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PRESS RELEASE

ARIE DI TESTE: ITALIAN OIL PAINTINGS ON PAPER, 1500–1800

Colnaghi London — 23 November 2026–29 January 2027

Colnaghi is pleased to announce a landmark exhibition and scholarly catalogue devoted to a medium that resists the conventional divisions between painting and drawing.

Colnaghi presents *Arie di Teste: Italian Oil Paintings on Paper, 1500–1800*, an exhibition bringing together twenty-eight works that reconsider the history, function and artistic significance of oil painting on paper. Curated by Dr Luca Baroni, Director of the Rete Museale Marche Nord, and Federico Bonezzi of Colnaghi, the exhibition will open at Colnaghi, 26 Bury Street, London, during the week of 23 November 2026. Highlights will then be presented at Colnaghi New York in occasion for Master Drawings New York.

Oil on paper occupies an unusually mobile position in the history of European art. It combines the immediacy and portability of drawing with the colour, surface and possibilities of painting. From the late fifteenth century, artists used the medium to examine heads and expressions, test compositions, explore the effects of light and colour, and develop ideas that might later be carried into larger works. Some sheets appear closely connected to a particular commission; others feature observation or invention whose purpose remains less certain. The range of these uses, and the difficulty of assigning the works to a single category, have made oil on paper a greatly compelling yet comparatively neglected subject of study.

The exhibition takes that difficulty as its point of departure. Scholarship has often treated these paintings through the study of individual artists or regional schools, while their connections across artistic centres, their varied functions and their place within an artist's practice have received less attention. Since Rudolf Wittkower's introduction to *Masters of the Loaded Brush: Oil Sketches from Rubens to Tiepolo* (New York, 1967), which examined the broader tradition of oil sketching, the field has developed through important studies and exhibitions, but no comprehensive account has yet been established. Works whose relationship to a documented commission is unclear have at times been treated as workshop derivatives, despite the quality and independence of their execution.

Arie di Teste proposes a broader framework. Arranged chronologically and by school, the exhibition traces the medium across Italian artistic centres, with particular concentrations in Bologna and Urbino and examples connected with Venice, Emilia, Rome, Tuscany and Naples. It begins with a rare portrait by the German Renaissance painter Hans Maler, executed in oil on vellum, a flexible support that anticipates the use of paper. From there, the selection includes works associated with Dosso Dossi, Francesco Salviati, Girolamo Muziano, Paolo Veronese and Jacopo Tintoretto; Federico Barocci and the Carracci; and Giovanni Battista Castiglione, Francesco Mola and Jan Boeckhorst. The exhibition

concludes in the eighteenth century with a study by Anton Raphael Mengs for his *Noli me tangere* in Oxford.

The range of subjects makes clear that oil on paper was not confined to a single stage in the making of a painting. The exhibition draws attention to portraits and studies of heads, including depictions of children and older people; compositional and nude studies; and works that test the disposition of figures or the effects of colour and light. It also considers how images might be reused, adapted and circulated. In some cases, a sheet may have served a preparatory purpose; in others, it may have functioned as a *modello* or an independent *ricordo*, or may record an encounter with a sitter that was complete in itself. The works therefore invite close consideration of their material construction and of the particular circumstances in which they were made, rather than classification according to a single presumed function.

The title refers to the study of heads, one of the most distinctive applications of the medium. Giorgio Vasari's phrase *arie di teste* evokes the variety of expressions and character types that artists could observe and record in paint. The heads associated with Federico Barocci and the Carracci are especially significant in this regard. Their subjects include men and women of different ages, children, and sitters whose expressions or physical circumstances invite close attention. These paintings make visible the medium's capacity to bring together observation and painterly freedom: colour can be worked directly on the sheet, while the surrounding setting may remain unresolved.

Barocci's practice provides a central point of enquiry in the exhibition and catalogue. His use of oil on paper, considered alongside his drawings and paintings, offers a means of examining how artists moved between media and supports. The Carracci material presents a different but related set of questions. Their heads constitute one of the largest and most closely debated groups of oil paintings on paper, raising questions of attribution, workshop practice and the status of apparently informal studies. The catalogue considers these questions as open areas of research, bringing technical evidence and close examination of the objects into dialogue with historical documentation and established scholarship.

The accompanying scholarly catalogue extends the exhibition's argument through essays on the changing reception of the oil sketch; the scope and functions of oil paintings on paper; material experiments and fifteenth-century precedents; Federico Barocci's practice; and the complex questions surrounding heads associated with the Carracci. By bringing works from different regions and generations into direct comparison, *Arie di Teste* makes the versatility of oil on paper visible as a steady artistic practice. The exhibition asks how artists used this adaptable surface, how their contemporaries understood and collected such works, and how they should be considered within the broader history of Italian and European art.

