

# Paolo Guidotti

(Cavalier Borghese)

Italian architect

1560-1619

Son of Giacomo, he was born in Lucca around 1560, in a family of noble origins. After an initial formation in his hometown, of which there is no news, he arrived in Rome, according to his first biographer G. Baglione, at the time of Pope Gregory XIII. However, the first works by Guidotti date back, according to Baglione, to the years of the pontificate of Sixtus V (1585-90).

Since there are no documentary evidence, some frescoes have been hypothetically attributed to Guidotti in the major works promoted by that pontiff: in the Holy Staircase, the group of *Angels with the Cross* in the atrium vault, and, doubtfully, the box with *Adam and Eve hunted from the earthly paradise* and that with the *passage of the Red Sea*; in the Vatican Apostolic Library, the *Council of Florence*, the *Lateran Council V* and the *Papal Chapel of S. Maria del Popolo*; in the Lateran Palace, the *Angels* and the *allegorical Figures* in the Hall of David, two figures in the frieze of the Sala dei Pontefici, or the "Lateran Pacts", depicting *S. Cornelio Pope* and *S. Lucio Pope*, and the *Baptism of Constantine* in the Hall of Constantine.

The first document relating to Guidotti dates back to 1589, when his name appears in a "list of candles" of the Academy of S. Luca in which the painter appears as "m [esse] r the Cavalier Paulo Guidotto lucchese": too early to allude to the future honor, the title may refer to its noble origins. By July 1591, as recorded in the payment documents relating to the entire commission (Mangia Renda), Guidotti painted in one of the pendentives of the dome of S. Girolamo degli Schiavoni *S. Matthew Evangelista*, explicitly mentioned by Baglione: to this the critic has recently added also *St. Mark the Evangelist*, in another dome. When the work was finished in this church the artist moved to Naples, where, in 1593, he painted the frescoes with *Marian Stories* in the apse of S. Maria del Parto (signed and dated).

From the beginning, the style of Guidotti is revealed as bizarre and nonconformist, heir to cultured mannerism. The pictorial work of Guidotti is hardly classifiable, as it is subject to a continuous and hypersensitive transformation: from the unreal gleams of D. Beccafumi to the strong Caravaggesque contrasts, to the cubizing volumes of L. Cambiaso, Guidotti continuously changes style, always faithful but to an anticlassic language.

In October 1593 he was already back in Rome, as the 18th of the month was again present at the meeting for the sale of candles on the occasion of the feast of St. Luke. On April 29th 1594 filed a lawsuit against the architect Honorius Longhi "because he had taken him for the collar, leading him more punches and also pulling out the dagger". From October to November 1599, together with other artists already present in the Sistine workshops, Guidotti was paid for some frescoes in the dome of the church of S. Maria dei Monti, within which they were also attributed other works on walls and canvas. In September 1602 he painted for the fathers of the Jesus of Rome a "small picture on the table" depicting the *martyrdom of the ss. Abondio and Abondanzio*, now lost, as was lost a *S. Sebastiano* in oil on canvas made in 1602-03 for the destroyed oratory of S. Giacomo a Scossacavalli, seen for the last time by I. Faldi (1957) in the Petrian Museum in the Vatican, of which only a photographic testimony remains.

Already in these years Guidotti enjoyed a certain fame, if, in 1604, C. van Mander remembered it as "excellent and superior, of an entirely different nature from the other masters, forming very rare concepts and inventions": he dedicated himself, in fact, also to the study of letters, mathematics, astrology and music and he went into law. F. Baldinucci recounts that he also attempted the flight with wings built in whale bone, but fell on top of a roof, "breaking his thigh from his flight": with the same curiosity and the same scientific spirit he studied anatomy, going at night, according to his pupil Matteo Boselli, in the cemeteries to remove from the corpses "that part of his body, which he did for his need [...] and made that study in drawing on it".

In October 1604, 1607 and 1608 the name of Guidotti is still present in a list of the Accademia di S. Luca, of which, in September 1605, he had been appointed secretary; the following year he was among the artists registered in the prestigious Congregation of Virtuosi al Pantheon.

