



## ROSALBA CARRIERA (1675 -1757)

*Cleopatra Holding a Pearl*

c. 1725

Pastel on blue paper laid on canvas  
14 ¼ x 11 ¼ in. (36.1 x 28.5 cm)

### PROVENANCE

M. Euler, Paris;

Paris, Hôtel de Bullion, 9 April 1781, lot 26 (72 livres);

Sir Cecil Fane de Salis, Henley;

London, Christie's, 11 March 1932, lot 93;

Arthur Ackermann & Sons, London, acquired from the above;

Count Pio de Persico, acquired from the above and thence by descent (according to the below sale catalogue);

London, Christie's, 3 July 2007, lot 57 (as 'Portrait of a Girl');

Galleria Previtali, Bergamo;

Private collection, Germany;

Hampel, Munich, 27 March 2025, lot 270;

Philip Mould and Company, London, acquired from the above.

### EXHIBITIONS

Gorizia, Palazzo della Torre, *Le Meraviglie di Venezia*, 14 March-27 July 2008, no. 43.

### LITERATURE

Dario Succi and Annalia Delneri, *Le Meraviglie di Venezia: dipinti del '700 in collezione private* [Venice: Marsilio, 2008], pp. 154-55, illus.

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastelists before 1800*, Online edition, no. J.21.179372, illus. (also under J.21.17937 and J.21.1794).

*This work will be included in the artist's forthcoming catalogue raisonné, written by Xavier Salomon.*

PHILIP MOULD  
—  
& COMPANY



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Rosalba Carriera was perhaps the most celebrated artist in early 18th century Europe and a pioneer of the development of pastel as a medium for portraiture. It was largely due to her exploration of the medium and her technical brilliance that pastels gained new popularity.[1] Rosalba's father had encouraged her initial training with the Venetian artist, Antonio Balestra, and her interest in pastels may have arisen from a chance meeting with artists visiting her native city from Paris or Rome. Her slow progress professionally may relate to the difficulties faced by a woman wishing to break into the ranks of the powerful male artists guilds. She was thirty-two before she gained admission to her first professional body, the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome, on 27 September 1705, with the help of her brother-in-law, Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini. Nevertheless, her reputation continued to grow, reaching its apogee when she accepted an invitation to Paris in 1720 from the grand collector and arbiter of taste, Pierre Crozat. From that time, she was assured a ready market for her portraits in the courts and palaces of Europe, especially from the English milords, whose attentions she likened in 1721 as "*attaqué par les Angles*".[2]

Rosalba has chosen to illustrate a scene from the infamous encounter between Cleopatra and Mark Anthony, as recorded by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*: [3] "*There were two pearls that were the largest in the whole of history; both were owned by Cleopatra, the last of the Queens of Egypt—they had come down to her through the hands of the Kings of the East... In accordance with previous instructions the servants placed in front of her only a single vessel containing vinegar, the strong rough quality of which can melt pearls.*" [4] *She was wearing in her ears that remarkable and truly unique work of nature. Antony was full of curiosity to see what she was going to do. She took one earring off and dropped the pearl in the vinegar, and when it was melted swallowed it.*"

In Rosalba's image, she has closely followed Pliny's account. The Egyptian Queen is shown with the two giant pearls, one she holds between her fingers, delicately suspended on the point of dropping it in to the cup of vinegar - the other still hangs from her left ear. Her exotic headdress is festooned with jewels. As much as using the pearls as an attribute for the identification of Cleopatra, the artist has chosen to illustrate this very moment in the story of her engagement with Mark Anthony, when she confounds him with her strength of will and begins her conquest of his heart. Delneri is surely right to observe "*un'atmosfera di sottile seduzione*", reinforced by the almost exposed breast on the left.[5] There is a clear purpose behind the choice of subject. Cleopatra, as an historic paradigm, was engaged on equal terms with the rulers of the ancient world, politically, militarily and romantically, providing a model of womanhood that even the most reactionary of contemporary observers could understand. In the story, she scorned the value of her celebrated pearls to drive home to Mark Anthony her queenship and her power. For Rosalba, given her own youthful struggle to gain recognition in her chosen field, it must have been supremely satisfying, when she had reached the pinnacle of professional success in the world of art, to reflect upon and remind the viewer of such a triumphant, classical precedent of femininity.

This example of Rosalba's work can be celebrated for other reasons too. The condition of the pastel, one of the most vulnerable and fugitive of drawing media, is almost miraculous in its state of preservation. The colours are unfaded and full of subtlety, the different pastels woven together, allowing individual strokes to remain clearly visible across the surface of the sheet. In places the pastel has been laid on thickly like impasto in an oil painting. The support remains attached to its original stretcher, and the blue paper on which it is made is folded around the sides where it is tacked to the wood. None of the original support for the work has been disturbed over the three hundred years since its



creation. Although chronology is difficult with Rosalba, since none are dated, it can be pieced together from the records of her travels, the diaries and letters of her sitters, and the notes kept in her own diaries. Delneri's understanding of the style has led her to suggest that it was made at the height of Rosalba's powers, around 1725.[6]

Jeffares, in his biography of Rosalba, describes her technique thus, "*Eyes, nose and face are modelled with an intelligence that defies analysis.*"[7] Among her many distinguished sitters were, William Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire, the Empress Elisabetha of Austria, Countess Orzelska, Duchess of Schleswig-Holstein, Viscount Coke of Holkham Hall, King Augustus III of Poland, and most importantly, Frederick Christian, Prince-Elector of Saxony. His collection in Dresden eventually amassed no less than 157 of her works. An illustration of the status of the present pastel is revealed in the copies made after it in the 18th century, one of which is in the Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, Innesbruck,[8] with a second being on the art market in London.[9]

[1] For further information on Carriera's contribution to the development of pastel as a medium, see Thea Burns, *The Invention of Pastel Painting* (London: Archetype, 2007), 101-130, quoted in Wunsch, O. "Rosalba Carriera's Four Continents and the Commerce of Skin," *Journal 18*, Issue 10 1720 (Fall 2020), <https://www.journal18.org/5218>.

[2] Quoted in Jeffares, Online, p. 2.

[3] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History (Naturalis Historia)* (Book IX, 59, 119-21). It was recounted again in the 5th century by Macrobius in his *Saturnalia* (Book III, 17.14-17)

[4] Perhaps sadly, the story must be apocryphal. Vinegar does not have the ability to dissolve pearls although it is quite useful for cleaning them.

[5] Succi and Delneri, *Le Meraviglie*, p. 154.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Quoted in Jeffares, Online edition, p. 5.

[8] Innesbruck, *Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum*, Inv. 1127.

[9] Most recently, this version appeared at Bonhams, Knightsbridge, 8 April 2020, lot 201.