

CARTE D'ARCHIVIO

JOHN R. SPENCER

Francesco Sforza and Desiderio da Settignano: two new documents

Francesco Sforza's attempt in 1462 to obtain two stucco Madonnas and one marble sculpture from the hand of Desiderio da Settignano led only to disappointment for the Duke of Milan, but the record of the negotiations provides us with new information on the Duke's interest in art, the price of a stucco relief in the 15th century, the dating of Desiderio's S. Lorenzo tabernacle and even on the speed of the ducal couriers between Milan and Florence (1).

On February 10, 1462 Francesco Sforza wrote to his representative in Florence, Nicodemo Tranchedini da Pontremoli, that « Magistro Benedetto, nostro ingenigero » had ordered two gilded and painted stucco Madonnas from Desiderio da Settignano (2). The price was to be twenty-two to twenty-five ducats. Since the Duke is now informed that the pieces are ready, he instructs his representative to pay for them, ship them to Milan and to try to obtain a work in marble provided it is not too large or too expensive. On the 17th of February, 1462, Nicodemo replied (3). Desiderio has no Madonnas in his shop in marble, in stucco, in terra cotta or in any other material. He claims further that he does not know any Master Benedetto. Moreover, he is unable to execute any work for the Duke of Milan, because he has been occupied and will be occupied for a great deal of time to come on certain work in S. Lorenzo. Tranchedini closes with a promise to try to obtain a piece of sculpture by Desiderio at any cost, but there is no evidence that he succeeded in fulfilling the desires of his master.

The dramatis personae of this exchange of letters may require some identification, particularly since they are of considerable importance for the interchange of artistic ideas between Milan and Florence during the reigns of Francesco and Galeazzo Maria Sforza.

Nicodemo Tranchedini da Pontremoli served as Milanese ambassador to Florence from the time of

Filippo Maria Visconti through the reign of Galeazzo Maria Sforza (4). He negotiated several successful treaties of alliance and peace settlements for Francesco Sforza. He was a close confidant of Cosimo de' Medici, so close, in fact, that he was present at Cosimo's death. He corresponded with such humanists as Francesco Filelfo, Ivano da Sarzana and others. As the Milanese representative in Florence his major duty was to keep the Ducal court informed of political events in Florence as they occurred. He also executed a number of small personal commissions for the Duke, such as obtaining spectacles, books, particular kinds of cloth and men of a wide variety of skills to serve the needs of the court.

« Magistro Benedetto da Fiorenza, nostro ingenigero » can only be the enigmatic Benedetto Ferini who first appeared in Milan in 1453 and who died in Bellinzona in 1479 shortly after obtaining Milanese citizenship (5). He is perhaps best known for his work at the Castello Sforzesco where he was in charge of constructing and decorating the chapel and the Sala Verde for Galeazzo Maria. In 1459 he was involved in a lawsuit in Florence, but the Duke intervened with the consuls of Por Santa Maria for a postponement because Benedetto could not be excused from his work on the Castello (6).

Benedetto may have taken advantage of his required presence in Florence at a later date to execute various Ducal commissions. This document is the first indication, however, that he was employed to acquire works of art for Francesco Sforza.

Desiderio does not require identification, but the documents do supply us with additional information about him. The high reputation that he enjoyed in Milan has been available for some time but generally ignored. Cardellini (7) most recently turned to Filarete's treatise on architecture, which was being composed while these negotiations were going on, as an index of Desiderio's

