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NEW LIGHT ON MATTIA AND GREGORIO PRETI

The restoration of the *Allegory of the Five Senses*

THE RESTORATION OF THE *ALLEGORY OF THE FIVE SENSES* BY GREGORIO AND MATTIA PRETI

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A painter aged around forty, with the tools of his trade in his hand, turns towards us with aristocratic condescension, almost as if inviting us to participate in the cheerful symposium taking place behind him (**Fig. 1**). His facial features and grooming – black hair, olive complexion, ruddy cheeks and thick dark handlebar moustache – are reminiscent of early 17th-century Calabria, which the brothers Gregorio and Mattia Preti had left at the start of the Barberini papacy (1623-1644) to seek their fortunes in the Papal capital.

The artist, spectator and creator of the allegorical scene, should probably be identified as Gregorio Preti (Taverna 1603 - Rome 1672). He has depicted himself aged around forty, wearing an ample blue-grey surcoat at a time when he could still be considered to hold a pre-eminent position in the management of the family workshop. Beneath the repaintings and adjustments made during its execution, the X-ray images of the canvas show the presence of an older looking face, with a fairly pronounced receding hairline, a large double chin and marked wrinkles around the eyes and on the forehead (**Fig. 2**): this appearance is difficult to reconcile with that of the younger and more talented Mattia (Taverna 1613 - Malta 1699), who was barely thirty at the time.



Fig. 1 - GREGORIO AND MATTIA PRETI, *Allegory of the Five Senses*, detail of the self-portrait of Gregorio Preti



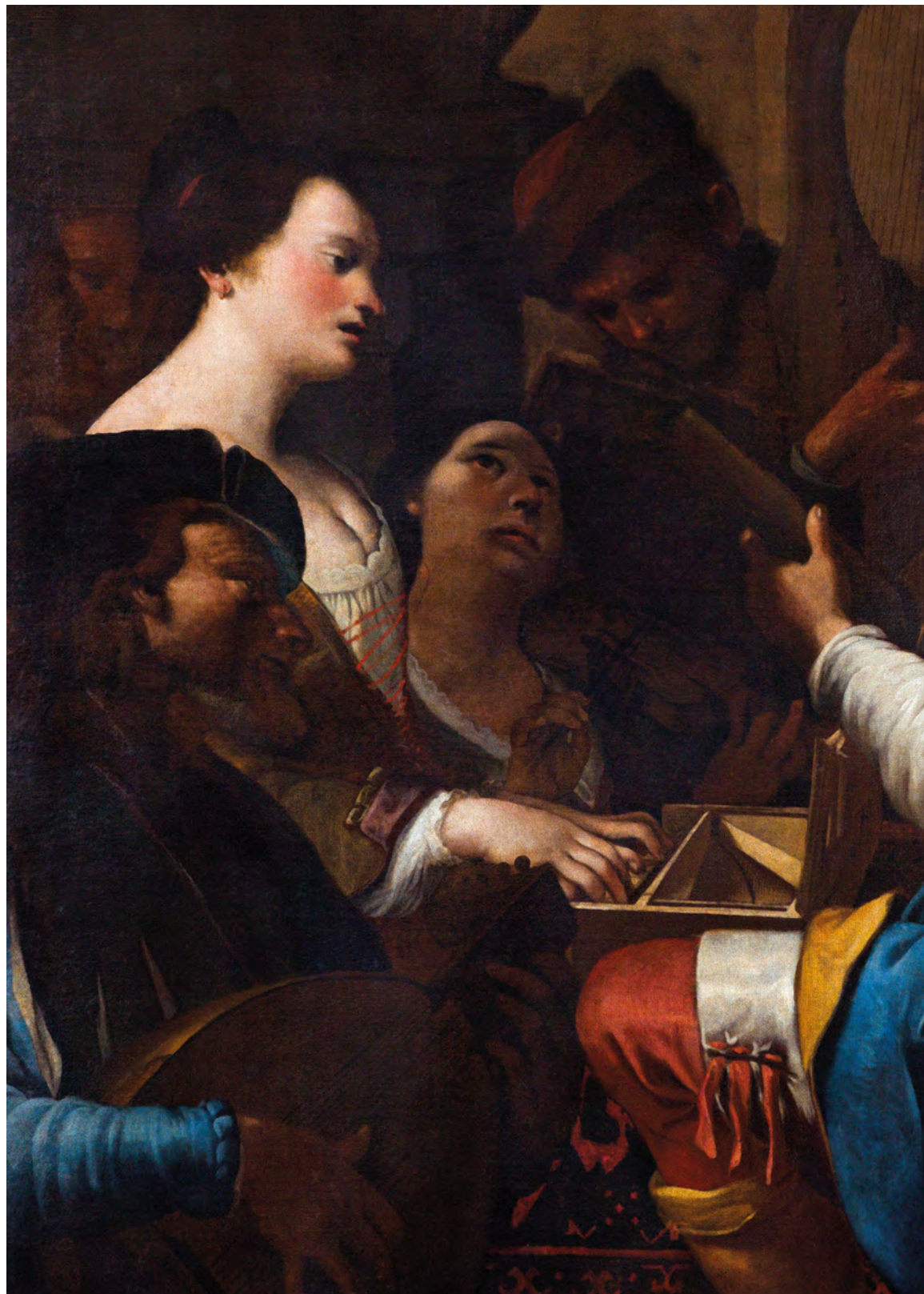
Fig. 2 - X-ray image of the self-portrait of Gregorio Preti



