Old Italian Woman with Distaff
by Jean-Victor Schnetz

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Idyllic genre scenes from Roman popular life were a favourite subject among the European artists who flocked to the eternal city from the end of the Napoleonic Wars and onward. These paintings were often skilfully composed using comprehensive model studies. The characters they depicted were hardly taken straight from the streets, but were instead professional models who offered their services on the Spanish Steps in Rome, so the same model can feature in works by different artists in the same period. Danish Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg’s diary has several examples of this. He mentions his work on La Ciociara from 1816, where the interesting element of this piece is that Eckersberg decided to make one of these folk characters a subject in her own right. The painting has a monumentality that is reminiscent of Rafael. The artist’s diary from the time also reveals the careful preparation that went into this staged presentation of a Roman woman, as he hired clothes and jewellery for fourteen days, specifically for the purpose. The name of the painting refers to the sitter’s accessories, which came from an area called Ciociaria to the southwest of Rome. The value that Eckersberg placed on this work can be seen in his choice to keep it and later use it as a study object for his pupils.

Eckersberg left Rome the year that he painted La Ciociara. This was the same time that another David disciple, Frenchman Jean-Victor Schnetz (1787–1870) arrived in the eternal city. He would eventually

Fig. 1 Jean-Victor Schnetz (1787–1870), Old Italian Woman with Distaff, 1820s. Oil on canvas, 55 × 48.5 cm. Purchase: Hedda and N.D. Qvist Fund 2021. Nationalmuseum, NM 7603.
specialise in depictions of popular life and individual character pictures of the type Eckersberg produced of the Roman woman.4 A few years later, Schnetz fell for the beautiful Maria Grazia Boni from Sonnino. This beauty and her mother would soon feature in paintings by the artist and his Academy colleagues. According to rumour, Maria Grazia’s mother was married to a brigand, a brigante, people who had long made the outskirts of Rome a lawless area. Many came from the town of Sonnino in Lazio and were captured during a major raid in the summer of 1818, on the order of the Papal State’s strongman, the authoritarian Cardinal Ercole Consalvi. The bandits were then gaoled in Castel Sant’Angelo and the Termini prison (Terme di Diocleziano) in 1818.5 The following year, the cardinal decided that Sonnino should be razed to the ground as a warning example – a reminder that brigandry had reached the end of the road in this region. It must thus have been an unpleasant surprise for Cardinal Consalvi when the same bandits and their families soon became popular subjects for Rome’s many artists, also working as individual models.6 It is among these artists that we find Jean-Victor Schnetz.

The Nationalmuseum’s recently acquired painting by Schnetz, Old Italian Woman with Distaff (fig. 1), shows an old woman, worn down by life, taking a break from her work of spinning wool with a distaff. She has already placed her tool inside her braided corset, part of the model’s genuine folk costume, as was the distinctive headpiece. The old woman has clasped her hands together, as if deep in prayer, an impression accentuated by the pious, god-fearing gaze. This virtuous attitude appears entirely removed from the tough reality that may previously have characterised her life.

Schnetz continued this theme, characterised by religiosity, in a painting called La Prière des pélerins italiens, 1823 (Private collection, Paris). This was one of several compositions in which the artist used Maria Grazia Boni’s mother as a model. In another case, he had her play the role of a fortune teller. This painting belongs to the Musée d’Art Roger Quilliot, Clermont-Ferrand, and is called La Diseuse de bonne aventure (The Fortune Teller) (fig. 2). This was

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Fig. 2 Jean-Victor Schnetz (1787–1870), The Fortune Teller, c. 1820–24. Oil on canvas, 74 × 62 cm. Clermont-Ferrand, Musée d’Art Roger Quilliot.

Fig. 3 Léon Cogniet (1794–1880), Study of an old Italian Woman. Oil on canvas, 61.7 × 50.7 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Orléans, 298.
3. Wilhelm Bendz was one of the people to copy La Ciociara. It is found in the famous interior from Amaliegade, 1826 (Hirschsprung’s collection). Eckersberg’s original was sold when his estate was auctioned on 17 April 1854 (no. 26), eventually ending up in Claudius’ collection, Malmö. It was sold in 1997 at Museumsbygningen in Copenhagen (4 September 1997, no. 158) and acquired by an American collector. Acquired by the Nationalmuseum at Christie’s, New York, 19th Century European Art, 25 April 2016, no. 67.
5. The model Maria Grazia appears to have ended up in the Termini prison, which was part of the Terme di Diocleziano that had been converted to

Notes:
ACQUISITIONS/OLD ITALIAN WOMAN WITH DISTAFF BY JEAN-VICTOR SCHNETZ

Fig. 5 François-Joseph Navez (1787–1869), Scene of Brigands with the Fortune Teller, 1821. Oil on Canvas, 104 × 148 cm. Private Collection.

function as a gaol. See also https://www.sonnino.info/Sonnino/pinellirobert/pinellirobert.php, (accessed 26 January 2023)


