

Observations on the Neo-Hellenism of the Maestri del Battistero in Parma

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The frescoes in the Baptistry in Parma have, with few exceptions, long remained extraneous to Italian art historiography. The restoration work of twenty years ago stimulated new studies on the technique, procedures of execution, visual sources and, in general, the iconography of the thirteenth century pictorial decoration. However, these studies did not clear up all of the ambiguities of a text that has essentially remained indistinct within the linguistic *koiné* that was widespread in the Mediterranean area after the fall of Constantinople and the flowering of the Crusader states.

Starting with the Greek visual sources, which are already recognized as fundamental, the present study goes into greater depth on the comparisons between the variegated forms of the 'new art' in the areas still under Byzantine influence, from Nicea to the despotates of the Balkan peninsula, which connoted the evolution of Comnenian art towards Paleologan classicism.

The *atelier* active in the Baptistry presents a few clear formal characteristics: an accentuated rendering of the emotional values through meditated gestuality, experimentation with perspectival formulas and the recovery of a confident monumentality. These factors indicate precise Neo-Hellenistic ascendants of genuine Greek derivation, and are connected to the pre-Paleologan revival that sprang from the courtly tradition of the Macedonian Renaissance, but this is not all.

The work in Parma thus appears to be fully coherent with the expressive novelties on the historical borders of the Eastern Empire between 1230 and 1260 already pointed out by Byzantinists. In this way, the re-consideration of formal elements contributes to a confirmation of the dating to around 1250, a proposal put forward by various scholars, while it again strengthens the critical intuitions expressed long ago by Pietro Toesca (1927) and Roberto Longhi (1939) on the non-Italian training of the painters.

New Perspectives for the Iconography and Patronage of Frescoes in the Oratories of Porro at Lentate sul Seveso and Mocchiolo

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Recent restoration work at St Stephen's, the Oratory of the Porro family at Lentate sul Seveso, has revealed a large number of graffiti, which are to be read as a parallel to the detailed report that Antonio Barberi drew up of the Savoy-Visconti expedition guided by Amedeo VI (1366/67) in order to support the *basileus* of Constantinople John V Paleologus against the Turks in the Black Sea. At the service of the Green Count there was 'Galiardon' (Gaiardo Porro) and also *magister* Giovanni, a banner painter who may perhaps be drawn in relation with Giovanni da Milano.

The construction and decoration of 'Visconti' oratories are to be connected to the recurrent spreading of the plague. The one to commission the decoration of the oratory of St Stephen's is the notary and compositor of illuminated manuscripts Stefano Porro († 1372/77), Count Palatine since 1360, acting as an intermediary of the Visconti especially with the Savoy and Gonzaga family. The graffiti date 1375 marks the end of the painting activity for the frescoes in the only hall, which is decorated with *Scenes from the Life of St Stephen* (painted after 1371, on the basis of the details of clothing and customs as documented by the chroniclers of the time). The fresco cycle consists of 43 panels and

ends with the *Reunion in Rome of St Stephen and St Lawrence*, as told in *The Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*). According to the contamination technique, it is an act of homage to Francesco Petrarca, who was made poet laureate in Rome and visited the Basilica of St Lawrence, but it evokes also the act of submission (1369) by John V Paleologus to the Roman Pontiff. It is part of the ecclesiastical debate going on at the time about the primacy of Rome over Constantinople. The unusual frontal position of the *Last Judgement* in St Stephen's, in the beginning mausoleum of the Porro family, is the same as the position of the *Parecléison*, the mausoleum added by Teodoro Metochite in the Kariye Camii, Istanbul. The arrangement of the fresco of *The Virgin Offering her Breasts* and of the fresco of *St John Baptist Offering his Head* is strictly symmetrical. These iconographic subjects are related to the rituals of the Byzantine Court.

The Oratory at Mocchiolo was extended after the epidemic of 1372-74 by a member of the Porro family, probably Giovanni Angelo (or Giovannolo), the *Donor Holding the Model of the Oratory* (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera), member of the Savoy order of 'True-Love Knots', founded by Amedeo VI. The first representation in Italy of the *Holy House of Nazareth* is being transported by angels – the Porro family from Lentate guarded a stone of the Holy House from Palestine as a relic. The frescoes of the *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine* and *Saint Ambrose flagellates the heretics* celebrate after 1387 the patron saints of Catherine, Ambrogio Capapisto's daughter and wife to Giovannolo Porro who became an abbot (1391) after his wife's death.

It is here suggested that also the oratory at Lentate may have undergone extension works. The original structure is portrayed in the illuminated *Codex Astensis* (f. 173), kept in the Visconti library, which is now kept in Asti (Archivio Storico del Comune). In the presbytery of St Stephen's, a *Procession of angels* hold up the symbols of power granted in 1387 by Wenceslaus IV to the Porro family together with the title of marquis. The bejewelled crown is to be connected with the cult of the 'Holy Nail', which was reintroduced when Milan Cathedral began to be constructed. The scene of *St George, the Princess and the Dragon* commemorate Giorgio Visconti, who served in the army together with Giovannolo in the White Company of John Hawkwood and was later *ordinarius* and *deputatus* (1387) of Milan Cathedral. As to the *Donor Holding the Model of the Oratory*, it is here suggested an alternative to the traditional couple of Stefano Porro and Caterina Figini, namely the Visconti collecting agent Stefanolo da Lentate (†1391?), portrayed together with his wife and followed by his departed children.

