
Mattia Preti - A Game of Backgammon



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Presentation of the painting as part of the *Masterpieces at the Castle* series

27 June-24 September 2023

Gallery of Masterpieces

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Among the paintings on permanent and temporary display at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, Italian art occupies a special place. This is hardly surprising, for it was Italy that radiated most strongly as a centre of art

during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. However, each of the paintings on display casts its own unique glow. It is no different with the new addition to the castle's collection - the atmospheric and richly symbolic *Game of Backgammon* by Mattia Preti, one of the most important continuators of the style developed by Caravaggio.

A Game of Backgammon is a gem of Baroque painting, a painting that captures and holds the viewer's attention from the first glance. It presents three figures brought out of the darkness by a beam of light: a woman, a boy and an elderly man. They are sitting at a table on which a board of backgammon, one of the oldest board games, is spread out.

The southern Italian artist, Matti Preti (b. 24 February 1613 in Taverna, d. 3 January 1699 in Valletta), used a relatively limited range of colours in this work, dominated by brown, black and white. In only a few places we notice blue, yellow and red. In order to make the content of the representation clearer and direct the viewer's gaze to the key parts of the work, the artist inscribed the entire composition in the form of a triangle based on the lower edge of the canvas. These measures testify to the great skill of Preti, who at the time of creating the painting had already been studying for nearly two years at the famous Academy of Saint Luke in Rome.

The style of painting represented by Preti, based on sharp chiaroscuro, realism and theatrical composition, was primarily influenced by the work of Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio.

An analysis of the individual elements of the work shows that *A Game of Backgammon* is not a genre scene, i.e. a realistic representation of an authentic event, but an allegorical representation carrying a universal reflection of an existential and moral nature.

The figures gathered around the table represent the three stages of human life: youth, maturity and old age. The symbolic significance of the work is emphasised by the placement of the figures in an unspecified place and time and by the costumes, which belong to different eras. The old man's armour is made in the style of Milanese armour of the 2nd half of the 15th century, while the woman's dress and headpiece are reminiscent of German clothing from the 1520s. Only the young man's attire appears to be related to the time the canvas was painted.

The game is an allegory of life which is subject to chance, just like the dice thrown on the board. However, the unpredictable vagaries of fate can be overcome if the game is played skilfully.

The painting can be seen as part of the Gallery of Masterpieces ticket.

By a ticket



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