

*L'ebbrezza di Noè
con i figli*

Francesca Baldassari


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ENRICO
CAVALIERE

GUILLERMO
PINILLA

A NEW DISCOVERY
**THE DRUNKENNESS
OF NOAH WITH SONS**
BY LIVIO MEHUS

by Francesca Baldassari

ENRICO CAVALIERE

HIPPEUS ART DEALERSHIP

Enrico Cavaliere is an international fine art dealer based in London and Paris, with a specific focus on Old Masters and 19th century art.

Academically trained in Art History and Business between Italy and the UK, after acquiring several high profile professional experiences in the international art world – most notably at Christie's and Sotheby's – Enrico then decided to establish Hippeus Art Dealership, assisting both private as well as institutional clients. Enrico professionally advises his clients on every delicate aspect surrounding the purchase or sale of a work of art, either via auction or private treaty, by carefully assessing quality, condition, provenance, rarity and value.

Throughout the years, Enrico has organised high profile exhibitions as well as managed the sourcing and sale of prestigious artworks, often on the occasion of important international art fairs, such as Frieze Master and TEFAF.

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Guillermo Pinilla is an international art dealer based in Paris, specialising in Old Master paintings and equipped with substantial knowledge of modern art too. Academically trained in Art History and Economics in Paris, Guillermo Pinilla has amassed significant experience through various high-caliber transactions in the global art market before founding Sahen Art. Currently Guillermo Pinilla is at the helm of Galerie Pinilla, having facilitated the acquisition of significant works of art for a wide range of prominent private collectors as well as museums worldwide. With extensive knowledge of both the American and European markets, Galerie Pinilla provides expert guidance in the acquisition and sale of artworks, focusing on discovering and reattributing Old Master paintings and sculptures. This includes meticulous evaluation of authenticity, provenance, condition, and value in order to ensure informed and strategic decisions.

Actively involved in major international art fairs, the gallery has established a reputation for excellence and a discerning eye.

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A new discovery

The Drunkenness of Noah with sons

by Livio Mehus

The subject of the present painting is a biblical episode narrated in the ninth book of *Genesis*, when Noah, who survived the deluge, began farming and planted a vineyard (fig. 1).

Having subsequently exaggerated his wine consumption, he fell into a deep sleep, oblivious to his scanty outfit. As such, he is represented on this canvas with his body lying on a rock in the foreground, his vigorous chest exposed, one hand behind his head and the other resting below, with only his male part covered by a single grape branch.

To his left features his son Cam, who looks at us whilst holding a bunch of grapes and smiling as if to mock his father's behaviour. On the other side, Noah's other two more respectful sons, Sem and Jafet, are turning their back on us and leaving their father to recover from the alcohol intoxication. They are both carrying a long, heavy mantle that they mean to use to cover him.

The scene painted here by Livio Mehus (Oudenaarde, 1627 - Florence, 1691) does not portray what followed: Noah, once healed from the inebriation, cursed his son Cam, who had mocked him, and praised the other two, who, from that moment on, were tasked to continue their father's lineage.

This canvas is one of the most convincing examples of Livio Mehus's late production, dating back to the mid-1670s¹ and further enriching the painter's *oeuvre*, which encompasses biblical/religious scenes, historical and mythological subjects, and portraits – all characterised by a vibrant style and a vigorous light² rendered through energetic strokes.

¹ The canvas measures cm 99 × 134. *Provenance*: Seville (XIX century), Jácome y Arias de Saavedra Collection (n. 230); Pamplona (XIX century), Alzugaray Collection; Madrid (XX century), José María Gaztelu Collection (n. 15); Pamplona, private collection.

² To know more about Mehus's production, we refer to the volume *Livio Mehus, un pittore barocco alla corte dei Medici*, in the catalogue of the exhibition curated by Marco Chiarini (Florence, Sala Bianca di Palazzo Pitti), Livorno, 2000.



