

DESCRIVEDENDO

Errand Boy Seated with a Basket on His Back, Eggs and Poultry Giacomo Ceruti (Pitocchetto)

“Errand Boy Seated with a Basket on His Back, Eggs and Poultry” is the title of this work by Giacomo Ceruti known as il Pitocchetto, painted between approximately 1730 and 1735. The painting measures 130 centimetres high by 95 centimetres wide and is therefore presented as a rectangle with the longest side vertical. It is an oil on canvas, painted in a realistic manner: that is, the use of shapes and colours tends to reproduce in detail what the human eye perceives.

In an unrecognisable setting, the painting depicts a modest-looking boy who is a 'porter', i.e. he earns his living by carrying what can be contained in a large wicker basket. He is seated on a stone, dressed in humble clothes, with his basket, empty at the moment, slung over his shoulder, the handle slung over his shoulders, and holding a live cock and hen and a basket of eggs in his hands. The painter portrays him full-length from a close distance, standing at his height. The boy is seated almost in profile, facing to the left of the canvas; his face, on the other hand, is turned three-quarters and looks towards the spectator.

To better understand the position of the various elements in the work, let us now try to imagine it divided into 9 sectors of equal size, obtained by crossing three columns and three rows. To each sector, by convention, we give the numbering used in telephone keypads. From left to right: 1, 2, 3 at the top; 4, 5, 6 in the middle; 7, 8, 9 at the bottom.

The face occupies sector 2. The porter has the features of a young boy: under a black woollen cap he shows in three-quarter view mainly the left side of a face with still childlike features. In it, the eyes stand out, large and dark, intensely looking at us. A few wisps of brown hair come out haphazardly on the left side from under the cap, which covers a good part of the ear; the forehead is partly covered by the headgear and ends with two straight, thin eyebrows; the rounded nose and smooth cheeks seem barely flushed; the closed mouth shows full, deep pink lips. The face conveys a sad and fatigued air, like the figure as a whole.

The boy's torso occupies section 5. He appears slightly reclined backwards, leaning against the large, tall basket he carries on his shoulders. He wears a frayed shirt of a dull white, held open at the front and over it passes diagonally, from the right shoulder to the left arm, the wicker strap of the large basket carried behind. The left arm is stretched along the side, covered by the sleeve of the shirt up to the middle of the forearm. In section 8, the boy comes to rest his left hand on the stone, on which he is sitting, bending his fingers as if to follow its edge. The right arm, which is less visible, is also held along the torso, from the shoulder to the hip. In section 5, the forearm then bends towards the legs of the seated boy and passes through the arched handle of a small basket, visible next to the right leg; the basket is tilted towards the viewer, so as to show the eggs it contains. The right hand, on the other hand, grasps the legs of a white hen and a black rooster, lying on its haunches; of the two animals the heads with their beaks, crests and red wattles are clearly visible, close to the left edge of the canvas, between sectors 4 and 7. Also in sector 7, the boy's legs, which are held horizontally up to the knees to support the poultry, continue downwards: the right one comes to rest the entire sole of the foot on the ground, while the left one crosses behind the right ankle and thus hides the view of the left foot behind the stone. The porter wears simple brown trousers that he keeps tucked in at calf height, while his feet are bare. The right side of the canvas, in sections 3, 6 and partly 9, is occupied by the large, low, wide, woven wicker carrying basket, which is now empty and which the boy carries over his shoulder, with the large handle, also made of wicker, slung over his shoulders and the longer sides of the basket parallel to his back. In this position the basket, resting on the stone where the boy is sitting, exceeds his head in height.

The porter is seated on two juxtaposed stones, in sectors 8 and 9, next to which are smaller, irregular stones resting on a strip of ground. In the background, at a short distance from the subject in the foreground, is a wall composed of large stone blocks, which fills mainly on the left sectors 1 and 4, and partly 2 and 3, above the head of the porter. The light comes from an unseen source

placed high up and slightly to the right, which frontally illuminates the boy's face placed in three quarters, but also his body, poultry and eggs. On the wall to the left, in section 4 and part 7, the large shadow cast by the basket he is carrying is evident. The painting has a brown dominant: the boy's trousers, the large basket and the small one with the eggs, the stones, the floor, the wall. Some objects have a greater sheen, such as the woven wicker baskets, but in general earthy, dull tones prevail. Among the lighter hues, the shirt is opaque and off-white. A lighter white is instead that of the eggs and the hen's plumage: the light falling on these elements makes them stand out more. In this context of mostly muted colours, matching each other, the bright red of the poultry's crests and wattles stands out in contrast.