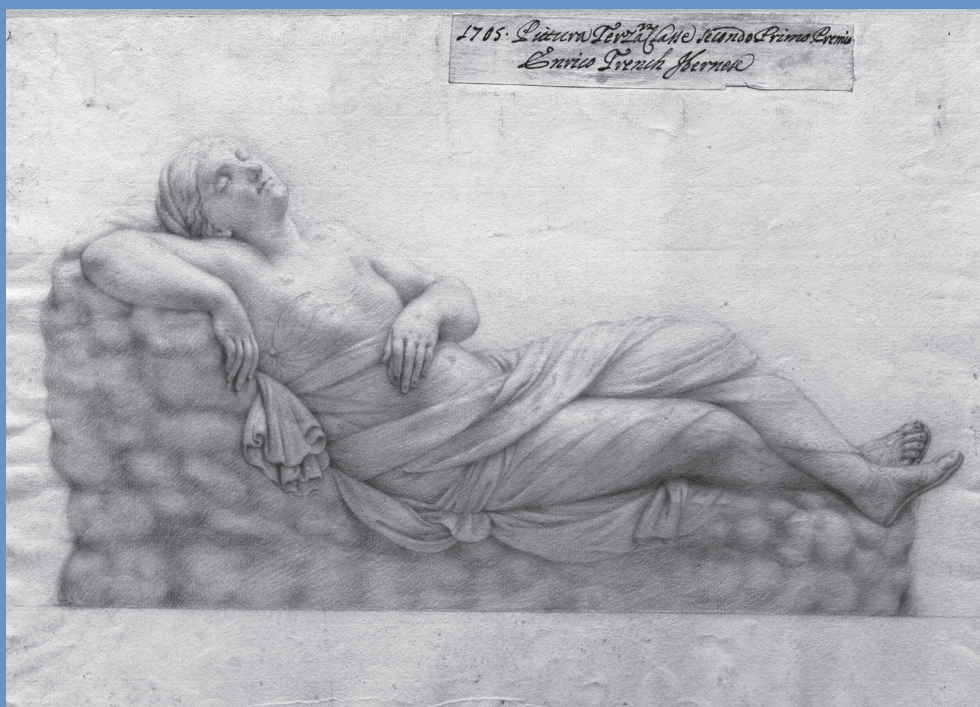


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About a Painting in Ambrosiana signed with a Monogram, and a Proposal for its Identification with Jacobus Victor

Many Italian museums possess paintings by unknown artists from northern, central and western Europe which very often have been registered under the rather generic designation *pittore nordico*. These works mostly belong to the schools of the Low Countries from the XVIth and XVIIth centuries; but even if some Italian art historians nowadays are trained in analysing paintings from the Flemish and Dutch schools, the authors of astonishing few of these paintings have been identified.

One of these works has attracted my attention because the name of the Danish-Dutch-Italian painter Eberhart Keilhau (also known as Bernardo Keilhau or Monsù Bernardo) (1624-1687), whom I have dedicated first an Italian and then a Danish monograph¹, has been involved in the attempts to unveil the author. I refer to the picture in Pinacoteca Ambrosiana (the Ambrosian Art Gallery) in Milan *Vecchia filatrice con pollame* (*Old Woman spinning with Poultry*, fig. 1, tav. XVI)². In the nineteenth century it was believed a work by the German painter established in Italy, Peter Philip Roos (in Italy known as Rosa da Tivoli) (1657-1706), until a monogram V.H. was found on the canvas, and the date of execution was changed from the XVIIth to the XVIIIth century³.

A couple of decades ago new studies resulted in its dating back again to the XVIIth century and in its attribution to an anonymous Flemish painter in proximity of Bernardo Keilhau⁴.

In 2007 the whole problem was taken up to new consideration by Gerlinde Gruber in her catalogue item in the repertory of the paintings of Ambrosiana from the last half of the XVIIth century and the whole XVIIIth century⁵. Her conclusion was that the painter with the monogram probably was the same master that had painted the two pendants in the Cathedral Museum at Mdina, Malta (figg. 2, 3, tavv. XVII, XVIII) which, together with a third painting belonging to the group, in 1969 had been attributed by Raffaello Causa to Bernardo Keilhau, and in 1988 were included in the catalogue raisonné in the monograph on this painter⁶. However, her only argument for this proposal cannot be accepted because it depended on a great misunderstanding. It sounds in this way: «Per Keil [*sic*] i netti contorni della chitarra nel *Suonatore di chitarra* (fig. 2, tav. XVII) sono atipici» («The precise outlines of the guitar in *The Guitar Player* are atypical of Keil [*sic*]»). The fact is that these *netti contorni* are not authentic but originate from the restoration of the canvas executed at the end of



1. Master of the Monogram V.H. and Bernardo Keilhau, *Old Woman Spinning with Poultry*, canvas, cm 132x180, Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana.

2. Bernardo Keilhau, *Guitar Player*, ca. 1654, canvas, cm 97x73, Mdina, Malta, The Cathedral Museum.

3. Bernardo Keilhau, *Old Woman with a Fruit Bowl*, ca. 1654, canvas, cm 97x74, Mdina, Malta, The Cathedral Museum.



the 1960s, when parts of the disappeared contours of the music instrument were painted over by the restorer⁷. This intervention is moreover very well recognizable on the picture itself. In return Mrs. Gruber made an interesting reference to a painting in a private collection in Milan representing an old woman with a distaff which, during a cleaning of the work, had revealed the signature V.H. and the year 1656. It is a great pity that the owner did not want to have the picture photographed, and sold it soon afterwards. So its whereabouts are unknown today. Anyhow, another art historian, and even a connoisseur of Keilhau's oeuvre, Maria Silvia Proni, knew very well this painting, and had not agreed with the owner in his original attribution to the Danish painter⁸. Finally Gerlinde Gruber has also nominated a photograph in the Roberto Longhi Foundation in Florence showing another version of the Ambrosiana composition where the woman is identical whereas the group of animals is reduced, and the background instead of a view to a building in a park is closed by a wall made of ashlar (fig. 4)⁹.

