



'MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN NATURE ITSELF': THE EARLY COMMERCIAL AND CRITICAL FORTUNES OF NEAPOLITAN BAROQUE STILL-LIFE PAINTING

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Abstract

*This article considers the early reception of Neapolitan baroque still-life painting by seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century viewers. Although originating as a relatively cheap and critically under-valued picture type, Neapolitan still life nonetheless came to enjoy widespread popularity in baroque Naples. An analysis of primary and early secondary sources (ranging from payment documents, to art inventories, to early writings on art) reveals a surprisingly high value attached to Neapolitan still life from a relatively early date. This contrasts markedly with the situation in Rome where the local specialists were significantly under-priced relative to their Neapolitan counterparts. Neapolitan still life was highly valued in both a critical as well as an economic sense. Early writing on Neapolitan still life is also remarkably free of the commonplace deprecation of still-life imagery in relation to the supposedly more exalted category of history painting that is found so commonly expressed in other European art-theoretical writings. The positive Neapolitan attitude culminates in Bernardo de' Dominici's *Vite de' pittori napoletani* (1742–45). While the early Roman biographers tended to downplay the achievements of the Roman still-life specialists or else ignore them altogether, de' Dominici set the seal on the Neapolitan predilection for still life by writing the first systematic account of a regional school of Italian still-life painting.*

Keywords: Naples, baroque art, still-life painting, art-market studies, Luca Forte, Giacomo Recco, Giuseppe Recco

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Introduction

Neapolitan still life constitutes one of the signal achievements of Italian baroque painting. The standard text on Italian still life by Luigi Salerno, for example, justly describes it as: 'the most important and richest of all such schools in Italy' (1984, p. 105). Yet what has long struck the present writer about the early documentation of Neapolitan still life is what it suggests, not so much about the aesthetic distinction of Neapolitan still life per se, as rather about the unique nature of the broader reception of the genre among its early viewers. In particular, de' Dominici and other early sources of information that can be gathered together on the topic seem to assume a high critical status for Neapolitan still life, as both attained within its homeland as well as abroad. As a result, its critical status – as well as its economic value, as shall be shown – was evidently significantly higher than that commonly held in other European centres. Elsewhere, still life was generally regarded as the least conceptually demanding form of painting, and was thus considered the lowest of the genres, to be placed at the bottom rung of a standard hierarchy that stretched upwards to the exalted potential of history painting. The evidence from Naples, on the other hand, suggests a very different understanding. Apparently, the critical fortunes of still life were transformed by the end of the seventeenth century, in Naples at least, from a base metal to gold. The account that follows will trace this development with particular attention to the role of Naples in this alchemical alteration.

Luca Forte and the humble origins of Neapolitan still-life painting

Neapolitan still life did not begin its development as a particularly highly valued genre. Indeed, the opposite seems suggested by the early evidence. This holds true, for example, for the early work of Luca Forte, who is universally recognised as the father of Neapolitan still life (Causa, 1962; Gregori, 1996; De Vito, 2006). His early works coincide with the first Neapolitan

appearance of the genre as an independent artistic category during the opening decades of the century. Forte's paintings tend to be reasonably small – around 50 to 75 centimetres in width (Fig. 7.1). Only rarely do they exceed a metre. This is an important indication in itself since it suggests that, during its initial development at least, still-life painting offered its practitioners only limited opportunities for attracting the kind of deluxe, one-off commissions that were the preserve of large and prestigious history paintings and other specially ordered compositions.

This modesty of scale went hand in hand with a relative modesty of pricing. Still-life painting was one of the cheapest types of painting, for example, in a detailed and carefully compiled inventory drawn up in 1659 by the painter Domenico Gargiulo on behalf of his long-standing patron, Ettore Capecelatro, Marchese di Torella (Labrot, 1992, Inv. 16, pp. 113–15, also Inv. 16, pp. 101–4). In this inventory, a series of unattributed still lifes are appraised variously at six ducats apiece (for two paintings of vases of flowers), 5.5 ducats each (for 8 compositions of vases of flowers for a total of 44 ducats) and 8 ducats each for three paintings of fruit. This contrasts with the much higher valuations assigned to the most prestigious items in the collection: 280 ducats to a painting by Stanzone of *Jacob and Rachel* measuring around 2.63 x 2.11 centimetres, for example, or 360 ducats to an equally imposing painting of *Fortune* by Van Dyck, whose works were rare and highly prized in Neapolitan collections. These last prices also correspond with the highest prices known to have been paid by Neapolitan patrons for specially commissioned gallery paintings produced by the leading figure painters of the day (Marshall, 2010, pp. 126–38).

The relative cheapness of early Neapolitan still life is further indicated in a partnership document of 1630 between Giacomo Recco and the otherwise unknown painter Antonio Cimino (Delfino, 1984, doc. 27, pp. 159–60). A contemporary of Luca Forte, Giacomo Recco, represents another of the founding figures of early Neapolitan still life (Causa, 1961). He is particularly known for his compositions of flowers set in elaborately decorated vases that offer a Caravaggesque update on compositional models stretching back to precedents by the circles of Giovanni da Udine and Polidoro da Caravaggio from the 1520s onwards (Salerno, 1984, pp. 32–3, 263; Fig. 7.2). In 1630, Recco, aged twenty-seven, formed a partnership with Cimino for a period of one and a half years. The contract mentions an annual rent of 30 ducats on a workshop in via Santo Spirito and specifies in some detail the partners' joint obligations for the running of the business. Cimino provided the capital for the two



Figure 7.1: Luca Forte, *Still Life with Apples and Pears*, c.1625–35. Oil on canvas, 26 x 35cm, Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples, on deposit from the Museo Duca di Martina, Naples. (Image credit: Pedicini Images)

artists' joint venture. Besides paying the rent and for materials, he provided 50 ducats to acquire paintings (or 100 ducats if he were to be able to raise the money, in which case Recco agreed to contribute 50 ducats). Recco was to use the money

to purchase from outside the workshop a range of paintings of various types and of varying quality, as will appear pleasing to Giacomo, for the common good and benefit of the partnership, and always having acquired the paintings from outside the workshop and after finishing the transaction, Giacomo must carry them back to the workshop and there they must sell and dispose of them for whatever price they can attain and for the greatest benefit and usefulness [to the partnership].

