

# THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE



## Art in France

Poussin and the Vouets at Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Fragonard's 'fantasy figures' and his 'Woman with a book'

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April 2015

## Giovanni da Modena

Bologna

by ROBERT GIBBS

GIOVANNI DA MODENA represents the International Gothic in Bologna almost single-handedly, although his figures have a fiery intensity, angular and occasionally angelic, that sets him apart from most of what we associate with the style elsewhere. In many ways, despite his Modenese origins, recorded in his two surviving signatures, his art shared much of the jaggedly linear qualities of Bolognese quattrocento painting, but his sense of form never surrendered its plasticity: the flowing International Gothic curves frequently emerge to emphasise the most lyrical of young Madonnas, the curl of her lips emphasised by the gentle concavity of her head. Equally typical are his prophets and Apostles blazing with religious fury. First documented in Modena in 1404, he was recorded in Bologna until 1453–54 when he was working on the rose window of Modena Cathedral. Today he is best known for the almost-complete cycle of frescos that cover the walls of a chapel in S. Petronio, begun in 1390 by Bologna's government 'del Popolo e degli Arti' and clearly intended to promote the city's patron saint. The exhibition *Giovanni da Modena: un pittore all'ombra di San Petronio* in the Museo Civico Medievale and Basilica di S. Petronio, Bologna (to 12th April), celebrates both the artist and the church.

The silk merchant Bartolomeo Bolognini brought the first phase of the construction of S. Petronio to a conclusion with the frescoing of his recently acquired chapel in c.1411–12. Thereafter building was stalled until a couple of



79. *Paradise, with a section of Hell*, by Giovanni da Modena. c.1411–12. Fresco. (Cappella Bolognini, S. Petronio, Bologna).

centuries later when the nave was completed, although the gigantic crossing remained unrealised and the lateral chapels sank into an almost permanent gloom. The Bolognini chapel, which faces east, perhaps served as the Cappella Maggiore in the quattrocento, and the most important aspect of the current exhibition is the illumination of six of the original chapels and the removal of the back of the stalls in the first chapel on the right, so that all that remains of the basilica as it was in 1450 can be seen for the first time in many years: it is greatly to be wished that this becomes permanent.

In the catalogue Fabio Massaccesi describes Bolognini's political rise, as well as Giovanni's interaction with the work of Jacopo di Paolo, evident in the scenes of S. Petronio's legend on the altar wall. The cycle includes a great assembly of saints too formal in their rows to constitute Paradise anywhere less academic than Bologna (Fig.79), an exceptionally elaborate *Adoration of the Magi* (Fig.78) and an

*Inferno* with torments 'as horrible as possible'. Giovanni succeeded so well that Vasari attributed his work to Buffalmacco, whose *Triumph of Death* in Pisa must have been canonical for the sixteenth-century writer. The attribution stuck also to the little panel painting after the *Inferno* now attributed to Jacopo Bellini's brother Giovanni di Nicolò (cat. no.4). Only in 1934 did Roberto Longhi in *Officina ferrarese* propose Giovanni da Modena's authorship for the frescos. A splendid video tour of them in the exhibition deserves to be given a permanent home.

The two *Crucifixions* in the first eastern chapel are generally assumed to be the 'Old and New Testament scenes' added by Giovanni in 1420 to the original frescos. He adapted the crucifixions to represent the *Redemption of Adam and Eve* and the *Triumph of Ecclesia over Synagoga*, his florid architecture contrasting with the precise 'Giottesque' structures below. In the opposite chapel his Madonna and flanking saints, together with a fine representation of the Florentine knight who commissioned it, are signed and dated to 1420. Giovanni is also credited with two dramatic reclining figures in red and black in the manner of carved tomb effigies on the opposite wall, as well as a fresco of St Lawrence in the fourth chapel 'dei Notai'. It should be noted in the latter that the St Florian(?) in an ebulliently skirted coat and a kneeling donor to the left of Lawrence is part of the same fresco, intonaco and framing, even if less intense in execution.<sup>1</sup>

The architect Antonio di Vincenzo's design that contained these chapels included significant sculpture from the start, quatrefoils on the plinth of the façade, probably based on designs of Jacopo di Paolo, and less prominent but more dramatic, the plaques supporting the great chapel windows predominantly by Alberto da Campione from Milan. As Laura Cavazzini shows in an excellent essay, Giovanni's sense of fiery expression, wildly flowing hair and plasticity owes a lot to Alberto's carvings on the exterior of the Bolognini chapel as well as to Jacopo della Quercia's work for the basilica.

