

# PORTRAIT OF VINCENZO BELLINI (1819)



## *Giuseppe Cammarano*

*(Sciacca (Agrigento) 1766 - Napoli 1850)*

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**Misure:** 49,5 x 39 cm

**Tecnica:** oil on canvas

Signed and dated lower right: “Gius. Cammarano f. 1819”

Provenance: Naples, private collection (since 1970s)

Bibliography: G. Brevetti, *L'altra faccia di un “bad painter of royalty and Olympus”*. Su Giuseppe Cammarano e il suo inedito ritratto di Vincenzo Bellini, in “Valori Tattili”, n. 18, 2021, pp. 60-73.



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The young man looking to his right with two small but lively eyes and tawny, tousled hair, is the protagonist of this striking portrait by Giuseppe Cammarano, a prominent painter in Naples at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. Originally from Sciacca, he belonged to a family of theatre people and trained with Fedele Fischetti and Domenico Chelli. Cammarano was able to combine the Rococo colour traditions of 18th-century Neapolitan painting with the influences of Neoclassicism, matured following his collaboration with Philipp Hackert and his Roman stay, during which he had the opportunity to spend time with artists such as Luigi Sabatelli. Thanks to his versatility, he succeeded in gaining the trust of both the Bourbons and Murat, for whom he executed some frescoes and several portraits. Cammarano was also confirmed as the official court painter following the return to the throne of Ferdinand I, who commissioned him to paint the first portrait of the “restored” sovereign, designed to visually re-establish the Bourbon's sovereignty - he was portrayed between an allegory of Justice and the Gulf of Naples with a smoking Vesuvius (Caserta, Palazzo Reale). In 1816, he was then chosen to make the velarium of the San Carlo with Apollo introducing the greatest poets, from Homer to Alfieri, to Minerva.

In 1819, the date next to the signature at the bottom right of this portrait, Cammarano was busy decorating a room in the Royal Palace with the subject of Minerva rewarding the Virtues, but above all making portraits of the family members of the prince heir Francis I (Caserta, Royal Palace), which were to be included the following year in the large group portrait (now in Capodimonte) in which the spontaneity achieved in the individual portraits is lost, replaced by rather funny and disharmonious results. However, compared to those academic and clearly well-defined portraits, in this painting of a disheveled young man, the atmosphere is completely different. Evidently, not “restrained” by a courtly purpose, Cammarano felt free to venture into a style of painting not bound to strict rules and, in line with his young age and the temperament of his subject, produced an image that exudes energy and vitality with a romantic touch, shedding a new and unprecedented light on the evolution of the painter's portrait painting.

The subject in question is most likely to be identified with a very young Vincenzo Bellini, whose features are well known thanks to a considerable number of portraits that show a variety of his



physiognomic features such as the reddish hair, the shape of the eyes, the full lips, the earring on the left ear lobe, and more generally the Norman appearance. If we compare our portrait in particular with the one preserved at the Conservatorio San Pietro a Majella in Naples - dubiously attributed to Cammarano himself and probably executed a few years later - we can see a very close resemblance, not only in the facial features, but also in the choice of the young composer's posture, here too facing to his right. This second portrait would therefore have been made based on the first one, which would also have served as a precedent for a third portrait, also painted by Cammarano and in which, unlike the first two, the subject looks to his left (Naples, San Martino Museum).

The date of execution supports the hypothesis that Bellini himself is portrayed in our painting. The young musician arrived in Naples on 18 June 1819, not eighteen yet, from his native Catania to attend the Real Collegio di Musica di S. Sebastiano. It is therefore to be assumed that, as soon as he arrived in the city, he turned to the most prominent painter of the moment - a Sicilian like himself and accustomed to frequenting the theatrical and musical worlds - so that he could capture his beardless features and exuberant vitality. Besides representing an unusual and remarkable example of Cammarano's portrait production, the painting therefore constitutes an extraordinary visual testimony of what the painter looked like when he landed on the Continent, ready to become a successful artist.

*Giulio Brevetti*