Fig. 1) *The Drunkenness of Noah with sons*

In the present painting, this can be clearly seen in Noah's body, revived on the chest, along the sides, and around the knees and quadriceps by quick touches of *biacca*, or equally in the profile of one of the two sons carrying the mantle on the left.

In our composition, the pictorial matter is dense, though smoothed by rapid strokes that skillfully imitate the texture of the fabrics and textiles in particular, whereas the palette, which finds close similarities with contemporary examples in Florence and Rome, anticipates here certain stylistic solutions that we will see again only later on in XVIII-century artists such as Alessandro Gherardini and Giovanni Camillo Sagrestani.

Having arrived in Milan at a very early age, after an initial apprenticeship within the workshop of Carlo Fiammingo (whose real name was probably Karel Philips Spierinks), according to the biographer Filippo Baldinucci (Florence, 1681–1728) – thanks to whom we can reconstruct his life and activity³ – Livio Mehus decided to move to Rome. En route, stopping in Pistoia, he

³ F. Baldinucci, *Notizie de' Professori da Cimabue in qua*, Florence, 1681-1728, 1845-1847 edition, V. 1846, pp. 526-538.

met Prince Mattias de' Medici (1613–1667), the then-governor of Siena, who, having become familiarised with his art, decided to support his training and education by introducing Mehus to fellow painters Giuliano Periccioli and especially Pietro da Cortona, who had just completed the frescoes in the Jupiter Room (*Stanza di Giove*) at Palazzo Pitti in Florence and was about to start the decoration in the Mars Room (*Stanza di Marte*).

Later, Mehus, for unknown reasons, decided to travel back to Milan. Given the difficulties attached to the voyage, he stopped first in Lucca, then near Genoa, and later in Piedmont before finally arriving in Lombardy, where he stayed for three years. And it was indeed in Milan that Prince Mattias, who clearly had not forgotten his skills, managed to track him down and subsequently convince him to work for him. It is documented, for example, that from May 13th to August 13th, 1652, Mehus worked in the prince's villa in Lappoggi, near Florence, together with other artists such as il Borgognone.

Filippo Baldinucci recalls that, afterwards, Mehus travelled to Rome again with the renowned draughtsman and printmaker Stefano della Bella in around 1650, and then to Northern Italy with Siennese painter Raffaello Vanni. Another documented trip to Rome took place in 1655, when Prince Mattias asked Cardinal Carlo de' Medici whether his *protégé* could stay at the villa in Trinità dei Monti or at Palazzo Madama, with the subtle, clever intention of having him work alongside Pietro da Cortona, to increase Mehus's prestige.

To the same decade, the 1650s, and to the end of it more precisely, dates one of the earliest known works by Mehus: the portrait of Saint Barbara kept inside the cathedral in Siena, with its bright colours that are a testament to Antoine Van Dyck's influence on the young Flemish artist. A few years later, in 1661, Mehus was in Rome once more, where he stayed for roughly a year, further deepening his collaboration with Pietro da Cortona and taking profound inspiration from the abundant local antiquities, as shown by his various sketches and drawings of this period⁴.

He then travelled to Venice, where he ended up staying for 18 months. There, he became acquainted with Milanese painter Federico Panza and familiar with the production of all of the great Venetian Renaissance masters, from Titian to Paolo Veronese, from Tintoretto to the Bassanos.

After a quick stay in Bergamo in 1673, he decided to settle in Florence, where he produced works for the church of Santa Maria della Pace as well as

⁴ To know more about Mehus's graphic production, we refer to M.N. Barbolani Montauto, *L'antico e Venezia nei disegni di Livio Mehus*, published in *Paragone*, 68, 135-137, 2017, pp. 26-55.



Fig. 2) *The Toilet of Venus*, Pistoia, Fondazione Pistoia Musei - Antico Palazzo dei Vescovi, in comodato

for other religious institutions in the countryside, but especially for numerous important local collectors and connoisseurs.

In Florence, Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici quickly acknowledged Mehus's talent and became his main patron. In fact, Ferdinando amassed 45 paintings by him, as stated in the inventory compiled after his death in 1713, half of which now enrich the city's public art collections.