(Delfino, 1984, doc.27, pp.159–60, my translation)¹

Figure 7.2: Giacomo Recco, *Vase of Flowers with the Arms of Cardinal Poli*, c.1623–53. Oil on canvas, 76 x 60cm, Pietro Lorenzelli collection, Bergamo. (Image credit: Pedicini Images)



The emphasis elsewhere in the contract on paintings of flowers and fruit suggests that the partners hoped in this instance to capitalise on Recco's specialist knowledge by developing a niche-market in the emerging genre of still-life painting. Recco's capital was his expertise since he was given the money by Cimino to buy other still-life paintings that were then no doubt hung alongside Recco's own and displayed for prospective clients to view in their workshop. In terms of monetary value, Recco and Cimino evidently considered their start up capital of either 50 or a maximum of 150 ducats sufficient to acquire a solid stock of still lifes to sell to the public. It was just as well they were specialising in still life since, for the same sum, they would only have been able to acquire one or two large and complex history paintings by the leading figure painters of the day.

Luca Forte and the commissioned still life

Not all early Neapolitan still life was this modest in terms of its scale and pricing. A small but significant number of still lifes included large-scale figures by local specialists. The oeuvres of Forte and Recco, for example, include some compositions with figures attributed to Massimo Stanzione and Artemisia Gentileschi (Salerno, 1984, no. 29.8, p. 119; Spinosa, 2009-10, cat. 1.54, p. 138; Bissell, 1999, cat. 44, pp. 276-7). Some of these collaborative paintings can also be traced back to early Neapolitan collections. The 1654 inventory of the collection of Ferrante Spinelli, Principe di Tarsia, for example, refers to: 'A painting measuring around six hands [c. 158cm] with a landscape and figures who sing and play musical instruments, with fruit, by Aniello Falcone and Luca Forte' (Labrot, 1992, Inv. 15, item 148, p. 97).² Spinelli's painting has been associated with a canvas now at the Prado (Fig. 7.3), notwithstanding an alternative suggestion



Figure 7.3: Aniello Falcone and Luca Forte, *Concert*, c. 1640s. Oil on canvas, 109 x 127cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. (Image credit: © Museo Nacional del Prado)



Figure 7.4: Luca Forte, *Still Life with Fruit*, c.1640–47. Oil on canvas, 78.9 x 104.7cm, signed with monogram, Collection of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum of Florida, Florida State University. (Image credit: The Collection of The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, the State Art Museum of Florida, Florida State University)

that the Prado painting might be identified, instead, with a composition originally in the possession of the Neapolitan viceroy, the Duke of Medina de las Torres (Spinosa, 2009-10, p.169). Either way, the reference indicates the enthusiastic take-up among the leading Neapolitan collectors of this novel form of collaborative output. Although quite rare at this stage, these paintings nonetheless constitute the forerunners of a combined type of still life with large-scale figures that would grow in stature and prominence to encompass the monumental still-life paintings produced by Luca Giordano in collaboration with the still life specialists of the 1680s, as presently to be discussed.

Another indication of the early potential of Neapolitan still life to attain a certain prominence and prestige within early Neapolitan collections are the works produced on a larger and more imposing scale than was otherwise the norm. Luca Forte appears to have periodically produced works of this kind, for example, even when not drawing on large-scale figure painters to help fill out his compositions. A good example is the *Still Life with Fruit* now at the John and

Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida (Fig. 7.4). This painting is larger than normal and contains an unusually ambitious composition that John T. Spike has described as 'a tour de force' of Forte's later, more complex compositional approach (1983, cat. 17, pp.60–1). The original owner of this painting can also be securely identified since the painting contains an inscription noting its owner as 'Don Joseph Carrafas'. It can thus be unequivocally associated with one of the 'Two paintings with gilt frames measuring four by three and a half hands [c.105 x 93cm] with an inscription by Luca Forte'³ that is listed in the collection of the early seventeenth-century Neapolitan aristocratic collector Don Giuseppe Carafa di Maddaloni in June 1648 (Labrot, 1992, Inv.9, item 8, p.76).

How expensive were these larger and more ambitious still lifes? In the case of Luca Forte, an unusually detailed correspondence relating to the important Sicilian patron and collector, Don Antonio Ruffo of Messina, provides useful information along these lines. Ruffo commissioned canvases from many of the leading painters, including Pietro da Cortona in

Rome, Guercino in Bologna, Preti in Malta, and Ribera, Stanzone and Artemisia Gentileschi in Naples. He also commissioned a still life from Forte in September 1649 (Ruffo, 1916, pp.58–61). Forte's responses to Ruffo's enquiries regarding the painting's cost demonstrate his high opinion of the value of his work. His first requirement was that Ruffo send him a 50 ducat down-payment before he would commence work on the composition. This price is significant in itself since it compares directly with the customarily high *caparre*, or initial installment down payments, paid to Ribera, Stanzone and the other leading Neapolitan history painters.⁴ Two weeks after receiving this money, Forte fended off Ruffo's inquiry about the final price of the painting by noting that the finished work would cost around 200 ducats, more or less depending on the work:

Padre Tomaso Maria Ruffo [Ruffo's nephew who worked as an agent on Ruffo's behalf] has asked me to provide you with the price [but] in respect [of that] it is not possible to say at this point because I don't yet know how much work will go into finishing the painting, but so as to serve you and the given Padre since you asked me a similar question in the earlier letter, I can say that regarding the price it will be 200 ducats, more or less according to the work that there is in it.

