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EST. 1817

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Luca Giordano called Fa Presto
(Naples 1632 – 1705)

An Alchemist

Oil on canvas

43 x 27 ¼ in. (109 x 69 cm.)



Provenance

With Blondeau & Associés, Paris, by 2001.
Private Collection, Europe.

Exhibited

Naples, Vienna, Los Angeles, *Luca Giordano 1634-1705*, 2001-2, no. 5 (entry by N. Spinosa and J.P. Marandel).

Literature

O. Ferrari & G. Scavizzi, *Luca Giordano. Nuove Ricerche e inediti*, Naples, 2003, p. 30, cat. no. A021, and p. 154, fig. A021.

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This powerful picture by Luca Giordano, one of the most important artists of the second half of the seventeenth century, is one of a number of depictions of philosophers and scientists painted by the artist in the early years of his career. The painting depicts a scientist or alchemist, to judge from the array of objects on the tray – books, alembics, vials and instruments – all rendered with great skill.

In the first part of his long career, Giordano was influenced principally by the Spanish-born Caravaggesque master Jusepe de Ribera, who was the leading artist in Naples in the 1620s and 30s. Ribera painted a number of *Philosophers* in two series executed in 1630 and 1637, and these influenced contemporaries in Naples such as Francesco Fracanzano and the Master of the Annunciation to the Shepherds. They were also to inspire Giordano in the 1650s and 60s, although, as we will see, they served merely as a starting point for the younger artist to transform into his own pictorial language.

Giordano painted a large number of these single figures depicting philosophers, scientists and mathematicians. Generally portrayed three-quarter-length, they number about 40 in total, although not all can be easily identified with specific historical figures. Exhibitions such as that in Naples, Vienna and Los Angeles in 2001/2 and recent studies on the young Giordano, including G. Scavizzi & G. de Vito's *Luca Giordano Giovane 1650-1664* (Naples, 2012) have led to a greater understanding of this phase of the artist's career and his production of works of this type, even if there is not universal agreement on the dating of such works.

Giordano executed his depictions of these men of learning in two phases, the first in the second half of the 1650s, when he closely follows Ribera's series of the 1630s with its 'dry and vigorous' handling,¹ as can be seen in the *Socrates* in the Baratti Collection, Milan.² The second period comes in the 1660s, when Giordano looked to Ribera's second series of 1637, paintings which are notable for the richer, more painterly treatment of the paint surface. At this stage, Giordano treated these prototypes as mere starting points in the pursuit of his own artistic goals. Giving

¹ As described by Spinosa and Marandel in the exh. cat., *Luca Giordano 1634-1705*, 2001-2, no. 5.

² Scavizzi & de Vito, *op. cit.*, p. 104, fig. 82.

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freer rein to his imagination than in his works of the 1650s, he created a series of works that reveal an over-riding interest in the individuality of his subjects – both physical and psychological. In this regard one can see the fundamental difference between the two artists: As Scavizzi observes,³ Ribera was always a painter firmly rooted in the naturalist tradition, whereas Giordano was more interested in the dramatic possibilities of his subject. Thus, where the Spanish master portrayed his philosophers almost uniformly as sober, stoical heroic types, the younger artist presented his figures as real, emotionally expressive individuals.

In this way, Giordano moved beyond Ribera's prototypes in the 1660s, extending the range of figures and also the way of presentation. His skill lay in bringing these men of learning to life and giving them individuality even if their identifications are not always clear. As Orreste Ferrari wrote in 1992, in Giordano's philosophers there is a "strong emphasis on the expressive qualities of the faces and [...] a greater dramatization in their depiction [than in Ribera]."⁴In the present work, for example, one can feel the presence of a real person, not an archetype, a model selected from the dark side streets of Naples and painted from life with all the signs of his difficult existence marked on his face, enhanced by the dramatic, uneven play of light across his features. A similar approach can be seen in the lively expression of the *Democritus* (Pinacoteca Civica Tosio Martinengo, Brescia)⁵ or the animated face and demonstrative gesture of *Crates* (Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome; fig. 1)⁶. Some, such as the *Astrologer* (private collection), even have the feel of a portrait.⁷ On this basis, the present work can be dated to the 1660s.⁸

If Giordano's interest in these subjects may in part be explained by the influence of Ribera, it should also be noted that the popularity of the theme may also have been the result of

³ Scavizzi & de Vito, *op. cit.*, p 97.

⁴ Una "vigorosa sottolineatura dei caratteri espressivi dei volti e [...] una piu scoperta drammaticità della rappresentazione [che in Ribera]." Scavizzi & Ferrari, *Luca Giordano, L'opera completa*, Naples, 1992, p. 10.

⁵ The figure may in fact depict an astrologer rather than Democritus (see Scavizzi & de Vito, *op. cit.*, p. 104, fig. 83, and p.110 for a discussion of the subject).

⁶ Scavizzi & de Vito, *op. cit.*, p. 104, fig. 85.

⁷ Scavizzi & de Vito, *op. cit.*, p. 106, fig. 88.

⁸ As proposed by Spinosa and Marandel in the exh. cat. (see Exhibited). Scavizzi and Ferrari (*op. cit.*) however prefer a slightly earlier dating to c.1655-1660.

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importance of Neo-Stoicism in intellectual debates of the time and a growing interest in the sciences in Naples around the middle of the seventeenth century.⁹ In 1650, the *Accademia degli Investiganti* was founded in the city by a group of scientists. The academy was closed in 1657, although it reopened in 1662 only to close definitively 6 years later. Two members were friends of Giordano and it is tempting to speculate that he found commissions for such works among these circles. As de Vito notes,¹⁰ in the study of Francesco d'Andrea, one of the most important members of the academy, there were 18 portraits of *Uomini Illustri*, although there is no further information on them.



Fig. 1: Luca Giordano, *Crates*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome.

⁹ For a fuller discussion, see Scavizzi & de Vito, *op. cit.*, pp. 96 & 109-110.

¹⁰ Scavizzi & de Vito, *op. cit.*, p. 110.