The coat of arms on the *Chalice of Stefano Porro* in the museum at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, dated 1369, is another important element in order to identify those who commissioned the presbytery frescoes at Lentate as well as their dating. In fact, the coat does not correspond to the two coats of arms present in the sepulchre in Saint Stephen's, which attest to the acknowledgement (1379) of the second branch of the Porro family – connected with the Cane family of Casale Monferrato and whose founder is the jurist Niccolò. The fresco depicting the two martyr twins commemorates the *Blessed Felice and Rocco Porro*, the two twin brothers of the family and is the counterpart to the fresco of *St Maurice on Horseback*, which is the celebratory representation of the young duke Giovanni Maria Visconti. It is an equestrian portrait similar to the statues of both *Regisole* in Pavia and *Giustiniano* in Constantinople.

The last decorating campaign concerns the *Tomb of the Porro Family*. The text of the epitaph which is written in letters later than 1369, was subsequently drawn probably by the son of Niccolò, the jurist Antonio Porro, an "author of fine works in the years

1398†1410" and mentioned in the fresco *Liberation of the Devout Person*. In the arcosolium, the new iconographic juxtaposition of the *Resurrected Christ of Pity*, surmounted by *Flowers in Heaven*, translates into pictorial forms the thought of Pope Gregorio "Magnus" (*Moralia*, V, XXXIV, 61), who appears in the presbytery vault can be identified also through iconographic elements that are usually acknowledged as his own.

Apart from individual episodes, the overall structure of the figurative cycles interlinks the sacred and the profane as well as the west and the east, a combination which could be attributed to great personalities like Francesco Petrarca, the Imperial Chancellor of John V Paleologus Demetrio Cidone (1324 ca.-1400 ca.) and the Benedictine bishop Giovanni Capogallo (1350 ca.-1413). The first could harmonize classical culture and Medieval Christian culture and, together with Guido Sette, was on friendly terms with Stefano Porro; the second favoured the integration of Medieval Latin culture with Byzantine culture. The third was an advisor (*consiliarius*) of Gian Galeazzo Visconti together with Antonio Porro (†1404), a son of the late Stefano's.

New Developments on the St. Nicholas of Tolentino Polyptych by Civerchio in the Monastery of San Barnaba in Brescia

MARIO MARUBBI - ANNA MARIA PANSERA

In the absence of an original contract that might have given information about the initial terms of the agreement, a new document of 6 March 1494 enables us to make a more detailed reconstruction of the events surrounding the *Polyptych of St. Nicholas of Tolentino*, commissioned from Vincenzo Civerchio by the Augustinian prior of the monastery of San Barnaba in Brescia (the painting is now housed in the Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo). At that date, Vincenzo Civerchio should have already delivered the finished work, but because of the prolongation of his other work, the polyptych was not delivered. The new contract forced the painter to live in the monastery together with his collaborators, and to finish the work by the end of June of the same year, under penalty of revocation of the contract and calling in another painter to finish the work.

In fact, the panel with *St. Sebastian* was signed by another painter, the Leonardesque Francesco Galli, called Neapolus, but x-rays have revealed that there is clearly another earlier painting by Civerchio under Galli's work. It remains to be seen if Galli, as threatened in the 1494 contract, was called in to finish the work because of Civerchio's breach of contract, or if he was one of Civerchio's partners, making every effort to deliver the polyptych on time, that is, by 1495, the year the two panels effectively date from.

Confirmation of a Stay in Genoa for Vincenzo de' Barberis of Brescia

GIANLUCA ZANELLI

According to a document published in 1995 by Janice Shell, on 23 April 1520 the Genoese painter Battista Grasso was in Milan to request the collaboration of the Brescian Vincenzo de' Barberis and his disciple Filippo d'Oleggio with the aim of concluding the two altarpieces commissioned from Grasso. The Lombard artists were then to have made an effort to reach the Ligurian centre by the following feast of the Ascension.

Recent restoration work has made it possible to identify with a high degree of probability the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the church of Santa Maria Assunta in Genova Rivarolo as one of the two works

entrusted to De' Barberis by Battista Grasso. The work clearly shows in fact the typical components of the language of the Brescian master, showing close links with numerous moments of his production, in particular with the altarpiece of *Ss. Mary Magdalene, Roch and Sebastian* in the church of Santi Fedele e Gerolamo in Buglio in Monte, datable, also thanks to the comparison with the *Assumption* of 1520, to around the middle of the third decade of the sixteenth century.

