

BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

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Art Collection
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

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Charles de La Fosse
(Paris, 1636-1716)

The Supper at Emmaus

c.1700-1705

Oil on canvas

124,5 × 135 cm

Fundação Gaudium Magnum

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Charles de La Fosse
(Paris, 1636-1716)

Study for The Supper at Emmaus

c.1700-1705

Oil on canvas

29 × 22 cm

Fundação Gaudium Magnum

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The blessing and breaking of bread in Emmaus, close to Jerusalem, one of the scenes showing Jesus Christ after his miraculous resurrection, is the subject of these two works by French painter Charles de La Fosse, inspired by the story from the Gospel of Luke and with an iconographic tradition that was well established in European painting.

Born in Paris in 1636 to a family of silversmiths, he was an apprentice in the studio of Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), an influential painter linked to the founding of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1648. Well-travelled and eclectic, Le Brun drew inspiration from the tradition of early French baroque, as well as learning from the Bolognese colourists, ancient models, and the classical style of Raphael and his workshop.

De La Fosse encountered the same pictorial influences throughout his long formative period in Rome and Venice, with a recommendation from Colbert and a scholarship from Louis XIV, between 1658 and 1664, during which time he also became familiar with the most advanced techniques of fresco painting, which turned out to be decisive for his success in grand royal construction works.

On his return to France, once again as an associate of Le Brun, he contributed to the painting campaign for the palaces of Tuileries (1666-1667) and Versailles, from 1674 to 1710, the latter including the decoration of the Grands Appartements, the Grand Trianon and the palatine chapel. At various points, he was able to intersperse this work with prestigious commissions for the crown, including the great works on Les Invalides, for the clergy and for some of the most enlightened patrons of the day, including Lord Montagu, who asked him to work on his famous London residence, between 1689 and 1691, and, towards the end of his life, the collector Pierre Crozat, in whose Parisian mansion he stayed until his death, in 1716.

This intense activity did not prevent him from taking on the demanding role of director of the Academy, nor of discreetly following the academic dispute between the painters who supported the supremacy of drawing and those who argued the superiority of colour, a debate that dragged on through last quarter of the 17th century; nor did the bonds that tied him

to Le Brun, who favoured drawing, inhibit him from clearly siding with the latter camp. Indeed, his experiences in Italy and his admiration for the Flemish painting of the time, particularly Rubens, whose recognisable female types served as inspiration, were decisive in the formation of his own style. The marks of the Bolognese painters, such as Francesco Albani (1578-1660), are also identifiable in his work, but it was largely the Venetians, with Titian and Veronese to the fore, who made the greatest impression on him.

Although it was with compositions on large surfaces, painted as frescoes, that de La Fosse made his name, he also proved his talent on the easel, with historical painting and works inspired by mythology; he did not feel genre painting to be worthy of the same attention, however, and it has been noted that he was not even receptive to synthesis with what were seen as lesser genres, which were followed by many other artists of the day.

The Supper at Emmaus, with a preparatory study that always accompanied the main work, originally belonged to the English painter John Greenwood (1727-1792) and was later sold at Christie's, in 1774, to Lord Lyttelton, who displayed it in his Neo-Palladian mansion Hagley House, where it remained until the late 20th century.

Dating from 1700-1705, the opulent colour of the painting is undoubtedly inspired by the Venetian pictorial tradition, notably resembling compositions by Veronese, and presumably also by earlier works that the artist might have seen in the Lagoon City. Note, for example, the figuration of an elegantly-dressed Black server, a motif that first appeared on a canvas by the Venetian painter Marco Marziale (active 1492-1507), a pupil of Giovanni Bellini, now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice. The thick, rapid brush strokes accentuate the brilliance of what is really a still life, arranged on the table. The scene is bathed in a dusky light, contrasting only with the whiteness of the tablecloth over which Christ holds the bread, a gesture with a Eucharist dimension. And, in this narrative setting, also polarised between the astounded reaction of the disciples and the Redeemer's serenity, we find the characteristics of a court painter, in both the theatrical arrangement and the sophistication of the dinner service, which add an almost profane tone to the composition.

MIGUEL SOROMENHO