(Ruffo, 1916, pp.59–61)⁵

The paucity of documentary evidence relating to Forte – or indeed to any Neapolitan still-life specialists of the 1630s–50s – renders it difficult to confirm how regularly Forte or his other first-wave colleagues might have attracted prestigious and expensive commissions of this kind. It seems, though, that Forte at least may well have been accustomed to receiving high fees for his largest and most ambitious specially commissioned gallery paintings. On 27 March 1663, the painter Mattia Preti wrote to Don Antonio Ruffo noting that he had seen a very large still life by Forte – measuring around 211 x 290cm, and so evidently one of the most ambitious works ever produced by this artist. The painting was circulating for sale on the secondary market in Malta. Its asking price was 400 ducats – an extremely costly amount for a gallery painting – so much so, in fact, that Don Antonio Ruffo evidently chose not to pursue the lead any further (Ruffo, 1916, p.248).

The cost of early Neapolitan still life in relation to Roman prices

200 and 400 ducats was a lot to pay for gallery paintings by any standard of the period. This is made

clearer by comparing these prices to those achieved by the leading still-life specialists active in the neighbouring city of Rome.⁶ During the 1650s, for example, the Chigi paid the early Roman still-life specialist Michelangelo Pace (also known as Michelangelo di Campidoglio) a mere 20 scudi on four separate occasions for still-life paintings that were evidently quite large and complex – one measured 9 x 6 palmi (c.201 x 134cm) (Golzio, 1939, docs.2043 and 3396, pp.279, 281; and see further docs. 2080 and 3717, pp.280, 283). Likewise Mario dei Fiori – by far the most popular and successful Roman still-life painter of the day – had four of his admittedly rather smaller still-life compositions (e.g. a *Small painting of flowers* measuring c.56 x 45cm) valued at between 25 and 30 scudi each in a 1671 inventory of the collection of Cardinal Antonio Barberini (Aronberg Lavin, 1975, Inv.IV, pp.310–11). To put these valuations into perspective, the Cardinal owned some of the most prestigious and expensive paintings then in Rome. His version of Lanfranco's *Venus Playing the Harp* (*Allegory of Music*) now at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, was valued at 500 scudi, while Correggio's *Taking of Christ* was valued yet higher at 1000 scudi, one of the highest valuations on record for a painting of this kind (Aronberg Lavin, 1975, Inv.IV, items 366, 379 and 398, pp.310–11; for the *Taking of Christ*, see item 362, p.310; for Lanfranco's *Allegory of Music*, see item 248, p.303).

Other prices recorded for early Roman still-life painting confirm the essential accuracy of Richard Spear's observation that Roman still life paintings were 'remarkably cheap' in comparison to Roman history paintings (Spear and Sohm, 2010, p.107). In 1661, for example, the Chigi once again paid Paolo Porpora 80 scudi for two presumably pendant canvases of animals measuring c.112 x 156cm – including one of sea turtles and another of crocodiles and a hare (Golzio, 1939, p.283; for Porpora's *Still Life with Hares and Crocodile* [formerly Chigi collection], see Zeri, 1989, II, fig.869, p.733). Porpora's work compares particularly closely to Forte and the Neapolitan context, in fact, since he was a recent Neapolitan émigré who had spent the first twenty years of his career in Naples, commencing with an apprenticeship in the early 1630s training under the previously mentioned early specialist Giacomo Recco (Prota Giurleo, 1953, pp.12–13; Damian, 2007, pp.46–7). Finally, in 1638, Giovanni Stanchi received 50 scudi for a painting of a garland of flowers containing an image of the arms of the Barberini family measuring 5 x 4 Roman palmi (c.112 x 89cm) (Lavin, 1975, doc.326a, p.41). In the following year, he was paid 32 scudi for an unusually large still life measuring c.145 x 190cm with some figures of putti added by Camassei (and for which the figure painter was paid, as was usual,

the higher amount of 47 scudi) (Bocchi and Bocchi, 2005, p.324). Stanchi's 1638 garland painting, with its interwoven reference to the arms of its owners, was clearly specially commissioned and thus would have represented the top end of the deluxe products created by this artist for a prestigious private patron. And yet it seems that the highest price Stanchi could ask at this stage in Rome was a quarter of the asking price of Forte's comparable deluxe commissions in Naples.

Giuseppe Recco and the increasing value of later seventeenth-century Neapolitan still life

The growing prestige and costliness of early Neapolitan still life was further consolidated by the ensuing generation of specialists active from the 1650s onwards. In particular, Giuseppe Recco and his family workshop attained a central prominence to the genre and attracted a particularly high degree of international interest and financial benefit for their works. Recco dominated later seventeenth-century Neapolitan still

life not only by virtue of his own prolific and multiform production, but also by dint of his position as the most prominent member of an intergenerational family workshop. Rather like the Della Robbia family in the field of Italian renaissance terracotta production, the Reccos remained leading figures in the development of still life from at least the time of Giuseppe's father and uncle – Giacomo and Giovan Battista Recco – active from the 1630s (De Vito, 2010–11, pp.30–46; De Vito, 2008; Damian, 2007, pp.34–5; Causa, 1961, pp.344–53;). The Recco name remained synonymous with the genre thereafter not only via the model of Giuseppe Recco's own work from the 1650s–90s but further down the family line to Giuseppe's children, Nicola Maria and Elena Recco, who helped extend the family's reputation well into the eighteenth century.

