

# PIER FRANCESCO MOLA

Coldrerio 1612 - Rome 1666

## *A Standard Bearer*

101.5 x 77.5 cm

This present picture, virtually unknown and unpublished prior to its appearance in a recent London sale (Christie's, December 6, 2007) is one of only two extant paintings in Mola's oeuvre of a single, martial figure, depicted life-size. The other one is the celebrated so called "Oriental Warrior" or "Pirate" in the Louvre, Mola's only extant painting, which is signed and dated (1650). Both pictures have in common a rather unspectacular, undistinguished or even obscure provenance: The Louvre picture had been for two centuries in the possession of a family in the Jura in France, prior to its purchase by the Louvre from a small Parisian gallery in 1948, and nothing is known about the provenance of the present picture prior to 1986.

Richard Cocks in a statement quoted in the catalogue of the Christie's sale of December 6, 2007 not only confirmed the attribution, but correctly placed the present picture in the stylistic vicinity of the "Oriental Warrior" and of the altarpiece of c. 1652 of the "Preaching of St. Barnabas" in SS. Ambrogio e Carlo in Rome, the church of the Lombard nation in Rome, a painting given by Luigi Alessandro Omodei, created Cardinal in 1652, to that church. Cocks was unaware or negligent of the fact that the St. Barnabas altarpiece had been recently dated later, into the Sixties, by Spiriti (1995) and Petrucci (1995), but such a dating has already been rejected as unfounded by the present writer (2007).<sup>i</sup> All three pictures, the "Pirate", the "Standard Bearer" and the St. Barnabas altarpiece, belong to a short period of 1650 - 53 ca. when Mola was influenced by Salvator Rosa.<sup>ii</sup>

The Rosa influence can also be detected in Mola's three lunette frescoes in the Chiostro Grande of the former Dominican monastery S. Maria della Quercia near Viterbo (their execution is documented September 1650 - January 1651).<sup>iii</sup>

The facial features of the "Pirate", the "Standard Bearer" and the St. Barnabas are very similar, so much as to make one wonder whether Mola used the same male model in all three paintings.

The "Oriental Warrior" is, however, a much larger picture, the figure is depicted knee-length (172 x 123 cm), whereas the "Standard Bearer" is depicted only half-length. Both figures are turning to the left (as seen from the viewer), but looking back to the right, over their left shoulder. Both figures are depicted against a cloudy sky. In the picture of the "Pirate" the background shows a strip on the bottom depicting a coastal landscape with rocks and sailing boats on the water.

A main difference between the two pictures lies in the fact that in the Louvre picture all elements, the drapery, the face, the arch and the arrow are highly finished and tightly modelled, while in the present picture the rich, freely floating drapery of the standard is treated much more sketchily and loosely, using various glazes. Some pentimenti in these areas can be detected even with the naked eye, and more may be revealed by x-rays. The drapery shows stripes of various pale colours, yellow-ocre, white (with a shade of pink), pale blue. The canvas shows no cusping ("cimose"). Therefore it is likely that it was slightly cut down on the edges. The very sketchy rendering of the texture of the drapery, quite unusual in Mola's oeuvre, contrasts with the finely, yet brilliantly executed golden ornaments (a mask with feathers(?), ending in arabesques) on the cuirass and a similar mask on the helmet.

The generally more painterly and smoother handling of most parts, the face, the white collar, the subtly rendered feathers on the helmet and even the brilliantly rendered metal surface of the cuirass make us wonder whether the present work may have been painted even a little earlier, closer to the altarpiece in the Costaguti chapel in SS. Domenico e Sisto in Rome (1648).

As has been pointed out already by Cocks, in this picture Mola was probably inspired by some of Guercino's depictions of the ancient god Mars, such as the Mars in Tatton Park, England, of c. 1628 (cf. L. Salerno, *I dipinti del Guercino*, Rome 1988, p.217, no. 123 bis), the Mars in the picture of "Venus, Mars and Cupid" of 1633, painted for the Duke of Modena (Modena, Galleria Estense; Salerno 1988, p. 242, no. 151) or the "Mars with an Amorino", painted in 1648/49 for General Barone Mattei (Cincinnati(Ohio), Cincinnati Art Museum; Salerno 1988, p. 329, no. 257). Another "Mars with an amorino" was painted in 1640 for the Abbate Gavotti (cf. C.C. Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, ed. 1841, II, pp. 265 and 320; and B. Ghelfi, *Il libro dei conti del Guercino 1629 - 1666*, Bologna 1997, p.101). In all, seven depictions of Mars by Guercino are known.<sup>iv</sup> It remains an open question, which of these pictures Mola might have actually seen, but at least two patrons were members of families resident in Rome: the Barone Mattei was the Marchese Luigi Mattei, second son of Asdrubale Mattei, marchese di Giove (died in 1638). In 1641 - 42 General Luigi Mattei directed the papal troops in the war of Castro.<sup>v</sup> The Abbate Gavotti belonged to the Roman branch of the family coming from Savona.

i. E. Schleier in the catalogue "Caravaggism and the Baroque in Europe", Robilant + Voena, (London and Milan) Turin 2007, p.46

ii. See Schleier, *Pier Francesco Mola e la pittura a Roma, nel catalogo della mostra "Pier Francesco Mola 1612 -1666"*, Lugano - Rome (Milan) 1999, pp. 72 - 73, e Schleier 2007, p. 46.

iii. E. Schleier, *Novità sugli affreschi del Mola a S. Maria della Quercia presso Viterbo*, in : *Antichità Viva* XXVIII, 4, 1989, pp. 32 - 35; E. Schleier, *Eine unbekannte Vorzeichnung zu Molas Fresken im Chostro Grande von S. Maria della Quercia bei Viterbo*, in : *L'Arte del Disegno, Festschrift für Christel Thiem*, Mich- Berlin 1997, pp.139 - 144; Almamaria Tantillo, *nel catalogo della mostra Pier Francesco Mola*, Lugano - Roma 1989, pp. 204 - 205

iv. Cf. the catalogue of the exhibition "Italian Paintings & Sculptures of the 17th and 18th centuries", Tenth Summer exhibition, Heim Gallery London 1976, no.4

v. Cf. John T. Spike, *Italian Paintings in the Cincinnati Art Museum*, Cincinnati 1993, p. 36 - 37; Luigi Crespi, *Felsina Pittrice, Vite de' Pittori Bolognesi Tomo Terzo*, Rome 1769, p.3; Ludwig von Pastor, *Geschichte der Päpste*, XIII,2, Urban VIII (1623-44), zweiter Teil, Freiburg 1929, pp. 868,870.