reputation in Milan. Desiderio is mentioned by name four times (8) and in one incident (9) Francesco Sforza descends from his horse to take the sculptor by the hand and to congratulate him on the beauty of the work he has completed. Francesco's attempt to acquire three works by Desiderio is a vindication of Filarete's accuracy and a further indication of the extent to which Desiderio's reputation had spread outside Florence. Moreover, Nicodemo's conversation with Desiderio shows the sculptor to be more than « il vago Desider si dolce e bello » of Giovanni Santi's rhymed chronicle. He stubbornly refused to recognize Benedetto Ferini even though a fellow-Florentine described him in some detail. Whether from a sense of honor and responsibility toward S. Lorenzo or from some less laudable motive, he refused to execute the works that Francesco Sforza desired. His taciturn replies, traditionally typical of Tuscan stone-workers, fall like chips of stone and are in strong contrast to the gentle and flowing contours and surfaces of his sculpture. He was undoubtedly a stronger individual than his sculpture might lead one to believe and he was certainly aware of his reputation both within Florence and without.

The exchange of letters sheds new light on the difficult problems raised by stucco (or gesso) reliefs in 15th century workshops. It is clear that the purchaser expected and demanded that the relief be gilded and painted. Probably it was subcontracted to a painter, such as Neri di Bicci (10), for coloring. Neither the artist nor the patron would have accepted a stucco in the stripped and bare state in which so many are known today. It would also appear that the sculptor usually kept a number of such stuccoes on hand, for Nicodemo asks if Desiderio has any stuccoes elsewhere, since there are none visible in the shop. Desiderio concedes that he does execute stuccoes on demand, and there is the implication that stuccoes were made occasionally without referen-

131

ce to specific orders, probably whenever the shop had little other work on hand. In this case the correspondence provides for the first time documentary evidence for two widely held assumptions on stucco sculpture of the 15th century.

Another widely held assumption, that the stucco relief was relatively inexpensive and therefore more widespread than marble sculpture, is brought into question by Francesco Sforza's letter. Unfortunately, he does not make it clear whether the price of 22 to 25 ducats is for each relief or for the pair. Any attempt to relate the price he had been quoted with other known works of the 15th century inevitably becomes involved with size, but the following comparisons seem apposite. We are assuming, for the sake of argument, that the Florentine florin and the Milanese ducat are approximately equal in value as they were in weight and fineness, even though it is known that the two were rarely at absolute parity. Donatello was to be paid 40 florins for each panel of his Cantoria; 50 florins if they were good (11). Desiderio and two other sculptors valued four *storie* in marble for frate Andrea Rucellai in 1453. Desiderio's estimate was the lowest, 22 florins per panel. The other sculptors valued them at 24 and 25 florins (12). Luca della Robbia received 25 florins for his glazed terra cotta Stemma of the Mercanzia (13). Bernardo Rossellino (?) received 100 florins, less 3 lire, 15 soldi, 8 denari, for a marble angel for the tomb of the Cardinal of Portugal (14). Inflation and rising prices for artists' work during the 15th century make comparison difficult. For example, Donatello's panels for the Cantoria would certainly have been valued at more than twice Luca's Stemma. However, it is clear that a Desiderio stucco commanded the same price as one of Fra Andrea Rucellai's marble panels, the same price as a della Robbia terra cotta and about one-fourth the price of a full round marble from his closest competitor. Further indication of the value of a work in stucco can be derived from Desiderio's expenses. In 1456, for example, he purchased a house in Via S. Maria near S. Pietro Maggiore for 60 gold florins (15). The rent on the shop that he shared with his brother on the ground floor of the Panciatichi house on the river side of S. Trinita came to 13 florins a year (16). Francesco Sforza's order would have been adequate to pay the rent on the shop for almost two years. In other words, a good stucco relief was not cheap.

Desiderio's last work, the S. Lorenzo tabernacle, has long been the subject of considerable speculation in the absence of any certain documentation. Until a record of payments becomes available Nicodemo Tranchedini's letter supplies the first solid document for the dating of the tabernacle. The sentences in

which Desiderio states that he has been involved with work at S. Lorenzo and will be for a good while make it clear that work was started before 17 February, 1462 but that it was still far from completion.