Moved by profound esteem and admiration for Mehus, Ferdinando even agreed to cover the expenses for the artist's funeral in 1691 and kept collecting his works after his departure – mainly sketches and drawings – some of which must have been still available in his studio, while others he must have obtained through intermediaries and fellow painters such as Sebastiano Ricci⁵.

⁵ The inventories of Grand Prince Ferdinando de' Medici were published by M. Chiarini in *Paragone* on three separate occasions. We hence refer to M. Chiarini, *I Quadri della collezione del Principe Ferdinando*, published in *Paragone*, no. 301, 1975, pp. 57-98; no. 303, 1975, pp. 75-108; and no. 305, pp. 53-88.



Fig. 3) *Study of a Reclining Male Nude*, Rome, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe della Farnesina

In this previously unpublished *Drunkenness of Noah with sons*, recently discovered in the auction market, Mehus shows to have fully mastered what he learned from the Italian Baroque, the final result being an intriguing, eclectic style that undoubtedly makes him one of the most original artists of his time.

The dramatic dynamism that marks the scene would have been unobtainable without the influence absorbed from Pietro da Cortona and Pieter Paul Rubens, particularly if one observes the wise use of light that sculpturally shapes the bodies.

Noah's naked body, lying on the rock, almost represents a legacy of Mehus's time in Rome, where he eagerly studied Roman and Greek antiquities. Also derived from da Cortona and Rubens is the heavy and shimmering sky, whereas the trees, with their intricate branches, reveal a proximity to the dark and gloomy landscapes by the Neapolitan Salvator Rosa, who lived in Florence between 1640 and 1649.

Additionally, the languishing looks, together with their elegant and undulating movements, of Noah's three sons, are a testament to Mehus's appreciation for Correggio – something that he had in common, despite the rather different stylistic outcomes achieved, with the Genoese Baciccio.



Fig. 4) *Barberini Faun*, Munich, Glyptothek

Among the closest references to this *Drunkenness of Noah with sons* is *The Toilet of Venus*, which he signed, once in the Bigongiari Collection in Florence and now owned by Italian bank Banca Intesa and currently at Palazzo dei Ves-covi in Pistoia (fig. 2). Very similar are Cam's facial features and expression, the goddess combing Venus's hair, and the iridescent draperies enveloping the sinu-ous bodies of the characters populating both paintings.

To further support the attribution, there is also *Study of a Reclining Male Nude*, red chalk on paper, currently kept at the Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe della Farnesina in Rome (inv. FC 125440)⁶ (fig. 3). The posture of the arms and hands in the drawing in Rome is, in fact, identical to Noah's, almost overlapping, whilst differences can be noticed in the legs and torso.

⁶ The drawing measures mm 257 × 358. For more information about this specific drawing, we refer to M.N. Barbolani Montauto in *Livio Mehus...* (see note no. 2 above), 2000, p. 143, no. 120.

In addition, when looking at Noah's figure, it is impossible not to think about the *Barberini Faun*, now in the Munich Glyptothek (fig. 4), one of the most famous and celebrated Hellenistic marble sculptures, which Mehus undoubtedly had the chance to admire, study, and copy in his drawings and sketches multiple times when visiting the Barberini collection in Rome.

To conclude, the documentary sources do not mention a canvas depicting such a subject, but we know that from his early days as a painter, Livio Mehus counted among his network several highly influential members of the aristocracy and the high clergy, most notably in Florence – people such as the aforementioned Prince Mattias de' Medici, Cardinals Giovan Carlo, Leopoldo, and Maria de' Medici, as well as Grand Prince Ferdinando. Also among his collectors were Marquises Sacchetti, Gerini, and Guadagni, Senator Ascanio Samminiati, the cavalier Ambra, Paolo Falconieri, and Alessandro Strozzi. Hence, it would not be a surprise to discover that this *Drunkenness of Noah with sons* was originally destined to enrich the prestigious collection of a Florentine patron.









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