The relatively limited surviving *œuvre* of Giovanni, compared with earlier Bolognese



78. *Adoration of the Magi*, by Giovanni da Modena. c.1411–12. Fresco. (Cappella Bolognini, S. Petronio, Bologna).



80. Detail from *Statutes of the Company of Drapers*, open to show fol.2v, illuminated by Giovanni da Modena. 1407. Vellum, 37 by 26 cm. (page) (Museo Civico Medievale, Bologna, MS 639).

painters, is perhaps due to fresco cycles having been lost and to a more meticulous technique, although not in his illumination! The exhibition itself is small; absentee paintings are represented by photographs, of which the most crucial is a triptych signed on the reverse and not reproduced before (no.2). This is a highly complex work, suggesting Gentile da Fabriano and artists of the Veneto, but it is very different from the *Statutes of the Company of Drapers* of 1407 (no.1; Fig.80). But Massimo Medica's dating of the triptych close to the Bolognini chapel is convincing, and he notes the prominence of St Blaise, patron of woolworkers, but also patron of Bolognini's original parish.

Giovanni seems to have painted frequently for the church of S. Giacomo. Apart from a fragmentary fresco of St Anthony in its sacristy, a new attribution of Benati's, the Berlin Sts Cosmas and Damian (no.10, not exhibited) is associated by Giacomo Calogero with an unspecified commission of 1427 for the church. Six polyptych panels (nos.15–16), reassembled from the Bologna Compagnia dei Lombardi and the Ferrara Pinacoteca, make a very lively complex even without the missing Madonna and were probably from the same church, since they include Nicolas of Tolentino, newly canonised in 1446, and St James in the place of honour.

The charming fragmentary early Madonna from S. Maria dei Servi is not usually visible (no.3); equally charming but dated much later in the 1430s is the Madonna of the Franciscan convent in Carpi (no.12). Gianluca del Monaco explores the history of the large *Crucifix* in the Pinacoteca (no.7, not exhibited), with its unusual Stigmatisation of St Francis that might associate it with a chapel of that dedication probably founded in 1418, although Massimo Medica, noting its affinity to the Bolognini chapel frescos, suggests it might be associated with the funeral of the Franciscan Alexander V in S. Francesco in 1410. Del Monaco dates the Madonna (no.11) in the 1420s both through its reflection of the perspectives of the Cappella del Dieci di Balia 'neogiottesco' and its echoes of Jacopo della Quercia's Trenta altarpiece of 1422. Three examples of Jacopo della Quercia's work or close copies (ex-catalogue) have a particular

affinity with some of Giovanni's work, especially a late Madonna from Modena (no.13). This work is curiously contrasted to the Madonna from Corpus Domini (no.18), which has the flattened forms and angularity typical of mid-century Bolognese painting. It is considered a workshop piece, but relates closely to the canvas of S. Bernardino now recognised as Giovanni's work for S. Francesco, Bologna, dated to 1451 (no.17). A Madonna belonging to the Cassa di Risparmio di Ferrara (no.14) looks at once more personal to Giovanni, yet quite unlike either of these last two. There is perhaps a diversity of approach in Giovanni's late work, although Paolo Cova proposes that his well-documented son Cesare had a major collaborative role, especially in the second of the pair of two large Calvary and Crucifixion frescos in the Cappella della Croce in S. Stefano.