The Tranchedini letter raises some problems with the monument and with the indirect documentation previously available. The notice transcribed by Moreni (17) that the tabernacle was walled in during the summer of 1461 has generally been interpreted to mean that the tabernacle was completed and put in place by August 1461. Clearly this was not the case. If we assume that the architectural (and relief) elements were walled in during the summer of 1461, this would mean that Desiderio had only three free standing full round figures to do — the Infant Christ and the two candle bearing angels. This is a most unlikely hypothesis, since the work of assistants is most clearly evident in precisely these pieces (18). Moreover, Desiderio would have no reason to state that a great deal more work remained to be done. A more attractive hypothesis would consider the tabernacle as originally set up to be more or less a free-standing altar instead of the present wall tabernacle. In such an event the 1461 document would most likely refer to walling up the support members. In this case Desiderio would state in all honesty that he had been working for almost a year but he still had a great deal to do. Further documentation will undoubtedly settle the matter once and for all, but it seems to me from an examination of the monument and of this one document that Desiderio was occupied with the S. Lorenzo tabernacle from 1461 up to his death in January 1464. It was probably not fully completed even at this date, but finished and set in place by his assistants.

This brief exchange of letters is as rich in information as it is in problems. For the first time we begin to have some notion of Francesco Sforza as a collector of works of art. He was willing to spend up to 25 ducats from the privy purse for a stucco and a great deal more for a work in marble. He knew of Desiderio's reputation through Filarete and Benedetto Ferini, but Francesco Sforza was much too astute to spend 22 to 25 ducats on reputation alone. One wonders how he knew of Desiderio's work and what examples could have been in Milan. Can the innumerable Milanese low relief portraits descend from something like Desiderio's Caesar relief? Apparently it was common for a Florentine sculptor of the 15th century to make up a number of stucco reliefs in the hope of finding a buyer. One begins to wonder just how many stucco and terra cotta reliefs could have been made from a mold and what could have happened to all of them that so few are left. Finally one wonders what

could have been driving Desiderio to complete the work at S. Lorenzo. If the Medici family had been the commissioning patrons, surely they would have permitted him to execute a relatively minor work to assure the continuing friendship of Francesco Sforza and his ambassador. Desiderio would be an outstanding exception if he truly felt himself bound to fulfill punctually the time clauses of his commission. There is always the possibility that ill-health may explain his curt answers to Nicodemo and his burning desire to refuse all other work until the sculpture in S. Lorenzo was « all cleaned up ».

JOHN R. SPENCER

NOTES

(1) The documents discussed here were discovered during the course of an investigation into artistic activity in Milan and Lombardy during the reign of the Sforzas. This research was sponsored by a grant from the National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities of the U.S. Government.

The correspondance is preserved in the copy books of the ducal chancery now in Paris and Milan. The Duke's letter to Florence is to be found in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, fonds it. 1595, fol 284v. Nicodemo Tranchedini's reply is to be found in Milan, Archivio di Stato. Arch. Duc. (Sforzesco) Firenze 270, fasc. febbraio, fol 153r.

(2) I have not found Francesco Sforza's commands to Benedetto. They were probably oral rather than written in any case.

(3) Since Nicodemo consistently uses the Milanese calendar in which the Year commences on January 1, there can be no possibility of « stile fiorentino » for the date of his reply.

(4) In 1473 Galeazzo Maria and Bona reconfirmed the citizenship granted him by Francesco Sforza. The document refers to his 44 years of service. See: Caterina Santoro, *I registri delle lettere ducali del Periodo Sforzesco*, Milan, 1961. Reg. IV, 23 (fols 26r-27r).

(5) SEE, *Storia di Milano*, Fondazione Treccani, vol VII, p. 630. In the document of 13 June, 1477, granting him citizenship upon his own request (Santoro, *Registri*, Reg. IV, 168, fol 161) he is called Benedetto de Fermis da Firenze and it is stated that he has been in Ducal service for more than twenty years.

(6) ASM. Reg. miss. 42, fol 179v. 10 July, 1459.

