

NUZZI, MARIO (*Mario dei Fiori*) (1603-1673)

***Youth with Monkey and Fruit***

Oil on canvas

97 × 130 cm

University of Barcelona

On temporary loan from the Prado Museum, no. P-5273

Mario Nuzzi, born in Penna (Abruzzo), is considered one of the forerunners of Italian Baroque flower painting in the first half of the seventeenth century. His artistic output, in Rome, exerted an influence not only on the development of the Italian still life, but also on the Spanish works of painters such as Juan de Arellano (1614-1676) and Bartolomé Pérez (1634-1698). While Nuzzi's paintings draw on the naturalism of the Caravaggio tradition passed down by his uncle and teacher Tommaso Salini (Rome, ca. 1575-1625), the still-life paintings produced by his school, such as the present one, contain only late echoes of Caravaggio's naturalism.

In *Youth with Monkey and Fruit*, any intention to portray the plant elements with a certain degree of realism is achieved solely in the areas of shadow, where the spectator can appreciate the precision of the description and an elaborate use of colour. The painter skilfully balances the composition by means of a calibrated arrangement of two diametrically opposed areas of light: one is the sky in the top left background and the other is the group of fruit, vegetables and flowers at the bottom right. The objects in the foreground are bathed in a bright, artificial light that falls starkly on the scene, undercutting the naturalness of the colours and textures and flattening out the surfaces. The arrangement of the bright anecdotal elements follows a pyramidal morphology that builds up from the flat top of the imposing column at the bottom of the picture. At the same time, a swirling dynamism is created around the enormous squash in the centre. The scene is intersected by a diagonal line, marked by the branch held in the monkey's hand, which separates the still life on the right from the animated youth and exotic animal on the left. The diagonal extends upward along the underside of the large illuminated fig leaf and downward to the curve delineated by the youth's right forearm. In the painting, the figure of the monkey serves the function of signalling how the painting should be interpreted, not only with its gestures but also with its gaze, which leads the spectator's eye toward the youth.

In the lower part of the composition, the marble base marks a horizontal line over which the fruit spills. It helps to link the real space of the spectator mentally with the space in the painting. The subtle play of light over the surfaces and the exquisite internal textures of the autumn viands and the youth's skin, full and fleshy like the fruit, awaken and engage the spectator's senses.

The plant elements show natural imperfections on their outer surfaces, such as the fig branch bounding the upper part of the painting, which is laden with burst and bursting fruit. These imperfections reveal that the scene's stillness is only an apparent stillness, because they allude to the inevitable passage of time and the vital processes of nature, which continue through maturity and decomposition. The allusion expresses an admonition to the young man that beauty and youth are fleeting and that maturity, symbolized by the autumn elements, soon arrives.

(RB)

**Essential bibliography:**

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**General bibliography:**

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