

NICOLÁS CORTÉS

GALLERY



Luca Giordano, called Fa Presto

(Naples, 1634 -1704)

The Drunkenness of Noah

Ca. 1665

Oil on canvas

234 x 150 cm

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Luca Giordano was a Neapolitan painter who was given the nickname “*Luca fa presto*” due to the habit of his father, the painter Antonio Giordano, of constantly encouraging him to work faster. Luca was the most important painter in Naples in the second half of the 17th century, introducing a softer and lighter interpretation of the prevailing Baroque style. Through the Viceroy, who was Antonio Giordano’s patron, Luca entered José de Ribera’s studio at a very young age where in just a few years he was able to paint in his master’s style. ¹

By the age of thirteen Giordano already possessed the technical skills, confidence and aspirations of a mature artist. Against his father’s wishes he ran away to Rome where he lived from copying the works of Raphael, Michelangelo and above all Pietro da Cortona, who became his second major influence. Giordano succeeded in obtaining employment with him, assimilating Cortona’s style as he had with Ribera and some works of this period have in fact been confused with his master’s. Giordano also went to Venice at this period and many of the city’s churches now house examples of his work, including *The Madonna of Grace with the Souls in Purgatory* in the church of Santa Maria di Castello, *The Deposition* for Santa Maria del Pianto (now Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice) and a *Virgin and Child with Saint Joseph and Saint Anthony of Padua* for the church of the Spirito Santo (now Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan).

In 1654 Giordano returned to Naples where he secured his first documented commission. During the following decade he fully assimilated all the influences he had previously received, from late Ribera to the mature Rubens, Preti, Van Dyck, Cortona and the Venetian painters, achieving a synthesis notable for its original treatment of the paint, which is flowing and diluted in a transparent, golden luminosity. In 1667 the artist returned to Venice where he painted *The Assumption*

¹ According to Palomino it was during this period that “he came close to the school of José de Ribera and adhered so greatly to his manner that he produced works of his own invention that seemed originals by the master.” De Domenici, who was well informed about the artist’s works present in Naples, stated that Giordano “*copiava assai bene le cose del maestro, e faceva anche qualcosa de sé, imitando le battaglie di Aniello Falcone*”, referring, among the works that “*son tenute in pregio, per memoria delle sue prime fatiche*”, to those that were in the chapel of the congregation of students in the Jesuit seminary next to the Gesù Vecchio, including “*un uomo e una donna resuscitati de San Francesco Saverio*”.

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of the Virgin for Santa Maria della Salute. In 1672 he executed the altarpiece for the principal altar in the parish church of San Gregorio Magno in Crispano. Also dating from this period is *The Annunciation* now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

In the late 1670s Giordano focused on major decorative schemes and frescoes. The earliest, dating from 1678 and 1679, were those devoted to *Saint Bridget* in Naples and *The Life of Saint Benedict* for the church of San Gregorio Armeno. In 1680 the artist went to Florence where the Marquis of Neri and Bartolommeo Corsini commissioned him to execute the frescoes for the dome of the chapel in the Carmelite church. The following year Giordano returned to Naples, summoned by the Spanish Viceroy, the Marquis of El Carpio, and painted *The Crossing of the Red Sea* (now Santa Maria Maggiore, Bergamo). In early 1682 he returned to Florence to complete the Corsini chapel and between 1682 and 1683 painted one of his masterpieces on the vast ceiling of the ballroom in the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi. In 1684 he returned to Naples where he painted the frescoes on the large interior front wall of the Gerolamini.

The artist's growing fame led to an invitation from the Spanish monarch to work in Spain as Charles II wished to employ a master of decorative painting in order to leave his personal mark on El Escorial.² It was here that Giordano executed what is generally considered his second masterpiece, the decoration of the monastery. This extensive project allowed him not only to develop a new style but also to make use of new themes based on the Old Testament which reflected both the interests of the court³ and his own.

