

Ermenegildo Constantini

Italian painter of the late-Baroque
(1731-1791)

Son of Marcantonio di Domenico, Roman, and Santa Piacentini, was born in Rome on 28 March 1731 and was baptized the following day in the church of S. Marcello. Painter, his artistic figure is still unknown to modern critics.

The only news regarding the period of its formation is provided by Cracas which he says is a pupil of Marco Benefial. The first documented date of his activity is July 1755, the year in which his nude drawing is awarded at the Academy of S. Luca. Five years later he will send another drawing that will not be awarded in 1765. The Discalced Augustinians commissioned him an altarpiece for the chapel of St. Anne in their church of Jesus and Maria al Corso, where depicted with a somewhat unique composition, *S. Antonio S. Anna*. The following year he painted a *S. Bonaventure* for the altar of the third left chapel of the church of S. Lucia al Gonfalone. Also in the same church, on the altar of the sacristy, a *Crucifixion* was placed in July 1767.

Cracas, from which we have detailed information about the first works of Constantini, gives news of a painting, much admired, which was exhibited on 24 December. 1767 in the church of S. Maria in Via, depicting a *S. Teresa presenting the city of Lucera to the Virgin*; the panel was to be subsequently sent to the new church of the Carmine in the Apulian town.

In 1769, at the end of the rebuilding of the church of S. Caterina in via Giulia operated by P. Posi, he painted in the vault of the nave a group of elegant *musician Angels*, whose sketch is kept at the Academy of S. Luca. Taddeo Kuntz also collaborated in this work, painting the beautiful chiaroscuro *angels* that support the box.

The collaboration with Kuntz, which was also renewed later in the church of S. Stanislao dei Polacchi, testifies to an affinity of style between the two artists which is indicative of the formal context in which Costantini moved. Kuntz is in fact the painter who "definitively ends the Roman rococo". Thus, while working in S. Caterina alongside artists such as Lapis, Monosilio, Corvi, Lapiccola, transition painters who conducted their first neoclassical experiences, Constantini did not draw from this proximity any stimulus for a formal update of his style, remaining an isolated representative of a decorative language substantiated by rococo grace. In 1772 under the direction of Lapiccola, he participated, together with other artists, in the restoration of the frescoes of Villa Giulia.

The collaboration with Lapiccola also has implications for Constantini's private life since February 6. 1773 Lapiccola baptizes her third child.

In 1773-74 payments to Constantini "figurative painter" are documented, for "natural chiaroscuro paintings and... ornaments" in the Audience room on the ground floor of Palazzo Borghese. In 1775-76 he painted the ceiling of St. Stanislaus of the Polish painting of the church nave, the background of a blue sky tenderly, the *Gloria S. Stanislao Kostka* surrounded by various holy and graceful angels; here, once again the

painter expresses his preference for baroque compositions lightened by the elegance and grace of the color with light tones.

April 10 1776 he was elected academic of S. Luca. The enterprise of St. Stanislaus made him obtain an important commission from GF Albani, cardinal of Ostia and Velletri and protector of Poland, who called him to Velletri to decorate, in 1776-77, one of the halls of the municipal building where the cardinal went setting up his private apartment.

Since the palace was destroyed in the Second World War, we know only from the guides that Constantini painted a series of marines on canvas, work paid 1,945 scudi.

Also for Cardinal Albani, Constantini painted a canvas with the *Multiplication of the loaves and fishes*, for the Sacramento chapel in the cathedral of Velletri.

Praised by Guattani (1790), this painting is a typically academic work, weak in coloring and shadows and demonstrates how the painter was at ease not so much in the works on canvas as in the fresco techniques and in the decoration of large surfaces, in which he expressed the best of his art.

Another noteworthy undertaking, carried out in the years between 1780 and 85, was the decoration of the dome of the church of Monteoliveto Maggiore, whose lively sketch is kept in the convent of S. Francesca Romana. Referable to the same years is a large fresco in the vault of the gallery of Palazzo Antici in Recanati (Guattani, 1790). Tommaso Antici, envoy of the king of Poland, declared his satisfaction and esteem for Constantini in a letter with which he recommended it to the canons of Città di Castello who wanted to make new decorations in the cathedral. It was a very important and demanding commission for which an artist was requested who did not disfigure the comparison of the paintings already performed by Benefial.

From the contract signed in May 1787 we learn that Constantini had to paint the side vaults of the dome whose subjects, chosen by the canons and indicated by the contract, were: the *Triumph of religion* with numerous allegorical figures, the *Death of s. Florido*, *S. Florido and S. Amantius in the act of presenting himself to Pope Gregory* and finally the *Church in triumph*. The compensation for this work was set at 2,000 scudi and three years were expected to complete. However, it was terminated very abruptly in October 1789 by the ruinous earthquake that shocked Città di Castello; the bell tower of the cathedral collapsed on the dome causing it to collapse with the almost finished parts of Costantini's paintings. In reporting the news, Cracas even communicates the death of the painter under the rubble, news denied in the following days with the clarification that Constantini had left with his son shortly before the collapse, in which he was instead the painter who helped him died, Filippo Crosti of Città di Castello. Two sketches of this work remain, preserved in the chapter house of the cathedral.

Thanks to some documents, including some letters from the painter, found in the Episcopal archive of Città di Castello, and to information provided by Cracas about the progress of the works, we can obtain some elements on private life; we know that he had a wife and five children, one of whom, Giovanni, was a painter; he is in fact appointed as assistant to Constantini in the contract for the decoration of the cathedral.

Back in Rome, after the unfortunate Umbrian parenthesis, in 1790 he painted a *Glory of musician angels* in the vault of the chapel of the Madonna in S. Nicola da Tolentino.

The harmonious arrangement of the angels' figures, placed in an open space surrounded by a balustrade, testifies to the degree of refined elegance and compositional ability to which the painter had come; at the same time the colors become heavier and brighter.

Between 1780 and 1790 there is a self- *portrait* and a portrait of the sculptor *Giuseppe Angelini*; the latter painting is surprising for the novelty it shows compared to the usual style of Constantini: abandoned the triumphant and academic tone, the portrait is cordially communicative in the shaded face with surprisingly modern cut.

The last known work of Constantini is a copy of the framework *S. Nicola da Tolentino di Raffaello* (destroyed in the earthquake, the fragments were dispersed in the 19th century), signed and dated 1791, sent to Città di Castello in the church of S. Agostino, to replace the original and now in the local art gallery.

Constantini died in Rome on 2 August 1791.

by Marina Coccia - Biographical Dictionary of Italians - Volume 30 (1984)

Translated from:

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