Giuseppe Recco's output was not weighted entirely towards the deluxe end of large-scale specially commissioned work. Indeed, its variety and diversity suggests that one of the key factors contributing to his success rested on his ability to create a range of price points for his work. In particular, his smaller



Figure 7.5: Giuseppe Recco and Luca Giordano, *Marine Still Life with Fishermen*, 1668–9. Signed and dated 'G.° Recco 1668'. Oil on canvas, 180 x 230cm, Pagano Collection, Naples. (Image credit: Pedicini Images)

paintings could be quite reasonable in cost. In 1673, for example, he was paid 30 ducats for two small paintings 'each containing a jar of flowers' (Nappi, 1992, p.93).⁷ The description suggests that these works would have represented an updated version of the relatively simple compositions depicting a single vase with flowers that was a particular specialisation of Giuseppe's father, Giacomo Recco, during the 1630s–50s (see Fig. 7.2). Two years later, Giuseppe was paid 50 ducats for two paintings of fish (p.93). That these paintings were also relatively small and not especially demanding compositionally is suggested both by the relatively modest price, and also by the fact that Recco was able to complete the order in only three and a half weeks.

Increasingly and particularly from the late 1660s, though, Giuseppe Recco became renowned for progressively larger and more spectacular compositions that were also very highly valued in economic terms. In 1669, the Marchese di Noja authorised a payment of 62 ducats towards a total amount of 100 ducats received up until that point for a painting measuring 7 x 9 palmi (c.185 x 237cm). This was to be for a painting 'depicting various kinds of fish and with the figure of a fisherman among other things by Luca Giordano' (D'Addosio, 1912–13, p.493).⁸ This can be securely identified with a painting now in a private collection that is signed and dated 1668, and in which the figure of the fisherman is clearly attributable to Giordano on stylistic grounds (Fig. 7.5).⁹ Spike, who first published the painting, surmised that the discrepancy between the date of 1668 and the document reference of 1669 was probably the result of Giordano requiring extra time to complete his portion of the commission (1983, p.96, n.2, and cat.33, pp.96–7 for the painting more generally). He also noted that the document attests to the unusually high status of still-life painting in Naples since Recco was evidently awarded the commission in his own right and would thus have been expected to sub-contract Giordano from out of the 100 ducat fee for his work (p.96).

Although Spike's point about the high critical status of still life during this period is valid, it is not certain that Recco would have been expected to pay Giordano from his 100 ducat fee (thus effectively halving his earnings, if assuming an amount of 50 ducats for one of Giordano's figures). This seems unlikely for two reasons. First, it would make this painting under-valued in relation to other documented prices here discussed. Second, it goes against the mode of payment recorded for a directly comparable commission undertaken by the Chigi in Rome that is probably an important precedent for this and other monumental still-life paintings with large-scale figures. In 1659, the Chigi

commissioned an important series of decorations for their villa at Ariccia (Rudolph, 1979, pp.12–20; Salerno, 1984, p.174; Bocchi and Bocchi, 2005, pp.100–6). This included a series of four very large paintings of the four seasons (measuring 195 x 265cm). The figures and background in these works were produced by Roman figure painters while the still-life elements of all four paintings were added by the previously mentioned still-life specialist Mario dei Fiori. The documentation for the commission demonstrates that the figure painters were paid separately for their contributions. Carlo Maratta, Giacinto Brandi and Bernardino Mei were each paid 70 scudi for the figures and backgrounds in *Summer*, *Autumn* and *Winter* respectively, whereas the slightly more junior and less well-known painter Filippo Lauri was paid 60 scudi for his work on *Spring*. Mario dei Fiori was paid separately a flat fee of 100 scudi for his work on all four paintings plus another of the same dimensions: making an average of 20 scudi per painting (Golzio, 1939, docs.2076–7, p.280). Thus, this is further evidence of a higher financial valuation in Naples. In Rome, the leading still-life painter, Mario dei Fiori, was paid 20 scudi for his contribution to a composition that is directly comparable with a Neapolitan commission for which Giuseppe Recco was paid five times more in Neapolitan ducats.

Recco and Giordano's 1668–9 co-painted still life measures 180 x 230cm, equivalent to around 7 x 9 Neapolitan palmi, thus making it a particularly large and imposing canvas on a par with other major gallery paintings of the period. In 1677, by contrast, Recco received an unusually large down-payment of 100 ducats which, the bank-transfer document notes, was to be paid out as an on account fee for two paintings 'of fish'. These two paintings were to measure the even more grandiose dimensions of 12 palmi in width – or around 316cm (Nappi, 1992, p.93).¹⁰ Recco had already received 100 ducats in hand for this commission, so the finished canvases must have cost at least 300 or, more likely, 400 ducats for the two works combined. The patron who commissioned these works was Carlo della Torre, an artist-cum-dealer who was heavily involved in local and international trade in Giordano's and Recco's work (Marshall, 2003; Marshall, 2016, pp.135–8).

