

# The *Job* at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

New ideas and recently identified paintings by the young Piola



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**BILBOKO ARTE  
EDERREN MUSEOA  
MUSEO DE BELLAS  
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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“A painting of Job, by Piovera (Piola)” figures in the list of the assets of the late Gio<sup>1</sup>. Stefano Perrazo auctioned in Genoa in July 1668<sup>2</sup>.

A review of the original document, still kept in the State Archive in Genoa, which is where the above quote comes from, fills in some of the gaps in our knowledge of this painting and leads us to conclude that it coincides credibly with the painting now in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum<sup>3</sup>.

It was sold in Piazza Cicala, in the heart of Genoa’s old quarter; the auction document mentions the knock-down prices and the names of the buyers. At 144 lire, Piola’s painting was highly valued, particularly when compared with the 60 lire paid for a *Saint Stephen* by Gio. Andrea De Ferrari or the 120 lire for a painting by Borzone with *Madonna and Saints*, presumably a retable. The amount paid also suggests that Piola’s *Job* was probably quite a sizeable painting.

Very little is known about either the painting’s previous or its subsequent owner. In Gio. Stefano Perrazo’s case, we know he possessed the painting twenty years after it was executed, meaning that he might well have commissioned it. Besides acquiring the Piola, Giovanni Battista Piatto also made the successful bid for Gio. Andrea De Ferrari’s *Saint Stephen*.

Although it is impossible to reconstruct the painting’s subsequent movements, it is probably —though we can’t be absolutely certain— the *Job and His Children* by Genoa painter Domenico Piola (Genoa, 1628-1709),

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1 The name Giovanni was written thus in Genoan documents of the time.

2 State Archive, Genoa, Ancient Notaries, 8307, Notary Gio. Teramo Burgenzio, doc. 268, *Callega bonorum quondam domini Gio. Stapahni Perratij*, 17th July 1668. The location of the document, partially transcribed, is to be found in Belloni 1973, p. 56. My thanks to Agnese Marengo and the staff at the State Archive in Genoa for their help and cooperation.

3 Sanguineti 2004, p. 377, was the first to point up the connection between the painting mentioned in the document and the one in Bilbao, only as a hypothesis depending on subsequent data with regard to Belloni’s partial and somewhat gap-ridden indication. Bilbao Fine Arts Museum acquired the painting (175.5 x 220 cm) from a private individual (Eduardo Flugas) on 14th July 1923. In the first catalogue of the museum’s art holdings (1923), the work is already attributed to Domenico Piola. The complete bibliography of the work is included by Ana Sánchez-Lassa in Genoa 2003, no. 16, p. 104. To this should be added Sanguineti 2004, pp. 376-377, no. 1.7, fig. VI.



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1. Domenico Piola (1628-1709)  
*Job and His Children*, c. 1650  
Oil on canvas, 175.5 x 220 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 69/196

acquired by the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum in 1923 [fig. 1], attributed to Lanfranco and then “restored” to the Genoan painter after his signature was discovered<sup>4</sup>. It is highly probable that it is the same painting, despite its theme being most unusual, if not unique, in the catalogue of the known works by this artist. It is certainly anomalous with regard to his more usual repertoire of allegories, sacred and devotional themes, plus some not very big biblical scenes like this.

Job, to whom an entire book of the Bible is devoted, is a just man who embodies the drama of human suffering and the virtue of constant devotion and obedience to God. Satan, in an attempt to show God that faith gives way to the great adversities, brings down his malign power against Job, destroying his cattle, his house, his servants, and finally his children. A messenger arrives and announces: “Your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking in their oldest brother’s house, and suddenly a great wind swept across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they died” (Job, 1, 18-19). This is the exact moment shown in Piola’s painting, in which the artist chooses to portray a variation from the biblical text, as Job, who is shown naked by the side of his aged wife in the far left of the scene, turns his sad but hopeful gaze to Heaven. The nakedness of the leading character, explicit in Piola’s version, facilitates a direct reference to what the Biblical text says in the following verses: “Then Job got up and tore his robe. He shaved his head, and then he threw himself down with his face to the ground. He said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will return there. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. May the name of the Lord be blessed!” (Job, 1, 20-21).