The painting is large and horizontal in format (170 x 363 cm) with over twenty life-size figures (**Fig. 3**): an imposing inn scene that we should imagine being hung high up near the ceiling of a tall room in an aristocratic palace. The painting was a special commission, assigned to the two artists in around 1641-1642 by an illustrious member of the Barberini family, very probably Prince Taddeo (1603-1647). The original provenance of the *Allegory of the Five Senses* is known from the family's 17th-century inventories, in which the painting is first recorded slightly after 1672 and in 1686 as a 'horizontal painting with various portraits: an instrumentalist, a singer, a gambler, a drinker and someone cheating a companion, about 14 palms long and 8 palms high'.

Fig. 3 - GREGORIO AND MATTIA PRETI, *Allegory of the Five Senses*, Rome, Gallerie Nazionali di Arte Antica

The 17th-century connoisseurs failed to notice the allegorical reference to the five senses underlying the scene; it only came to light in modern studies in 1985 thanks to a perceptive insight by Giuseppe De Vito. The lively musical performance on the left of the table alludes to hearing, whilst the pipe smoker at the centre of the banquet recalls smell; the innkeeper and the drinkers indulge in taste, whilst on the right the palm-reading scene - with a gypsy woman cheating a naive young man - suggests touch. Finally, sight is celebrated at the bottom by Gregorio Preti himself with the display of his brushes and palette in his own self-portrait.