If Della Torre was content to pay Recco 200 ducats out of his own pocket for each of these two paintings, then, as a long-standing dealer with a major stake in selling the work of Giordano and his colleagues, he must have been confident that he could turn a profit when it came to selling these canvases on to one or other of the prestigious Neapolitan and international collectors with whom he was in contact. This is confirmed by an appraisal of 1685 of a valuation of

285 ducats per painting made in relation to another group of ten paintings by Giordano and his colleagues – including six very large paintings with still-life elements added by Recco and other local specialists. This group appears to have incorporated a large proportion of Della Torre's earlier stock that the dealer had been forced to deliver back to two of his associates as part of a long-standing debt of 2400 ducats, thus further underscoring the importance of these paintings as financially valuable assets to be bought, sold and used as collateral in complex business deals (Marshall, 2016, p. 138).

A large proportion of these documented still lifes from 1684 to 1685 were included in a legendary exhibition of paintings held in Naples on 25 May 1684 (Ferrari and Scavizzi, 1992, vol. I, pp. 119–22; Lattuada in Zampino, 1997, pp. 150–69; De Vito, 2012–13; Marshall, 2016, pp. 244–6). This formed part of a temporary exhibition of contemporary paintings by Neapolitan artists to accompany the celebrations of the Festa dei Quattro Altari of 1684. De' Dominici emphasises

the exhibition's importance as a turning point in the evolution of the genre, noting that it contained no fewer than fourteen extremely large paintings (said to measure 10 to 14 to 18 palmi – or 263 to 367 to 474 cm in width). The still-life elements were contributed by Recco and the other local specialists – Francesco della Quosta, Giovanni Battista Ruoppolo and Abraham Brueghel (the last artist having recently moved from Rome). The impresario in charge of orchestrating this massive project was none other than Luca Giordano (de' Dominici, 1742–5, III, pp. 296–8). Giordano and his workshop contributed monumental figures to compositions ranging from imposing images of bucolic pastoral scenes, to bounteous floral and fruit arrangements, to massive and imposing scenes of marine still life. The exhibition was an immediate sensation and overnight success thanks to its physical scale and to the startling innovation of an extended suite of monumental canvases containing large-scale figures set amidst extensive still-life landscape backgrounds – a combination of history painting and



Figure 7.6: Luca Giordano and Giuseppe Recco, *The Riches of the Sea with Neptune, Tritons and Two Nereids*, c. 1683–4. Oil on canvas, 234.5 x 296cm, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Mary Overton Gift Fund 1997. (Image credit: Art Gallery of South Australia, Mary Overton Gift Fund 1997)

still life that had never before been seen in Naples on such a scale (Marshall, 2016, pp.245–6). Its fame was such that it prompted a panegyric poem by the Neapolitan dramatist and poet Andrea Perrucci that stressed the paintings' power to elicit: 'Applause, praise, honour, acclaim and amazement' on the part of contemporary viewers.¹¹

One of the most striking pieces from the series is Recco and Giordano's *Riches of the Sea with Neptune, Tritons and Two Nereids* (Fig. 7.6). This painting has been identified with an inventoried canvas hanging in the Spanish Royal collection in 1700 (Fernández Bayton, 1975–81, II, p.295). It was thus probably a diplomatic gift sent to Madrid by the Marques del Carpio, Neapolitan viceroy from 1683 to 87. Although not necessarily painted with the Spanish royal court in mind, therefore, it is not difficult to appreciate how the canvas might have functioned as a powerfully effective advertisement for the wonders of Naples when placed in this setting. It offers the viewer an almost encyclopaedic distillation of the spectacular bounteousness of the marine produce of the Habsburgs' southern Italian territories. We are presented with a prodigious pile of seafood combining in dramatic fashion the relatively common with the rare and exotic. Scores of bream, sea bass and mullet vie for the viewer's attention alongside progressively more prized local delicacies ranging from red mullet, scorpion fish and conger eels, no fewer than four lobsters, a pair of loggerhead sea turtles (at that stage prized for their eggs as much as for their meat), and, jutting into the composition from the bottom edge, an entire sword fish, still bleeding from the harpoon blow inflicted on it by one of the feluccas plying the Straits of Messina. To the left is an equally extravagant mound of shellfish, including dozens of oysters, sea urchins, scallops, razor shells and yet more exotic varieties, capped off with decorative swags of coral. It is, in short, a prodigious haul that exceeds even the most fantastic catch of the day, and that has been heaped enticingly for the visual delectation of the Spanish King.

The painting evidently functioned highly successfully as a calling card advertising not only the bounty of Naples but also the prodigious talent of the artist responsible for serving up such a dazzling array of still life. Within a decade of its arrival in Madrid, in 1694, the Spanish King went so far as to send out an invitation to Recco to serve as painter to the King. The request represented a signal honour to this artist and a landmark moment in the international recognition of still life more generally. The only other Neapolitan called to Spain in this manner was Luca Giordano, an internationally renowned history painter, whose works were in high demand for decades throughout

the Italian peninsula and beyond. Recco's departure for Madrid thus sets the seal on the success of his career as the first Neapolitan still-life painter to possess a truly international crossover appeal. But this signal distinction nonetheless also carried within itself the seeds of disaster, as it transpired. Then aged sixty and evidently no longer physically robust, Recco caught a fever en route to Madrid and died soon after making landfall at the port of Alicante – a sad end to an otherwise flourishing career (de' Dominici, 1742–5, III, pp.296–7).