(7) IDA CARDELLINI, *Desiderio da Settignano*, Milano 1962, pp. 89-90.

(8) J. R. SPENCER, *Filarete's Treatise on Architecture*, New Haven 1965, pp. 77, 116, 129, 180.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 129.

(10) CLARENCE KENNEDY, « Documenti inediti su Desiderio da Settignano e la sua famiglia », *Rivista d'Arte*, vol. XII, (1930), documents XIV and XVIII.

(11) H. W. JANSON, *The sculpture of Donatello*. Princeton 1957, p. 119.

(12) KENNEDY, doc. V.

(13) ALAN MARQUAND, *Luca della Robbia*, Princeton 1914, p. 183, 53.

(14) FREDERICK HARTT, GINO CORTI, CLARENCE KENNEDY, *The Chapel of the Cardinal of Portugal, 1434-59*. Philadelphia 1964. pp. 93-4. The question mark is Hartt's.

(15) KENNEDY, doc. VII.

(16) KENNEDY, doc. X.

(17) CARDELLINI, *Desiderio*, p. 217.

(18) CHARLES SEYMOUR, jr. *Sculpture in Italy: 1400-1500*, Pelican History of Art, 1966, p. 149.

DOCUMENTS

1. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale. fonds it. 1595, fol 284v. Nicodemo de pontremilo.

Altra volta nuy dessemo la circa ad Magistro Benedetto da fiorenza nostro Ingenigero de farne fare per

mano de Magistro desyderio scultore fiorentino doe belle Imagine et figure de nostra dona de gesso ornate de oro: et colorite in modo che ne satesfacero: Et perche Intendemo per relatione de dicto Magistro Benedeto che gia soy fornite: desiderando de haverle te comettemo et volemo che ricevuta la presente tu debby ritrovarti col dicto Magistro scultore: et fare mercato cum esso de dicte imagine et pagarle; poy piu presto che te sera possibile ne le mandaray havendo advertentia de assetarle per modo che vengano salve et de darle a tal persona che le porta conzamente che non se rompano per la via: avisandote che dicto Magistro Benedeto ne dice che dicte imagine non costarano piu de ducati vintidoi fino in vinticinqui et cossi dice essere rimasto de accordo cum esso scultore appresso Volemo che te In-

formi dal dicto Magistro desyderio se lha veruna altra figura de marmo pur de nostra dona che sy bella: et havendole ne daray aviso per toe lettere: et della valuta dessa: et della grandezza perche piacendone le faremo comprare: Milano die x februarius 1462.

2) Milano, Archivio di stato. Arch. Duc. (Sforzesco), Firenze, 270, fasc. feb., fol 153r.

Illustrissime princeps ecc. hogi quamprimum hebi lettera de Vostro Celsitudine de. x. del presente anday a pontica de maestro desiderio scultore. Et in effecto nedum che lhabia facte quelle ymagine ma dice non cognosce quel Maestro Benedeto. Et trovandossi li un Citadino chel cognosce non gli seppe may dare ad intendere chi se fosse. Et vedendoio che non

havia ymagine veruna de nostra donna, ne de marmoro ne de gesso, ne de pietra cotta, ne de verunaltra materia. El domanday se ne avesse altrove, disse de no. Domanday se de quante luy ne fece may fosse possibile haverne una et costasse qual se volesse purché fosse cosa degna. disse che ne cercaria, dissegli se ne voleva fare una. disse essere stato obligato et essere ancora per un bon pezzo ad certi Lavori qui in San Lorenzo, Et che non spazando quella, non pigliaria altra interpresa. Vedro se ne trovasse veruna Et trovandola degna non la lassero per denari. Ma me e dicto dachi el manegia tutto el di che fa adasio Et anche non gli ne reesse de ver (?) una che fosse da pari de Vostro Sublimita.

(Nicodemo concludes with news from Florence). Ex Florentia. 17. februarius 1462. Servitus Nicodemus.

