely inspired by the foreign traders who frequented the port of his native Genoa, just as exotically dressed foreigners had been a familiar sight in the streets and marketplaces of Amsterdam for Rembrandt before him. Mola could have drawn a similar inspiration from his Venetian stay, where the Islamic Near East occupied a significant place in the collective imagination.

While Mola often depicted single, idealized figures, such as *An Oriental Figure* (Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford, fig. 1), or included figures wearing turbans in his paintings for rhetorical reasons, like in the *Allegory of the Phlegmatic Temperament* (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice) or in the *Saint John the Baptist preaching in the Wilderness* (c. 1640, National Gallery, London), the present canvas seems to stand out from the above examples not only for the intense and individual presence of the sitter, but also for his specific headgear. He is not dressed in vaguely oriental costume, typically embellished by exotic elements such as jewellery or colourful scarfs or, on the other hand, depicted as an old, derelict man impersonating a Stoic philosopher. The dry, yet powerful characterization of the man (the high cheekbones, thin jawline, and deep dark eyes), as well as the undone white *tagelmust*, as already recognised by Petrucci, are features of people from Maghreb, rather than Turkey, Persia or elsewhere. These are less common features in idealised heads, while they appear in the rare, actual portraits of Africans from the same period. One can recall, for example, Peter Paul Rubens' *Head of an African man wearing a turban* (c. 1609, private collection, fig. 2): clearly a portrait of a specific man, later used by the artist in larger compositions. Similar turbans and powerful expressions also feature in the portraits of 17th-century North African ambassadors in Britain, such as the Portuguese-born Jaurar Ben Abdallah, ambassador for the Emperor of Morocco Muhammad al-Shaykh al-Saghīr (1636 – 1655) to Charles I of England (1625 – 1649) in 1637, or Abd el-Ouahad ben Messaoud, ambassador for Ahmad al-Manṣūr of Morocco (r. 1578 – 1603) to Elizabeth I of England (r. 1558 – 1603) in 1600 – 1601 (fig. 3).

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This canvas is evidence of how, unlike most of his contemporaries, Mola had the talent to represent such Oriental subjects with a true and unpatronizing attitude. One should also mention the splendid and exceptionally powerful portrait of a *Barbary Pirate* (Musée du Louvre, Paris, fig. 4), signed and dated 1650: the grandiose figure, also cast against a cloudy sky, is depicted with great attention to the sitter's personality and elaborate dress.

As is often the case, we do not know who originally commissioned this work, but it is interesting to note that a 'testa del Mola, col turbante', then in the collection of Lelio Falconieri, was presented at the annual exhibition at San Salvatore in Lauro in Rome in 1696.¹ This may be the present painting, or yet another work in this vein by the artist.²

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Figure 1. Pier Francesco Mola, *A Male Figure in Middle Eastern Dress*, c. 1650 – 1653. Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford

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Figure 2. Peter Paul Rubens, *Head of an African man wearing a turban*, c. 1609.
Private collection

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Figure 3. Unknown British painter, *Portrait of Abd el-Ouahad ben Messaoud*, 1600.
University of Birmingham Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon

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Figure 4. Pier Francesco Mola, *Oriental Warrior, also known as Barbary Pirate*, c. 1650.
Musée du Louvre, Paris

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Footnotes

¹ G. Ghezzi & G. De Marchi, *Mostre di quadri a S. Salvatore in Lauro: (1682–1725)*, Rome 1987, p. 80.

² F. Petrucci, “Il Mercante di Venezia” e altri dipinti del Mola’, *Studi di Storia dell'Arte*, no. 18, 2007, pp. 293-294, fig. 3.

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