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Marco Tullio Montagna (Velletri, 1594 – Rome, 1649)

The Journey of Jacob

Oil on canvas, 121 x 169 cm

The little-known Marco Tullio Montagna was one of the most important painters in seventeenth-century Rome. Mainly famous for his frescoes depicting religious scenes, he worked alone and with the Florentine Simone Lagi (documented in Rome from 1620 to 1640) for renowned Roman aristocratic families, such as the Borghese, the Barberini and the Colonna, and for Pope Urban VIII. Most of his frescoes are still housed in important residencies and churches in Rome and the Lazio. His early style was deeply influenced by Giuseppe Cesari, called Cavalier d'Arpino (1568-1640). Montagna's works from the 1630s on present formal and stylistic features ascribable to his contacts with Pietro da Cortona (1596/1597-1669). This explains why, for a long time, several frescoes once thought to have been painted by Pietro da Cortona are now attributed to Montagna – e.g. the frescoes in Villa Muti-Arrigoni at Frascati.

Similarly, our painting was once attributed to the young Pietro da Cortona. However, the spatial construction of the crowded scene, the quickly sketched physiognomies and the colourful draperies of the group in the centre of the picture recall works undoubtedly by Montagna - e.g. *The Marriage of the Virgin* in the Oratorio of the Church of San Giuseppe dei Falegnami, 1631 (Fig.1). In particular, the semi-naked man crouching on the right corner evokes the man seen from the back in the left corner of the above-mentioned fresco, attesting Montagna's interest in the rendering of the human

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body. Moreover, the attribution is also supported by the fact that the frame of this painting reproduces the decorative pattern of Montagna's stucco frame for one of his frescoes in Villa Muti-Arrigoni at Frascati (Fig.2).

Stylistically, the rendering of the animals - the flock and the dog on the left and the horses on the right - recalls the young Pietro da Cortona's approach to the same subjects. Similarly, the atmospheric quality of the whites, in contrast with the bright hues of the draperies, and of the distant landscape bring Montagna close to Pietro's examples, and to the genre of ideal landscapes produced in Rome from the 1620s on.

The painting represents the imminent departure from what looks like a moment of rest in the long journey of Jacob and his tribe narrated in the Old Testament. The fact that the frame is actually a boiserie with an additional thick support on the back makes us think that the canvas was part of a more complex decorative structure probably depicting the whole story of Jacob's journey, which re-proposes the framework of most of Montagna's frescoes constructed throughout different sections. Seventeenth-century sources mention this artist's production of easel paintings, but no work has been identified until now. Our painting is hence a particularly important addition to Montagna's catalogue, being the first canvas undoubtedly attributed to this painter.

We hereby thank Ursula Verena Fischer Pace, who examined this canvas and identified it as by Marco Tullio Montagna giving us important suggestions for its valuation. She is currently working on a detailed study on this work.

Bibliography:

Guerrieri Borsoi, Maria Barbara, 'Marco Tullio Montagna', in *Dizionario Biografico degli italiani*, vol. 75 (2011)



Fig.1

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Fig.2