

BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

EN

Artworks from Gaudium Magnum Foundation
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

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Alessandro Magnasco
(Genoa, 1667-1749)

*Joseph interpreting the Baker's
& Cupbearer's dreams*

Oil on canvas
134 × 177 cm

Gaudium Magnum Foundation
– Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

Born in Genoa in 1667, Alessandro Magnasco worked mainly in Milan, where he had moved to in 1672, except for a short period in Florence, at the service of Ferdinando III de' Medici, between 1703 and 1709.

Often working in partnership with other artists, who collaborated with him on landscape backgrounds or architectural *capriccios*, Magnasco became especially well known for his slender and angular figures, loosely rendered in nervous and highly expressive impasto brushstrokes. Moving away from classical tradition and late-Baroque elegance, he combined an innovative language with uncommon iconographic motifs, depicting the everyday lives of characters on the fringes of society, usually absent from the «great painting» of his time. His scenes filled with false beggars and charlatans, inspired by the genre painting of the *bamboccianti* (Flemish painters based in Rome), by the anti-heroes of picaresque novels or the “literature of wandering”, are among his most distinctive motifs. But these portraits of organized mendicity reveal an alert, and mainly critical, gaze on a concrete reality, which went beyond the satirical or moralizing dimension of his sources, and therefore appealed to different sensibilities and audiences. The literature in the libraries of some of his Milanese patrons (such as the Arese, the Borromeo, or the Austrian governor Gerolamo di Colloredo) shows that the artist mirrored the intellectual preoccupations of a knowledgeable and educated clientele, taking part in a debate that was already foreshadowing the ideas of the Enlightenment. Thus, his scenes of the monastic life of Capuchin and Trappist monks, of meditating hermits in shadowy woods, were also echoing reformist notions of a renewed commitment to worldly detachment and prayer, promoted by authors such as Ludovico Antonio Muratori. Likewise, his depictions of rituals in synagogues or of Quaker meetings, as well as of catechism sessions in churches, may sometimes seem scathing in tone, but they convey a curiosity and an actual knowledge, on the part of his patrons, of religious diversity in a society anxious to confront popular superstition. Besides these subjects, there are also works that overtly denounce the torture practiced by the Inquisition, or judicial violence and the brutality of forced labour in the galleys, in expressive and intensely dramatic scenes that anticipate artists such as Goya or Gericault. Returning to his hometown after 1735, Magnasco lived and worked there until his final days,

even though the Genovese did not prove as receptive to his repertoire as his former clientele. He died there in 1749, at the age of 82.

At first glance, this painting might seem like another one of his works denouncing prison cruelty. However, in a peculiarly disconcerting architecture, reminiscent of the impossible perspectives and multiple viewpoints of Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons*, the mood is serene, almost melancholic, and only the chains, shackles and instruments of torture evoke the violence of captivity. Sitting on a flight of stairs, a turban wearing character, attired in noble garments of a luminous blue and white, appears to be explaining something to his ragged companions, who are intently listening to his words. In fact, the scene illustrates an episode in the biblical story of Joseph, son of Jacob, sold by his brothers to the Egyptians, and then unjustly incarcerated on a false accusation. Thanks to his intelligence and his prophetic powers — which he uses to interpret, first, the dreams of his fellow prisoners, and then, once freed, those of the Pharaoh himself — Joseph becomes governor of Egypt, where he will forgive and welcome not only his brothers, but all the Jews, and finally reunites with his father. This redemptive “hero's journey” (which is also predictive of Christ's journey) has inspired the most diverse artistic expressions, from painting to literature, but also music. Premiered in Vienna in 1726 and performed in Milan shortly after, Antonio Caldara's oratorio *Gioseffo chi interpreta i sogni* opened precisely with the scene represented here, in which an imprisoned Joseph sang of the misfortunes of being deprived of freedom: “Libertá, cara e gradita...” (“Freedom, dear and welcome”).

While the world of the stage was not alien to Magnasco, who was always keen to explore a scenographic dimension and to borrow characters and atmospheres from the theatre, here this relationship takes on a particular character: the strange architecture is, after all, a literal stage set, in the tradition of the vistas *per angolo* created by architects-scenographers such as the Galli-Bibiena, with whom the artist was no doubt familiar. Either as a memento of a particular performance or a work freely inspired by the scenography that originated it, what is undeniable is that it offers us (yet) another perspective of the painter, in his relationship with the cultural environment of his time.

MARTA CARVALHO