Giordano arrived in Spain in April 1692 in the company of his son Niccoló, his nephew Giuseppe and three assistants: Aniello Rossi, Matteo Pacelli, G. Battista

² According to De Domenici, his arrival was large due to Cristóbal Ontañón, special envoy to the Kingdom of Naples, who, on his return to Madrid, praised the artist's work and his rapidity of painting. Ontañón declared that the artist was the only one capable of rapidly painting the frescoes for the church of El Escorial which the monarch wished to see completed as soon as possible given that, according to Palomino, the building's bare walls displeased him.

³ The analogy between the Spanish Habsburgs and the Old Testament prophets is striking, as is that with David and Solomon, the builders of the temple, who were compared to the two great 16th-century Spanish monarchs, Charles V and Philip II.

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Sottile, as well as a servant, his confessor and also Paolo de Matteis according to Baldinucci. Palomino wrote a detailed account of the artist's work in Spain which can be confirmed by written documentation and the commissions of this period.

Giordano embarked on his activities in Spain with the vault of the staircase in the monastery of El Escorial. This was rapidly followed by the scenes of *David and Solomon* and the cycles on biblical episodes. According to the records of Patrimonio Nacional, the artist executed series on *Noah*, *The Prodigal Son*, *Samson*, *Abraham* and *Jacob*. He also painted series of saints, mythological subjects and New Testament episodes. Finally, he executed two cycles on *The Life of the Virgin* (now Guadalupe and Vienna), the frescoes for the ceiling of the Casón del Buen Retiro in Madrid, those in the Sacristy of Toledo cathedral, and those in the church of San Antonio de los Alemanes, again in Madrid.

Nicolás Cortés Gallery would like to thank Giuseppe Scavizzi and Riccardo Lattuada for independently confirming the attribution of the present work. Its composition can undoubtedly be related to Giordano's painting still in the Escorial (fig. 1),⁴ executed between 1666 and 1667. It is extremely likely that the present work was a royal commission (see O. Ferrari, G. Scavizzi: *Luca Giordano: la obra completa*, Naples, 2000, p. 280, cat., no. A186, ill., p. 562).

All painters were prohibited from reproducing a work already painted for the monarch without his consent, for which reason it is possible that the present painting was a type of "presentation model" made so that the king could confirm his approval of aspects such as the subject and composition. Another possibility is that it a replica commissioned from Giordano from a client very close to the royal family who enjoyed the king's favour.

Due to the work's size it can, however, be argued that the painting was probably the "modello" used to produce the larger work for the Escorial (which measures 224 x 192 cm). That version, in the Spanish Royal Collections, has on occasions been considered to be the pair to *Job on the Dung Heap* by Giordano (fig. 2)⁵

⁴ Inv. no.: 10014806.

⁵ Patrimonio Nacional, inv. no.: I00148802.

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as the two works are of the same size and are generally mentioned together in early sources. ⁶

With regard to the dating of the present canvas, it must have been painted prior to 1667, as was the final work for the monastery, possibly around 1665 when Giordano returned to the realist idiom of Caravaggio and Ribera in Naples which he had employed for his earliest works.

This return to a naturalist focus, which Giordano employed for some years from 1662 onwards, allowed him to pursue his interest in descriptive details of the bodies and clothing as well as the figures' expressions. The artist's preference for realism did not, however, prevent him from continuing to explore technical and painterly effects based on dense layers of warm, brilliant colours. This is evident in the present work, particularly in the treatment of the red cloak held up by one of Noah's sons.

The subject of the Drunkenness of Noah is narrated in the Old Testament book of Genesis (9: 21-23). Noah was found drunk and naked by his sons Shem and Japheth who covered him with a cloak while his third son Ham looked at him and mocked him. In Christian iconography this subject is usually seen as a prelude to the mocking of Christ on the road to Calvary and was frequently depicted by leading artists.

⁶ Pérez Sánchez, Alfonso E.: *Luca Giordano y España* (exhib. cat.), Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid, 7 March to 2 June 2002, p. 125 [cat. 13].

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Fig. 1: Luca Giordano, *The Drunkenness of Noah*, Patrimonio Nacional.

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Fig. 2: Luca Giordano, *Job on the Dung Heap*, Patrimonio Nacional.