

omit?
Attributed to Francesco Fontebasso

1644

Before the Masked Ball

Plate

Canvas. 166.4 x 127 cm. (65 1/2 x 50 in.).

The protracted uncertainty as to the authorship of this remarkable painting ^{has been} ~~is~~ most frustrating. It would seem as if the artist as well as his sitters were masquerading. Polish authorship has been repeatedly urged, and then flatly rejected by Polish specialists, who also find the style unsuited to Bacciarelli, Italian court painter in Warsaw. The figures and especially the architecture have been considered typically Austrian, in the neighborhood of Maulbertsch. Anton Kern, a Bohemian pupil of Pittoni in Venice, has come into the competition. The French artist Flipart, active in Venice and Madrid, has been more than once suggested, as has another Frenchman, Noël Hallé. And there are points in favor of the Swedish court painter, Gustav Pilo.¹

But the strongest probability remains that the painter of No. 1644 is Italian. The wide range of other schools considered has been partly due to the costume style of the picture, even though the masquerade theme should warn against attaching weighty significance to this criterion. The costumes give no cause to doubt Italian origin. Very similar examples appear among eighteenth-century paintings cited in the recent monumental history of Italian costume,² where No. 1644 is reproduced in color for its display of typical Venetian masquerade costuming of about 1760-70. The sense of unreality, at which masquerade aims,

so pervades Before the Masked Ball as to suggest comparison in some details with such a fantastic scene as Erminia and the Shepherds (No. 1932, Pl.) painted about 1755 by Antonio Guardi. The male footgear in the two paintings, with the capricious accent of the bright red heel, is especially telling.

Some connection with Venice-oriented artists of the Bolognese school is suggested by a comparison of the figures in No. 1644 with such a portrait as Giuseppe Maria Crespi's Cacciatore in the Bologna Pinacoteca or, especially, with Antonio Crespi's portrait of his brother Luigi (dated 1771) in the same gallery.³ Most emphatically urged in recent years has been an attribution to the Florentine Gian Domenico Ferretti, at a date in the early 1720s, which would seem to be much too early for No. 1644. For a discussion of this attribution we shall have to await the promised publication by its chief proponent.⁴

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Most of the Italian artists to whom No. 1644 has been attributed are Venetians. When we first hear of the picture, some twenty-five years ago, the names associated with it are Pietro Longhi and Lampi.⁵ It entered the Kress Collection with an attribution to Amigoni. But the most convincing support has gone to Francesco Fontebasso, whose style, thanks to scholarly research of the past five years, has become much better known than formerly and more fully appreciated.⁶

It now seems likely that No. 1644 may have been painted by Fontebasso in the latter part of his two-year sojourn, 1761-62, at the court of St. Petersburg. Among his paintings from that rich period of activity the Portrait of an Oculist, in the Russian State Museum, Leningrad,⁷ provides a striking parallel with No. 1644 for the gestures of hands, the subtle play of light and shade, and the remarkably beautiful rendering of materials-- laces, brocades, furs, and jewelry.⁸ Fontebasso's Queen Tomyris Receiving the Head of Cyrus, now in a Brussels private collection,⁹ provides an equally good parallel for the baroque architectural background of No. 1644: ~~the~~ large dark marble columns immediately behind the figures and ~~the~~ curved pilastered and sculptured portico beyond. Whether this sumptuous background is based on actual architecture seen by the artist or whether it was his own invention

is a question which has not been answered. Also whether the three figures in No. 1644 represent actual people remains an intriguing question: if, as seems likely, this picture was painted by Fontebasso at about the same time as he painted for the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg the Accession of Catherine II to the Throne, then the proposal that the imperious lady in No. 1644 is Catherine II, Empress of Russia, gains credence.¹⁰ While in the formal scene painted for the Academy of Fine Arts the Empress is surrounded by allegorical figures of Russia and the Virtues, here, in a festal scene, she is accompanied by two elegant gentlemen in Polish costume, appropriate to the often-distinguished, always loyal personages who made up her court of "favorites."¹¹ Catherine II was thirty-three years old when she ascended the throne, in June 1762, and age entirely suitable for the lady in No. 1644. Given the opportunity to paint a portrait of this cultured, brilliantly intelligent woman, who had just reached the pinnacle of power in Russia, Fontebasso, it is easy to understand, would have been inspired to paint the masterpiece of his career.

Provenance: Camille Groult, Collection, Paris (sold, Galerie Charpentier, Paris, Mar. 21, 1952, no. 84 of catalogue, as attributed to Pietro Longhi, with the comment that in the Groult Collection it had been frequently attributed to Lampi). French dealer (bought from the preceding; sold to the following).