Little remains of Giovanni's activity as illuminator, known only from the *Statuti dei Drappieri* of 1407. Medica has, however, traced his impact on contemporary illumination, notably on the Masters of 1411 and 1446. The finest manuscript is a *Valerius Maximus* (no.6) probably made for Bolognini, or else his nephew, whose initials it now bears. Its illumination is the work of the 1411 Master and an associate. Medica rightly notes echoes in the 1411 Master's art of Jacopo Avanzi and earlier. Medica's catalogue essay enables him to bring together several studies that have identified the major Bolognese illuminator after Niccolò da Bologna, the 'Brussels Initials Master', as Giovanni di fra' Silvestro: his richest work, the *Missal of Cardinal Migliorati* (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, ms.34; 88.MG.71) passed into the hands of Baldassare Cossa, later the Antipope John XXIII.

The catalogue<sup>2</sup> is a major contribution, even if some key items arrived too late to be fully illustrated. It includes precise entries for all the works as well as invaluable essays on Giovanni the artist and the political context by Giancarlo Benevolo, his relationship to contemporary sculpture and the long-established Bolognese production of illuminated manuscripts. The exhibition is described as concluding a cycle devoted to the painters Vitale, Simone and Jacopo di Paolo, but the review of Bologna's complex role in Renaissance politics and art suggests that the bizarre careers of Michele di Matteo and Giovanni Martorelli might well be candidates for the next exhibition, and suit the chaotic state of Italian arts administration at the present time.

<sup>1</sup> C. Volpe: 'La pittura gotica da Lippo di Dalmasio a Giovanni da Modena', *La Basilica di San Petronio*, Bologna 1983, p.269, fig.262.

<sup>2</sup> Catalogue: *Giovanni da Modena: un pittore all'ombra di San Petronio*. Edited by Daniele Benati and Massimo Medica, with essays by Daniele Benati, Massimo Medica, Laura Cavazzini, Fabio Massaccesi, Paolo Cova and Giancarlo Benevolo, and entries by Gabriella Bernardi, Giacomo Calogero, Paolo Cova, Mark Gregory D'Apuzzo, Gianluca del Monaco, Angela Lezzi, Massimo Medica and Ilaria Negretti. 224 pp. incl. 51 col. + 159 b. & w. ill. (Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, 2014), €28. ISBN 978-88-366-3033-2.

## Madame Cézanne

New York

by KARSTEN SCHUBERT

IF WE 'RECOGNISE' a sitter in a painting by applying our knowledge of that person to the picture, then Cézanne's portraits of his wife, Hortense, confront us with a dual challenge. After a century of research we still know remarkably little about Mme Cézanne, who she was and what she was like, and as for the paintings of her, like all Cézannes, they are still enigmatic, unfathomable and as magical as ever.

When John Rewald wrote his study of the artist in the 1930s (published 1939), he turned the lack of information about Mme Cézanne to suit his own agenda. He was constructing an image of the painter as a solitary figure in the south of France, alone, detached, in a way a classic account of the Romantic nineteenth-century lone genius, the perfect counterpart to the high-octane drama of the life stories of Gauguin and Van Gogh. It is an indication of the persuasive power of Rewald's interpretation that it still, by and large, stands, although in a number of areas much detail has since been added to give a more nuanced picture. We now know, for example, that Cézanne's involvement with his contemporaries and the Parisian art scene was much greater than Rewald allowed. This was the subject of a revelatory exhibition at the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris two years ago.<sup>1</sup> The only area of Rewald's account that has frequently escaped revision is his portrayal of Mme Cézanne. With little or no additional information available, Rewald's narrative depicts Mme Cézanne stoney-faced, grumpy, unloving, unloved, more hindrance than help to her husband who was too preoccupied with work to extricate himself. This account has been repeated and honed unquestioned for nearly a century. Rewald was not the first to describe Hortense



81. *Madame Cézanne in a yellow chair*, by Paul Cézanne. c.1889–90. Canvas, 81 by 65 cm. (Fondation Beyeler, Basel; exh. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).