However, an accurate examination of the enigmatic painting rouses the suspicion that more than one hand has worked on the painting, which circumstance nobody, as far as I know, has ever considered. I suggested this possibility in my last book on Keilhau¹⁰, proposing that at least two – if not three – specialists had been engaged in the execution, a figure painter who certainly was Bernardo Keilhau, and an animal painter from the Low Countries – perhaps from the Spanish parts, but more likely from the United Provinces of the Netherlands.

My attribution to the Danish artist was based on the analysis of the woman who with a little smile observes the quarreling animals at her feet. She is a very near relative to the old women very often represented by this painter. Her special resemblances to the Mdina lady (fig. 3, tav. XVIII) allows us furthermore to presume that these two figures belong to the same period of the painter's life. I had already dated the two pendants of Malta to the months which the painter passed at Bergamo as court painter of the *luogotenente* from

4. Master of the Monogram V.H. and Bernardo Keilhau, *Old Woman Spinning with Poultry*, whereabouts unknown.



Venice, the nobleman Giovanni Carlo Savorgnan, that is to say about one year from the beginning of 1654 until the beginning of 1655¹¹. Therefore I think that the picture of Ambrosiana was executed in 1654-1655 either at Bergamo or in Venice where Keilhau spent three months in the spring of 1655 in order to finish some paintings left here, and before his definitive departure from these parts of Italy.

These conclusions are not at all in conflict with the fact that the painter with the initials V.H. has dated the above mentioned representation of a half-figure of an old woman with a distaff to the year 1656. On the contrary. To me that indicates simply that after the accomplishments of the great composition now in Ambrosiana and the other version of the composition once in Brescia (fig. 4), he has decided to execute a figure in the style of Keilhau's characteristic old women.

If we continue the critical analysis of the picture of Ambrosiana, it reveals other parts of its secrets, as for instance the special type of composition showing a female figure sitting amidst a group of *animali da corte* (domestic fowl). It is a clear derivation from a painting which passed the

Roman art market in 2004 with an attribution to the Genoese master Anton Maria Vassallo (fig. 5, tav. XIX)¹². In spite of the fact, that some components of the composition are characteristic of Vassallo, it has not been painted by him, nor by our unknown master V.H., but by an anonymous Italian painter recently baptized lo *Pseudo Salini* or *Il nodo Salini*¹³. It is not my intention to participate in the intricate complex of problems concerning the attempts to identify this artist – or these artists – which occupy some Italian art historians of our period; but I only want to point out that at least one of the authors of the *Old Woman spinning with Poultry* must have known this painting and used it as a model for a new composition enriched with some anecdotal scenes showing the daily life of domestic fowl.

A comparison of the two paintings is interesting because it tells something important of the conception of the Ambrosiana version. Even if the structure and at a certain degree also the various picture components are the same in the two editions of the subject, essential divergences exist between the Italian model and the scene which it inspired. The animals in the first case are

5. The Pseudo Salini, *Young Woman Spinning with Poultry*, canvas, cm 119,5x169, whereabouts unknown.





6. Frans Snyders, *A Hawk and a Brood Hen*, 1646, canvas, cm 113x158, Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts.

presented in a peaceful, paradisiac atmosphere and gathered around a copper basin with water in harmonious, reciprocal acceptance of each other. They are seen from various angles and in various positions as if they were created for a manual of poultry. In the second version this quiet, silent, idyllic world has been transformed into a noisy happening of agitations, quarrels, conflicts, aggressions and fights. At the top of the canvas, a cock and a turkey are making great noise in order to shoo a cat which is invading the scene from above; and in the foreground to the left a small chicken and a duckling are fighting violently, whereas the principal incident in the center of the composition represents a turkey approaching in an aggressive attitude a wickerwork basket in which is a nest with chicks and their mother, an enormous hen which, alarmed by the imminent peril, has risen and assumed a position of attack in defence of her progeny.

Such a realistic scene is not Italian. To trace the origin we must move to the Low Countries. But not all of them. Animal painters from the

northern united provinces preferred to represent the harmonious life of the animals in outside surroundings. However, that was different in the Spanish parts where Frans Snyders (1579-1657) had indicated the way towards a much more realistic and even ferocious aspect of the everyday life of animals. The invention of a cat seized by *Gier des Fleischlichen*¹⁴ creeping up on a place where there is the fragrance of meat or fish is his, just as it was also Snyders who introduced the description of two chicken fighting. Even the principal subject in the Ambrosiana composition showing the furious hen determined to defend her offspring can be traced back to the great master from Antwerp: in 1646 he signed a picture which has inspired several animal painters in all parts of the Low Countries to execute variant compositions with other kinds of animals in other kinds of surroundings. The beautiful Snyders prototype, *A Hawk and a Brood Hen* (fig. 6, tav. XX), belonging to the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest¹⁵, shows in the center foreground a splendid hen in all her might tackling the terrible

hawk which emerges in full speed from the sky direction small, scared chicks.