This is then an iconography rich in implications, one that, for the person who commissioned the work, in his wish to identify with the theme, meant consolation for the earthly misfortunes suffered, and the possibility of reaffirming the strength of his faith and his detachment from earthly goods. In this way it becomes a meditation on the snares of wealth and opulence, of the kind enjoyed by much of the Genoan aristocracy and bourgeoisie of the moment —this is 1650— dealt with in a key different from those found in other large paintings produced by Piola when young. A glance at the early numbers of his catalogue<sup>5</sup> shows a painting in horizontal, presumably large, format of the story of David and Abigail, an example of the virtue and magnanimity of a rich and powerful man; two different versions of an *Allegory of Peace and Abundance*, also associated with the theme of wealth, visually explicit in the large table with flowers, fruit, animals, ornamental tapestries and so on. In these early years, Piola was still working in tandem with his brother-in-law Stefano Camogli on the rich accessories for still-life and animal paintings, a large *Mercato*<sup>6</sup> which, this time devoid of any moralizing intention, recalls once again the theme of wellbeing in *Superba* [Pride, a popular nickname for the city of Genoa] in a happy moment in its long history.

A wellbeing threatened by personal catastrophe, as the Job painting would seem to suggest, or by historical vicissitudes, which the virtuous man resists with the strength of his faith.

The theme of death and the catastrophic destruction of a lineage, given visual form by Piola in the dramatic motif occupying virtually all of the large painting in Bilbao, remits to a very young artist—just twenty-two<sup>7</sup>—who assumes a vast repertoire of illustrious iconographic precedents to achieve the daring foreshortening of the bodies on the ground, in a vertiginous cascading collapse towards the viewer in the foreground of the painting.

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4 «D. Piola. an(non)rum XX.II» is inscribed on the ruined lintel in the painting. The artist therefore executed the painting at the age of 22. Domenico Piola was born in 1628 and not in 1627 as stated (Sanguineti 2004, p. 243). The correct date is therefore 1650 (Ibid., p. 376).

5 Ibid.

6 Elena de Laurentiis in Genoa 2006, pp. 54-55, no. 10.

7 Ref. note 4.



2. Perin del Vaga (1501-1547)  
*Fall of the Giants*, 1531-1533  
 Fresco  
 Palazzo del Principe (Palazzo Doria), Genova



3. Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, "El Grechetto" (1609-1664)  
*Cain and Abel*  
 Oil on canvas, 249 x 296 cm  
 Galleria di Palazzo Bianco, Genoa

One inevitably thinks of Perin del Vaga's famous *Fall of the Giants* fresco on the vault of the west salon of Andrea Doria's palace in Genoa, known as the Palazzo del Principe [fig. 2]. Domenico Piola's first biographer, Carlo Giuseppe Ratti, says that after his apprenticeship with the painter Gio. Domenico Cappellino, "he began to study the beautiful paintings of Perin del Vaga at the Palazzo of the Prince Doria"<sup>8</sup>.

When narrating the young Piola's early studies, Ratti describes him as an "ingenious imitator of the Works of Castiglione. He portrayed all the designs and paintings of this man of worth he was able to obtain and conscientiously. With them he felt such genuine pleasure as he painted (...)"<sup>9</sup>. If Perino del Vaga is a clear precedent for the *Job*, less evident, perhaps, but much more subtle and substantial are the numerous allusions to the works of Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione [fig. 3], known as "El Grechetto" (Genoa, 1609-Mantua, 1664), an artist who accompanied Piola, and so many other young Genoan painters, down the path to modernity and the baroque that Rubens opened up in the early years of the 17th century. Rubens's chromatic, compositional and formal drive, allied with Castiglione's naturalism and his sharp, cultured inspiration, provided the cultural *humus* for the young Piola's formation. Artists such as Gioacchino Assereto (Genoa, 1600-1650) [fig. 4] and Giovanni Battista Langetti (Genoa, 1635-Venice, 1676)

8 Ratti 1769, p. 31.

9 Ibid.



4. Gioacchino Assereto (1600-1650)  
*Cain and Abel*  
 Oil on canvas, 180 x 138 cm  
 Koelliker Collection, Milan  
 Inv. no. LK 1054

5. Giovanni Battista Langetti (1635-1676)  
*The Torment of Ixion*  
 Oil on canvas, 230 x 160.5 cm  
 Koelliker Collection, Milan  
 Inv. no. LK 0567



[fig. 5] move with much more conviction down the naturalist road, i.e. resisting, unlike him, the exquisitely seductive charm of myths and allegories gracefully narrated in a fantasy of colour. It is precisely to them we need to look, with the required shifts in the chronological order of things, to understand the web of figurative relationships surrounding the Bilbao *Job*, which was a complex, new and certainly anomalous painting for Piola himself.