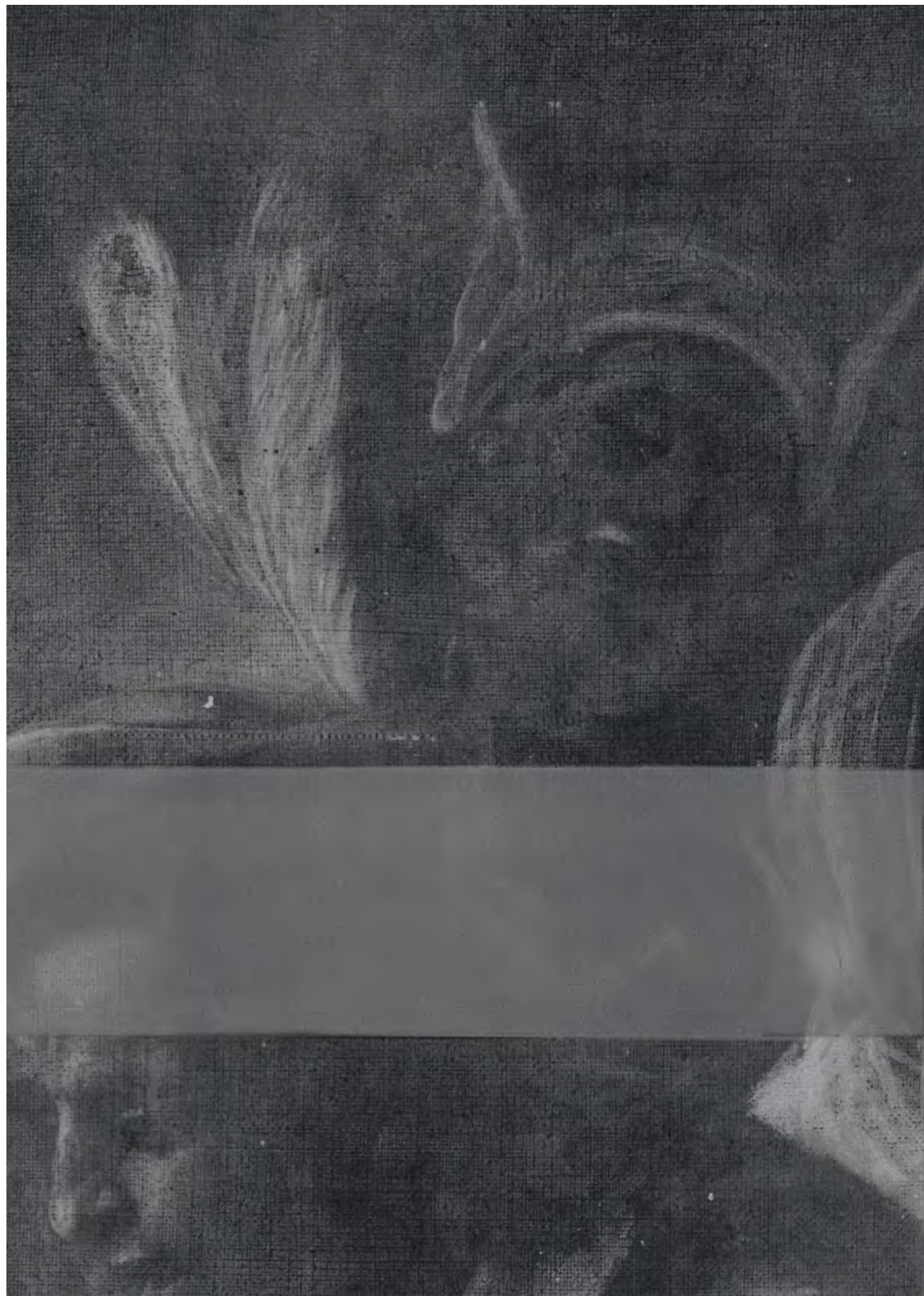


On the far right of the composition are two ancient philosophers: Heraclitus and Democritus. The latter, smiling and wearing a turban, has a large book resting on a globe and holds his hand open with his five fingers clearly visible, thus alluding to the five senses illustrated in the *Allegory* (Fig. 4). Democritus thought that there were two different forms of knowledge: an authentic form resulting from intellect and an inauthentic form deriving from the senses. In his opinion, the latter led to a misleading and imperfect truth as it was nourished by the chance collisions of the atoms of which he believed matter to be made up. The philosopher therefore laughs at the vanity of worldly things, like the monkey depicted on the top left, an established allusion to folly and the idiocy of the human race. By contrast, Heraclitus appears gloomy and frowning, as the philosopher of "becoming" who cannot take his eyes off the tragic fragility that destroys all things: a nihilistic scepticism underlying a radical critique of the concept of knowledge itself.

The laughter of Democritus and tears of Heraclitus, symbolically contrasted, warn the viewer of the limitations of knowledge achieved through the senses, since the two philosophers - with Gregorio Preti himself - are the only figures who seek out the gaze of the viewer. Their faces are thus a sort of warning to spectators, inviting us to go beyond the appearances created by empirical reality.

Fig. 4 - GREGORIO AND MATTIA PRETI, *Allegory of the Five Senses*, detail of Heraclitus and Democritus





THE SECRETS OF THE PAINTING: X-RAYING THE PRETI BROTHERS

The in-depth diagnostic tests conducted on the *Allegory of the Five Senses* made it possible to penetrate the various paint layers of the canvas, providing us with a better understanding of the artistic techniques used by Mattia and Gregorio Preti at around the beginning of the fifth decade of the 17th century. At that time, the two painters were about to leave the room that Mattia had rented in Rome in the district of 'Campus Martius near Monte Citorio' to move to Palazzo Mignanelli, near Piazza di Spagna, in 1645-1646. Here Mattia developed key relationships with some of the most important members of the Roman aristocracy (from Taddeo Barberini to Olimpia Aldobrandini and Giulio Rospigliosi, from Marcantonio V Colonna to Olimpia Maidalchini Pamphilj), whilst Gregorio attempted to make ends meet by painting dozens of paintings with the help of various assistants and apprentices, and undertaking, with his brother, a final attempt at an iconographical theme clearly derived from Caravaggio.

That the execution of the *Allegory* was a tortuous process is apparent from the numerous alterations that appear in the overpaintings of the background, some of which are even visible to the naked eye. The most striking of these is certainly the head of a man wearing a skullcap with his mouth half-open that we see above the faces of the morra player and the gypsy woman (**fig.5**). The X-rays executed on this occasion by ArsMensurae (Rome) have made it possible to determine the appearance of this figure, whose grotesque face is perfectly finished; he must have been a sort of street player with a fool's cap, included by the painter to underline the irrepressible idiocy of the human race, slave to the vices and temptations of the senses. The two Preti brothers therefore not only corrected the position of various heads and some body parts whilst work was underway - a fairly common practice in paintings executed without the help of preparatory cartoons - but removed some figures that were already finished and completely repainted entire portions of the composition.