Exhibition Information

Title: *Arie di Teste: Italian Oil Paintings on Paper, 1500–1800*

Dates: 23 November 2026 – 29 January 2027

Location: Colnaghi, 26 Bury Street, London SW1Y 6AL, United Kingdom

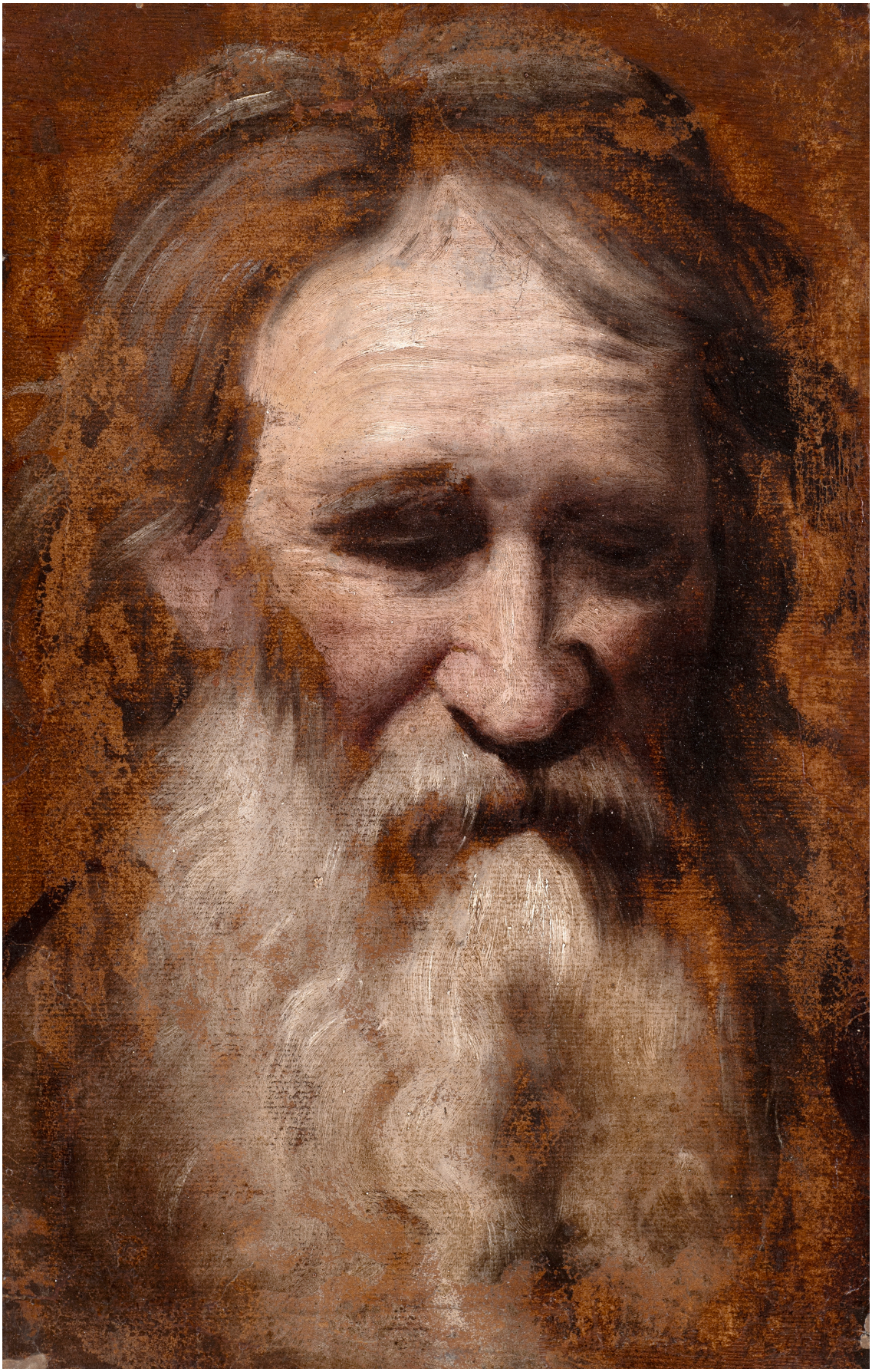
Opening Hours: Monday to Friday, 10am – 6pm

For inquiries: press@colnaghi.com

Website: https://www.colnaghi.com/



Francesco Salviati (Florence 1510–Rome 1563), *Portrait of Giovanni da Cepperello*, ca. 1538, oil on paper, 44 × 34 cm (17 3/10 × 13 2/5 in.).



Annibale Carracci (Bologna 1560–Rome 1609), *Head of an Old Bearded Man*, oil on paper laid on canvas, 38.8 × 25 cm (15 1/4 × 9 7/8 in.).



Federico Barocci (Urbino c. 1533–1612), *Head of Saint John the Evangelist*, possibly after 1582 and before 1607–1608, oil on paper laid on canvas, 39.4 × 29.9 cm.



Cristofano Allori (Florence 1577–1621), *Head of a Boy Looking Down*, oil on paper laid on canvas, 36.5 × 26 cm (14 3/8 × 10 1/4 in.).



Anton Raphael Mengs (Aussig 1728–Rome 1779), *Head of a Woman Looking Up*, oil on paper laid on board, 38.6 × 30.5 cm (15.2 × 12 in.).