

After closely studying the *Portrait of a Woman with a Vase of Flowers* [Fig. 1], I have come to believe that it is a painting by Lucchese master Pietro Paolini, probably from the 1620s. I should emphasize that I have not been able to view the painting in person but am instead relying on a high-quality digital reproduction that allows for general observations but doesn't permit considerations of its physical state.

Gianni Papi tentatively attributed the painting to another Lucchese painter, Paolo Guidotti (1559-1629), known as "il Cavalier Borghese," and dated it to about 1600. Guidotti's career stretched between mannerism and baroque, and in the latter decades of his career, the art of Caravaggio had a transformative impact on his style. His idiosyncratic manner, characterized by a dark palette, dramatic chiaroscuro, and rough, loose brushwork, reveal a closeness at times to other Roman Caravaggisti such as Orazio Borgianni.

However, for his tentative attribution, Papi was dependent on a photograph of the work in a pre-cleaned state. After cleaning and restoration, the painting is far less murky, and the colors show a treatment of color and brushwork that are less characteristic of Guidotti. Moreover, the physiognomy of the sitter, the composition, and brushwork are consistent with works by Guidotti's younger compatriot, Pietro Paolini (1603-1681). Finally, the sitter is dressed in a costume that was in fashion beginning in the 1610s, suggesting it cannot be from 1600.

Little of Paolini's life is documented, and his artistic development remains unclear, as almost nothing is signed or dated. This holds particularly true for his early period. He seems to have gone to Rome in 1619 where, according to Baldinucci, he went to study with Angelo Caroselli but shares elements

in common with other Caravaggesque painters such as Manfredi and Cavarozzi. He seems to have remained in Rome until 1628, when he went to Venice, finally returning to Lucca in 1631.

Caravaggesque elements are subtle but evident in this painting black background, burgundy drapery hanging behind, the soft shadows defining the sitter's face, and especially in treatment of vase of flowers painted with loving detail on the sitter's right. As Papi notes, the vase is unmistakably Caravaggesque in inspiration – reminiscent, for example, of the one in Caravaggio's famous *Lute Player* (Hermitage) [Fig. 2]. But the combination of female sitter juxtaposed with a still life of flowers in a glass vessel appears already in Paolini's *Ages of Life*, 1628-1629 (P. Mazzarosa de' Vincenzi Collection, Lucca) [Fig. 3]. However, the painting is softer and more lyrical than many first-wave Caravaggists.

One telltale sign of Paolini's authorship of the *Portrait of a Woman* is his distinctive treatment in the proportions in the face with the eyes placed rather too high on the head, and the small, squarish foreheads, and, in the hairline, a slight widow's peak. We see this, for example, in the woman playing the lute in the *Bacchic Concert* (Dallas Museum of Art, 1625–1630) [Fig. 4], the *Portrait of a Man with a Child's Skeleton* [Fig. 5], and the women in the *Concert* (Formerly Getty Museum, 1620-30) [Fig. 6], and especially the young woman in the *Procuress* (Beauvais) [Fig. 7], as well as many others.

Another signature element of Paolini's treatment of faces seen here are the eyes, whose prominent upper and lower lids give almost the impression of being sculpted. Indeed, his handling of eyes verges on formulaic, varying little regardless of the sitter's gender. Compare, for example, the eyes in this painting to Paolini's *Portrait of Woman and Young Girl* (Ajaccio) [Fig. 8] or his *Portrait of a Man with a Child's Skeleton* [Fig. 5].

Paolini's early works in particular are characterized by a warm light, usually from left, that gives the flesh tones a golden glow. We see these effects, for example, in his musical scenes in the Louvre [Fig. 9], Dallas [Fig. 4], and formerly the Getty [Fig. 6], as well as the *Fortune Teller* (Auckland Art Gallery) [Fig. 10] and *Ages of Life* [Fig. 3]. It is difficult to judge color from a reproduction with certainty, but it appears that such warm tones were more evident in the *Woman with a Vase of Flowers* before cleaning. Nevertheless, they appear to my eye consistent with these other works. Additionally, Paolini often repeats the way light falls on faces, three-quarters illuminated and a highlight on the middle of the forehead, the bridge of the nose, and the right cheekbone [*Portrait of a Man* (Toulouse), Women on right of *Concert* (Louvre) [Fig. 9] and *Bacchic Concert* (Dallas) [Fig. 4], Female figure in *Ages of Life* [Fig. 3].

