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## Grown-up design

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## Master of the Blue Jeans

This artist's work speaks for itself – but who is he? **Page 3**

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## Jeans genius

*The compelling paintings of an enigmatic artist have emerged after centuries of obscurity. By Susan Moore*

It is rare for a new artistic personality to emerge after centuries of oblivion. It is an even rarer treat if that personality is as original and compelling as the so-called Master of the Blue Jeans. Little is known about this enigmatic artist, not even his name or his nationality, but it seems most likely that he was active in the Italian regions of Lombardy or Veneto at the end of the 17th century.

Only 10 paintings have – so far, at least – been ascribed to him. As for the apparently anachronistic sobriquet, it derives from the recurrence in his paintings of the workaday blue cotton fabric with a white warp that was woven in Genoa. In 17th-century France it was known as *toile de Gênes*; in England, Genes or jeans.

Genoese fustian, to give it its proper name, found favour in Italy and far beyond because it was less expensive than the superior productions made elsewhere. It used indigo dyes to create intense shades of blue (the French weavers of Nîmes – *de Nîmes* gives us the word denim – clung to the use of woad). Given its durability and its drape, the fabric was favoured for hangings and bed linen by the well-to-do, and for clothes by the poor.

The subjects of this enigmatic artist include the very poorest, who are portrayed with uncompromising objectivity and disarming directness. Even more unusually, perhaps uniquely for this period in Italian painting, these humble people, men, women and children, are accorded a monumentality and a dignity usually reserved for the rich or for Biblical or mythological figures.

At the Galerie Canesso in Paris, eight canvases are reunited for the first time. Maurizio Canesso acquired "The Barber's Shop" at Christie's, New York, in 2004 where it was described as Neapolitan school. Previously, when it had belonged to Wildenstein in Paris, it was believed to be by a painter from Lorraine. It is a striking image. The three protagonists – barber, assistant and client – fill the entire picture plane but only their faces and the white cloths of the linens, the ivory comb, the rim of the bowl and the blue fustian of the man's gaiters emerge out of the shadows. Unlike just about every other barber-shop genre scene painted, where the barber is extracting a tooth or performing some grisly operation, the barber is doing nothing more dramatic than tending his client's hair. There is no burlesque, no comedy. The artist is taking a fresh, unconventional look at scenes of everyday life.



In 1998, "A Woman Begging with Two Children", recently discovered by Alessandro Morandotti, astonished audiences at an exhibition of Italian genre painting in Brescia. This is the cold, dark realm of the desperate. The young woman bends, a stick in one hand, the mendicant's cup in the other, and a container of embers at her feet. Beside her stands a girl, possibly an adult dwarf, and they both hold our gaze. Their

**Documentary** (from left) 'A Beggar Boy with a Piece of Pie' and 'A Woman Begging with Two Children', by the unidentified artist now known as the Master of the Blue Jeans



condition is wretched, and they seem to know it, but they are allowed their dignity. Once again, these almost sculptural figures inhabit no real space and emerge out of darkness. There is no allegorical subtext, and certainly no maudlin sentimentality. It was the unmistakable "denim" of the white frayed and unhemmed edges of the woman's heavy blue apron that prompted the artist's christening.

Around that time, a corpus of paintings evidently by the same hand was beginning to emerge and these were published by Gerlinde Gruber, this exhibition's curator, in 2006. Maurizio Canesso was gripped. He bought all the works he could, including two paintings that he tracked down to a bed-and-breakfast in Imperia, near Genoa. These have been supplemented by institutional loans, many of which are second versions of the compositions. We might conclude from this that these singular, and thus far undocumented, paintings found favour at the time.

Not all the artist's subjects are impoverished. In "The Frugal Meal", the clothes of the elderly couple may be patched and the tablecloth torn but they are neat and clean. Their wholesome meal is made up of the typical north Italian fare of bread, rice soup and a plate of little birds. Bites have already been taken out of a pie of Lombard greens. There is a knife and a brass spoon. Most 17th-century scenes set around tables feature games of cards, or love, or music,

and have some allegorical or moral meaning. This is simply a carefully observed meal. In another picture, a woman sits quietly sewing. Beside her, a rustic jug and bowl stand on the floor.

These humble artefacts are rarer survivors than their grander cousins. The period clothes of the poor have also rarely survived, as they were usually worn until they fell apart. As the Master reveals, the humblest wore ragged clothes that had evidently belonged to several other people before them. The subject of "A Beggar Boy with a Piece of Pie", perhaps the most compelling of these paintings, is swamped by the tattered jacket of a grown man, perhaps a soldier.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the so-called pauper painters have been studied less than their more highfalutin' colleagues, which may explain why these paintings have been attributed to such wide spans of both time and place. Most, at some time or another, have been linked with the greatest 17th-century realist painters – Velázquez in Seville, the brothers Le Nain and Georges

Perhaps uniquely for this period in Italian painting, these humble people are accorded monumentality and dignity

de la Tour in France, the Flemish painter Michiel Sweerts and the later, 18th-century north Italian Giacomo Pinetti.

In an attempt to pinpoint the Master within a less sweeping panorama, he forms part of an exhibition – the most thoughtful and ambitious Old Master dealer show in years, with prices ranging from €70,000-€800,000 – that brings together loans by the Danish Eberhard Keilhau, known as Bernhard Keil, the Bergamasque Evaristo Baschenis, as well as Sweerts and Ceruti.

Interestingly, the mystery painter's canvases are Italian, his palette and the provenances of his paintings specifically Lombard but his technique seems more plausibly northern. Our mysterious Master evidently belongs to that groundswell of awareness of, and empathy for, the plight of the poor that was gathering across 17th-century Europe. Equally evidently, he is revealed as distinctly his own man.

*'Il Maestro della tela Jeans', Galerie Canesso, Paris, until November 27*  
[www.canesso.com](http://www.canesso.com)