

FRANCESCO BASSANO II

(Bassano del Grappa 1549 - Venice 1592)

Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments

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

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

Exhibited: To be included in the forthcoming exhibition *Arte e Vino*, Palazzo della Gran Guardia, Verona.

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.



Francesco Bassano II, *Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments* (Detail)



Illumination showing the collection and crushing of freshly picked grapes, from the *Tacuinum Sanitatis* of Vienna, c.1390 (Figure 1)

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





Francesco Bassano II, *Autumn (Moses Receiving the Commandments)*, c.1576, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Figure 2)

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 (fig. 1).

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'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



Francesco Bassano II, *Winter*, 1577/8, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 3)

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 (fig. 2). 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* 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* and now all housed in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg (figs. 3, 4 and



Francesco Bassano II, *Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments* (Detail)

5). 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

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.

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 Zampezzì (1620-1700), Giovanni Antonio Guardi (1698-1760) (see inventory) and Giambattista Piazzetta (1682-1754). Repetitions of *Spring* and *Winter* are known by David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690) (see inventory), 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



Francesco Bassano II, *Autumn, with Moses Receiving the Ten Commandments* (Detail)

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



Workshop of Francesco Bassano II, *Spring*, c.1580s, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 4)

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 II.



Francesco Bassano II, *Summer*, 1577/8, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 5)

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.