



BERNARDO STROZZI
(ITALIAN (VENETIAN SCHOOL, BORN GENEVA)
1581-1644)

St. Catherine of Alexandria

c. 1615
Oil on canvas

Provenance: Private collection, Genoa; Samuel H. Kress collection; Columbia Museum of Art since 1954.

The Artist

One of the most influential painters of his native Genoa, Bernardo Strozzi was a painter of religious works, genre scenes, and portraits. Strozzi's artistic career followed an unconventional trajectory, his formal training lasted only a few years during which he apprenticed with the Sienese painter Pietro Sorri, who resided in Genoa from 1595 to 1597. Strozzi's training came to an end when he took vows to enter the Capuchin order in 1598. For a decade, he lived in the Capuchin monastery of St. Barnaba, where he earned the nickname "Il Cappuccino." As a friar, Strozzi continued his artistic practice, producing several paintings of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the order. Upon his father's death in 1610, Strozzi requested temporary release from monastic duties to support his widowed mother and sister as a painter. Strozzi's career soared in this decade, garnering the patronage of Genoa's powerful Doria family as well as earning his first commissions in fresco. In 1630, after his mother's death and his sister's marriage, the Capuchin monks sought the artist's return to the order, reasoning that the obligation to provide for family was no longer necessary. Strozzi avoided the command to return to monastic life, which resulted in his imprisonment for eighteen months and eventual departure from Genoa. By 1633, Strozzi resurfaced in Venice where he continued to paint under the moniker, "il prete Genovese" (The Genovese Priest), until his death.

The Painting

The virtuous Catherine of Alexandria is oft depicted with a spiked wheel, a macabre attribute of her martyrdom. The tale of the virgin martyr is recounted in Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*. As a young woman of remarkable beauty and noble birth, Catherine applied her learning and oratorical gift to persuade the most learned pagan philosophers to embrace the Christian faith. She invoked the wrath of the emperor Maxentius after converting two hundred of his guardian soldiers along with his wife. Maxentius's retribution was severe, and in a first attempt to execute Catherine he subjected her to an apparatus constructed of spiked wheels. Angels saved her by breaking the torture device, thus a broken wheel is an iconographical emblem of the saint. The fragment of wheel just visible beneath Catherine's skirts was once covered with overpainting, which led to a misidentification of the figure as another virgin martyr, St. Ursula.

Typical of artists working during this time, Strozzi produced autograph copies of his own paintings, including many versions of St. Catherine. Between 1615 and 1620, he painted three near identical copies similar to the painting of the saint in the Columbia Museum of Art. The Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, the Foundation E.G. Bührle in Zurich, as well as a recently recovered Nazi-looted painting promised to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art share a full-length depiction of the beautiful saint.¹ Along with the spiked wheel, the three versions feature other attributes of Catherine's iconography, including the palm, a traditional symbol of martyrdom, a book symbolic of her erudition, a crown to signify her nobility, and a sword that refers to her death by decapitation. In contrast to the silvery sheen of Catherine's garments in the other paintings, the Columbia Museum's picture has a more subdued palette nor does she carry a sword. The raking light sets off the figure against the dark background, as well as suggests an awareness of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro effects. The robust brushwork highlights the shimmering gray-violet tones of the cloak

that wraps around the figure clad in a red dress. Resting on a large tome, her left hand holds up a martyr's palm. Pentimenti are visible around her right hand, indicating where the artist made adjustments to the figure's position. Following Catherine's gaze heavenward, the viewer is drawn to her crown and the thin golden line of a halo. Several motifs shared with the artist's other paintings in this period firmly date the painting to Strozzi's early period. The bands of decorative slits on her right arm match the garment on the young bravo seated to the left in the Worcester Art Museum's *Calling of St. Matthew*, 1620, a subject clearly inspired by Caravaggio's painting in the Contarelli Chapel in San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. St. Catherine's upturned head, the small open mouth with visible teeth, and rosy cheeks are features that she shares with the female saint in Strozzi's earlier *Martyrdom of St. Ursula*, 1610, formerly in the Luigi Koelliker Collection, Milan-London. Strozzi's *St. Ursula* painting is another example of the artist's interpretation of the revolutionary art of Caravaggio.²

by Sandra Cheng

Exhibitions: Palazzo Reale, Genoa, Italy, June 1947–September 1947; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, extended loan, 1950–1953; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, December 1961–February 1962; University Art Gallery, Binghamton, NY, October 1967–November 1967.

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Notes:

1. Christopher Knight, "Recovered Nazi-looted painting on view at LACMA," *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 2013, accessed April 9, 2015.
2. Caravaggio's late painting, *The Martyrdom of St. Ursula*, was acquired by Marcantonio Doria and transported from Naples to Genoa by May 1610, see Mina Gregori's entry on the painting in *The Age of Caravaggio*. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: Electa and Rizzoli, 1985, 352, cat. no. 101.