In 1608 his first known, signed and dated easel painting depicts *David with the head of Goliath*, preserved in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. On September 13 of the same year he was awarded by Pope Paul V Borghese the honorary title of knight of the Militia of Christ, as a reward for "a group of six figures in a piece of white marble, all intiere" donated by Guidotti to Cardinal Scipione Borghese. The work was to be of a certain importance, as the pontiff himself as well as honor, wanted to grant the artist, and at his express request, the privilege of wearing the surname Borghese added to his (hence the 'epithet of "Cavalier Borghese" with which he is remembered from the sources).

The sculptural group is mentioned in some documents conserved in the Borghese Archives, in which we read that the work was rewarded on the 18th of August. 1608 with 250 scudi and that, on 15 November 1610, was placed in the Palazzo Borghese in Borgo Nuovo (now Torlonia), on a pedestal of yellow marble. There is scarce information on the activity of Guidotti sculptor; the only known work is the statue of *St. Potito* delivered in October 1615 for the altar of the Incoronata in the cathedral of Pisa.

Guidotti also painted a *self-portrait*, signed, in a private collection, wearing the dress with the cross of the Militia of Christ and in his hands a pen and a book, perhaps allusive to the manuscript of the "destroyed Jerusalem" composed by him in octaves. The *self-portrait*, of which there is a later autograph replica in a private collection, has been linked, on a stylistic basis, to the *Portrait of S. Giovanni Leonardi* kept in the general house of the regular clerics of the Mother of God, depicting the effigy of the saint after his death (1609).

From 4th July to 5th October 1610 Guidotti worked in the palace of the Marquis Vincenzo Giustiniani (now Odescalchi) in Bassano Romano, where, with the help of Domenico Tolomei and Giulio Donnabella, he decorated the Cavaliere hall.

It is a rectangular room with a pavilion vault, illusionistically transformed into a domed vault, in the center of which, in an eye open to the sky, is the personification of *Aeterna Felicitas*; in the cornice, among eight groups of telamons, are four allegorical figures (the *contempt of the world*, the *purity*, the *wisdom that descends from God* and the *Sacrifice of self* : the interpretation of the latter subject is controversial) alternating with as many biblical scenes (*Joseph and the wife of Putifarre*, *Susanna and the Elders*, the *Judgment of Solomon* and *Judith and Holofernes*). These frescoes are to be considered a kind of summa of the Roman late Romanesque pictorial language, where the plastic vision, which shines both in the perspective construction and in the volume of the bodies, is amplified by the accentuated use of chiaroscuro according to the Caravaggesque trend. The result of this "beautiful compound" is a scenic space with a strong impact, still adhering to the "sophisticated and captivating spirit of the" poetics of wonder "of the extreme mannerism". The adherence, in some particulars, to a neocambiasque language, here evident for the first time, can be put in connection with the client, of Genoese origin and collector of works of L. Cambiaso.

After finishing the prestigious assignment in Bassano Romano, in his moment of greatest glory, Guidotti returned for a long time to his hometown. On the basis of a documentary testimony it is almost certain that the painter left by 1610, to give to the fathers of the church of S. Romano in Lucca the painting depicting the *Virgin who gives the Child to s. Agnese da Montepulciano*, painted in Rome that same year. In 1611 he signed and dated a large canvas depicting *Liberty in Lucca* already in the palace of the Elders and now in the National Museum of Villa Guinigi; in the spring of this same year it is documented in Reggio Emilia, involved in the fresco decoration of the apse of the church of S. Giovanni Evangelista where he painted a *Resurrection of Christ* surprising for the anti-naturalism of the forms accentuated by a strong chiaroscuro contrast. Returning to Lucca in 1613 he painted his first fresco in that city, a *Madonna and Child among the SS Pietro and Paolino* in the loggia of the Praetorian Palace, today detached, and by 1615 he decorated the apse basin of the church of S. Giovanni with a great *Annunciation*.