A decade prior to the untimely cessation of his career, however, back in Naples in the 1680s, Recco further demonstrated his ability to conjure the bounties of Naples in a manner that was also highly appealing to the nascent international tourist market. Recco was particularly favoured, in this respect, by the concerted patronage of one of the earliest international dilettante tourists to the region. John Cecil, the fifth Earl of Exeter (1648–1700), commissioned a number of paintings from Recco during his visit to Naples in early 1684, the very moment when the finishing touches were being made to the exhibition of still-life paintings to be displayed in May that year.

The Earl maintained a keen interest in Recco's still lives. In Naples, he commissioned two extremely large canvases (measuring two and a half metres in height) of floral still lives set in elaborate vases that are still to be seen at Burghley House (Fig. 7.7) (Pagano di Divitiis, 1982, pp.384–5, nn.21 and 27). Recco's strikingly grandiloquent flowerpiece is clearly based on the paintings of flowers in vases produced by his father Giacomo Recco some fifty years earlier (see Fig. 7.2). Yet it clearly attempts to go beyond its earlier source in terms of its greater degree of depth, compositional complexity and scale, produced by the addition of two large-scale figures who struggle to hold the dazzling array of flowers that spill out from the vase. The documentation for the work indicates that Recco's attempt to go beyond his father's earlier achievement in this respect was enacted at both an economic as well as an artistic level. In this respect, it is significant that the Earl paid Recco the princely sum of 200 ducats each for the two paintings. The Earl also went on to commission two more large paintings of fish and four smaller compositions – two of fish and two of game, although these are unfortunately no longer extant at Burghley House (Marshall, 2016, pp.246–7). Had he been active a century later – in the Naples of William Hamilton, for example, and the growing importance of British Grand Tourists to the region – one could well imagine Recco's still lives becoming as acclaimed among English collectors in their way as Canaletto's visually



INSERT.Figure 7.7: Giuseppe Recco, *Flower piece*, 1683–4. Oil on canvas, 265.5 x 201 cm, Burghley House, Stamford, Lincolnshire. (Image credit: The Burghley House Collection)

dazzling views of Venice. Instead, his works at the exotic locales of Burghley House, the court of Madrid and elsewhere stand as effective forerunners to the splendidly evocative distillations of the natural bounties of Naples and its bay as subsequently popularised for the foreign tourist market by Joseph Vernet, Pierre Jacques Volaire and others (Causa, 1981, pp.182–212).

De' Dominici and the critical status of Neapolitan still life

The prominence attained by Neapolitan still life by the time of Recco's lavish and dramatic canvases is such that de' Dominici devotes a nine-page section of his early eighteenth-century *Vite de' Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti Napoletani* to 'various talented painters

of flowers, fruit, fish, hunting scenes etc.’¹² (1742–5, III, pp.293–301, quotation p.301). This account is noteworthy as the first attempt to present a systematic outline of a regional school of Italian still-life painting. By contrast, the Roman critical literature is lacking in a comparable endeavour until the modern period. To the contrary, in fact, the early Roman biographers tended to omit all reference to many of the early Roman specialists (such as the Verrocchio and Stanchi families among others, who are not discussed in any of the early sources). In the case of better known artists, like Michelangelo Cerquozzi, on the other hand, the early biographers tended to discuss them in terms of their work in fields other than still life, since the genre was evidently considered not to be of sufficient interest to justify an extended discussion in its own right. Thus both Giovanni Battista Passeri (1722) and Filippo Baldinucci (1681–1728) make only passing reference to Cerquozzi’s specialisation as a painter of fruit, while choosing to focus instead on his much more highly-regarded status as the so-called ‘Michelangelo delle Battaglie’, or the Michelangelo of Battle Scenes (Laura Laureati in Bocchi and Bocchi, 2005, pp.48–9). Pascoli (1730) marginally improved on this by including brief biographies of several still life specialists from the later seventeenth century (Ludovica Trezzani in Bocchi and Bocchi, 2005, p.399), but this was still far short of a systematic account of the development of Roman still-life painting. De’ Dominici, by contrast, includes biographies of most of the major Neapolitan practitioners, including Luca Forte, Paolo Porpora, Giuseppe Recco and Giovan Battista Ruoppolo. He also discusses foreign specialists resident in Naples (such as Abraham Brueghel), as well as brief sections on the later followers of Giuseppe Recco and his contemporaries.

One of the key elements running throughout de’ Dominici’s *Vite* is an emphasis on its subjects’ wider intellectual attainments and a recognition of their worth from prestigious individuals and institutions. This underscores de’ Dominici’s claims to the inherent nobility and high critical value of Neapolitan painting more generally. In the context of still life, de’ Dominici thus emphasises that Paolo Porpora was a fully accredited member of the Accademia di San Luca in Rome, and that Onofrio Loth was both an able civil administrator and fully accredited Doctor of Law, as well as one of the leading still-life specialists of the end of the century (de’ Dominici, 1742–5, III, p.300). As the most successful still-life practitioners of the period, de’ Dominici is particularly careful to provide Recco and his family with a detailed list of honours received. This includes a knighthood supposedly granted to Giuseppe

by the Spanish king (de’ Dominici, 2008, III/I, p.548, n.19, for a discussion), ‘as many honours as any qualified personage could desire,’¹³ that was awarded to Elena Recco by the Spanish royal court, and an ‘honourable provision in Naples for their household when they returned,’¹⁴ that was granted to Recco’s children upon their return to Naples from Madrid (de’ Dominici, 1742–5, III, pp.296–7).

