



Niccolò Tornoli
(Siena 1606-1651 Rome)

Saints Philip and James
Oil on canvas
cm 97x134 (38x53 in)
1645-50

Provenance:
Spain, private collection

Literature:
G. M. Weston, "Niccolò Tornoli's mosaic decoration in the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in St. Peter's", *Kermes* 111, *La Fabbrica di San Pietro* (forthcoming 2020)

Notes:
We are grateful to Dr. Giulia Martina Weston for her essay on the painting.

Endowed with a sense of mystery and monumental quietness, this arresting painting depicts an unusual subject. Despite the two protagonists have been traditionally read as Saint John the Baptist and Christ, several clues suggest they should be respectively identified as the Saints Philip and James. The elderly man on the left, almost twice as old as John the Baptist at the time of his beheading, holds a cross, the iconographical attribute of the apostle Philip, who was crucified in Hierapolis. The partial nudity of his torso, emphasized by sharp *chiaroscuro* contrasts, may be explained with Philip's fishing trade in his native Bethsaida of Galilee, where he seemingly belonged to a group influenced by John the Baptist. The younger figure on the right, pointing at himself while carrying a thin club, portrays the apostle James Minor, called the Brother of the Lord. According to the *Golden Legend* by Jacobus da Varagine (1275), James was the son of Alpheus and resembled Christ in both his physical appearance and manners. He was thrown from the pinnacle of the Temple by the Jewish leaders, and subsequently beaten on the head with a fuller's club. In Early Christian Rome, veneration for this particular pair of apostles originated in the transferral of the Saints' relics from Constantinople to the Church of the Twelve Apostles in the sixth century.

This exquisite painting represents a highly significant addition to the catalogue of Baroque artist Niccolò Tornioli.¹ Born in Siena in 1606, Tornioli forged his earliest works in the wake of Caravaggesque master Rutilio Manetti. By 1635, he settled in Rome with his patron Federico IV Borromeo and a year later became court painter to Prince Cardinal Maurizio of Savoy, for whom he produced a few religious works and designed sophisticated pyrotechnical machines.² Both the Oratorian Father Virgilio Spada and his brother Cardinal Bernardino, patron and friend of Guido Reni and Guercino, contributed to Tornioli's reputation in the Eternal City. In 1643, the artist's acquaintance with the influential Father Virgilio secured him the prestigious commission for the fresco decoration of the Sala Rossa in the Roman Oratory of Santa Maria della Vallicella, featuring *Episodes of St. Philip Neri's life*.³ As *pittore di casa* in the Spada household, Tornioli produced his most renowned masterpieces,

¹ Formerly in a Spanish private collection, the painting appeared at Fernando Durán, Madrid in 2018. The present study proposes a new attribution and wishes to encourage a fruitful debate on this Baroque masterpiece.

² S. Salort-Pons, "La llegada de Niccolò Tornioli a Roma y el malogrado mecenazgo del abad Borromeo", *Antologia di Belle Arti. Studi Romani* 1 (2004): 9-13.

³ G. M. Weston, "True miracles: Niccolò Tornioli's *Episodes of St. Philip Neri's life* in the Sala Rossa of Santa Maria in Vallicella (1643-1651)", *Annales Oratorii* 13 (2015): 81-123.

such as the *Astronomers*.⁴ Contemporary religious commissions include two *pendant* paintings for the Spada Chapel in the church of San Paolo Maggiore in Bologna (1647-1648) and the mosaic decoration of the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament in St. Peter's in Rome (1647-1649), the latter patronized by pope Innocent X Pamphilj for the 1650 Jubilee.