Even though our anonymous animal painter has shown this special subject matter of Snyder's, it is not possible from this fact to deduce that he originated from Flanders, nor that he had knowledge of the painting here reproduced. He – and naturally also Bernardo Keilhau – can in the Low Countries have seen one of the variants painted by a Flemish or a Dutch artist and taken this version as a model. Therefore we can better find his origin or at least his painting culture taking up once again our study of the picture itself, and looking once more at it in the light of its Italian model (fig. 5, tav. XIX).

The Italian painter responsible of the group of poultry has distributed the animals on a ground which permitted him to execute them individually with space between them or, where the space was not sufficient, he has used the linear perspective to place them in different levels of the composition starting from the two hens in the foreground and step by step arriving to the turkey before closing the scene with trees. In the Ambrosiana canvas, the animals – except the hen and the chickens in the foreground – have been accumulated in a way that they overlap each other. And in order to make clear the growing distance from foreground to background, he does not make use of the linear perspective but places the animals in a rather archaic manner one above the other the farther away they are considered to be. The composition is too compact, and there are too many animals concentrated upon a too limited area.

This is a rather exceptional phenomenon in paintings of the period dealing with the subject of domestic fowl. Usually the painters showed the animals in a habitat which permitted them to move around and the artists to exhibit their competence to depict them. And furthermore: our painter has not respected the proportions of the animals. For instance, the cock is too big in proportion to the turkey beside it. These characteristics most of all suggest that the author of the poultry either was a rather mediocre painter or was lacking in experience. Strange enough the foreground scene at the feet of the woman is realized with much more skill. Might it indicate that not master V.H., but his collaborator has intervened here?

Another feature which helps us to clarify the personality and the origin of the mysterious poultry painter is the chromatic scale. Here we cannot be misled, since we have to do with a monochrome painting based upon various tones of brown – in other words with a typical *toonschilderij*. This is an obvious indication that he

was not of Flemish but of Dutch origin, because this Netherlandish painting practise never gained access in the Spanish-Austrian part of the Low Countries.

Summing up our observations of the artist hidden behind the monogram, we can conclude that we have to do with a rather mediocre or perhaps immature painter originating from the Dutch painting schools, who resided in northern Italy between Bergamo and Venice in the middle 1650s and was in contact with Bernardo Keilhau, the court painter of a Venetian nobleman. Perhaps he was specialised in painting fowl, but in any case he has also executed a figure painting. His painting style was the characteristic *toonschilderij* – at least at the time around 1655 when he signed the Ambrosiana canvas with the monogram V.H.

With these informations I have a proposal to the identification – or better I have found only one artist who fulfills the conditions and therefore might possibly be the person we are searching for: the Dutch painter Jacobus Victor, born in Amsterdam as son of Louis Victor and Maria Paeuw probably in 1640. He died in the same city in december 1705. We know nothing about the beginning of his life and his first activity, neither where and with whom he served his apprenticeship and how he painted. The first notice of him dates from 1663, when he is documented in Venice as «Jacobus Fictor olandese,... mirabile nel formar animali volatili»¹⁶. In 1670 at the latest he is back again in Amsterdam where he marries, gets children and becomes a trader and the owner of a prosperous business in feathers and blankets. For many years this painter was confused with the Flemish artist Jacob van de Kerckhoven (Giacomo da Castello) (1636/1637-after 1712), he too active in Venice as a painter of poultry among other subjects¹⁷. However, in 1991 Debra Miller found out – with (Dutch) documents in the hands – that behind this confusion two different painters had been hidden¹⁸.

It is evident that when Jacobus – or Giacomo – is mentioned in a Venetian document of 1663 as «admirable in depicting fowl», he must have been well-known locally for his art, which even means that he must have been living in the town for some time. This reference is also important seen from another point of view: he is referred to as 'Fictor olandese', which reveals that he was known in Venice under that appellation. Or as he most probably had presented himself in his own language: 'Victor Hollander'. With the initials V.H. and with the Dutch pronunciation of the V as un F.

If we really have to do with our monogram painter, we must of course wonder why he has



7. Jacobus Victor, *Still Life with Fruits, Vegetables, Game and a Cat*, 1661(?), canvas, cm 112x145,5, Vicenza, Museo Civico.

used these two initials in the two paintings from around 1656 instead of signing them in one or another of the ways he used later on (Jacobus Victor or Giacomo Victor). But it has its explanation. In the 1650s he was of tender age, and almost surely he had not become a master before leaving Holland, which means that he was not yet allowed to sign paintings with his name. Once again we may wonder: if he had not finished his apprenticeship in the Netherlands, why had he then left for Italy at the age of only approximately 15 years, which was not normal at that time. But not impossible neither. For instance, Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652) is said to have left Spain for Italy even as young, and from Scandinavia we have similar examples. It happened when the young inexperienced painters had contacts or useful connections in Italy. And that is, what I think the young Jacobus also had. A contact named Bernardo Keilhau.

Above it has been noticed that nothing is known about Jacobus Victor before 1663. Therefore what posterity has written about him during the first part of his life are merely suppositions and theories without foundation on documents. It is usually supposed and even believed that he had made his traineeship at Utrecht first in the workshop of Gijsbert Gillisz. D'Hondecoeter (1604-1653) together with this painter's son Melchior (1636-1695), and secondly, after the death of Gijsbert, in that of this painter's brother-in-law, Jan Baptist Weenix (1621-1671), to whom also Melchior D'Hondecoeter transferred after his father's death¹⁹.