De’ Dominici was also evidently concerned to highlight the power of still-life painting via an emphasis on its ability to provoke powerful reactions from its contemporary viewers. A particularly striking instance of this occurs in his life of Giuseppe Recco. He concludes a passage noting the presence of Recco’s paintings in the city’s most prestigious collections – including those of the previously mentioned Principe di Tarsia and the Duca dei Maddaloni – with the following words: ‘So there is evident from Recco[’s hand] so many paintings of sweet things that have been painted with such life-likeness and truthfulness that they would bring about the miscarriage of a pregnant woman, as occurred once with one of his paintings of fish’ (de’ Dominici, 1742–5, III, p.297).¹⁵

Leaving aside the obvious gender bias that the passage contains,¹⁶ de’ Dominici’s reference to the perils of viewing still life is nonetheless highly revealing. De’ Dominici draws on a deliberately hyperbolic claim to foreground the sheer sensorial power of Recco’s still lives. In so doing, he creates a vivid metaphor of Recco’s early viewers being duped into mistaking the objects depicted in his paintings for actual food or at least, duped at the primal level of their own uncontrollable appetites.

This reference, in fact, draws on a long-standing theoretical tradition stressing the verisimilitude of the most celebrated examples of still-life imagery that stretches back to Pliny the Elder’s account of the birds that flew down to peck at a bunch of grapes painted on a wall by the legendary artist Xeuxis (Mansfield, 2007, pp.26–9). More specifically still, de’ Dominici should also be recognised as developing an earlier account of the dramatic power of a famous history painter – namely Ribera and his spectacular depictions of figures undergoing torment. In his *Teutsche Academie* of 1675, von Sandrart described a sensational painting of *Tityus* shipped by Ribera to Amsterdam for the rich Flemish merchant and collector Lucas van Uffel (Sandrart, 1675, p.278; for discussion, see Marshall, 2016, pp.223–5). *Tityus* depicts the ancient subject of the eponymous Titan who was punished eternally by the gods by being chained to a rock so that his liver can be eaten again and again by a vulture (Fig. 7.8). Ribera’s treatment of the subject constitutes a tour de force of his violent



Figure 7.8: Jusepe de Ribera, *Tityus*, signed and dated 1632. Oil on canvas, 229 x 301 cm, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. (Image credit: © Museo Nacional del Prado)

figure paintings. Wishing to stress the painting's power along these lines, von Sandrart accordingly notes that it was so horrendous that it frightened van Uffel's wife into miscarrying and giving birth to a deformed child.

Bizarre though this analogy might appear today, it nonetheless would have struck de' Dominici's early readers as both highly suggestive and serious in intent. It would have highlighted de' Dominici's wish to present still life as possessing an affective power that was every bit the equal of the greatest Neapolitan manifestations of history painting. This attitude, of course, stands at complete odds to the deprecation of still life painting that is commonly encountered in other contexts and that appears elsewhere as a standard feature of European baroque art theory. In other accounts, still life is habitually assigned the lowest rung on the hierarchy of the genres by virtue of its supposedly more descriptive and naturalistic emphasis (Jansen, 1999, p.51). It was considered less intellectual – and thus less financially valuable as we have also seen in the case of Roman still life – than all the other modes of painting. The idealist theory of art accordingly positioned

history painting at the furthest remove from still life. In his highly influential *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture pendant l'année 1667*, Félibien accordingly praises those artists who

occupy themselves with things which are more difficult and more noble, they escape from that which is more base and common, and ennoble themselves with a more illustrious labour. Thus someone who paints landscapes perfectly is superior to another who only makes fruits, flowers or shells. Someone who paints living animals is more to be esteemed than those who only represents things which are dead and motionless; and as the figure of man is the most perfect of God's works on earth, so it is also certain that whoever makes himself the imitator of God by painting human figures, is much more excellent than all the others.

(Félibien, 1725, pp.310–11).¹⁷

This bias is equally evident in Dutch and Flemish art criticism, the birthplace and home of still life (Jansen,

1999; Taylor, 1995). Netherlandish theorists, who might otherwise have been expected to express sympathy for still life, were nonetheless inherently critical of its supposed paucity of intellect and creativity. Thus for van Hoogstraeten, writing in 1678, 'however handsomely a flower piece, fruit piece or other still life, as we call it, is painted, it can never be placed higher than in the first rank of art... The paintings which belong to the third and highest grade are those which show the noblest emotions and desires of those creatures which are rational, that is, of human beings' (p.87).¹⁸ De Lairese is yet more damning. Picking up on an opinion voiced earlier in the previously cited comments of Félibien, he reserves his harshest condemnation for so-called 'dead' still life. As far as he was concerned, paintings of vegetables and fish, in particular, were not even worthy of the definition of art: 'Those who desire them may go to the market' (De Lairese, 1740, II, p.260).¹⁹

One man's meat is another man's poison, as the old saying goes. One can but imagine De Lairese's extreme disdain at the sight of Recco's previously discussed canvas of abundantly heaped dead and dying seafood. And yet the opposite sensation was clearly experienced by de' Dominici when gazing upon paintings of this kind – as well as by the original viewers of the 1684 exhibition of Neapolitan still life in which Recco's canvas was originally displayed – and ultimately by the King of Spain himself as he came to contemplate the painting in Madrid. These early audiences evidently perceived Neapolitan still life from a very different perspective to that of De Lairese. They appreciated its novelty while remaining remarkably free of the well-worn prejudices of the idealist tradition so prevalent in other centres. As a result, de' Dominici and his contemporaries were able to view Neapolitan still life not so much for what it was not, as rather for what it truly aspired to be: highly wrought creations graced with the potential to become 'more beautiful than nature itself' (de' Dominici, 1742–5, III, p.299).²⁰ This last phrase was also used by de' Dominici in order to emphasise not simply the vivid naturalism that is so evident in these paintings, but also equally the transformative power of the sophisticated processes of creativity that are so much at the forefront of the efforts of generations of Neapolitan still-life painters.

