Shepherd Playing his Flute - A Proposed Attribution of a Painting Long in the Nationalmuseum’s Collections to Bernhard Keilhau, Called Monsù Bernardo

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Fig. 1 Attributed to Bernhard Keilhau (1624–1687), Shepherd Playing his Flute. Oil on canvas, 98 × 137 cm. Marshall of the Court Martin von Wahrendorff bequest 1863. Nationalmuseum, NM 156.
BERNHARD KEILHAU (1624–1687) must surely be viewed as one of the foremost artists hailing from Scandinavia, from any century. However, he is largely unknown in Sweden and there are no works in the collections of the Nationalmuseum previously attributed to this artist.

Although Baldinucci wrote about Keilhau, his work was all but forgotten until the 20th century, when to begin with Federico Zeri and Roberto Longhi took an interest in it, identifying it as separate from that of Antonio Amorosi (1660–1738), with which it had often been confused. In 1988 the Danish art historian Minna Heimbürger published her catalogue raisonné of his work. Keilhau, the son of a German painter, was born in Helsingør (Elsinore), Denmark. His earliest training took place in that city, but in 1642 he travelled to Amsterdam, where he became apprenticed to Rembrandt for two years. He continued to Italy in 1651 and came to stay there for the rest of his life. In some respects his work was typical of the Bamboccianti, and in others he differed from them quite significantly. Keilhau traversed the Italian peninsula and absorbed influences directly and indirectly, for instance from artists of the Venetian, Genovese, Roman and Neapolitan schools, which fused naturally with his originally northern European, primarily Flemish and Dutch, manner, the latter perhaps kindled through his fraternising with fellow Northerners in his new environment. From 1656 until his death in 1687 he stayed in Rome, where, apart from the familiar epithet for northern European artists, Monsù, he also picked up artistic influences from, amongst others, Caravaggio. In general, the art he produced in Italy is infused with a strong sense of chiaroscuro. Typically, Keilhau would paint all kinds of genre scenes, but unlike most of the Bamboccianti he steered clear of landscapes. His most famous subjects include peasants, shepherds and sleeping children. A large part of his oeuvre consists of allegorical compositions of various kinds.

But in what way does the present picture fit into his oeuvre, if at all (Fig. 1)? The pastore con flauto is of course an ancient motif, with many examples before and after this 17th-century work, not least in Dutch and Flemish art. A particularly interesting example, considering the time Keilhau spent in Amsterdam, is a drawing in the British Museum, attributed to the school of Rembrandt and occasionally to Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–1678), and sometimes also associated with two later etchings by Rembrandt of male nudes (Fig. 2). In some cases, and perhaps in this one, the subject, with the shepherd in a state of undress, would probably be used as it was a good fit with a standard type of study of a male nude, where the flute could replace the common posing stick. However, this specific subject is otherwise non-existent, and related subjects are exceedingly rare, in Keilhau’s known oeuvre. Consequently, the attribution of the work to Keilhau suggested here is made primarily on technical and stylistic grounds. The way the artist builds volume both in the fabric and in the flesh and hair in the present painting is very reminiscent of Keilhau’s overall work. The heavily impasted areas of white heightening, characteristic of the artist, are present and correct, visible both in the strong brushstrokes which mark the highlights of the skin and in the cloth with which the shepherd is partly draped. But specifically, there are the thin and wispy brushstrokes of white heightening, applied in a peculiar cross-hatched manner, used to highlight different kinds of details such as the hands.

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Fig. 2 Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627–1678), Life Study of a Young Man Holding a Flute, c. 1646. Pen and brown ink with brush and brown wash, touched with red and black chalk; framing lines in pen and dark grey ink, 14.2 × 16.2 cm. Acquisition 1895. British Museum, London, 1895,0915.1267.
The work comes closest to a few paintings by Keilhau from the late 1640s and the 1650s. These include the *Contadino* (The Farmer), the *Cacciatore con fucile e cane* (Hunter with a Rifle and Dog), and the *Giovane Contadino* (The Young Farmer, Fig. 3), where not only the appearance of the face is similar to the shepherd, but also its rendering.6

The present painting does not have the standard measurements of the canvases that Keilhau used during this period for his half-length figures, such as those mentioned above. It does, though, closely match the measurements of many of his larger, horizontal allegorical compositions from the 1650s, like the famous *Pescvendolo, ragazzo e gatto con una bilancia* (“Fishmonger, Boy and Cat, with a Pair of Scales”, an allegory of taste and/or water and earth), the *Venditore di carciofi con ragazza* (“Artichoke Vendor with Girl”, earth and/or taste and/or winter), the *Scena di osteria* (“Scene from a Tavern”, taste), the *Vendita di verdure* (“Greengrocer”, earth), the *Servitori* (“The Waiters”, water and earth), the *Vendita di castagne* (“Chestnut Vendor”, taste), the *Erribvendolo* (“Greengrocer”, earth and/or taste) or the *Venditore di carbonella* (“Charcoal Vendor”, fire and/or touch), to name just a few.7

However, leaving aside the matter of size, the overall mood of the present piece is still more like Keilhau’s lone half-length figures – apart from those mentioned above, perhaps especially the *San Giovanni Evangelista* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Quimper, France (Fig. 4).8 That the *Shepherd Playing His Flute* should have more in common with works such as this is understandable, primarily because of the similar concentration on a single figure. There is an intensity shared by these pictures, strengthened by the artist’s forceful and meticulous rendering of the details of the face, especially the eyes, which makes...
them stand out from the rest of the composition. Of course, this becomes even more pronounced in works where, as in the present painting, the figure directly faces and engages the viewer.

There are to my knowledge only two other works that are directly related to the Nationalmuseum painting: an obviously lesser and probably later copy, attributed to the circle of Keilhau, that surfaced on the Parisian art market about 10 years ago, and a contemporary variant in the Pinacoteca Comunale, Spoleto, near Perugia, Umbria, both known to me only from photographs. Both works have the same measurements as the present painting. The second of them was formerly attributed to Pier Francesco Mola (1612–1666) and is now attributed to Francesco Refini (1615/20–after 1692), a local artist from Spoleto (Fig. 5). Although that work does have some evident quality, it is obviously executed by another hand than the Nationalmuseum painting. It does not exhibit the same forceful immediacy and detailed rendering, and seems to me to have been done after the present painting. Interestingly, an altarpiece in the Church of St Mary in Arrone, close to Spoleto, has quite recently been attributed to Keilhau.

The Shepherd Playing his Flute entered the collections of the Nationalmuseum early on, through the bequest of a large holding of old master paintings of high quality belonging to the then Marshal of the Royal Court in Stockholm, Martin von Wahrenendorf (1789–1861). The painting, and its old, now rejected attribution to Salvator Rosa (1615–1673), has always been something of an enigma in the Museum’s collection of Italian paintings, and the attribution to Bernhard Keilhau suggested here can hopefully at least put the work in its rightful context.

Notes:
4. See for example British Museum, museum no. 1895,0915.1267, School of Rembrandt, attributed to Samuel van Hoogstraten. “The drawing is usually associated with three etchings by Rembrandt, the ‘Nude Man seated on the Ground, with one Leg extended’ (Bartsch 196, Hind 221) ... The first and last of these are dated 1646 and the pose of the latter, though seen from a different angle, bears some relationship to the figure in the British Museum’s drawing: both are seated on a cushion on the floor and wear only a loin cloth.” https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P.1895-0915-1267, (accessed 29 April 2021).