A Promise of Felicity: The Gonzaga-d'Este Alliance

JOHN E. GEDO

The Art Institute of Chicago houses a panel (datable to 1480-1485, George F. Harding Collection) with enigmatic iconography of an astrological and mythological nature, which has been interpreted as *Phaeton Driving the Chariot of Phoebus* until the present day.

The recently restored work reveals a classical culture of rare skill and complexity, and proves to be from Mantua, both because of the clear Mantegnesque framework as well as the presence of numerous details that recall the emblems of the Gonzaga. The anonymous artist actually depicts an evocative horoscope drawn up for the engagement of Francesco Gonzaga and Isabella d'Este, and may have been following precise iconographical instructions furnished by Mantegna himself.

«Icona elegans et eruditissima». Carlo Francesco Nuvolone in Bormio, 1631-1634

CECILIA GHIBAUDI

In the collegiate church of Bormio, there is a canvas portraying the *Pietà with Saints*, with the inscription «Votum communitatis Burmii in tempore pestis 1629». The canvas was originally located in the no longer extant church of San Sebastiano.

Thanks to recent restoration work, the painting has turned out to be the first work recognized as Carlo Francesco Nuvolone's up to now, since it was commissioned from the painter on 17 June 1631 and the final payments were made in February 1634.

The work is closely linked to the slightly later altarpiece located in the parish church in Varallo Pombia, in the Novara area, since it is dated to before

1636. Apart from the fact that both are *ex votos* against the plague, between the two works there are close iconographical relationships, especially in the figures of St. Stephen (Bormio) and St. Vincent (Varallo Pombia), who appear to be derived from the same cartoon. Stylistic analysis reveals Carlo Francesco's debts to his father Panfilo, to Cerano and to Daniele Crespi. Crespi was Nuvolone's classmate at the Accademia Ambrosiana in the first decade of the seventeenth century.

Unpublished Youthful Works by Giovan Angelo Borroni

LAURA PAOLA GNACCOLINI

The examination of some unpublished or little known works makes it possible to define the phases in the early career of the painter from Cremona Giovan Angelo Borroni. According to the sources, the *Martyrdom of St. Andrew* (San Savino, parish church) was sent by the artist in Cremona from Bologna, where he had gone to study. The painting betrays his personal reflection on works of the Bolognese school, from Guercino to Giovan Gioseffo Dal Sole. His dependence on this last artist became more pronounced in a second version of the *Martyrdom* in a private collection in Milan, but at present only known through an old photograph.

A later canvas depicting the *Death of St. Joseph*, recently restored in the church in Fontanella al Piano (Bergamo), is documented as being connected with a commission in 1717, and already shows an orientation towards a certain degree of stylisation and stiffness in the drawing of the figures, typical in his mature works.

The Sacro Monte in Crea

ANTONIETTA GALLONE

The restoration work of 1992 in the chapels of the *Crowning of Thorns* (XIV) and the *Flagellation* (XV) at the Sacro Monte in Crea have shown that the colour of the statues was almost completely removed in different periods in order to proceed with a total renewal of the paint, following criteria that are no longer acceptable. The article presents the results or research aiming to study the original pictorial technique and identify areas where there was re-painting.

In the preparatory stages, it is possible to detect a layer of calcium carbonate on the terracotta at times, in the chapel with the *Crowning of Thorns*; of plaster alone or a mixture of plaster and calcium carbonate in the chapel with the *Flagellation*. In some cases there is a base coat of whitewash above it.

In most cases, the original paint is constituted of yellow ochre and red ochre in various hues, poorer colours with respect to the Sacro Monte in Ghiffa. In the re-painting, the pigments most often used were artificial ultramarine and artificial malachite, while in order to simulate the metal of the armour, oil paint with tiny flakes of aluminium was used.

The re-painting observed seems to have taken place in three stages: the first, towards the middle of the XIX century; the second, perhaps the most important and most extensive, at the end of the XIX century; the third, after the first two decades of the XX century.

The authors also report the results of an analysis of terracotta samples and a fragment of black earth that has made it possible to determine the morphology of the materials and textures.

Unpublished Documents for Ambrogio Bevilacqua and the De Donati Brothers

MARIO MARUBBI - GIOVANNI CANZI

Through a series of commissions to various artists (1493, 1498 and 1505), the Squassi, Prealoni and Osnago families provided the church of Melegnano with new and interesting Renaissance decoration, for which there is evidence in Bergognone's *Baptism*, the only panel from the great polyptych that has survived.

Unpublished documents found by Giovanni Canzi reveal that the cupola of the church was frescoed by Ambrogio Bevilacqua, while the De Donati brothers were commissioned to make a polyptych, perhaps in wood in low relief and polychrome, the project for which was probably modified while the work was in progress. In the end, a traditional type of altarpiece was installed, with the panels painted by Bergognone and the wooden frame constructed by De Donati.

Since the order of the ensemble of the Renaissance decoration has been lost, it is possible to reconstruct the way the church looked thanks to the detailed description contained in the specifications, from which it is clear that Foppa's work in the Cappella Portinari was still influential at the beginning of the sixteenth century.