SPHINX FINE ART



Francesco Bassano II (Bassano 1549 - Venice 1592)

Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments

oil on canvas
78 x 103 cm (30¾ x 40½ in)

The rich abundance of the harvest is charmingly illustrated in *Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments.* Set within a lush, mountainous landscape the present work shows rural land workers processing the fruits of their labours, as the sky darkens into the evening. In the foreground, along a river bank, the early stages of the wine picking and pressing process are depicted. On the right, a couple pick grapes from a vine that are then placed in woven baskets. Alongside the pair an older woman, accompanied by a loyal spaniel, leans down to lift a pair of baskets. Standing inside a barrel, a young barefoot boy squelches the freshly picked grapes with his feet, his tunic held up above his ankles.

On the left, two oxen are tethered and tended by a young boy wearing a feather plumed hat, a wooden stick slung over his shoulder. The oxen are evidently hauling the large wooden barrel that sits atop a wooden cart - presumably for transporting the freshly pressed grape juice for winemaking. Alongside the animals, a young girl kneels and drinks some of the russet coloured liquid from the grapes with a beaker. Beside her, more freshly picked grapes are decanted into a barrel by a bearded man. The background is also filled with interesting minutiae. A hare, caught in mid flight, scampers across the grass while a woodsman makes his way towards the harvesters, heavily laden with a staff over his shoulder and several timber-framed thatched dwellings are seen on the edge of the tree line.

Despite the secular subject matter of the harvest, there is also a subtle religious dimension in the painting. On the far left of the composition, Moses receives the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. This was a popular iconography during the Renaissance and it was not unusual to include the detail within a larger genre scene such as the harvest.

The theme of the harvest is frequently referenced in both the Old and New Testaments and is richly illustrated in religious, as well as secular, art. The autumn fruit harvest from trees and vines begins in August when the grapes begin to ripen but the gathering for wine and storage of dried figs and raisins continued into September and October - presumably the months illustrated in *Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments*. The traditional pastoral method of hand-picking and pressing the grapes, as depicted in the present work, was an age-old practice that continued until the mechanisation of wine harvesting in the 1960s.

The production of wine in *Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments* introduces a further latent religious theme. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the Catholic Church was a staunch supporter of wine production due to its integral role in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist. This ceremony recalls the moment in the Last Supper when Jesus handed a cup to his disciples and said, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, never again shall I drink the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink with you in the kingdom of my Father.'[1]

The present work is part of a series depicting the *Four Seasons.* They are derived from a series first designed by Francesco Bassano's father, Jacopo Bassano (c.1510-1592) around 1574.[2] The series proved extremely popular and a number of versions were created within the Bassano family workshop.[3] Francesco evidently appreciated the great popularity of the series and continued to produce the scenes in the later 1570s and 1580s. Experts are in disagreement as to whether four autograph versions of the originals by Jacopo Bassano survive, though there is a complete set of the series in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna now ascribed to Francesco.

The Kunsthistorisches version of *Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments* is almost identical to the present work in terms of palette, composition and execution. Each of the seasons in the Kunsthistorisches series contains a religious narrative from both the Old and New Testaments. In *Winter,* it is Christ carrying the Cross, in *Spring* it is the Expulsion from Paradise while *Summer* shows the Sacrifice of Isaac. These scenes depict everyday activities that Bassano would have encountered in his hometown of Bassano del Grappa and the mountain in the background of *Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments* may represent the distinctive shape of the Monte Grappa.

It is unclear how many sets Francesco continued to produce for clients and patrons, but different versions of *Winter, Spring* and *Summer* are now all housed in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg. These three works differ from the Kunsthistorisches series in terms of compositional structure as well as in their omission of a religious iconography or narrative. This may have been due to the wishes of the patron as well as a decision by Francesco to introduce variety and iconographical diversity into works that would be otherwise identical, while still retaining the characteristic smooth drawing and heavy brushwork evident in his vivid, enigmatic style of painting.

Francesco often collaborated with his father Jacopo and it is often difficult to distinguish between the hands up to c.1575. However, of the works from 1575-1577, a greater number can be attributed to Francesco, for example the cycles of the *Four Seasons* and the *Elements,* which were devised by Jacopo in the period of partnership between father and son from 1574-1576.

The popularity of the *Four Seasons* series is attested by the copies and prints that were created afterwards. Between 1598-1601, Jan Sadeler I (1550-1600) and his brother Raphael Sadeler I (1560/61-1628 or 1632) made engravings of *The Four Seasons* while they were working in Venice. These were subsequently disseminated throughout Europe and such prints proved inspirational for numerous artists in Italy, Flanders, The Netherlands and France including: Luca Giordano (1632-1705), Giambattista Volpato (1633-1706), Francesco Maffei (c.1600/1620-1660), Giambattista Zampezzi (1620-1700), Giovanni Antonio Guardi (1698-1760) and Giambattista Piazzetta (1682-1754). Repetitions of *Spring* and *Winter* are known by David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690), whose technique and rendering of landscapes from the middle of the 1650s are most notably influenced by the works of Bassano.[4]

As a young artist, Bassano was trained in the workshop of his father Jacopo between 1560 and 1570. This was a period of stylistic change for Jacopo who was moving from Mannerism towards the naturalism found in the Venetian tradition. Initially Bassano chose to imitate his fathers' style as he contributed towards many of Jacopo's works and produced skilful replicas to sate the voracious appetite of Venetian collectors for the Bassano workshop.

