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EST. 1817

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**Giuseppe Cesari, called il Cavaliere
d'Arpino** (Arpino 1568-1640 Rome)

The Virgin and Child

Inscribed on reverse: 'Abozzo del/Cavalier
d'Arpino'.

Oil on panel

11 ¼ x 8 ¼ in. (28.5 x 21 cm.)

Painted c.1635



Provenance

Private collection, Rome;
with Fabio Massimo Megna, 1997;
with Dickinson & Roundell Inc;
private collection, London, from whom purchased in 2023.

Literature

H. Röttgen, *Il Cavalier Giuseppe Cesari D'Arpino*, Rome 2002, no.260, p. 475.

The *Virgin and Child*, by the Italian Mannerist painter Giuseppe Cesari, is painted with a charm and elegance which follows Raphaelesque conventions, particularly in the serene simplicity of the Virgin's face which is rendered with utmost restraint. The minimal yet vibrant colour palette too enhances this compositional harmony, with the cinnabar red of the tunic and ultramarine blue of the cloak and headdress serving, in their contrast, to enhance her marble-like pale complexion, and her purity. The pomegranate in her left hand – an ancient symbol of love, fertility and immortality – has here become a symbol of resurrection. The Christ Child's pose can be compared with the altarpieces in the churches of S Maria Assunta in Calvi, Umbria¹, S Lucia in Serra San Quirico (Fabriano)² as well as the *Virgin and Child*

¹ See Röttgen, cat. 258.

² See Röttgen cat. 265.

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with *St Joseph and St Anna* in a private collection³ all of which ultimately derive from Michelangelo's *Risen Christ* in S. Maria sopra Minerva, Rome (Fig. 1).

An autograph repetition of the present panel can be found at the Fondazione Cavallini Sgarbi, Ferrara.



Fig. 1: Michelangelo, *Risen Christ*, 1519-21, marble, S. Maria sopra Minerva, Rome.

Giuseppe Cesari, the son of a painter of votive images, was born in 1568 in the small town of Arpino, located between Rome and Naples. After moving to Rome, probably in 1582 when he was thirteen, he was apprenticed to Nicolò Circignani (1530/1535? - 1596?), a painter working in a *maniera* style developed in Rome under the influence of Federico Zuccaro. Cesari participated in the decoration of the Logge of

³ Sold at Sotheby's, New York, 22 May 1992, lot 189; see Röttgen cat. 263.

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Gregory XIII in the Vatican and in subsequent projects executed by groups of artists working under Circignani's direction. Many papal commissions of the late sixteenth century were given to such well-organized teams of artists who could quickly execute the large narrative cycles required by the Counter-Reformation Church. In this environment, Cesari found an opportunity to develop his precocious talent and to experience the styles of other painters, particularly Cristoforo Roncalli (Il Pomerancio, 1552-1626), a fellow student of Circignani. The soft, transparent colour of Cesari's early style is close to that seen in the works of Giovanni de' Vecchi (1536-1615), Andrea Lilio (1555-1610), Francesco Vanni (1563-1610), and others working in the idiom of Federico Barocci (1535-1612).

Cesari received his first independent commission in 1588, at the age of 20, for frescoes in S. Lorenzo in Damaso (lost but known through copies). These frescoes broke with the style of his teacher Circignani and reflected study of earlier Roman fresco cycles by Girolamo Muziano (1532-1592), a Brescian trained in Padua. Cesari's S. Lorenzo frescoes constituted the first step toward what Herwarth Röttgen has called a "stile cerimoniale e rappresentativa," characterized by symmetrical compositions, narrative clarity achieved through frontality and schematization, and a larger, more imposing figure canon. Cesari further developed this style in a series of major commissions executed in Rome and Naples during the 1590s. In the frescoes of the Olgiati Chapel in S. Prassede, Rome, he made a significant, forward-looking break with earlier Roman ceiling decoration, creating a realistic expansion of the vault that may reflect the experience of north Italian ceilings during a probable trip in 1590-1593.

Cesari's position as the most prominent painter in Rome brought him the commission for scenes of Roman history in the Palazzo dei Conservatori in 1595 (executed 1595-1640) as well as close, personal ties with the papal court. He was made a Cavaliere di Cristo by Pope Clement VIII for his accomplishments in supervising the decoration of the transept of the Lateran Basilica (1599-1601); his own contribution was the *Ascension* over the main altar.

In addition to executing commissions for large fresco cycles and numerous altarpieces, Cesari made a specialty of small pictures such as the present *Virgin and Child* executed for private patrons, both Roman and foreign. These cabinet pictures were quite unlike those of his Roman contemporaries and expanded a market previously served by foreigners or artists working outside Rome. Cesari executed these paintings on panel, copper or slate to accentuate their delicate technique and high finish, whether religious or

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mythological in subject, such paintings exhibit to a high degree the elegance and rarified gracefulness characteristic of Cesari's art.

Although he never adapted to the radical changes brought about in Roman painting by his former student Caravaggio and by the Carracci and their followers, Cesari continued to receive significant commissions until his death in 1640. Cesari had no followers as such, yet his art was of importance for a number of his contemporaries. Both Caravaggio and Andrea Sacchi studied with him at the beginning of their careers and continued to express admiration and respect for him. He was instrumental in Guido Reni's initial success in Rome and influenced the younger Bolognese painter's style, at least for a time. Adam Elsheimer (1578-1610/1620) probably studied Cesari's small cabinet pictures, and Paul Brill (1554-1626) was said to have benefitted from studying the treatment of landscape in his paintings.