To make it clear, there is no substance in these proposals even if they might sound rather likely. But when we are left only to hypotheses, I think it may be allowed to make an alternative suggestion, which I should like to do in this place. First of all I am rather sceptical of the idea that Jacobus'



8. Jacobus Victor, *Three Hens with Chicks near a Reed Cage*, canvas, cm 112,5x96,5, whereabouts unknown.

parents living in Amsterdam should have sent the boy to start his apprenticeship in Utrecht in the workshop of a well-known animal painter when in Amsterdam there were many artists who accepted the novices for their first practice in drawing, copying and the other basic exercises necessary for their further traineeship. The artistic training of a son in a painter's house was an expensive affair for the father, and having him accommodated in the home of a famous artist was even more expensive. In fact, it seems to me more credible another hypothesis put forward by some scholars, namely that the boy in the start was taken care off by his much elder half-brother, Jan Victor (1619-after 1676), painter in Amsterdam of portraits, genre scenes, landscapes, historical and biblical subjects. In this case Jacobus could even continue to live at home, which was a more economical situation. Or he might have been sent to Eberhart Keilhau who had opened «*casa e scuola*» in Amsterdam after having worked first by Rembrandt van Rijn and then by Hendrick Uylenburgh²⁰.

Around 1650 the Danish painter and his works were well-known in the artistic circles of the city, as well as his departure for Italy in 1651 must have been it, too. Had the boy Jacobus been one of his «*giovani scolari*»²¹, there is nothing to prevent that he, when his teacher had left, really did go to

Gijsbert Gillisz. D'Hontecoeter in Utrecht – after having decided on animal painting, of course.

These reflections conclude in the suggestion that around 1654, when Jacobus was about fourteen years old, and before having finished his apprenticeship, he went to Venice most properly with the intention to seek his fortune there under the protection of Eberhart Keilhau and with his help. If this possibility can be accepted, his arrival must have coincided with the latter's decision to leave Venetia and Lombardy and continue his journey southward in Italy. Mere coincidence? Or has there existed a tacit agreement between the two painters to try to recommend Jacobus to Savorgnan as Eberhart's (now in Italy called Bernardo) successor or at least to make the nobleman house the young painter in Venice for a while?

For a more solid and persuasive attribution of the animal group in the Ambrosiana picture to Jacobus – or Giacomo as his name was in Italian and with which he even signed pictures after his return to Holland – the most important thing to do is naturally to compare it to paintings signed by him, even if they originate from later periods. The earliest work known today by him is a composition in Museo Civico at Vicenza signed and dated 1661 (or 1662) and showing fruits, vegetables, game and a cat (fig. 7, tav. XXI)²². It shows a rather simple composition where the various objects are distributed on almost the same picture plane in the foreground in a distinct horizontal line at the bottom and in a vertical direction at the left border. They are represented at rather irregular intervals, stuck together especially in the left side where they have been put one upon the other to give the illusion of depth until the background' composed of a stone wall built of ashlar in the upper left corner. To the right the three fruits upon the bench are painted with some space between them, but they are without connection to their support. They are simply hovering over the bench instead of resting upon it.

Two dead animals – a duck suspended from the ceiling and a hen placed upon the bench beneath – are the protagonists of the whole scene, bathed in sharp light and executed with a palette consisting of mainly white and yellowish-whitish tonalities. Even if it is not easy to find out in which plane of the composition they are situated, the rendering of their splendid plumage is of an impressive execution. No doubt where the young Dutchman had his strong point.

Seen in the light of our painting in Milan and its variant once in Brescia, we notice the same difficulty of working with space, depth and

distance in a composition. Furthermore we make again acquaintance with the ashlar wall which in an upper left corner closes the scene. And then we witness to the characterization made of Jacobus Victor by Sansovino and Martinioni in 1663 – that is to say exactly in the same period – «mirabile nel formar animali volatili»²³. Certainly, from this period and onwards Jacobus Victor seems to have concentrated his activity almost exclusively on poultry.

Another painting by him is known from the 1660s, a group of domestic fowl²⁴. The whereabouts of this signed and dated work are unknown today, but it allows us to date a variant and similar version to the very same time around 1667 (fig. 8, tav. XXII)²⁵. The two compositions show a progress which has distanced the painter a great deal from former years. He has now reached a real maturity in mastering first of all a perfect colour scheme applied to the canvas in imperceptible passages from tones of brown and reddish brown to reddish gradations. This is something which could only be observed faintly in the Ambrosiana cock craning his neck to scare the cat. Compositionally he has now got a better control of the situation. He has even ventured to create movement in the positions of the animals, apparently a new but in any case a surprising phenomenon in his interpretation of animals. However, a reminiscence from earlier has survived, namely the vertical direction of the whole composition which the painter seems to have been especially fond of. And again he resorts to the stone wall, his favourite expedient to close a composition avoiding in this way to show the animals in for instance a landscape setting as preferred by many of his fellow countrymen²⁶.