Notes

¹ 'in compra de diversi quadri de diverse pitture et qualità fuora della botecha conforme ad esso giacomo parerà et piacerà per commune utile, et beneficio et sempre che esso giacomo haverà fatta compra de quadri fuori detta botecha dopo sequita la compra debbia esso giacomo portarli alla botecha et là si debbiano vendere, et smaltire a qualsivoglia prezzo si potrà convenire con maggior utile, et beneficio sarà possibile...'

² 'Un quadro di sei palmi in circa con paese è figure che sonano, et cantano con frutti d'Aniello falcone è luca forte'.

³ 'Dui quatri di quattro palmi e tre e mezo con cornice in[d] orata, et historiate di mano di Luca Forte'

⁴ Ruffo paid Ribera 50 ducats on 1 March 1649, for example, for a large painting of the *Pietà* that cost him 270 ducats in total plus an in kind 'present' said to be worth 30 ducats (Ruffo, 1916, p.46). For further discussion of Ruffo's prices in relation to other Neapolitan figure painters, see Marshall (2017).

⁵ 'il quale ha comandato instantemente accosare a V. S. Ill. ma il prezzo di detto quadro per quanto non è possibile poter dire per a punto perchè non posso sapere sin tanto sia finito la fatica verrà in detto quadro ma per servire tanto al detto R. Padre quanto a V. S. Ill.^{ma} già cortesissima sua lettera me lo attende similmente mi ha parso di farline avisato, che appresso a poco il suo prezzo sera da D.^{ti} 200 più e meno secondo la faticha che vi serà in esso ...'

⁶ At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Neapolitan ducat and Roman scudo were set as more or less equivalent one to one currencies of account. As the century progressed, however, a series of destabilising economic and social conditions in Naples meant that the Neapolitan baroque ducat became progressively devalued in international exchange rates in relation to the more stable Roman scudo. For the most part, though, Neapolitan artists and commentators appear to have been oblivious of such higher order issues of foreign exchange and to have continued to perceive the scudo/ducat as equivalent one-to-one currencies of account (they are referred to interchangeably in the Neapolitan letters of Artemisia Gentileschi, for example, as well as throughout de' Dominici's *Vite*). I have accordingly chosen not to convert the prices in scudi over to ducats according to international exchange rates but have rather treated them as notional one-to-one currencies rather than as strictly converted sums (for further discussion, see Marshall, 2010, pp. 119–20).

⁷ 'per il prezzo di due quadri con una giarra di fiori per ciascheduno.'

⁸ 'di varie sorte di pesci con la figura di un Marinaro et altre mani del sig. Luca Giordano'

⁹ The attribution of the figure to Giordano was subsequently accepted by Ferrari and Scavizzi in their standard catalogue of Giordano's work (1992, I, cat. A203, p.283).

¹⁰ 'Da Carlo della Torre D. 100 a compimento di D. 200 in conto di due quadri gli sta facendo di palmi dodici di pesce.'

¹¹ 'Per li quadri di erbe, frutti, fiori, pesci, e figure, de' cinque famosi pennelli de Signori Francesco la Questa, Giovanni

Battista Roppoli, Abram Brueghel, Giuseppe Recco e Luca Giordano', stanza 2, line 4: 'Applausi, encomi, onor, lodi, stupore' (Perrucci, 1695, p.253).

¹² 'vari virtuosi pittori di fiori, frutta, pesci, cacciagioni etc'.

¹³ 'ricevè tutti quelli onori che può desiderare qualsisia qualificato personaggio'.

¹⁴ 'ottennero onorata provizione in Napoli per loro casa, ove fece ritorno.'

¹⁵ 'Si veggono di Recco molti quadri di cose dolci somigliantissime e dipinte con tanta verità, che cagionaron l'aborto ad una donna gravida, come avvenne ancora con un suo quadro di pesci.'

¹⁶ This bias, of course, conforms to the well-worn antinomy of the contrast between the ostensibly sensory and impulsive female as versus the supposedly more rational and controlled male, for which see Maclean (1980, pp.49–52) and Sommerville (1995, pp.12–14).

¹⁷ 'il est constant qu'à mesure qu'ils s'occupent aux choses les plus difficiles et les plus nobles, ils sortent de ce qu'il y a de plus bas et plus commun, et s'anoblissent par un travail plus illustre. Ainsi celui qui fait parfaitement des paysages est au-dessus d'un autre qui ne fait que des fruits, des fleur sou des coquilles. Celui qui peint des animaux vivans est plus estimable que ceux qui ne representent que des chose mortes et sans mouvement; et comme la figure de l'homme est le plus parfait ouvrage de Dieu sur la terre, il est certain aussi que celui qui se rend l'imitateur de Dieu en poignant les figures humaines, est beaucoup plus excellens que tous les autres.'

¹⁸ 'Echter state di vast, dat hoe overaerdig eenige bloemen, vruchten of andere stilevens, gelijk wy't noemen, geschildert zijn, deeze Schilderyen evenwel niet hooger, als in den eersten graed der konstwerken moogen gestelt worden ... De Schilderyen dan, die tot den derden en hoogsten graed behoorten zijn die de edelste beweegingen en willen der Reedewikkende schepselen den menschen vertoonen.'

¹⁹ 'die zullen wy voorby gaan: die ze lust, mag zich na de markt.'

²⁰ 'più bello del naturale medesimo'.

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