“A more exciting occasion to learn and to perfect such a manner of painting was conveyed to him at that time by Valerio Castello, who, on seeing some of his works, and liking them to a high degree, chose him as companion in the Works that he had undertaken inside the Chapel of the Nuns of Santa Maria in Passione”<sup>10</sup> (the frescoes are no longer extant). This is the Valerio’s last period, (Genoa, 1624-1659) and the frescoes were left unfinished at his premature death, frescoes that Piola was continue. By that time, Domenico had been applying his own brush to vaults and walls rather than on canvas for some years. In the summer of 1651 he received an advance enabling him to buy the colours he would need to use for the frescoes of the Marini family chapel in the now destroyed Church of San Domenico. He was paid the rest of his fee in 1653. Although Piola was learning the art of the fresco painter in the 1650s, he had encountered Valerio’s agile, light, rapid mode of painting, some time before he was to produce a picture of such impact and scope as the *Job* in Bilbao, which dates back to 1650<sup>11</sup>.

In 1647, Domenico Piola executed the retable of the *Martyrdom and Glory of St. James* for the Oratory of San Giacomo della Marina in Genoa, a fresh, youthful work for which he had the direct support of Valerio Castello, who produced the preliminary sketch<sup>12</sup> [fig. 6].

10 Ibid, p. 23.

11 Ref. note 4.

12 Marzia Cataldi Gallo in Rotondi 1996, p. 85, fig. 74; Sanguineti 2004, p. 373, no. I.1; Manzitti 2004, pp. 92-93, no. 32.



6. Valerio Castello (1624-1659)  
*Martyrdom and Glory of St. James*, 1647  
Oil on canvas, 62 x 48.5 cm  
Private Collection

The retable of S. Giacomo della Marina is another essential factor in the young Piola's formation: when at the age of twenty he was given his first public commission (and one of his first works in general), he knew that the resulting work would be hung just a few metres from Castiglione's great retable *The Battle of Saint James*, finished two years previously<sup>13</sup> [fig. 7].

Castiglione's work and Valerio's style together point the young Piola insistently towards another *maestro* he needed to take note of. This was Giulio Cesare Procaccini, who had by then been active in Genoa for some time. Many of Procaccini's works were to be found in local collections from 1610 on. One of his extraordinary works recalls the great *Battle of Saint James* painted for Gio. Carlo Doria between 1617 and 1621<sup>14</sup> [fig. 8], also a direct —or indirect— visual precedent for the *Job*.

So the exquisite chromatics of Milanese artists combined with the taste for colour already picked up from the works of Rubens in Genoa by artists with the courage to tackle what was then a new, groundbreaking theme<sup>15</sup>. Rubens was the master of the new art of movement, and it is clear from the young Piola's formal and compositional experiments that he was aware of this. Beyond what appears to be a direct allusion to Rubens in the body lying in the foreground of the *Job* picture —a reference to, for example, the *Juno and Argus* today in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, Corboud Foundation [fig. 9], documented in Genoa from 1658 only, though, given the sheer number of references to be found in the works of Genoan

13 Fausta Franchini Guelfi in Rotondi 1996, pp. 63-82, no. 5.

14 Anna Orlando in Genoa 2004, pp. 232-233, no. 40.

15 Orlando 2004.



7. Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, "El Grechetto" (1609-1664)  
*The Battle of St. James*, c. 1645  
Oil on canvas, 316 x 327 cm  
Oratorio di S. Giacomo della Marina, Genoa



8. Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1574-1625)  
*The Battle of St. James*, c. 1618-1620  
Oil on canvas, 335 x 310 cm  
Private Collection



9. Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)  
*Juno and Argos*, 1611  
 Oil on canvas, 249 x 296 cm  
 Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. Corboud Foundation, Cologne  
 Detail



10. Domenico Piola (1628-1709)  
*Job and His Children*, c. 1650  
 Oil on canvas, 175.5 x 220 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Detail



11. Domenico Piola (1628-1709)  
*Venus and Love in Vulcan's Forge*  
 Oil on canvas, 160 x 140 cm  
 Private Collection



12. Domenico Piola (1628-1709)  
*The Guardian Angel*  
 Oil on canvas, 100 x 127 cm  
 Private Collection

artists, undoubtedly present before that year<sup>16</sup>— the Genoan work of Rubens *in toto* left evident traces in the young Piola [fig. 10]. This influence is particularly clear in works such as *Venus and Love in Vulcan's Forge* [fig. 11], and a hitherto unheard of *Guardian Angel* [fig. 12] studied recently when it came up for auction<sup>17</sup>.

Ongoing research into these works by Domenico very close to the 1650 *Job* point to a greater solidity of forms, to a more compact, more decided manner of expression: not yet the manner of his mature works, but definitely moving away from the livelier, lighter and more “valerioesque” brushwork to be found in

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Orlando in Aste di antiquariato Boetto, Genoa, 27th-28th November, 2006, lot 421, p. 216-217. Measuring 100 x 127 cm, the painting has an addition at the top.



14. Gregorio De Ferrari (1647-1726)  
*Tobias Buries His Father*  
Oil on canvas, 305 x 207 cm  
Oratorio della Morte e Orazione, Genoa



15. Gregorio De Ferrari (1647-1726)  
*Juno and Argos*, 1685-1695  
Oil on canvas, 137 x 139 cm  
Musée du Louvre, Paris  
Inv. no. R.F. 1981-9

his works from 1647-1649: the retable at San Giacomo de la Marina mentioned above, *The Last Supper* in the Diocesan Museum in Albenga (Savona) dated 1649, the *Saint Gregory the Elder* from the Voltaggio Collection in Alessadria, very close in time and all of them vibrant in the blurring of shapes outlined rather than actually drawn.

As Piola was producing his first public works, Gregorio De Ferrari (Porto Maurizio, 1647-Genoa, 1726) was born in Porto Maurizio, at the western end of Liguria on the French border. As well as studying as Piola's pupil, De Ferrari later became his son-in-law. His magnificent Ligurian sense of Rococo painting was brought alive under Piola's wing; comparisons of some works done decades after the *Job* are of no little interest for demonstrating the modernity and daring of the young painter in 1650. See for example *Tobias Buries His Father* in Genoa's Oratorio della Morte e Orazione [fig. 13] or *Juno and Argus* in the Louvre [fig. 14].

These iconographic traces (which Piola covered step by step, reviewing and revising their stylistic components) give an accurate indication of the cultural baggage the young Piola brought with him as he was starting out. He had clearly absorbed the lessons of the great local masters who had gone before him, and assimilated their ideas, modes and styles. During his early formative years, he looked very closely at the works on view in the city, before —this would be around the mid-point of the century— gradually honing what was to become a highly personal and very successful stylistic trademark. The reaffirmation of Domenico Piola's work in the second half of the 17th century is a major advance for Genoan culture: he was the dominant figure in the circles where the important public and private commissions were made, executing great cycles of frescoes and countless altar retables. He also headed a workshop studio, which, with son Paolo Gerolamo and son-in-law Gregorio De Ferrari, would make its glorious mark on the century of the Rococo. Nevertheless, the secret of such success lies in Domenico's early years, in the multiple cultural references in which works like the Bilbao *Job* are imbued. If they are not yet "typical" of the style employed by the better known Piola, it is precisely because they are the result of a complex, and quite daring, period of youthful experimentation.

And at the age of twenty-two, which, as the painter quite emphatically tells us, he was when he produced the painting of *Job*, Domenico Piola seems suddenly to come to his maturity as an artist. Is that what he was trying to say when, not without a touch of legitimate pride, he drew explicit attention to his age in a painting that must have been a major commitment for him, rather than simply dating it?

It's a hypothesis.

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