

Nature in
the Spotlight
European Still Life
1600-1700



3
PANFILO NUVOLONE
(Cremona 1581 – Milan c. 1651)

Still life with a bowl of asparagus on a stool, a basket of cherries, fruit and game

Oil on panel, 78 x 123 cm

LITERATURE

G. Sestieri (ed.), *Nature morte italiane del XVII e XVIII secolo*, exh. cat. (Rome, 2000), pp. 16–17, n. 10; M.C. Bagolan, G. Sestieri (eds.), *Nature morte lombarda del XVII e XVIII secolo*, exh. cat. (Milan, 2003), pp. 10–11.

A history painter as well as a specialist in still life, Panfilo Nuvolone was born in Cremona and undertook his training in the late-mannerist, counter-reformed climate of Milan under the religious rule of Archbishop Federico Borromeo (1564–1631). The frescoes executed by the artist for the Sanzoni chapel in the Church of Sant'Angelo and for the apse of the Church of Santa Maria della Passione reveal that Nuvolone achieved a certain success in the Northern Italian city, employing a theatrical style that recalls the work of Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1574–1625) and Piero Francesco Mazzucchelli called il Morazzone (1573–1626). His recognition as an artist by the 1620s is attested to by the presence of his name in the renowned *excursus* of Milanese painters compiled by Girolamo Borsieri in 1619, while after this period the production of Nuvolone's figurative work seems to decline, perhaps due to his inability to keep up with artistic developments.¹ Fortunately, the decrease in commissions for altarpieces and frescoes was met with a growth in Nuvolone's production as a still-life specialist, an activity that first received critical attention from De Logu in a ground breaking analysis of two works on panel of *Fruit on a metal stand* in a private collection, signed and dated 1617 and 1620 respectively.² Characterised by rigorously symmetrical and paired-down arrangements, Nuvolone's compositions are among the most inspired examples of the archaic still life in early seventeenth-century Northern Italy, along with those of Fede Galizia (1578–1630). The artist's refined treatment of the painted surface, which allowed

him to render impeccable illusionistic effects, meant that the Nuvolone's works were received with instant success by collectors of the day. Indeed, documentary evidence has revealed the presence of early still lifes by Nuvolone in the collections of the Dukes of Savoy (1625) and the Archbishop Cesare Monti in Milan (1638).³

Nuvolone's still-life paintings of the 1620s, amongst which are the *Cristal stand with peaches and apples* at the Civic Museum of Cremona and the *Metallic bowl of grapes and peaches and a disguised portrait* in a private collection, demonstrate striking parallels with the subjects depicted in the work of Fede Galizia. These similarities, which have sparked a long history of scholarly debate over attribution, indicate a widespread interest among Milanese artistic circles in the small-scale still life, where fruit or flowers are depicted alongside tableware. The theme of the stand with flowers and fruit also occurs in the work of Francesco Codino (c. 1590 – after 1624) and his circle, such as the *Still life with a basket of fruit and a cake stand* in the Castello Sforzesco, Milan. The sustained success enjoyed by the stand of fruit as a subject in Milanese circles, which has its origins in the *Plate of peaches* by Ambrogio Figino dated 1591–1591 – a likely model for Caravaggio's *Basket of fruit* in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana – would continue until the second half of the *seicento*, demonstrated by the *Still life with grapes, apples, figs, squash and a stand of pears* by Carlo Francesco Nuvolone (1609–1661), the eldest son of Panfilo, now in the Lampronti collection (fig. 4).

The articulate composition, presence of superimposed levels and inclusion of elements not found in the panels described above, suggest that the present work was executed during an autonomous phase in Nuvolone's career that outlived the production of Galizia, probably during the 1630s. Although characterised by a greater inventiveness and a more sophisticated perception of space – perhaps a result of Carlo Francesco's contribution – the present panel displays the same static quality of the works of the 1620s. The elements represented are described in isolation as single entities that the viewer assimilates one by one. While still archaic, the image displays a sophisticated use of light, which creates a series of intense contrasts that allows the painter to define the minute details of every surface. The tendency to define volume using gradual chromatic cadences and the glazed effect of tableware are also typical of Nuvolone's work.



Fig. 4. Carlo Francesco Nuvolone, *Still life with fruit and a stand of figs*, oil on canvas, 48,5 x 66 cm

¹ G. Borsieri, *Il Supplimento della nobiltà di Milano* (Milan, 1619), pp. 65 s.

² G. De Logu, *La natura morta italiana* (Bergamo, 1963), pp. 28, 163.

³ F.M. Ferro, *Nuvolone. Una famiglia di pittori nella Milano del '600* (Brescia, 2000), pp. 161–166.