The physiognomic types, cropping and depiction of the apostles Philip and James find a wealth of persuasive parallels within Tornioli's *oeuvre*. The meticulous and voluminous rendition of Philip's beard, as much as the incised wrinkles above his eyebrows and on his forehead, may be compared to those in the figure of the elderly Aristotle (on the left foreground) in the above-mentioned *Astronomers* (fig. 1). Philip's naked and vigorous torso betrays Tornioli's exposure to ancient Roman sculpture and sarcophagi, precociously documented by the frieze-like composition of *Lot and his daughters* (fig. 2). Furthermore, the physiognomy of James Minor in the painting under scrutiny, particularly the elongated face, pointy nose and parted lips, closely recalls the effigy of Jesus in *Christ driving the merchants from the temple* (fig. 3). Considering the style of the canvas and the features of the brushwork, characterized by a controlled application of a liquid and loaded *ductus*, *Saints Philip and James* should be regarded as a pinnacle of Tornioli's mature manner of the late 1640s. In these years, by means of controlling the brownish hues of the priming (*imprimatura*), Tornioli achieves a properly Roman Baroque palette, closely reminiscent of Giovanni Lanfranco's earth-toned nuances. Furthermore, his solemn and theatrical use of *chiaroscuro*, almost a *revival* of the Caravaggesque cypher deprived of its original dramatic depth, finds remarkable parallels in the output of the young Mattia Preti and his older brother Gregorio. Gregorio Preti and Niccolò Tornioli were members of the Congregazione dei Virtuosi al Pantheon, respectively since 1632 and 1636, and they both appear in the records of the Academy of Saint Luke in the 1640s. Stylistic borrowings and overlaps may have been further facilitated by a shared pool of notable patrons and buyers, such as the Barberini or the astute *maestro di casa* Giovan Carlo Vallone. The latter assiduously frequented the Virtuosi al Pantheon and purchased works by Tornioli, Preti, Jan Miel and Mario de' Fiori among others for the Bolognese noblewoman Cristiana Duglioli Angelelli.⁵

⁴ Weston, "After Galileo: The Image of Science in Niccolò Tornioli's *Astronomers*", *Art History* (special issue *Art and Technology in Early Modern Europe*) 39, 2 (2016): 302-317.

⁵ F. Curti, *Committenza, collezionismo e mercato dell'arte tra Roma e Bologna nel Seicento. La quadreria di Cristiana Duglioli Angelelli*, Rome 2007.

The idiosyncratic sense of stillness and frozen monumentality of the two apostles in the canvas *Saints Philip and James* should be also understood in light of Tornioli's prolonged interactions with contemporary sculptors. In particular, his involvement in the decoration of the Spada Chapel on the High Altar of San Paolo Maggiore in Bologna provided him with the unique opportunity of working alongside Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Alessandro Algardi. At the time, Tornioli and Algardi had known each other for at least a decade, since they are both proposed as new members of the Virtuosi al Pantheon on July 10, 1639. At closer inspection, the rhythm of the draperies, the diagonal contraposition in the gestures of the apostles, and the deep shadows projected by a cold light seem reminiscent of Algardi's distilled classicism, chiefly exemplified by the sculptural group with the *Beheading of Saint Paul* in the Bolognese Spada Chapel (Fig. 4). Acting as the fulcrum of the whole chapel, the figures of the executioner and St. Paul are visually linked by the diagonal formed by the sword and right elbow of the former, culminating above the latter's neck. The kneeling figure of the Apostle is presented in a pious resignation to the imminent martyrdom, thus increasing the contrast between his internal peace and the executioner's physical brutality. A very similar aura of intense and timeless spirituality is to be found in Tornioli's *Saints Philip and James*, a masterpiece which bears witness to the fecund intersection of the sister arts in mid-century Rome. Furthermore, the distinctive Early Christian iconography bears witness to the broader philological rediscovery of the traditions and cults of Early Christianity, inaugurated by Philip Neri and Federico Borromeo, reflected in Virgilio Spada's collecting practice, and carried on by the Roman Oratory and its *milieu*.

Enriching the catalogue of a Siennese protagonist of the Roman Baroque, Tornioli's *Saints Philip and James* chiefly documents the richness of the artistic scenario in the Eternal City towards the middle of the seventeenth century, betraying stylistic and compositional borrowings among artists and across media, and encapsulating the depth of Counter-Reformed spirituality.



Giulia Martina Weston
10th September 2020



Fig. 1 Niccolò Tornioli, *Astronomers*, ante 1645, oil on canvas, 148 × 218.5 cm, Rome, Spada Gallery.



Fig. 2 Niccolò Tornioli, *Lot and his daughters*, c.1636, oil on canvas, 98 × 133 cm, Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle.



Fig. 3 Niccolò Tornioli, *Christ driving the merchants from the temple*, c.1647, oil on canvas, 153 × 198 cm, Rome, Spada Gallery.



Fig. 4 Alessandro Algardi, *Beheading of Saint Paul*, 1643, marble, St. Paul: h. 190 cm; executioner: h. 282 cm, Bologna, San Paolo Maggiore, High Altar, Spada Chapel.