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Francesco Fontebasso
Venice, 1709 - 1769

Adoration of the Shepherds
c.1750

Oil on canvas, round-arched at the top; in an original carved Venetian frame
85 x 52 cm

Provenance:

German private collection, 1923;
Sotheby's, London, 21 April 1982, lot 100;
Galerie St. Lucas, Vienna, 1982-83, Old Master Paintings, no.24;
Erna Weidinger Collection (1923-2021);
ImKinsky, Vienna, 8 November 2022, lot 1, where acquired.

Exhibited:

Vienna, Galerie St. Lucas, Old master paintings, winter 1982/83, no. 24

Literature:

H. Voss, *Francesco Fontebasso. Ein Beitrag zur Malerei des venezianischen Rokoko*, in 'Jahrbuch für Kunstsammler', III, 1923, pp. 29, 32-33, fig. 14;
H. Fuchs, *Meisterwerke der Barockkunst*, in 'Weltkunst', November 1982, p. 3122 (b/w-ill.);
M. Magrini, *Francesco Fontebasso (1707-1769)*, Vicenza 1988, p. 224, cat. 238, fig. 130;
R. Pallucchini, *La pittura nel Veneto. Il Settecento*, II, Milano 1995, p. 138, fig. 191

Apprenticed to Sebastiano Ricci, but greatly influenced by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Francesco Fontebasso is worthy of his prominent position in 18th century Venetian painting.

He was first exposed to Tiepolo's work in 1730 when he saw for the first time the frescoes at Palazzo Patriarcale, Udine (fig.1). Tiepolo's influence on his artistic development thereafter was profound and became evident in his first major commission in Venice for the Chiesa dei Gesuiti, a fresco executed for the Manin in 1734.

From this point onwards, he achieved definitive recognition as a leading artist in Venice, obtaining major commissions from the Venetian aristocracy and resulting - in 1755 - with him becoming a founding member of the Accademia Veneziana (he subsequently became its president in 1768) and - in 1761 - with his invitation to Saint Petersburg by Empress Catherine II to work on projects for the Winter Palace and other Imperial residences. Here, Fontebasso was also appointed professor at the Imperial Academy of Arts, before returning to Venice in 1768.

The present, jewel-like and immaculately preserved *Adoration of the Shepherds* is most representative of Fontebasso's highly skilled technique and, dating from around 1750, was created at a time of maturity and great success for the artist. Fontebasso may have been inspired by a composition by Sebastiano Ricci, which is known through an etching by Pietro Monaco (fig.2).

However, at the same time, Fontebasso demonstrates here his total independence from Ricci's style, reinterpreting Tiepolo's light virtuosity in a wholly personal style: the airy grandiosity of the composition is imbued with anecdotal sweetness and a little irony. Despite the secluded sacredness of the scene, the painter does not shy away from depicting the shepherdess with a basket of doves balanced on her head with her breasts uncovered, while the ox, appearing from the background, seems to participate in the adoration with a humble, 'human' expression.



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Joseph bears a strong resemblance to Fontebasso's depiction of *Saint Jerome* in the Louvre (Inv. No. MI 883), also dating to around 1750 (fig.3).

The characteristic putti can be seen floating above the scene, with their presence echoed in the opulent carved frame. These putti are depicted within billowing clouds, adding to the overall ethereal and otherworldly quality of the painting. Highly finished and refined, this canvas was meant to be an independent work for a sophisticated patron, rather than a preparatory sketch for a larger work.

Fontebasso returned to this subject many times throughout his career, both in painting and drawing. One can find close similarities with a painting of the same theme in the Duomo di San Mauro in Cavarzere, near Venice, which is of the same period but in landscape format (fig.4). Even closer in composition are two wonderful pen and ink drawings, one in the Art Institute of Chicago (fig.5), while the other is one of the superb sheets from an album of highly finished drawings purchased in 1935 by the Museo Correr (fig.6). In the latter, in particular, one can find numerous similarities, including the same flying angel with hands joined in prayer.



Fig.1 G. B. Tiepolo, *Rachel hiding the idols from her father Laban*, fresco, ante 1729
Palazzo Patriarcale, Udine



Fig. 2 P. Monaco, after S. Ricci, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, etching, 50 x 36 cm, 1750-63
British Museum, Inv. No. 1865,0520.727

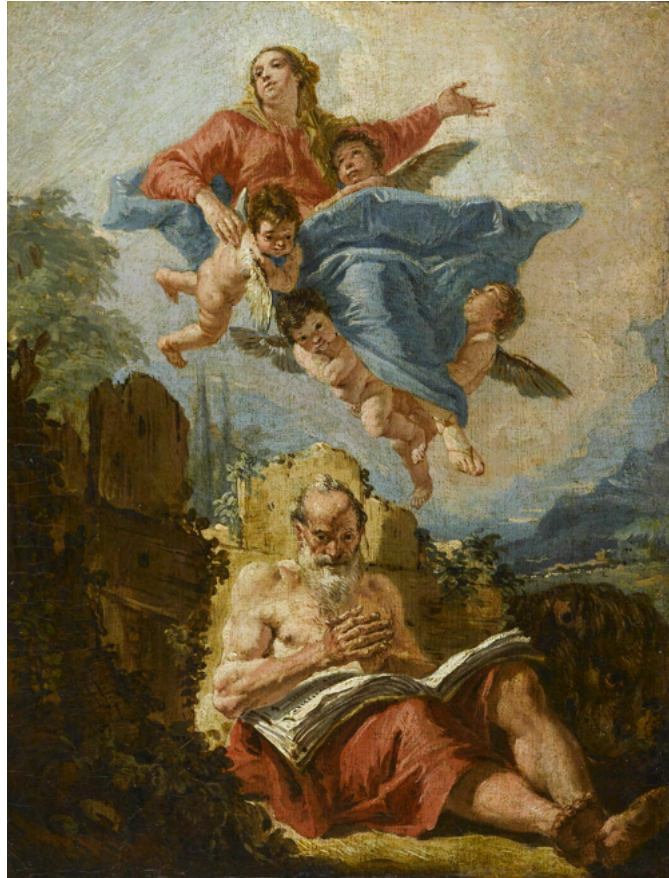


Fig.3 F. Fontebasso, *The Virgin appearing to Saint Jerome*, oil on canvas, 29 x 34 cm, c.1750
Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig.4 Francesco Fontebasso, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, oil on canvas, 110 x 80 cm, c.1750
Chiesa arcipretale, Cavarzere



Fig.5 Francesco Fontebasso, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Pen, brown ink and brush and black ink, with black and red ink washes, over black chalk, on ivory laid paper, 46.4 × 33.5 cm, c.1750
Art Institute of Chicago



Fig.6 Francesco Fontebasso, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Pen and brown ink and brush and black ink, with black ink washes, lead white, 47 x 34 cm.
Museo Correr, Venice