Fig.5 - X-ray image of the man with a fool's cap

For example, the X-ray studies show that the two brothers initially included a male figure with his hand resting on his head at the centre of the table (**Fig. 6**), like the figure they had painted in the same position (**Fig. 7**) almost ten years earlier, in the *Allegory of the Five Senses* now in Turin (on display in the exhibition). By contrast, the lute player on the far left was originally a gentleman without a hat and wearing a fur waistcoat, holding tight to an object: perhaps a hat or a theatrical mask. Clearly the artists tried out various compositional solutions directly on the canvas, starting from rough sketches drawn earlier or Mattia's notes, kept in the workshop.

The absence of a preparatory drawing combined with a still limited mastery of large formats may have led the two painters to opt for a uniform dark background, easier to execute than the representation of a complex space rendered perspectively. The depth of the image is suggested exclusively by the juxtaposition of the various figures assembled around the table (at least ten of which were removed when the painting was already finished to make the composition less crowded!).

Whilst reducing the number of figures in the central and right-hand part of the painting allowed the two artists to "simplify" the *Allegory*, rotating the harp by 180 degrees served to correct a musically erroneous position and, on the left side, to give greater emphasis to the guitar player, shown standing in front of the table to separate the concert from the gambling scene. By contrast, the inspired - but careworn - violinist was painted on top of another female figure, placed next to the "singer" shown in profile (**Fig. 6**).



Fig. 6 - X-ray image of the left-hand part of the *Allegory of the Five Senses*

Fig. 7 - GREGORIO AND MATTIA PRETI, *Allegory of the Five Senses*, Turin, Pinacoteca dell'Accademia Albertina, detail



A MASTERPIECE REVEALED

Fig. 8
Allegory of the Five Senses,
cleaning test

The principle objective of work to restore the *Allegory of the Five Senses*, sponsored by the Dentons Europe law firm and executed with skill and enthusiasm by Giuseppe Mantella and Sante Guido, was to recover the painting's full legibility. In the past, the canvas had been subjected to drastic cleanings that damaged its constituent materials, removing overpaintings, "cleansing" almost all the figures shown in shadow and revealing alterations as well as sometimes incorrectly interpreting the various paint layers and adjustments made by the two artists as they worked. These interventions also led to a generalized thinning of the paint that caused it to disintegrate, thus revealing the warp and weft of the canvas. Probably in order to conceal this phenomenon, between the 18th and 19th century it was decided to burnish the whole painting with dark varnishes, thus deadening its refined colouring.

The restoration was accompanied by a series of non-invasive tests (executed with the collaboration of T. Pasciuto and with Color Profile by M. Melis) that allowed us to study the invisible parts of the painting using images taken at various wavelengths, from ultraviolet (300 µm) to infrared (1000 µm). The study of the X-rays also provided considerable new information on the state of conservation, the painting technique and the compositional evolution of the work.

The *Allegory* was painted on a balanced weave hemp-linen canvas, a very common type of support in the 17th century since it was well suited to the application of the preparatory primer. By contrast, the use of a canvas woven in one piece with a warp measuring about 180 centimetres was fairly unusual for such a large work: large canvases were often made of several pieces sewn together. This choice, together with the use of some particularly expensive pigments – such as vermilion and ultramarine – demonstrate the particular care taken in the execution of the painting, evidently connected to the requirements of the prestigious Barberini patrons.

After removing the varnishes, the altered retouchings and repaintings, repairs made with plaster and glue emerged in several places (**Fig. 8**), and were removed in a long and patient process requiring the use of a scalpel and high magnification visors. The restoration of the painting, achieved with varnishes, was limited to filling in gaps repaired with plaster and the careful overpainting of abrasions, especially on areas of flesh, darkened by a myriad of small detachments that revealed the brown preparatory layer beneath. This made it possible to ensure a better interpretation of the work and at the same time to highlight the painting's complex stratigraphy, revealing the numerous alterations brought to light by older restorations.



THE TRIUMPH OF THE SENSES

New light on Mattia and Gregorio Preti

Rome, Palazzo Barberini

22nd February - 16th June 2019

Curated by Alessandro Cosma and Yuri Primarosa

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