

Filippo Gherardi

Italian painter of the Baroque period
(1643-1704)

He was born in Lucca in 1643 by the painter Sebastiano.

In the paternal shop, where the Gherardi - also known by the nickname of Sancasciani - took the first steps in the art of drawing, was then the countryman Giovanni Coli, seven years younger, with whom the Gherardi held a strong friendship, destined over the years to turn into a stainless artistic association. In fact, until the death of Coli, in 1681, all the works of Gherardi were performed together with the partner, so that it is difficult, and in some ways impossible, to reconstruct independently the biographical and professional paths of the two painters.

From the workshop of Sebastiano, Gherardi and Coli later passed under the directives of Pietro Paolini, a decent artist from Lucca who had studied in Rome and Venice, and then returned to his homeland where he had founded a renowned academy of painting. Shortly thereafter, in 1659, perhaps at the suggestion of the Paolini, Rome moved and entered the studio of Pietro Berrettini da Cortona, eager to know the characters and forms of the new Baroque painting. Around 1662, to further enrich their baggage of artistic knowledge, the two painters went to Venice. In this city, before obtaining independent assignments, Gherardi and Coli began to work by painting numerous copies of the great Venetian artists of the sixteenth century, above all Titian and the Veronese, of whom they deeply assimilated the figurative solutions and stylistic formulas, without disdaining to practice also in the quadrature technique.

Of their first public commission received in Venice - a large painting with the *Madonna in glory* for the church of the Italian colony in Lisbon - remains only the testimony of the historic Lucchese Trenta (154), to whom, moreover, most of the biographical information on the two artists. In 1663 the Gherardi and Coli received from the abbot C. Condanino the task of carrying out a cycle of paintings for the vault of the library of the Benedictine monastery of S. Giorgio Maggiore. In the ceiling of the large hall, recently built according to the project of Baldassarre Longhena, five paintings were arranged, by 1665, whose subject was linked to the theme of *Divine Wisdom*, personified by the mythological figure of Minerva, according to a learned program elaborated and printed by the dean M. Valle.

The paintings represent *Jupiter and Minerva that bring out the elements from the primordial chaos*, *Minerva that distributes the stars and the planets while the cardinal Virtues support the earth*, *Minerva welcomes the Virtues in the temple of bliss and removes the Vices* (sketch in Udine, Museo Civico), the *Triumph of Minerva* (sketch in Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi), the *Sacrifice at the simulacrum of Minerva* (sketch in Udine, Museo civico). In the following three years the project was integrated with two large lunette canvases placed above the main doors, depicting *Mars and Venus* and *Mercury and the Genius*; while other five small paintings, lost, with allegorical enterprises concerning the Sun were placed under the windows.

The enterprise, destined to profoundly mark the orientation of the Venetian figurative culture of the second seventeenth century, represented a declaration of faith in the Cortona's magisterium and at the same time a loving and free quotation of the great Veronese scenographies, which became the result of this work. point of reference of an entire generation of lagoon artists who opposed the current of the "tenebrous".

After the road to the neo-onesianism of Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini and Sebastiano Ricci, Gherardi and Coli returned in 1669 to Rome, recalled by the promise of decorating the dome of S. Maria in Campitelli. But Pietro da Cortona, their most authoritative referent and protector, died and, consequently, the prospect of this commission came out, they were forced to face a difficult financial situation, aggravated by the loss of a large part of their assets - among them even cadres. del Tintoretto and Veronese - on a ship sacked by pirates. In 1670, Monsignor F. Bonvisi and Cardinal Giovan Battista Spada came to the aid of the two

artists, procuring them, at the remarkable figure of 1500 scudi, the commission for the fresco decoration of the dome of S. Nicola da Tolentino depicting the *Gloria of Nicola*; the work was finished in 1672.

Built according to the Lanfranchi scheme of the concentric circles, the work denounces all its debt towards the art of Pietro da Cortona, referring to the compositional structure and animation of the figures at the dome of S. Maria in Vallicella; some forms more loose and the richness of the color, with an almost stain-like arrangement of the brushstrokes, nevertheless seem to anticipate the manner of Giovan Battista Gaulli.

At the end of 1672 the two painters were summoned to Lucca with the task of carrying out three paintings for the church of S. Tommaso in Pelleria: the *Immaculate Conception* on the high altar (now moved to the right aisle), the *Incredulity* and the *Martyrdom of S. Tommaso* on the sides of the same.

Of all the works of the two painters, this is the only one to show evident differences in style, such as to induce the critics to attempt a difficult distinction between the two hands, where the lateral canvases, with a more expressive and lively pictorial texture, also because better preserved, would belong to Coli, while the *Immaculate*, in which the drawing trace is less evident and the chromatic system less fortunate, should be referred to Gherardi in this way he risks limiting his professionalism to that of a modest shoulder of the most valuable member. Such a schematic division of styles, besides being impossible to verify on the plane of strict visual philology, due to the lack of direct comparisons with works certainly attributable to Coli alone, clashes with the logic of the client who would not have allowed it to be entrusted to the painter less equipped the execution of the altarpiece of the high altar. However, it remains an enterprise to the extent possible of the distinction of their different pictorial ways and even of the determination of roles and functions within a society that involved "that one worked in the same head, or cloth, or figure of the other".