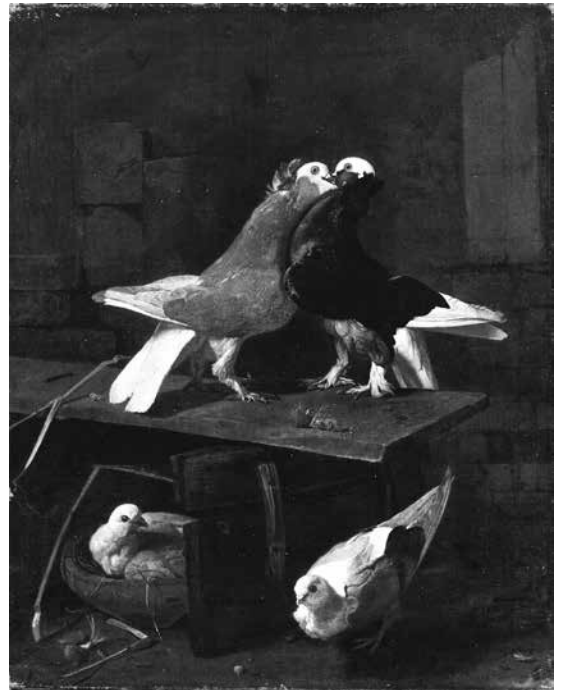
This kind of composition where the figures shown in natural size are placed in the first plane and so near to the spectator that the greater part of the whole canvas is occupied by them, is exactly the same method that Bernardo Keilhau employed. It had the 'advantage' that the space for a background scenery was reduced to a minimum. Did the young Jacobus Victor take over this painting structure from the Danish artist? At any rate it differs from the usual kind of compositions of domestic fowl by Flemish and Dutch animal painters who usually placed their animals in nature settings..

In the picture here discussed Victor has painted several chicks at the bottom of the canvas. As far as it is possible to distinguish (from a high resolution image, as I do not know the work itself), they are not executed in the same extremely detailed brushwork style as these animals are in

the Ambrosiana picture. This fact might of course raise the question of its author in the last work, a question which will be discussed later in this paper.

Among Victor's signed works is the charming painting in the Hamburger Kunsthalle called *Pigeons* (fig. 9, tav. XXIII)²⁷. Unfortunately we have no dating of it, but perhaps it was executed after the painter's return to Amsterdam, which took place probably in 1670 (he marries on the third January 1671), by the way a very unfortunate time for an artist to start living in The Dutch Republik²⁸. At any rate I don't think that it originates from the beginning of the 1660s as proposed by Bottari and Safarik²⁹. It is simply too advanced in the structure for such an early date. It shows finally our poultry painter at the summit of his ability when he had reached a better control of his earlier problems of space and linear perspective. The habitat of the birds is always the same narrow strip of ground in a poultry yard closed by an ashlar wall. And the composition holds the usual vertical direction. But now a rustic wooden bench placed diagonally traverses the scene creating the impression of depth which lacks in earlier works by the Dutch painter. It is interesting to notice that even now, when he has taken possession of

9. Jacobus Victor, *Pigeons*, canvas, cm 82x66,5, Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle (photograph: Elke Walford).



the linear perspective, he insists on using his old composition structure consisting in placing the animals over each other instead of behind each other. Apparently this is the consequence of his desire to show each bird in natural size and very near to the beholder.

After this attempt to follow Jacobus Victor and his artistic development through a selection of his signed works we have observed some characteristics which can help us to come to a decision as to our unconfirmed hypothesis that he might be the master who has signed the Ambrosiana painting with a monogram, and who probably also has worked on the canvas known from the photo in the Longhi Foundation.

It is my impression that the proposed attribution does not come into conflict with what we can deduce from this artist's oeuvre with regard to structural manner and painting style. On the contrary, there exist certain common traits which may support our theory for lack of watertight

proofs. The most important of them are the following:

– his pictures have been conceived as vertical constructions with figures and objects painted in levels above each other reaching from the bottom of the canvas to its top. Evidently it was his way of creating an effect of depth in the composition. The higher on the canvas, the farther away in the scene;

– the animals are executed in natural sizes, placed in the first plane of the painting field and very near to the observer;

– they are shown without backgrounds or landscape surroundings and move on a very narrow space usually closed by an ashlar wall or by a neutral, dark plane, seldom partly by a couple of trees with foliage, which is the case in the Milan painting, and which is the case, too, in at least one signed painting by him, *Still Life with various Dead Birds* (fig. 10, tav. XXIV)³⁰. The two trees with foliage which in this canvas cover the

10. Jacobus Victor, *Still Life with Various Dead Birds*, canvas, cm 49x63,5, whereabouts unknown.



11. Bernardo Keilhau, *A Hunter with Dog, Ducks, Chickens and Birds*, ca. 1650, canvas, cm 158x185, whereabouts unknown.



left part of the composition behind the animals correspond to the trees in the Ambrosiana painting. To the right is a view over a woodland area painted in the same manner and with the same colours on the palette which might indicate that this part also was executed by him. A detail as the grass-grown spot in the foreground on which the nearest birds are reposing appears also in the Ambrosiana composition. The dead birds are executed in a rather schematic way and without the tactile values known from his best works, or better from his mature works. In fact, the various characteristics place this work by Victor not far away from that of Ambrosiana, which suggests a rather early date (the beginning of the 1660s or even before?).

On the basis of these similarities I suggest the attribution to Jacobus Victor of the animals in the painting *Old Woman spinning with Poultry* in the Ambrosiana Art Gallery – with the exception of the group with the hen, chicks and ducklings which differs from the execution of the other animals, included the hare in the lower right corner, what concerns the unerring instinct for distribution of figures, the more meticulous execution of details, the different colouring and certainly also the use and effects of a bright and intense light. The basket, for instance, appears in a well studied distribution

of light and shadow, it has a perfect form, and its wickerwork has been executed with accuracy and patience.