His earliest signed work can be dated to between 1566 and 1567 and his father's acknowledgment of his precocious skill can be seen in their 1574 collaboration of *St. Paul Preaching* (Maróstica, S Antonio Abate), which for the first time is signed by both Jacopo and Francesco.

Francesco's excellent reputation in Venice led him to receive the coveted commission of producing a series of four paintings detailing the *Battles of the Serenissima* for the ceiling of the Sala del Maggiore Consiglio in the Doge's Palace, which he painted in the spring and summer of 1578.[5] It was in this year that he moved permanently to Venice where he opened his own workshop while still maintaining a close relationship with his father. According to the Venetian biographer Carlo Ridolfi (1594-1658), Francesco's move to Venice was to be closer to the art market he regularly supplied. As well as completing major commissions he also showed an aptitude for nocturnes with vivid light effects. Furthermore his works show an interest in the Mannerism that had been brought to Venice by the Flemish artist Paolo Fiammingo (c.1540-1596).

The intense strain of painting for commissions, tuberculosis and an obsession with the threat of persecution led a deeply depressed Francesco to attempt suicide in 1591 by throwing himself from the window of his house in San Canciano. He only survived for a few months after the accident and many of his unfinished commissions were completed by his brother Leandro (1577-1622).

We are grateful for the assistance of Professor Alessandro Ballarin who has confirmed that this is an autograph work by Francesco Bassano.

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[1] Matthew 26: 28-29

[2] Aikema, B., *Jacopo Bassano and his Public,* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1996,) p. 133.

[3] The workshop was in the family house in the Contrà del Ponte quarter of Bassano del Grappa. As well as the *Four Seasons,* the large Bassano family workshop also produced series of the Four Elements, the Months, and well-known biblical stories.

[4] See for example Teniers' interpretation of the *Four Seasons* in the National Gallery, London.

[5] Bassano completed other works for the Doge's Palace, for example the oval *Capture of Padua at Night* (c.1580) on the ceiling of the Sala dello Scrutinio for which he may have received assistance from his father.

Provenance:

Sale, Pescheteau-Badin, Gadeau et Leroy, Paris 29 April 1998, lot 77.

Exhibitions

Arte e Vino, Palazzo della Gran Guardia, Verona, 12th April - 16th August 2015

Artist description:

Francesco trained in his father, Jacopo's, workshop between 1560 and 1570, when Jacopo was moving from Mannerist experiments to an increased naturalism in the Venetian tradition. Francesco attempted to imitate his father's style in his contributions to their painting of the *Vision of St Eleuterius* (c. 1565; Venice, Accademia). They also collaborated on new versions of the biblical themes Jacopo had treated c. 1560; Francesco executed some preparatory drawings and parts of the paintings themselves. These works were in considerable demand from Venetian collectors and Francesco produced such skilful replicas that they are difficult to distinguish from the originals.

Francesco's precocious talent is evident in the *Miracle of the Quails* (Verona, private collection, see Arslan, 1960, i, p. 184; ii, fig. 207), the earliest work signed with his name alone, which from Jacopo's interventions can be dated to 1566–7. From the large altarpieces produced by his father in the 1560s and 1570s Francesco learnt how to relate figures to their architectural surroundings and how to structure a composition using receding diagonals, as in *St Paul Preaching* (1574; Maróstica, S Antonio Abate), in which Jacopo first officially acknowledged his son's mastery by signing with Francesco. In this altarpiece their techniques are similar but distinguishable; Francesco's brushwork is heavier and his style of description more modest. Other works signed by father and son, especially collectors' pieces, include a *Mocking of Christ* (c. 1575; Florence, Pitti), *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (Houston, Texas, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation), the *Vision of Joachim* (c. 1576–7; Corsham Court, Wiltshire), a new version of the *Departure of Abraham for Canaan* (Berlin, Gemäldegallerie) and the *Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1576–7; Rome, Galleria Doria–Pamphili).

In this period Francesco and Jacopo also collaborated on new biblical themes, for example the *Stories of Noah* (c. 1577; Kromeríž, Archbishop's Palace), where Francesco's hand is evident despite the single signature of Jacopo. It is more difficult to identify Francesco's hand in paintings produced c. 1575, when the workshop was reorganized for large-scale production. The pictures are not signed or individually documented, and Francesco closely imitated his father's style. Of the works from 1575–7, however, a greater number can be attributed to Francesco, for example, *Christ Driving the Money-changers from the Temple* (Isola Bella, Museo Borromeo), and the cycles of the *Four Seasons* (e.g. Summer; Modena, Galleria & Museo Estense) and the *Elements*, which were devised by Jacopo in the period of collaboration between father and son from 1574–6. In the *Annunciation to the Shepherds* (Kraków, Wawel Castle) the handling of light is less vibrant than in the version by Jacopo (1575; Prague, National Gallery, Šternberk Palace), and Francesco's characteristic smooth drawing and heavy brushwork are evident.