Returning to Rome, the two artists created, between 1673 and 1677, three canvases for the ceiling of the church of S. Croce and S. Bonaventura dei Lucchesi depicting *Heraclius showing the true Cross in Jerusalem*, in the middle, the *Angels with veil of Veronica* and the *Angels with s. Croce di Lucca*, in two side ovals, and, in eight small triangles, the *Putti with the instruments of the Passion*.

The large central panel depends, both in the composition and in the details, from the *Triumph of Venice* painted by Veronese in the ducal palace; it can be considered the manifesto of the neo-veronesism of Gherardi, in this case brought back to even more decorative modules in the choice of bright colors, with clear and delicate colors that seem to presage the Tepelicoso way, and open to solutions now undeniably late baroque in the shyness of the combinations of the figurative masses that unwind and collide around the central nucleus of the cross.

On September 15th 1675 Gherardi and Coli were elected members of the Accademia di S. Luca. This unequivocal signal of their success in the Roman environment followed, in the same year, the commission for the fresco in the ceiling of the great gallery of Palazzo Colonna, where it had already been prepared by Giovan Paolo Schor, between 1665 and 1667, a virtuosistic illusionistic frame, while on the walls shone since 1660 the elegant *Mirrors with cherubs and flowers* by Carlo Maratta and Mario Nuzzi (Mario de 'Fiori). In the extended quadrature of the vault the two painters frescoed five stories, completed in 1677, whose iconographic program wanted to magnify the military deeds of Marcantonio (II) Colonna, the hero of the battle of Lepanto in 1571, a victory that in those years bought a precise political meaning coinciding with the attempts of Pope Innocent XI, since the time of his election, in 1676, to organize an anti-Turkish offensive league.

The frescoes represent *The Doge who holds the council to eradicate the Turks*, *Pius V who entrusts the command of the fleet to Marcantonio II*, *the Battle of Lepanto*, *the Triumphal Entry of Marcantonio II in Rome*, *the inauguration of the bronze statue of Marcantonio II*. The large central fresco, with the *Battle of Lepanto*, although inspired by the installation and distribution of the figures to an engraving by A. Mitelli depicting the *Triumph of Emperor Leopold*, appears an invention completely new; extremely effective in the opening of the natural sky, as in the convoluted intertwining of the diagonals, the composition is supported by a brilliant color and a tremulous light, which cleverly blends the most daring Venetian tradition of the subtree with the new trends of Roman painting, from Pietro da Cortona of the Barberini tapestries at the Maratta of Palazzo Altieri.

In 1678, at the end of this intense decade, Gherardi returned to Lucca, where, always together with his partner, he prepared to fresco the apse of the cathedral with the *Trinity in glory* and *Angels* in the arc in front. The work, completed in September 1681, was paid only to Gherardi due to the death of Coli, on February 24 of this year.

Also in this work the two painters prove to be skilled manipulators of the most accredited figurative repertoires: if in fact the semicircle structure replicates that of the dome of S. Nicola da Tolentino, the quadrature with the fake monochrome bas-relief recovers the similar decoration of the vault of the Roman church of Saints Domenico and Sisto, fired in 1675 by Domenico Maria Canuti and Enrico Haffner.

The partially dry technique of the figures and the flat color layout, present in the frescoes of Lucca, could be further confirmation of the idea that "it was the Coli to give the brilliant color touch", while the Gherardi, although a worthy draftsman, was, however, devoid of imagination and talent; this statement is contradicted by the comparison with the works of Gherardi performed after the death of the partner, in which there is no lack of expert technique and lively brushstroke. In the *Miracle of the Holy House of Loreto*, frescoed by Gherardi around 1681 on the wall in front of the Lauretana chapel of S. Maria Corteorlandini in Lucca, there are in fact a clever staging and a brilliant color; Coli's contribution, even if there was, must be considered entirely secondary. In the fresco with the *Gloria of the Name of Mary*, made by Gherardi between 1687 and 1690 for A. Armini, father general of the Piarists, in the vault of the church of S. Pantaleo in Rome, confirmation of the validity and autonomy of his art. The decoration of the vault, to which the student C. Tondini had collaborated - who died during the works - and the quadraturist A. Colli, already the help of Father Pozzo, was completed, in the tribune, by the *Assumption of the Virgin*, but destroyed in 1700.

First of all, the work attests to a continuity of Gherardi's relations in the context of the most important Roman commissions that evidently had not failed at the death of Coli; secondly, it expresses a spectacular perspective illusionism which, in the pyrotechnic use of the breakthrough, so close to the solutions of Gaulli (Baciccìa) in the Roman church of Jesus, is one of the direct precedents for the work of Andrea Pozzo in S. Ignazio.

Returning to Lucca in the autumn of 1690, Gherardi painted the *miracle and martyrdom of S. Pauline* in the lower area of the choir of the church of the same name, where, despite the weakness of execution and the lack of strength in the drafting of the color, the vivacity of the representation and the richness of the compositional inventions remain happy. Always in the last years of the century we must date the canvas with the *Virgin, saints and souls of Purgatory*, on the main altar of the church of Suffragio, and the frescoes, lost, in the lunettes of the cloister of Carmine, depicting the *Miracles of s. Maria Maddalena de 'Pazzì*.

Gherardi died in Lucca in 1704; he was buried in the church of S. Cristoforo inside the same tomb of his friend and collaborator Coli.

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