

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**19th Century BRITISH OR AMERICAN SCHOOL**

**Carmela, A Young Girl in Anacapri**

Oil on panel.

Inscribed and dated CARMELA / ANACAPRI / OCT 22 '95 at the lower centre.

An indistinct (panel-maker or frame-maker's?) stamp on the reverse.

254 x 342 mm. (10 x 13 1/2 in.) [sight]

Although the author of this charming oil sketch, dated the 22nd of October 1895, remains to be determined, it may be posited that it is the work of a member of the colony of foreign artists working in Capri at the time. (Indeed, the form of the date would suggest an English or American artist, or possibly French.) In the latter half of the 19th century, several artists worked on the island of Capri, in the Tyrrhenian Sea opposite the peninsula of Sorrento on the Italian mainland. As one scholar has noted, 'The views around the island were favored by both European and American artists...Capri had become popular in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, when rugged nature alone, rather than landscapes with ruins or landscapes with allusions to past art became, for the first time, desirable subjects for the artist's brush...The island, though an established part of the tourist route by the 1850s, was not easily reached even a decade later...Capri also lacked the amenities desired by most tourists.

It had just one hotel; the local population of 5,000 were all either farmers or fisherfolk; and for transportation around the island, a donkey was recommended.'

One of the two towns on Capri, Anacapri is located on one of the highest points of the island, on the slopes of Monte Solaro. It is three kilometres from the port town of Capri, and for many centuries the only link between the two towns was a steep staircase of several hundred steps cut out of the rock along the mountain ridge. A road linking Capri to Anacapri was only completed in 1874, and the inhabitants of each town have long been deeply antagonistic towards each other.

In the 19th century Capri was famous for the beauty of its local women, many of whom had Greek ancestry. Writing in 1853, a German visitor to the island noted that 'The girls at Capri are not so much beautiful as graceful. Their features are frequently strange. The outlines of their remarkably low-browed faces are regular and often classical; their eyes are either black or glowing, or of a deep, sultry grey. The brown complexion, the black hair, the kerchief wound over the head, the coral necklaces and

golden earrings give their faces an Oriental appearance. Often I saw, but especially in the deserted Ana-Capri, faces of wild strange beauty, and if such an one, with dishevelled hair and eyebrows black and sharply defined, raised its lightning-like, flashing eyes from the loom in some dusky chamber, it seemed to me as though I saw the face of a Danaïde...One must see these graceful figures grouped together, or watch them as they ascend the hill, bearing on their heads the quaintly-shaped water jugs, or baskets filled with soil or stones. Being so poor they earn a scanty pittance by carrying the heaviest loads. A Capriot girl is the veriest beast of burden on the island. You may see the loveliest girls from the ages of fourteen to twenty years, Gabriele, Costanziella, Mari Antonia, Concetta, Teresa, and countless others, whose faces are admired on many a painting far away in England, France, and Germany, carrying up from the beach on their dainty little heads burdens that appear almost too great for the strength of a powerful man.'

Although the young girl depicted in this painting, who is identified as 'Carmela', may simply be a peasant girl whom the unknown artist paid to pose for him, Dr. Adrienne Baxter Bell has made the interesting, albeit very tentative, suggestion that she might be Carmela Salvia, known as 'La Bella Carmelina', who was a famous tarentella dancer on Capri. Carmela was born in 1880, in a small house on the slopes of on Monte Tiberio. As a young girl of fourteen, she was already known all over Capri as the finest tarentella dancer on the island and would regularly perform to visitors and tourists at an inn on Monte Tiberio.

A small painting of the same model named 'Carmela', dated August 1895 and very possibly by the same hand, appeared at auction in London in 2018.