

Antonio Mancini, *Self Portrait with Plate*
1852 – Rome – 1930

oil on canvas

26 ½ by 19 ¼ inches (67.4 by 49 cm)

signed and dated bottom right: 'A. Mancini / di Roma'

provenance: Thomas Lawson, Boston;
Scott & Fowles New York;
Alvan Tufts Fuller, Boston;
Collection Pospisil, Venice;
Private Collection, Milan

exhibited: New York, The American Art Galleries, 1923.
Milan, Villa Comunale, 1962.

literature: The Thomas W. Lawson Collection / At the American Art Galleries, New York, to be sold at unrestricted public sale / in the assembly hall / of The American Art Galleries ; February 3rd, 1923; sale on thursday afternoon february 8th., n. 204 ripr..
A. Lancellotti, Antonio Mancini, Istituto Nazionale L.V.C.E. Officine dell'Istituto italiano delle Arti Grafiche, Bergamo 1931, n.10 ripr..
M. Sciuti, La malattia mentale di Antonio Mancini, Estratto del fasc. III, 1947 della Rivista "L'Ospedale Psichiatrico", fondata da Michele Sciuti, Napoli, Tip. Ospedale Psichiatrico "L. Bianchi" 1947, pp. 42, 52, ripr 16.
Mostra di Antonio Mancini, introduzione di C. Lorenzetti, presentazione di F.Bellonzi, Milano, Villa Comunale, ottobre – novembre 1962, Milano 1962, p. 36 n. 48, tav XLVIII.
Antonio Mancini / Nineteenth - Century / Italian Master / Celebrating the Vance N. Jordan Collection / at the Philadelphia Museum of Art , Catalogo a cura di U. W. Hiesinger, pubblicato in occasione della mostra al Philadelphia Museum of Art, 20 ottobre 2007 – 20 gennaio 2008, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 106, nota 113.

note: Antonio Mancini was one of the leading figures of nineteenth-century European painting. In his lifetime, he was admired and emulated by Italian and foreign artists and was widely acclaimed by critics and the general public. One of Mancini's admirers was the illustrious American painter, John Singer Sargent. Indeed, Sargent wrote of Mancini, "I have met in Italy the greatest living painter."

Born in Rome to an Umbrian family of humble origins, Mancini trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Naples under the supervision of Domenico Morelli. He began his career in 1868 with the painting the Street Urchin, which found the admiration and appreciation of his teacher. From 1872 onwards, Morelli began to display his work at the Paris salons. He visited the French capital twice, also participating in the Universal Exhibition of 1878 and enjoying great success. On his return to Naples, he began to suffer from symptoms consistent with a psychotic disorder, which led to treatment in a lunatic asylum from the end of 1881 to February 1882. In 1883, Mancini returned to Rome.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Mancini travelled to England, Ireland and Germany where he painted important portraits, especially for local middle-class clients. He took part in leading exhibitions all over the world. In 1904, he won the gold medal at the

Universal Exhibition in Saint Louis for his “Portrait of Marchese Giorgio Capranica del Grillo” (National Gallery, London, on loan to the Hugh Lane Municipal Art Gallery, Dublin). At the Venice Biennale in 1920, where a solo exhibition was devoted to his paintings, he enjoyed unprecedented success and all his works were sold. In December 1930, while he was painting the final works for the Rome Quadriennale, which was to be held the following year, the artist died in house on the Aventine Hill.

In the present work, Mancini portrays himself in half-length bust, with one of his renowned painted plates in the foreground. These plates were ordinary ceramic dishes on which he created full-length figures, frequently naked, faces or portraits. His method was to use just his fingertips, dipped in paint, in the matter of a few seconds. His habit was to give these plates to a restaurateur or friend in exchange for a meal. The plate depicted here by Mancini, rendered with just a few deft touches, shows simply a head with a large headdress. It stands out against the dark background while the outer edge of the dish, left in its natural white, acts as a frame. Mancini enjoyed painting self-portraits throughout his life, from the first studies he made when he was only fourteen until 1929, just a year before his death.

This work belongs to the group of important, youthful self-portraits made during the so-called “period of madness” which can be traced back to the late 1870s – after his return from Paris – and continued until 1883 when he moved from Naples to Rome, including the brief phase spent in a mental institution. The facial features of the painter correspond most closely to the period 1882-83, as does the expression of excitement and the sneering smile, which occur fairly frequently in the self-portraits painted during that moment. Of Mancini’s known works, this is one of the most significant and complete from a pictorial perspective.

During this period his self-portraits were more frequently sketched, almost drawn, painted in oil on paper, often with a single colour such as the Naples self-portrait (Museo di Capodimonte) and Milan self-portrait (Museo della Scienza e della Tecnica). Here, broad brushstrokes were carefully applied to create the essential lines of the features of the face and the dark jacket while the plate is portrayed in a more controlled manner. The figure of the painter emerges from a bipartite background, light on the right and dark on the left, according to a procedure frequently repeated by Mancini in the following years.

The artist proved popular amongst collectors in the United States. In about 1907, Mancini received a commission to paint a large, full-length portrait of Thomas W. Lawson, an American financier from Boston given the moniker “the king of copper”. The self-portrait with the plate became part of Lawson’s collection in the same year and was later auctioned at the American Art Galleries in New York in 1923.

Subsequently, the self-portrait was with the well-regarded New York firm, Scott & Fowles. The work appears to have been purchased from the gallery by the American businessman and politician Alvan Tufts Fuller, the governor of Massachusetts from 1925 to 1929. His collection, including the present painting, came under the hammer at Christie’s, London, in December 1961. It was at this date that the painting returned to Italy. It was amongst the most-significant works by the painter selected for the large exhibition held at the Villa Comunale, Milan, in 1962. Thereafter, it remained tucked away in a private collection for over fifty years.

Cinzia Virno