It is more difficult to chronologically place the rest of the Lucca production, which includes numerous works that still exist: the *Miracle of S Silao* for the church of the monastery of S. Giustina, now in the oratory of S. Lorenzo; a *Madonna with Child and the ss. Stefano and Lorenzo* in the church of S. Alessandro; *St. Charles Borromeo* in that of the Saints Paolino and Donato; *S. Zita quenches a pilgrim* already for the altar of the chapel dedicated to the saint in S. Frediano, now in the wardrobe; and, for the same church, a *Deposition* defined by the critics as "shocking caravaggian incunabulum. The fresco depicting the *SS. Carlo Borromeo and Giorgio* in the church of S. Giovanni and the one with the *Fall of the rebellious angels*, painted for the tribune of the church of S. Michele "worthy of esteem for the great quantity of the unknown, bizarre of invention", just as other paintings are no longer traceable from the ancient city guides: a "half figure" for the Baroni collection, which on the back showed "a [...] frank and beautiful old head" painted by Guidotti "with the big finger of the right foot" as it was written on the same canvas with the signatures of the witnesses, an *Assumption* in S. Romano, a *Resurrected Christ* in S. Martino, a *Venus* in the Orsucci collection, and a *Virgin and St. John the Baptist* "half figures in natural" in the Spada (Ambrosini) collection.

In 1615 Guidotti was in Pisa, where he painted for the tribune of the cathedral the paintings representing *Moses that causes water to flow from the rock* (signed and dated) and the *Last Supper*, welded on March 5, 1616: works of a strongly Beccafumian tone, perhaps inspired by the presence, in the lower part of the same gallery, of Beccafumi's paintings. On the following November 13, the last payment for a cycle of frescoes, now detached, dates from the Pisan cemetery, depicting *Judith in front of Holofernes* and *Judith beheading Holofernes*, interspersed with two figures of soldiers and a standard bearer. In the Tuscan city of Guidotti there is still an *Annunciation* and an altarpiece with the *SS. Torpè, Orsola, Cecilia and Ranieri*, already in the church of S. Silvestro, now respectively in the royal palace and in the National Museum civic of S. Matteo.

In the Pisan territory the canvas has been attributed to him with the *Miracle of b. Salvatore da Orta* in the church of S. Croce in Fossabanda, and a *Last Supper* in the church of S. Maria Assunta in Fabbrica di Peccioli.

The Tuscan interval certainly ended in 1618, as in October of that year Guidotti is again present in the list of alms for the feast of the patron of the Academy of St. Luke. Remembered, on 6 January, at a congregation meeting, he was elected prince on 10 August. He renounced his position after a few months (in February 1620 he was prince Antiveduto Grammatica), "for his age, and his particular care", according to the justification put forward on 29 August 1620, refusing any other assignment. Instead he renounced the office of conservator of the Roman people given to him by Pope Borghese, and in this capacity he issued a decree against the non-fulfillment of painters towards the rules of the Academy of St. Luca (Missirini). From 1 April to 1 July 1621 he was conservator for the district of Castello (Salerno), during which he made a small painting, signed and dated, depicting the *crucified Christ triumphant over death, the flesh and the devil*, now in collection private in L'Aquila.

In 1622 he designed, as an architect, the wooden ephemeral apparatus inside St. Peter's in the Vatican for the canonization (March 12) of the SS. Ignatius, Francesco Saverio, Filippo, Isidoro and Teresa d'Ávila "with many arches worked in white, and colors of stone and gold with very vague design"; much appreciated by contemporaries, can be seen reproduced in a rare burin engraving by M. Greuter.

On the occasion of the restoration of the Basilica of S. Crisogono, between 1620 and 1623, Scipione Borghese commissioned Guidotti two oil paintings on the wall depicting a *Crucifixion* and the *Saints Domenico, Francesco and Angelo Carmelitano*, soldered on June 14, 1624; in the same church have been attributed to Guidotti, or to his school, also the *Miracle of S. Alberto degli Abati from Trapani*, the *SS. Barbara and Caterina* and a *S. Francesca Romana*, all oil paintings on the wall.

The last known work of Guidotti is the frescoed overhead depicting the *Martyrdom of S. Peter* placed in September 1628 on an altar in St. Peter's in the Vatican, but soon covered by a painting by Giovan Francesco Romanelli.

20th February 1629 Guidotti made a testament in his palace in Borgo, "opposite that of the cardinal of S. Clemente", Giovanni Domenico Spinola.

His wife Ursula Turini, Roman, his brother Giacomo Guidotti, a certain Giovanni Maria Brancaleoni, was appointed as his heir, and his only daughter, Giustiniana, was established as a universal heir, who in 1651 appeared on a list of female artists of the Accademia di S. Luca.

Guidotti died in Rome on 10 March 1629 and was buried the following day in the church of S. Maria in Traspontina.

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