Dating from this period (c. 1575) are the four altarpieces with predellas for the parish church of Civezzano, Trento (all in situ except the predella with the *Temptation of St Anthony*; private collection, see Borgo, 1975, fig. 46) executed by Jacopo and Francesco in collaboration. Two altarpieces of the series, the *Sermon of St John the Baptist* and the *Meeting of Joachim and Anna*, are signed by both artists. They also collaborated on frescoes (1575) for the parish church of Cartigliano, Vicenza: the wall scenes on the right, *Eve Offering the Apple to Adam* and the *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, belong to Francesco and show his characteristic pyramidal figure groups, full brushwork and contorted

drapery. In the *Circumcision* (Bassano del Grappa, Museo Civico), signed jointly, they used a new frieze-like composition, which reappears in the *Flood* (1577; Kroměříž, Archbishop's Palace) from the *Stories of Noah* and in the great *Forge of Vulcan* (Barcelona, on dep. Madrid, Prado). These experiences were fundamental to Francesco's development and for the demanding enterprise of the four Battles of the Serenissima for the ceiling of the Sala del Maggiore Consiglio in the Doge's Palace, Venice, which he painted in the spring and summer of 1578.

Francesco had worked in Venice before, probably earlier in 1578 when he executed the altarpiece with the *Virgin in Glory with St Nicholas of Bari* (on which his signature was discovered in the 1990s) and the painting of the *Sermon of St John the Baptist*, both for the Dolzoni Chapel in S Giacomo dell'Orio (both in situ) and reminiscent of the Civezzano cycle. This suggests that he was known in Venice before he moved there permanently in 1578, the year of his marriage to Giustina Como of Bassano del Grappa. He opened his own workshop there but maintained a close relationship with his father, who assisted in the design and execution of the paintings on the ceiling of the council chamber.

Jacopo may have helped Francesco with other works in the Doge's Palace, particularly with such demanding compositions as the oval *Capture of Padua at Night* (c. 1580) on the ceiling of the Sala dello Scrutinio. Thus the nature of the collaboration changed, with Jacopo supplying sketches for Francesco's prestigious commissions, such as the *Rape of the Sabine Women* (Turin, Galleria Sabauda), and working with him, as in the *Forge of Vulcan* (c. 1584; Poznan, National Museum), which is signed by both. In other works Francesco repeated his father's compositions, with a few variations, as in the *Adoration of the Magi* (Padua Cathedral), which contains his distinctive dense, brilliant colours, short stocky Magi and a massive Virgin. In such nocturnal scenes painted c. 1580 as the *Capture of Padua at Night* in the Doge's Palace, the *Baptism of St Afra* for S Afra, Brescia, the *Agony in the Garden* and the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (both Bassano del Grappa, Museo Civico), Francesco also used ideas from Titian and Tintoretto, as well as prototypes from his father's workshop.

According to Ridolfi, his move to Venice was due to the requirements of the art market. There, in addition to major commissions, he painted night scenes, with moonlight and vivid artificial light effects, for which he showed a particular aptitude. Many of his genre pictures were variations of designs by Jacopo, for example the *Four Seasons* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), and the allegories of the elements, *Fire and Earth* (Vaduz, Liechtenstein), which show how far Francesco had moved from the formal approach of Jacopo: the colours glow more vividly, the paint is thicker, the figure masses expanded and weighty. Some of these pictures, such as Hercules (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), indicate the Mannerist influence brought to Venice by Paolo Fiammingo.

Francesco's creations, linked to the 16th century Venetian tradition and to his father's inheritance, were marked by a pastoral tone. The 'nocturne' remained an important theme, in which light is not purely descriptive. His father's teaching is still clear in his monumental episodes from the *Life of the Virgin* (Bergamo, S Maria Maggiore), of the late 1580s, in the broadly conceived composition, the soft, brilliant colouring and the wide brushstrokes. A movement towards the style of Leandro Bassano, who moved to Venice in 1588, can be seen in the *Assumption* (Rome, S Luigi dei Francesi), and particularly in one of Francesco's last works, the *Presentation at the Temple* (Prague, Hradcany Castle), in which the emphasis is on description, with pale colours, broad, simple forms and more fragmented compositions.

In his last years he suffered from deep depression, worn out by the intense labour of painting, ill with tuberculosis and obsessed with a persecution mania. In November 1591 he threw himself from a window of his house in S Canciano, the house in which Titian had lived. He survived only another few months, and his commissions were completed by Leandro.