As I have already insinuated, most probably we have here to do with Keilhau's brushes. He was principally figure painter, but his Dutch culture had made him even a competent painter of animals and of still life objects. This fact can be verified for instance in a charming painting from his later Amsterdam period around 1650 showing a young hunter sitting before a house and a tree near to a sea, and surrounded by his dog, birds, water fowl and poultry (fig. 11, tav. XXV)³¹. From a comparison of the animal group beneath the sitting old woman in the Ambrosiana composition with the three chickens in the lower right corner of this picture it appears in fact that the careful, minute brushwork is the same. And rather different, too, from the manner used for the chicks in Victor's *Three Hens with Chicks near to a Cage* (fig. 8, tav. XXII). So to my opinion the whole group with the hen, the small animals and the wicker basket has to be attributed to the Danish master.

Another problem is to whom the delicious background scenery showing a manor house in a park has to be attributed. Even if the surface of the canvas with time passing has suffered from darkening of the colours and the growing



12. Bernardo Keilhau, *Old Man Warming his Hand over a Coal Pot*, ca. 1648, canvas, cm 97,5x72,5, whereabouts unknown.

of yellow of the varnish – apart from the dirt – it is possible to notice and to state that the colour scheme here is different from the rest of the painting. To my opinion it is unlikely to think of Jacobus Victor as its author. Surely he must be held responsible for the trees to the left, but this part of the background manifests quite another style, and a much more careful handling. The above discussed Hampel *Still Life* (fig. 10, tav. XXIV) shows also quite another type of landscape interpretation as well as a very different chromatic scale, concentrated on dark tone values³². I can't neither believe that Bernardo Keilhau executed such a minute, realistic and I should say also professional rural view. When he showed his figures in an outdoor setting, the buildings and the vegetation usually had a typically formulaic, stylized character. No doubt the author of this part of the composition was a specialist in landscape painting.

Since the picture in all probability came into being in northern Italy, a local landscape painter could of course be considered. But the choice is rather limited, and nobody seems to be topic for a serious discussion – except perhaps Antonio

Maria Vassallo, the Genoese painter already nominated, who had served his apprenticeship with the Flemish master Vincent Malo, which explains his habit sometimes to show his figure scenes with a landscape background. In fact, his landscape style in a few cases are similar to the present view, but we don't know if he had left Genoa in 1655-1656 nor if he had visited other parts of northern Italy at that time before establishing in Milan³³. So it remains rather problematic that he should have been the third man in the collaboration.

It seems to me more likely to seek him elsewhere and move to the southern parts of the Low Countries, where the landscape painter Jan Wildens (1585/1586-1653) in Antwerp had made a great success of his business. He had even been applied to by Snyders, Rubens, Jordaens and others for painting landscape backgrounds in their figure compositions. He dies in 1653 but his realistic and at the same time idyllic landscape style survived. It is in this environment that the small background view in my opinion has been conceived. Most probably one of Wildens' successors travelling about in Italy in the mid 1650s was our missing third associate in the painting of Ambrosiana.

Concerning the Brescia version of the composition (fig. 4), it is not easy from the old and rather indistinct photo to determine if it was the first edition or a copy made after the Ambrosiana painting. For our identification of the V.H. Master, it has been of importance on account of the wall seen behind the figures, a characteristic compositional component used by Jacobus Victor and, as far as I know, not by other painters of the period. Excepting one: Bernardo Keilhau. For the fact is, that in a few paintings from this artist's later years in Amsterdam (ca. 1646-1650) he has shown a half-figure in a narrow space closed just behind the figure by an ashlar wall of exactly the same type. We have a typical example in his painting *Old Man warming his hand over a Coal Pot* (fig. 12, tav. XXVI)³⁴.

I think that such a composition executed by the Danish master in Amsterdam can be taken as a rather strong argument for the hypothesis that the boy Jacobus already before leaving the Netherlands has been in contact with the about fifteen years elder Eberhart. At any rate it shows that this often recurrent picture component in Jacobus Victor's oeuvre has been taken over directly from him.

In the Brescia canvas, the old woman with a resigned look on her face and dressed in clothes of a heavy, soft material seems to be due to the

Danish painter, but it could of course also be an exact copy executed after the Ambrosiana figure by Jacobus, whereas the small animals and the hen in the basket seem executed by a less competent hand. This impression appears in particular from the workmanship of the basket – the only part of the photo perceivable in details – which has not the same exact, circular form, and neither the meticulously correct rendering of the wickerwork. I think that this part has been painted by Jacobus Victor, which might mean that we have probably to do with a repetition of the subject matter copied by this author from the canvas more rich in anecdotes.

Summing up briefly Jacobus Victor's contribution in the painting of Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, we can conclude our examination stating that he must be held responsible for the whole left part of the composition included the scene with the cat on the stone wall and the trees behind as well as the hare on the ground in the opposite corner, which unfortunately today is partly blurred, and finally also the spot of turf below the basket near to the lower border.

The fact that only Jacobus has left a kind of signature on the canvas has no grounds for wonder. In the first place, Bernardo Keilhau practically never signed his works, whereas Jacobus Victor very often did it. But I think there might be another explanation, too. No doubt the elder painter was the moving spirit in the conception of the picture and in the invention of its composition. He was the mature artist with much experience and with a certain knowledge of Italian paintings and painters from the period. No doubt it was he who suggested a subject matter derived from the painting by lo Pseudo Salini (fig. 5, tav. XIX) and enlivened by some animating stories from the world of the animals. He was also in a situation where he had no use for blowing his own trumpet, whereas – if our proposal stated above can be accepted – his real aim with this collaboration was to help the young Dutchman to start a career in Venice and environs at his own departure.

