

Girolamo Massei

Italian painter
(c.1545-1620)

He was born in Lucca probably around the years 1540-45. It had to be formed next to the Sienese Bartolomeo Neroni, called Il Riccio, who, after the fall of the Republic (1555), had moved to Lucca. Il Riccio, "returned to Siena with the help of Girolamo Mazzei, who brought with him the Lucca of S. Ansano". In the four plates of the Catalan, perhaps dated to 1569 and today in the church of S. Donato in Siena, it is not possible to identify the hand of Massei, of which no work prior to the transfer to Rome has yet been identified.

Massei delighted in perspective, and he gave it to anyone who was a scholar, and wanted to reveal documents; and Il Riccio would have taught drawing, perspective and military architecture in the years spent in Lucca. On the level of style, however, it is difficult to identify in the few works notes of Massei the signs of his formation occurred alongside this late and modest follower of the Sienese masters of the early sixteenth century.

At the time of the pontificate of Gregory XIII, when the great pictorial works of the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican opened, Massei moved to Rome to work on the second floor of the new wing of the lodges (1576-77).

Here he had "many works of his brush carried out"; but the generality of the reference and the lack of knowledge of the work of Massei make it difficult to identify the individual scenes he painted. Attribute to him the *healing of the man with an inhuman hand* and the *Resurrection of the daughter of Jairus*.

In 1578 he was welcomed into the Compagnia di S. Giuseppe al Pantheon, whose sessions were almost always present in the following years. In the early eighties Massei took part in the decoration of the cloister of the Ss. Trinità dei Monti, performing five lunettes with episodes of *life of S. Francesco di Paola* and *Charity* above the door leading to the convent; the cycle was described and reproduced in engravings in a pamphlet dated 1584.

In 1594 he copied, on behalf of the Filipino fathers of Rome, the *Ascension* of G. Muziano in the church of S. Maria in Vallicella in a drawing to be sent to the Naples Oratory. From the letter in which this commission is mentioned we also learn that Massei had recently painted the *Madonna del Carmelo* crowned by two angels for a chapel in S. Martino ai Monti. The small painting, which is today framed in a large canvas by A. Cavallucci with *The Souls of Purgatory*, is exemplified on images of a devotional character, almost neo-Byzantine. In the following years Massei worked, next to artists often of secondary importance, to the decoration of three ancient cardinal titles which, in the context of the Paleochristian revival encouraged by Clement VIII, were restored in view of the jubilee of 1600.

The intervention, sponsored by Cardinal Alessandro de' Medici, dates back to 1594-95, in the nave of S. Prassede, where Massei frescoed the scene of *Christ before Caiaphas*. In 1598-99 he worked, on commission of Cardinal Bartolomeo Cesi, in S. Maria in Portico; but his fresco in the left wall of the nave has been lost. In about 1597-98, on behalf of Cardinal Cesare Baronio, he decorated the façade of the SS. Nereo and Achilleo "a graffito". The paintings were almost completely lost; but the general scheme can be reconstructed thanks to a graphic project attributed to the same Massei. On the basis of an annotation of S. Resta to the painting *Abecedario* of P. Orlandi and of the confrontation with *Christ before Caiaphas* and with the *Episodes of the life of S. Francesco di Paola*, attributed to Massei also the *Homily of S. Gregory the Great* in the apse and the *Baptism of the SS. Domitilla and Plautilla* in the nave of the same church.

In 1601 he undertook to perform a painting of the *Marriage of the Virgin* for the chapel of the Society of St. Joseph at the Pantheon (all the decoration of the chapel was already lost in the middle of the seventeenth century). Massei was repeatedly appointed expert by his colleagues: in 1594 he estimated the frescoes of the brothers Giovanni and Cherubino Alberti in the sacristy of the canons in S. Giovanni in Laterano; in 1608-09, those of various painters in the new apartment of Paul V in the Vatican; and in 1609, those of G. Reni in the halls of the Dame and Aldobrandini, also in the Vatican.

In the early seventeenth century probably three lost altarpieces were already found in S. Andrea delle Fratte, a church rebuilt from 1604, and in S. Luigi dei Francesi. In the first one, assigned in 1585 to the minima of S. Francesco di Paola, for which Massei worked on the cloister of the Trinità dei Monti, there was a *S. Andrea* on the high altar and a *Madonna with the SS. Elena and Francesco* in the fourth chapel on the right. In the first chapel on the left of S. Luigi dei Francesi, whose patronage belonged to the Confraternity of Saints Sebastiano, Barbara and Apollonia, there was an altar piece with *S. Sebastiano* flanked by two paintings with *S. Caterina* and *S. Barbara* (currently in second chapel, on the sides of the altarpiece with S. Nicola di Bari).

In January 1612, Massei was a witness to the signing of a notarial deed drawn up in the house of GB Crescenzi, key personalities of the Oratorian circle. On April 13th 1620 he appears for the last time at the sittings of the Compagnia di S. Giuseppe al Pantheon. Massei returned to Lucca called by his brother and after a few years he died there at the age of "eighty years old", that is, shortly after 1620.

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