NANCY WARD NEILSON

Some documents for the paintings and choir decorations in S. Vittore al Corpo. Milan

Of the many Milanese churches rebuilt and redecorated during the episcopacy of the two Borromeo Cardinals, S. Vittore al Corpo is among the most important, and its decoration is still intact. While much of the work done in the church is by minor artists, the ensemble is greater than its parts. Little information has been published about the contracts and dates of this work. Some material is available in a book published in 1934 (1), but it is based on a register compiled in 1679 (2). Rich as this manuscript is in information, it is still a secondary source. Yet in the archive of S. Vittore al Corpo there is a cartella entitled « Autografi di artisti insigni circa opere eseguite nella Basilica di S. Vittore al Corpo ». While the documents preserved in this folder are only a small percentage of what one would hope to find, their publication may help in the eventual reconstruction of the decoration of the church.

The first document happily confirms the traditional date of 1619 (3) for Moncalvo's painting of the cupola. A payment dated the 27th November 1619 exists.

Io Gu.ºmo Caccia pittore confesso aver receputo dal R.º Padre Provinsore di S. Vittore Lire cinquecentovintima dico 521 contro pagamento dalli scudi mille per la pittura della Cupola di S. Vittore.

The following payments shed some light on Salmeggia's activity in

S. Vittore. Three paintings by the Bergamesque artist are in the church; *St. Francesca Romana*, signed and dated 1610, *St. Victor on Horseback*, which has a traditional, no longer controllable date of 1606 (4), and *St. Bernard and the Virgin*. The latter two are in the choir. From the records in the church, Salmeggia's activity is first established on the 3rd of August, 1602 when he signs a paper acknowledging payment for unspecified pictures.

Io Enea Salmeggia ho riceputo dal Il.º et P.º Sig. il Padre Abate di S.º Vittore dinari vinticinque da lire cinque e soldi tredici a bon conto di quadri che ho avuto di fare da sua Sig.ª Ill.ª.

No further notice survives until the 15th of February, 1608 when he writes:

Recevi in Enia Salmeggia dal R.º P. Abate di S.º Vittore a buon conto delli doi quadri cioè melli doble di genova no. quatordeli fano L 112.

and on this date gives Pietro Antonio Daverio the power to collect the rest of the money owed him by the church. Daverio collected the final payment on the 28th of November, 1608.

Io Pietro Antonio Daverio chonfesso aver auto et recepto dal molto R.º padre don sisto da Milano Abbate di S.º Vittore al Chorpo

lire ducento sesantre moneta di Milano che sono p saldo et intiere pagamento de doi ancone fatti de Ms Enea Salmeggia pintori...

133

Since, in two of the three documents, two pictures are mentioned and since the *St. Francesca Romana* is dated 1610, it seems clear that Salmeggia's *St. Victor on Horseback* and *St. Bernard and the Virgin* date between 1602 and 1608.

The chapel dedicated to St. Francesca Romana, the third on the right, was only begun with Salmeggia's altarpiece of 1610. The church authorities lost no time in completing the chapel of the saint canonized in 1608 for the contract with Gerolamo Chiocca is dated the 20th of January, 1611 (5). Drawn up between the painter and Don Sisto, it specifies: « à finire da pingere la cappella di S.ª francesca... cioè di fare due ancone grandi dalle parti di quelli miracoli di detta santa... ». On the 1st of February, Chiocca received the first payment of fifteen scudi.

The following documents are best summerized for they are simply payments for the stuccoes and their painting and gilding in the choir. Eight payments are preserved to Pietro Antonio Daverio, the stuccatore. They date from the 17th of December, 1603, the 5th of June, 1604, the 25th of November, 1604, the 27th of February, 1605, the 19th of May, 1605, the 20th of June, 1605, the 6th of February, 1606, and the 14th of July, 1606. Giorgio Linato, the gilder