Therefore, perhaps it was even on Keilhau's invitation that the young Victor signed the work with the initials which referred to the appellation under which he was going to be known locally for the time to come.

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NOTE

1. M. Heimbürger, *Bernardo Keilhau detto Monsù Bernardo*, Rome, 1988; Eadem, *Maleren Eberhart Keilhau 1624-1687*, Humlebak (Denmark), 2014.

2. Inv. n. 137, oil on canvas, 132 x 180 cm., acquired in 1830 as gift by will.

3. A. Ratti, *Guida sommaria per il visitatore della Biblioteca Ambrosiana e delle collezioni annesse*, Milan, 1907, p. 54.

4. M. Rossi, in M. Rossi, A. Rovetta (eds.), *La Pinacoteca Ambrosiana*, Milan, 1997, p. 230. Evidently Marco Rossi had understood that the old woman typologically belonged to Keilhau's characteristic female figures. Strange enough he thought of a painter from the Flemish school although Keilhau had his roots in Denmark and in the schools of the northern and not of the southern parts of the Low Countries.

5. G. Gruber, in *Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Tomo terzo – Dipinti della metà del Seicento alla fine del Settecento*, Musei e Gallerie di Milano, Milan, 2007, cat. n. 527.

6. In 1967 Raffaello Causa was adviser to the Cathedral Museum, and on his suggestion these three works were restored together with other important paintings belonging to the museum. See Heimbürger, *Bernardo Keilhau...*, cit., 1988, n. 82 and 83.

7. The restorer was Carmelo Said. I am grateful to Mgr John Azzopardi for all the informations about the three Keilhau pictures in the museum of Mdina. Like many other canvases of Keilhau also *The Guitar Player* has suffered from darkening, and some areas were more or less indecipherable as for instance parts of the guitar.

8. I am very thankful to Maria Silvia Proni for communicating to me what she possesses of informations about this painting.

9. In the Roberto Longhi Foundation, the photo is registered as Cerquozzi and has on its back the following inscription: «tardo seguace del van Laer e del Cerquozzi; già della fine del Seicento». According to another inscription, the painting in 1966 belonged to a private collector in Brescia.

10. Heimbürger, *Bernardo Keilhau...*, cit., cat. n. 317.

11. Eberhart Keilhau was born in 1624 in Helsingør (Denmark) as son of a German painter, who was engaged by the King at the Castle of Kronborg, and his Flemish wife. At the age of twelve he was sent to the workshop of Morten van Steenwinckel (1595-1646) in Copenhagen, and after six years of apprenticeship here he went to Amsterdam, where he was received by Rembrandt on the recommendation of some relatives of his mother. After two years as assistant of this great master he was active for three years in Hendrick Uylenburgh's academy. Then, in 1647, he established in Amsterdam with his own workshop and received apprentices. In 1651 he left Holland in order to visit Italy before the planned return to Denmark. Shortly after arriving in Venice he got the job as painter in the house of the nobleman Giovanni Carlo Savorgnan, and when the latter in 1654 was appointed *luogotenente* at Bergamo, Eberhart – or Bernardo as he was called now by the Italians – accompanied him as his court painter. He remained in

that town more than a year, exercising his métier also for local families, before deciding to continue his journey in Italy. He first returned for three months to Venice in order to finish some paintings left behind in the Savorgnan palace, and set out for Rome after a stay at Ravenna. In Rome he settled definitively, and without ever seeing again his native land he died in this town the 3rd February 1687.

12. The picture originating from a Roman private collection appeared in Rome (Sotheby's), 8-05-2004, n. 450. I thank Alberto Chiesa, Sotheby's Italy, who found much difficulty in recuperating for me the old photograph of the painting.

13. The expression *Il nodo Salini* was invented by Franco Paliaga in order to indicate a group of genre pictures which falsely had been believed to be works by Tommaso Salini, but in reality originated from a studio of artists who used preestablished models for the figures of animals and the objects in the compositions. F. Paliaga, *Sui dipinti di genere con animali vivi attribuiti a Salini*, in P. Carofano (ed.), *Atti delle giornate di studi sul Caravaggismo e il naturalismo nella Toscana del Seicento*, Pontedera, 2009, pp. 117-144.

14. H. Robels, *Frans Snyders Stilleben- und Tiermaler 1579-1656*, Munich, 1989, p. 192.

15. Inv. n. 751, oil on canvas, 113 x 158 cm., signed and dated 'Fr. Sneyders. Pinx. 1646'. *Ibidem*, n. 208.

16. The quotation is from F. Sansovino and G. Martinioni, *Venetia città nobilissima ed singolare....*, Venice, 1663 (appendix); first quoted by R. Pallucchini, *La pittura veneziana del Seicento*, Milan, 1981, p. 327. Writing the artist's surname with an F, the Italian author ignored evidently that his Dutch/German surname started with a V although it was pronounced as an F.

17. Pallucchini, *La pittura veneziana del Seicento*, cit., pp. 327-328. This famous scholar, who refers to various local documents, was not the only author to believe that the two names written in the old texts dealt with one and the same painter.

18. D. Miller, *A Confusion of Names: Jacobus Victors and Jacob van de Kerckhoven*, in «Old Holland», 105 (1991), pp. 44-49.

19. This hypothesis was first proposed by F. Bottari and E.A. Safarik, in F. Zeri, *La natura morta in Italia*, Milan, 1989, I, pp. 349-354. Although the proposal was merely hypothetical, later authors have not shrunk from repeating it as the fact of the matter.

