

# Caylus



**JOSE DE RIBERA, CALLED 'LO SPAGNOLETTO'**

(Játiva, 1591 – Naples, 1652)

*Susannah and the Elders*

Oil on canvas

138,5 x 179 cm / 54.3 x 70.4 inches

Painted between 1614-1618

## EXHIBITIONS:

San Diego, San Diego Museum of Art. *Spain: Art and Empire in the Golden Age*. May - September 2019.

Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts, January 2016 - February 2018.

Madrid, Fernán Gómez, Centro Cultural de la Villa *A su imagen. Arte, cultura y religión*, Isidro G. Bango Torviso (cur.), November, 2014 - April 2015, pp. 70-71, fig. 19.

Naples, Museo di Capodimonte. *Omaggio a Capodimonte da Caravaggio a Picasso*. October 2007 – January 2008.

Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. *El Seicento Napolitano. Del Naturalismo al Barroco*. May - July 2008, cat. 6, p. 44-47.

Madrid, Museo del Prado. *El joven Ribera*. April - August 2011.

Naples, Museo di Capodimonte. *Il giovane Ribera*. September - December 2011, p. 133-135.

## LITERATURE:

PAPI, G. *Ribera a Roma*. Cremona: 2007, fig.XII, XIII, XIV, cat. 10.

SPINOSA, N. *Ribera. Su obra completa*. Madrid: FAH, 2008, p. 24, 42, 44, cat. A27, p. 318.

PAPI, G. and SPINOSA, N. “La revolución de Ribera”. *Ars Magazine*, nº 1, December 2008, p. 97-115.

PORTÚS, J. *Ribera*. Barcelona: 2011, p. 56-57.

SPINOSA, N. *Pittura del seicento a Napoli. Da Caravaggio a Massimo Stanzione*, 2010, nº 355, p. 365.

In the past this painting was wrongly attributed to Pietro Paolini, the painter from Lucca, and after deep research Gianni Papi has established it as one of the finest examples of Ribera's early work. The attractive iconography refers to the well know story of *Susannah* from the Old Testament (Daniel, XIII, 4) which was widely painted during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as it represented the model for virtue.

According to the story in the Old Testament, *Susannah*, the wife of a rich Jewish man who lives in Babylonia, is surprised by two elders while she is taking a bath. The two men, who are judges, make dishonest propositions to *Susannah* and which she refuses, so they accuse her of adultery. Following the Hebrew law, she is condemned to death. However, Prophet Daniel proves the accusations are false and *Susannah* is set free, and instead the two judges are condemned.

The painting depicts the most relevant moment of the story, when *Susannah* is being harassed by the two elders and she screams. The drama of the situation is enhanced by the striking contrast of light and colour, the delicate and ivory like *Susannah*, and the dark and sinister elders. *Susannah's* natural and sculptured beauty prevails in the scene, yet we can feel the fear in her face, depicted with great realism. Nevertheless, Ribera's most powerful use of realism in this painting is in the lust on the ugly, wrinkled faces of the two old men. Ribera almost certainly chose the models for these two characters amongst the drunken men of the local taverns.

The style of this painting is comparable to that of the paintings previously attributed to The Master of the Judge of Salomon (named after his work in the Galleria Borghese in Rome). The group of paintings traditionally attributed to this painter have been carefully studied by Gianni Papi who has resituated them in the context of the young Ribera in his years in Rome (1612-1616) or in his early days in Naples, between 1620-1623. For example, the facial features of the lusting men is identical to many of the images of wise men, ancient philosophers, prophets and apostles painted by Ribera with the same techniques and light contrasts of *Caravaggesque* inspiration. The figures in this painting also present close similarities with other works by Ribera that are currently dated between the Roman and Neapolitan periods. For example *Christ Amongst the Doctors* in the Church of Saint Martin in Langres, France, dated from his days in Rome, *Peter's Denial* in the Galleria Corsini in Rome which also dates from the Roman period, and the *Saint Peter and Saint Paul* in the Museum of Beaux Arts in Strasburg, dated between his Roman and Neapolitan periods. Yet the strongest similarities in style are with *The Resurrection of Lazarus* in the Prado Museum in Madrid, which had always been dated as from the Roman period but now believed to be from around 1620.

The old man on the left of this painting reappears in the above mentioned *Peter's Denial* in the Galleria Corsini, while the old man on the right presents deep similarities with some figures in the also above mentioned *Resurrection of Lazarus* in the Prado. In addition, the model chosen by Ribera for the *Susannah* in this painting seems to be the same chosen for *The Resurrection of Lazarus* in the Prado, and for *The Calvary* in Osuna . All these similarities with works from Ribera's Roman and Neapolitan periods sustain the dates between 1614 and 1623 for this work. Besides this, this painting includes a unique decorative detail, the fountain on the right to *Susannah*. Ribera very rarely used architectural and decorative elements in his early paintings. The fountain here is decorated with a satyr with a long tail, probably alluding to the sin of lust, as his tail surrounds the soul of who through this sin becomes his victim. There is a drawing by Ribera

preserved in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (fig. 1) also of *Susannah and the Elders*, although the satyr on the fountain has been substituted by a *putto*. The Uffizi drawing was executed by the artist later than this painting. Therefore, Ribera included the element of the fountain in both of his versions of this subject, the painting and later the drawing, although with slight variations in the decoration. This has been interpreted as Ribera probably having a vague memory of the *Susannah and the Elders* painted in Bologna by Ludovico Carracci in 1616, (now at the National Gallery, London) which also includes the detail of the fountain, and which probably inspired Ribera's composition. In fact, Ribera himself discussed Carracci's version in one of his letters sent to his friend Carlo Ferrante. Besides this, we also find the example of the fountain in Peter Paul Rubens' *Susannah and the Elders*, dated from 1610 (today in The Royal Academy of San Fernando in Madrid).

We do not know if Ribera had the chance to see Carracci and Rubens' paintings, but correspondence proves he was aware of the existence of Carracci's version. Moreover, there is one more painting dated in the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that includes a similar fountain to the one used here by Ribera: the *Susannah and the Elders* in the Koelliker collection in Milan. This painting has been attributed to Caravaggio, Lanfranco, and Francesco Bonero in the past. However, Papi currently believes it could be a work by Gerard Douffet, who was active in Rome during the late 1620's. The Koelliker painting is a fine Caravaggesque example of the subject of *Susannah and the Elders*, and similar in style and composition to the painting by Ribera we are discussing here. The Koelliker painting is considered to derive from the *Susannah and the Elders* by the *Caravaggesque* painter Bartolomeo Manfredi, who painted it in 1614. Ironically Manfredi's painting was commissioned by Giulio Mancini from Siena, who was a great admirer of the young Ribera, and owned several of his early works. Therefore, there is a possibility the young Ribera saw Manfredi's work in Mancini's collection and was influenced by the composition for his, as did the author of the Koelliker painting. This being true, this painting by Ribera could not date from before 1614, and due to its similarities with Ribera's *Resurrection of Lazarus* in the Prado Museum in Madrid, and *Calvary* in Osuna, should not date from after 1618.

Finally, an X-Ray inspection has proved that there are several *pentimenti* (repentances), the most interesting being the right hand of the Elder on the left. In the final version, this hand shows a sophisticated perspective towards us, whereas the underneath drawing shows it was touching *Susannah's* shoulder, in a gesture of explicit lust.

Professor D. José Milicua, member of the Board of the Prado Museum , major specialist in Ribera's oeuvre, emphasising in his roman period, fully endorses the authorship and considers this work a masterpiece within the early works by Ribera.