


# Giacomo Ceruti

## *A Compassionate Eye*

European painting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is best known for historical scenes, expressive portraits, still lifes, and idealized representations of religious and mythological subjects. In contrast, the remarkable life-size depictions of people living at the margins of society painted by the northern Italian artist Giacomo Ceruti (1698–1767) defy easy categorization. The subjects of his pictures include elderly and disabled people begging for alms or sitting in forlorn exhaustion, as well as men, women, and children struggling for subsistence as cobblers, lace makers, spinners, and porters. At a time when genre paintings (scenes of

everyday life) often represented the poor as moralistic admonitions or figures of parody, Ceruti portrayed his subjects with verisimilitude and empathy. His images present us with austere fragments of the lives of people often written out of history, haunting portrayals that are both profound and difficult to explain. Is an actual person depicted? Was the work commissioned, and if so, by whom? Where was it exhibited, and what did it signify to contemporary audiences? But beyond question, Ceruti's pictures encourage us to consider broader issues such as economic inequality then and now, and the power of art to transcend categories and challenge social norms.

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# Poverty in Early Modern Europe

Defining “poverty” is complicated, since society’s material expectations and norms have varied depending on time period, social group, and location. But for large swaths of the European population in the early modern period, poverty meant perpetual hardship. In a society with few means of defense against recurrent crises—including recession, war, famine, and plague—the threat of poverty affected a sizable portion of the populace. Some historians divide those who experienced poverty in the period into three main categories: those who relied almost exclusively on begging or charity for survival (“structural poverty”); those who were paid very low wages and whose situation was dependent on the harvests and fluctuations in the price of bread (“wage-price poverty”); those who, although not destitute, could easily be plunged into economic hardship because of unexpected changes in their occupations or by illness, old age, or the death of a family member, predominantly affecting widows (“situational poverty”). What all these individuals had in common was that they possessed almost no property or savings and had to rely solely on their own labor to survive.

# Portraying the Social Margins

The paintings exhibited here are usually designated as genre paintings: works that depict scenes and subjects of ordinary life. We must be careful, however, in considering genre paintings as open windows into the lived experience of people on the social margins. Often the intent of such pictures was comical or moralizing, reflecting a stereotypical view of the individuals portrayed. Ceruti's pictures share certain features with genre painting, especially in the choice of subject matter, but they also mark a sharp departure. The sitters are presented in large canvases, life-size and full-length, turning them into solemn and monumental images. Instead of drawing from a repertory of stock characters, the artist portrayed them with great attention to their individual features, creating the impression that we are looking at someone recognizable. By elevating the protagonists of his paintings to the dignity of portraiture, Ceruti transformed them into people free from the clichés common to genre painting. The restrained and earthy palette lends immediacy and directness so as to convey the figures' heroic struggles with vitality and truth.

# The Cycle of Padernello

Although Giacomo Ceruti had considerable success as a painter, he was almost completely forgotten after his death. A new appreciation for his work dates only to the twentieth century, especially after thirteen of his paintings were rediscovered in the late 1920s in the castle of Padernello, near the city of Brescia in northern Italy. Twelve of those works, which became known as the “Cycle of Padernello,” are exhibited here. Scholars have wondered about their function, patronage, and original display. Were they conceived as a cycle? Who commissioned them? What was their purpose?

Eighteenth-century inventories of the property of prominent families from Brescia list paintings with *pitochi* and *portaroli* (beggars and porters) attributed to Ceruti. When he was active in Brescia in the 1720s and 1730s, the ruling elite and the clergy implemented a comprehensive plan of social reforms, revealing an active engagement with the problem of poverty. The characters Ceruti depicted would have belonged to what society regarded as the “redeemable” poor—individuals who posed no danger to others and deserved financial and spiritual aid. Among them were young women housed in charitable institutions where they were taught to read and sew; artisans with low income; older men reduced to begging, probably because they could no longer work; veterans with a physical disability; and young boys abandoned by their families and forced to live on the street and work as porters.

## Giacomo Ceruti (1698–1767)

Giacomo Ceruti was born in Milan in 1698. After marrying, from 1721 to about 1733 he lived in the nearby city of Brescia, where he created portraits and genre scenes for the local nobility, on one occasion receiving a horse as payment for paintings he made for the parish church of Rino di Sonico. Most of the pictures displayed here were produced during this period, when his distinctive portrayals of impoverished individuals and low-income tradespeople earned Ceruti the nickname *Il Pitocchetto* (the little beggar). Between 1726 and 1728 he was commissioned to paint seventeen portraits of illustrious Brescians to decorate the seat of government, the Palazzo del Broletto; the cycle was unfortunately dispersed. In 1736 he arrived in Venice as a guest of the outstanding collector Johann Matthias von der Schulenburg, for whom he painted portraits and genre paintings, including *The Three Beggars*, displayed here. The sophisticated and cosmopolitan artistic milieu in Venice greatly informed his work, evident in increasingly elaborate and colorful compositions. He returned



Map of Northern Italy: Giacomo Ceruti was active in the cities indicated with a star.

to Milan in 1742 together with a new partner, Matilde de Angelis, a bookseller, and there he continued to work on portraits, religious and mythological subjects, and still lifes (two of which can be seen here in Gallery S201). He died in Milan on August 28, 1767.

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