

# . AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

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**Gaspar van Wittel, called Vanvitelli**  
(Amersfoort 1652-1736 Rome)

*Naples, a view of the Seiano Grotto in Posillipo with  
the Tomb of Virgil*

Signed and dated (lower right, on the wall):  
'NAPOLI 1701 / GAASPERO V.W.'

Oil on canvas

28 ½ x 49 in. (72.4 x 124.5 cm.)



## Provenance

Commissioned by Don Luis Francisco de la Cerda y Aragón (1660-1711), 9th Duke of Medinaceli, Naples, *circa* 1700,  
Dowager Duchess of Medinaceli (c. 1660-1732), Madrid, and by descent to,  
Dowager Duchess of Uceda, Madrid, and by descent to,  
Don José María Martorell Téllez-Girón Fernández de Córdoba (1903-1960), Madrid, Duke of Plasencia (deposited by the 'Junta Delegada de Incautación, Protección y Salvamento del Tesoro Artístico' at the Museo del Prado for the duration of the Spanish Civil War until returned to the family on 30 April 1940, inv. no. 22410), and by descent until,  
[The Property of a Lady]; Sotheby's, London, 3 December 1997, lot 47, where acquired by the previous owner.

## Literature

V. Lleó Carral, 'Art collection of the ninth Duke of Medinaceli', *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXI, 1989, p. 115, no. 207 (mentioned in his posthumous inventory of 1711, as 'Gruta de Pozilio (*sic*) no. 221...1.200rs').  
L. Laureati and L. Trezzani, *Gaspare Vanvitelli e le origini del vedutismo*, exhibition catalogue, Rome, 2002, pp. 45, 69, 214 and 216.

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This view depicts the entrance to the famed Seiano Grotto in Posillipo, a 700-meter Roman tunnel built by Marcus Cocceius Nerva in 37 A.D., which linked Naples to Pozzuoli and the volcanic Phlegrean Fields. The tunnel ran beside the ruins of the famous tomb of the poet Virgil, seen here on top of the mountain. The inscribed monument crowned with the royal coat-of-arms at left was built to commemorate a series of successive improvements made to the grotto by Alphonse V of Aragon, King of Naples, between 1442 and 1458, and Pedro Álvarez de Toledo y Zúñiga, Spanish viceroy to Naples, between 1532 and 1553.

The Seiano Grotto was evidently a popular site, especially with foreign travellers on the Grand Tour, whom Vanvitelli depicts reading the inscriptions on the monument alongside local noblemen and villagers. Further testament to the popularity of the site and demand for its representation among collectors, is the existence of no fewer than thirteen views - including this one - by Vanvitelli (see G. Briganti, *Gaspar van Wittel*, Milan, 1996, pp. 272-274, nos. 381-391). Each depiction is characterized by different staffage as well as variations in size and format, with three examples being of upright orientation.

Gaspar van Wittel arrived in Naples in 1699 at the invitation of Luis de la Cerda, Duke of Medinaceli and Viceroy of Naples, for whom he painted at least thirty-five topographical scenes, including this view of the Grotto of Pozzuoli, notably the only signed and dated scene from this group. Vanvitelli's views made up a significant part of what was one of the most extraordinary collections of the time; it included masterpieces such as *Las Hilanderas* by Velázquez and *The Wine of Saint Martin's Day* by Bruegel the Elder, both of which are now in the Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Medinaceli had encountered Vanvitelli and his work in Rome, where he had served as Spanish Ambassador to Pope Innocent XII, a post he took up in 1687. There, he lived an extravagant lifestyle and had a notorious affair with the singer Angela Voglia, la Giorgina; a story that was to inspire Alessandro Scarlatti's *opera La caduta de' Decemviri*, the libretto for which was written by Silvio Stampiglia, a close friend of Medinaceli. When the Duke was appointed Viceroy in 1696 he moved to Naples, taking Giorgina with him, together with her sister and father. Moving to Naples shortly afterwards, in 1699, Vanvitelli worked for the Duke over a two-year period. After returning to Spain, where he was appointed Prime Minister in 1709 by Philip V, Medinaceli fell into disgrace when he was discovered to have leaked secret documents. He was imprisoned for treason and died in 1711.