



Cesare Dandini (Florence 1596 - Florence 1657)

The Medici Shelducks

82.55 x 69.85 cm (32 1/4 x 27 1/4 inches)

A pair of hanging shelducks is an unlikely motif to prompt thoughts of beauty, transience and the infinite, but these life-size birds, their breasts rotating in a pas de deux, remind us that a humble subject is no impediment to great art.

Shown in profile and straight on, this double portrait of a shelduck was painted by Cesare Dandini (1596 - 1657), an artist of the Florentine Seicento, whose subjects include Madonnas, magdalens and saints, but rarely still lifes. Painted between 1637 and 1647, *Still Life of Two Shelducks* was first recorded in the 1647 inventory of Cardinal Giovan Carlo de' Medici (1599-1648). The painting left the Medici family in 1664, finding its way centuries later to a Midwestern collection. Its publication in 1989, prompted discussion about the authorship of a famous and closely related painting in the Galleria degli Uffizi, *Two female goosanders*, heretofore given to Dandini. It is now accepted that our painting is by Dandini and the much publicized and exhibited Florentine painting is by Giusto Sustermans (Antwerp 1597-1681 Florence). Though belonging to different members of the Medici family, the two paintings are so similar in composition as to be considered pendants.

In Florence, kitchen scenes crowded with hanging fowl were a specialty of 17th century still life painters, most notably those by Jacopo da Empoli. In its simplicity and strong lighting, however, our painting has more in common with the still lifes by the Spaniard Juan Sanchez Cotan. Suspended from an asymmetrical metal bracket that end in a dragon and winged woman, the ducks are brought into relief by the neutral background, a convention used by Caravaggio in his *Basket of Fruit*. The eye-catching

plumage and elegant silhouette anticipate Jean-Baptiste Oudry's *The White Duck* of 1753. His contemporary Jean-Baptiste Chardin conveyed the subtext of mortality in his still lifes of ducks. Further ahead, Winslow Homer painted ducks in his memorable *Left and Right* painting.

These beautiful birds help us measure space, organize visual experience and consider the infinite. Like all great art, they place us firmly in the here and now.

Literature:

- S. Perlove, "An unpublished Medici gamepiece by Justus Sustermans", in *The Burlington Magazine* 131 (1989), pp. 411-414, fig. 47 (as Giusto Sustermans);
- E. Fumagalli, "Don Lorenzo (1599-1648)" in *Il giardino del Granduca. Natura morta nelle collezioni medicee*, Marco Chiarini (ed.), Turin 1997, pp. 83, 87, note 42 (as Sustermans?);
- S. Casciu in *Natura morta italiana tra Cinquecento e Settecento*, Mina Gregori (ed.), exhibition catalogue, Milan 2002, p. 266 (as Sustermans);
- S. Bellesi in *Il Corridoio vasariano agli Uffizi*, Caterina Caneva (ed.), Cinisello Balsamo 2002, p. 127, under no. 16 (as possibly by Cesare Dandini?);
- S. Bellesi, Cesare Dandini. *Addenda al catalogo dei dipinti*, Florence 2007, pp. 32-33, reproduced in color fig. 30 (as Dandini);
- E. Fumagalli, "Tendenze della Natura morta in Toscana nell'età di Galileo", in *Il cannocchiale e il pennello, Nuova scienza e nuova arte nell'età di Galileo*, exhibition catalogue, Florence 2009, pp. 252-256, 262, note 11, 375-376, under cat. no. 124, reproduced p. 252 (as Sustermans?);
- C. Profeti in *Villa Medicea di Poggio a Caiano, Museo della Natura Morta. Catalogo dei dipinti*, Stefano Casciu (ed.), Livorno 2009, p. 383, under no. 153 (as Sustermans);
- G. Romagnoli in *Per utilità e per diletto. "Cittadini in Villa"*, exhibition catalogue, Livorno 2010, p. 76, under cat. no.19 (as Sustermans).
- Dr. Lisa Goldenberg Stoppato, Cesare Dandini, *Two Shelducks hanging from their bills*, private report.