David M. Koetser's, New York (sold 1953 to the following).
Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1961. ^{#12}

References: (1) The above suggestions have been offered tentatively (usually only verbally) by a variety of serious critics. The attribution to Flipart has been published (by D. F. Zambelli, in Arte Antica e Moderna, Apr.-June 1962, p. 197). Pertinent examples by Kern are reproduced in Arte Veneta, vol. XXIX, 1975, pp. 247 ff. (2) R. L. Pissetzky, Storia del costume in Italia, vol. IV, 1967; see p. 33 and pl. 194 for No. 1644.

(5) ³The names of both Luigi and Antonio appear in the somewhat ambiguous inscription: the sitter holds the third volume of Luigi's Felsina pittrice; hence "Antonio" should refer to the painter of the portrait.
(6) ⁴The specialist on Florentine painting M. Gregori has expressed the intention of publishing No. 1644 as by Ferretti, reproducing for comparison portraits by Ferretti unknown to me. Of portraits published as by Ferretti, reproductions of four are readily accessible: see E. A. Maser, Gian Domenico Ferretti, 1968, frontispiece, Self-Portrait, Uffizi, Florence; G. Ewald, in Antichità Viva, vol. XIII, 1974, pp. 36 ff., figs. 3-5,

Portrait of Maria Francesca Mannelli in Costume of Cleopatra, private collection, Portrait of a Painter, Brera, Milan, Portrait of a Gentleman, formerly Sonino Collection, Venice. These reproductions provide some support for an attribution of No. 1644 to Ferretti. F. Zeri also (in letter of Feb. 17, 1971) writes me that he favors an attribution to Ferretti; later (Italian Paintings in North American Collections, 1972, p. 647) he lists it as Ferretti.

country have been chosen as a compliment to Catherine II as protectress of Russia? (10) The Accession of Catherine II to the Throne, an immense canvas (almost four by three meters), now rolled up and stored in the Russian State Museum, Leningrad, is reproduced by Pallucchini (fig. 117 of the 1976 op. cit. in note 6 above), who reports that Tomara Fomiciova, of the Hermitage Museum, when shown a photograph of No. 1644, thought that ^{the} lady in the picture might be Catherine II. To judge by reproductions of the large painting in Leningrad the resemblance to the express there is close enough. As for the Polish costume of the two courtiers in No. 1644 this was customary at the Russian court. (11) Ibid., p. 178. (12) Paintings and Sculpture from the Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, 1956, p. 190 (catalogue by W. E. Suida and F. R. Shapley), as Venetian, third quarter of eighteenth century. Shapley, Kress catalogue, vol. III, 1973, pp. 175 f., as Italian, mid-eighteenth century. No. 1644 is reported as varnished by M. Modestini in 1955.

(5) See Provenance. (6) It was R. Pallucchini (in Arte Veneta, vol. XXIV, 1970, p. 291) who made the suggestion, tentatively and without citing parallels, that Fontebasso, who could come up with surprises, might have painted No. 1644 during his period of activity at the court of St. Petersburg. In his subsequent pursuit of the study of Fontebasso, Pallucchini (in Paragone, vol. XXVII, 1976, pp. 172 ff.) gives much credit to a PhD thesis discussed at the University of Padua in 1973, but not yet published so far as I know, entitled Francesco Fontebasso, by M. Magrini. On the basis of this thesis, which involves a documentary study of Fontebasso's career and the first attempt at a chronological catalogue of his paintings, Pallucchini finds much to confirm an attribution of No. 1644 to Fontebasso.

(7) The Portrait of an Oculist is reproduced by Pallucchini, fig. 118 of 1976 op. cit. in note 6 above. (8) An example of Fontebasso's remarkable painting of materials in a quite different subject, which must have been painted about this time, is A Little Girl Eating Bread and Milk, in the National Museum, Stockholm; reproduced by Pallucchini, La Pittura veneziana del settecento, 1960, fig. 402. For parallels to the fashion of the lady's dress in No. 1644 see Fontebasso's Venetian Reception, Zoppas Collection, Conegliano (formerly Asta Collection, Venice); reproduced ibid., fig. 400; a detail is reproduced in fig. 116 of the 1976 op. cit. in note 6 above. (9) Reproduced by Pallucchini, fig. 120a of 1976 op. cit. ~~in note 6 above.~~ Dating from about the same time as Fontebasso's painting of the Accession of Catherine II to the Throne (see below), may not the subject of Queen Tomyris' victory over the powerful enemy of her