20. These informations are told by Filippo Baldinucci in his biography of Keilhau. F. Baldinucci, *Delle Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua*, 6, Florence, 1728, pp. 510-516.

21. *Ibidem*, p. 511. It has not yet been possible to trace any of Keilhau's young apprentices. If Jacobus had started his apprenticeship at the age of ten years, he might have been able to stay with Keilhau as one of his *giovani scolari* for several months before the Danish master left Amsterdam for Germany and Italy in 1651.

22. Inv. n. A 265, oil on canvas, 112 x 145,5 cm. It has been signed 'J. victor. f. A. 166[1?]'. The last figure, which is no more legible, has been interpreted as one when the signature was found during a restauration. In the

following, only works signed by Victor will be discussed, whereas all paintings attributed to him with more or less probability are ignored.

23. See note 16.

24. Oil on canvas, 106 x 88 cm., signed 'JACOMO VICTOR 1667'. In the 1990s the painting belonged to Galleria D'Orlane, Casalmaggiore.

25. Oil on canvas, 112,5 x 96,5 cm., signed 'Jacomò Victor. F.'. The painting was presented in Amsterdam (Christie's) 9-11-2010, n. 62. Judged from photographs, the canvas seems in some parts to have suffered from darkening of the colours.

26. His reluctance to show the domestic fowl in landscape surroundings resulted in the fact that sometimes he has called for help from a landscape painter. See for instance the painting *Three Pigeons* in Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, inv. n. Sp. 576, where the landscape was painted by Jacob Isaacksz. van Ruisdael. The canvas is signed by both painters.

27. Inv. n. HK-393, oil on canvas, 82 x 66,5 cm., signed 'Jacomò Victor. f.'.

28. The *rampjaar* of 1672 (the disaster year) made earning difficult for the Dutch artists and forced many – among them also Jacobus Victor – to search other ways of surviving. After the success which Jacobus seems to have enjoyed by his Venetian clientele and younger painters, another bad surprise must have discouraged him at the return, namely that the conception of animal painting had changed. The type of compositions which he had dedicated many years abroad to cultivate, to ameliorate and to perfect, was no more in great demand on the art market in Holland.

29. Zeri, *La natura morta in Italia*, cit., p. 350.

30. Oil on canvas, 49 x 63,5 cm., signed 'Jacobus Victor' with red colour (partly blurred) in the lower left corner. The picture has appeared in two sales of Hampel Fine Art Auctions, Munich, 26-06-2009, n. 273, and 10-12-2011, n. 1001. I am very grateful to Hampel auctioneers for providing me with photographs of the painting for publication in this place.

31. The painting was sold in Amsterdam (Sotheby's), 19-11-1996 n. 60 and provided with the information that it had belonged to Princess Christina of the Netherlands. It was sold again in New York (Christie's), 14-04-2016, n. 229, and has been published in Heimbürger, *Maleren Eberhart Keilhau* cit., n. 311.

32. The same kind of a dark background view composed mainly of fit groups of trees reappears in a few other works by the painter: *Fighting Cocks*, Luzern (Galerie Fischer), 24-11-1995, n. 2013, and *Poultry*, Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, inv. n. KMS 616.

33. The latest pieces of information concerning the much insufficiently documented painter are published by A. Orlando, *Pittura fiammingo-genovese. Nature morte, ritratti e paesaggi del Seicento e primo Settecento. Ritrovamenti dal collezionismo privato*, Turin, 2012, pp. 160-175.

34. Oil on canvas, 97,5 x 72,5 cm. Heimbürger, *Bernardo Keilhau....*, cit., n. 8; Eadem, *Maleren Eberhart Keilhau*, cit., n. 12. Vienna (Dorotheum), 19-12-2016, n. 197 (with the title *Allegory of Winter*).



XVI. Master of the Monogram V.H. and Bernardo Keilhau, *Old Woman Spinning with Poultry*, canvas, cm 132x180, Milan, Pinacoteca Ambrosiana.



XVII. Bernardo Keilhau, *Guitar Player*, ca. 1654, canvas, cm 97x73, Mdina, Malta, The Cathedral Museum.



XVIII. Bernardo Keilhau, *Old Woman with a Fruit Bowl*, ca. 1654, canvas, cm 97x74, Mdina, Malta, The Cathedral Museum.

XIX. The Pseudo Salini, *Young Woman Spinning with Poultry*, canvas, cm 119,5x169, whereabouts unknown.





XX. Frans Snyder, *A Hawk and a Brood Hen*, 1646, canvas, cm 113x158, Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts.

XXI. Jacobus Victor, *Still Life with Fruits, Vegetables, Game and a Cat*, 1661(?), canvas, cm 112x145,5, Vicenza, Museo Civico.





XXII. Jacobus Victor, *Three Hens with Chicks near to a Reed Cage*, canvas, cm 112,5x96,5, whereabouts unknown.



XXIII. Jacobus Victor, *Pigeons*, canvas, cm 82x66,5, Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle (photograph: Elke Walford).

XXIV. Jacobus Victor, *Still Life with Various Dead Birds*, canvas, cm 49x63,5, whereabouts unknown.





XXV. Bernardo Keilhau, *A Hunter with Dog, Ducks, Chickens and Birds*, ca. 1650, canvas, cm 158x185, whereabouts unknown.

XXVI. Bernardo Keilhau, *Old Man Warming his Hand over a Coal Pot*, ca. 1648, canvas, cm 97,5x72,5, whereabouts unknown.