Also typical of Paolini is the way the paint of the flesh tones is applied in rough, uneven strokes, lighter colors scumbled over and white highlights rapidly applied. We see such brushwork in the treatment of the woman's brow in the *Woman with a Vase of Flowers*—again, more evident in the photograph taken before cleaning [Fig. 11], where parallels with the treatment of the face in Paolini's *Woman and Young Girl* (Ajaccio) [Fig. 8] are particularly close. In addition, Paolini's treatment of skin sometimes gives it an excessively shiny appearance to the skin, as if the sitter is wearing makeup; it is more subtle in *Woman with a Vase of Flowers* than in Louvre and Dallas concerts [Figs. 9, 4] or *Ages of Life* [Fig. 3], but nevertheless apparent here.

According to Baldinucci, Paolini was a “pittore di gran bizzaria” and some of his eccentricities are evident in *Woman with a Vase of Flowers*. Most notably, his use of foreshortening can also be quite odd, as we see in the posture of the sitter's left elbow pointing outward as her hand rests somewhat

awkwardly on her hip. A comparable gesture, with the left hand reversed, can be seen in the male figure on the right of Paolini's Auckland *Fortune Teller* [Fig. 10]. On the whole less successful is the central woman of Beauvais *Procuress* [Fig. 7], which demonstrates the difficulty Paolini had at times with steep foreshortening in his early career.

Indeed, most of the analogies I have drawn here are from Paolini's Roman period, which, as noted, was from c. 1619 to c. 1628. His later works show the influence of Venetian painting, especially Veronese, or included sophisticated literary conceits linked with the literati of his native Lucca – and neither of these elements seem to be in evidence here.

A date of 1620s for the painting is also borne out by examination of the sitter's costume. Prof. Deborah Walberg (Bloomsberg University), art historian and expert on historical fashion, suggests that the sitter's style of dress came into vogue c. 1610-20 and became outmoded by the 1630s. She observes that "by the 1630's the lower square neckline was out of fashion, and sleeves were much fuller. The folded back lace cuff came into vogue right at that time – 1610-20. It was also much less common to see separate sleeves after the first quarter of the 17th century." She notes, however, some unusual elements, "I have never seen fabric quite like that depicted in the bodice and skirt, and the bodice point is incredibly rounded...I wonder if there is some repainting" (personal communication). Fashion historian Samuele Magri came up with a comparable date (personal communication), noting that just such a rounded bodice appears in Gerrit van Honthorst's *Fortune Teller* (Galleria degli Uffizi), dated 1616-1617 [Fig. 12].

In short, I believe the painting, from the physiognomy of the sitter to the composition, the treatment of light and shadow, as well as the costume, are consistent Pietro Paolini's work from his Roman period in the 1620s.

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Fig. 1. *Portrait of a Woman with a Vase of Flowers*



Fig. 2. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. The Lute Player, ca. 1595, Hermitage Museum.



Fig. 3. Pietro Paolini, *Ages of Life*, 1628-1629, Collection P. Mazzarosa de' Vincenzi, Lucca



Fig. 4. Pietrino Paolini, *Bacchic Concert*, 1625–1630, 46 × 69 in. (116.84 cm × 1 m 75.26 cm) Dallas Museum of Art



Fig. 5. Paolini Pietro, *Portrait of a Man with a Child's Skeleton* (*Francesco Maria Fiorentini?*), Fondation Bemberg, Toulouse



Fig. 6. Pietro Paolini, *Concert*, 1620-30, 100.5 cm (39.5 in) x 133.5 cm (52.5 in), formerly Getty Museum, Los Angeles



Fig. 7. Pietro Paolini, *The Procureess, or The Old Woman and the Young Gallant*, Beauvais, Musée de l'Oise



Fig. 8. Pietro Paolini, *Portrait of Woman and Young Girl*, oil on canvas, Ajaccio, Musée Fesch



Fig. 9. Pietro Paolini (Italian, 1603–1681), *Concert of Musicians and Singers*, 1620s. Oil on copper, 119 x 201 cm (46.8 x 79.1 in.). Paris, Louvre Museum, inv. no. RF 1981-44.



Fig. 10. Pietro Paolini, *The Fortune Teller*, oil on canvas, 1080 x 1702, mm
Auckland Art Gallery



Fig. 11. *Portrait of a Woman with a Vase of Flowers* (fig. 1) before cleaning



Fig. 12. Gerrit van Honthorst, *Fortune Teller*, 1616-1617, Oil on canvas, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi