

Giovanni Battista Mercati

Italian painter
1591-1645

He was born in Borgo Sansepolcro in 1591 by Raffaele and was baptized on October 1 of the same year.

Until the nineties of the twentieth century Mercati was almost ignored by historiography, from which it was possible to deduce only a few partial data that mostly accredited the role of engraver: of this activity Bartsch had drawn up a catalog of about sixty engravings.

Mercati was formed near the painter and engraver Raffaello Schiaminossi, of which he was also nephew. Confirming the presence of Mercati in his uncle's workshop is his first venture, the decoration of the sacristy of the church of S. Francesco in Borgo Sansepolcro in 1608, conducted in collaboration with Schiaminossi.

According to a part of the critique, the collaboration between the two artists would also be confirmed by the four allegories engraved by Mercati in 1616, representing *Modestia*, *La Sorte*, the *Amorous Contento* and the *Spy*, which would be interpreted as a continuation of a series created by Schiaminossi in 1605. Others believe that the chronological distance, but above all the difference in size and construction of allegories, are indicative of an independent work, although stylistically indebted to the master's methods. It is certainly in any case that, from an iconographic point of view, these are derivations from the *Iconology* of Cesare Ripa in the edition of 1613, the only one containing all the four subjects presented by the Markets.

In the second decade of the century, Mercati undertook the traditional journey of artistic training in Rome, together with his uncle. However, the Roman stay was interrupted in 1622 when, following the death of Schiaminossi, Mercati returned to Borgo Sansepolcro to estimate the works left by the master. It was a temporary return, as Mercati had already created a Roman clientele for some time.

Mercati was certainly in Rome starting from 1620, the year of the dedication to Lelio Guidiccioni of an engraving depicting the *mystical Marriage of s. Catherine* from a painting by Antonio Allegri, called il Correggio.

A poet and collector of antiquities and paintings, originally from Lucca, Guidiccioni had come to Rome in the early seventeenth century and had first entered the service of Cardinal Scipione Borghese and then Cardinal Antonio Barberini. He was a friend of many Roman nobles, including Paolo Giordano Orsini and Marcello Sacchetti, as well as numerous artists; it is therefore likely to indicate in him the proponent of Mercati's success in the Roman environment. The link with Mercati is also confirmed by the testament of 1643 of the same Guidiccioni in which he left his collection of prints, ancient medals and thirty drawings to «Raffaello Mercati, son of Giovan Battista», of which he had also been godfather.

The first known pictorial work of Mercati in Rome is dated 1624. On the commission of Cardinal Scipione Borghese he made, in fact, an oil painting on a wall depicting *S. Carlo Borromeo* for one of the altars of the church of S. Crisogono. In 1626 there is the engraving with *S. Bibiana who refuses to worship the idols*, dedicated to Marcello Sacchetti, which derives from the fresco of a similar subject realized by Pietro Berrettini da Cortona and recently completed, in the church of S. Bibiana. Also to Pietro da Cortona Mercati seems to have been inspired for the realization of the engraving with the *Decollazione del Battista* dedicated to Nicolò Alemanni, guardian of the Vatican Library, librarian and philologist at the service of the Barberini family.

Again in the Barberini context they are: the engraving of Mercati's invention, of which the preparatory drawing is also kept, dedicated to Cassiano Dal Pozzo in 1627, in which the theme of the *Baptism of Christ* is solved with simplicity and with an accentuation pathetic in the humility with which Christ receives the revealing sacrament of his divine nature; and the engraving with *S. Antonio da Padova* donated to Antonio Barberini in 1637 which reproduces in contrast a picture of the same Mercati made for one of the altars of the church of Maddalena di Sansepolcro, no longer *on site*.

In 1629 Mercati performed the collection of fifty two etchings, published in Rome under the title *Some views and perspectives of dishabited places in Rome*.

Characterized by an extreme topographic precision and an accuracy in the transcription of the views from the real that tends to highlight the mass of the walls and the play of architectural lines, the work brings the dedication to the Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinando II. Perhaps the link with some of the followers of the Grand Duke could justify the presence, according to Lanzi, of works by Mercati in Livorno.

By 1631, the date of a cycle of frescoes in Sansepolcro, is his most important work from the pictorial point of view: the decoration of the Orsini chapel of Pitigliano in the Roman church of S. Bartolomeo all'Isola with frescoes depicting *Stories of the Virgin*, probably commissioned by Paolo Giordano Orsini, belonging to the *entourage* of Guidiccioni and Alemanni.

The stories unfold with slow rhythms of didascalical evidence, reminiscent of cortonesque solutions. Some scenes are almost identical to those made by Mercati for the church of S. Chiara in Sansepolcro, although a certain approximation in the execution makes us lean towards a later realization of the Roman frescoes. In S. Bartolomeo, in fact, a more direct relationship with the works of Pietro da Cortona emerges both for the architectural layout of the scenes and for the strength of the design; the frescoes in Sansepolcro are more subdued and with an evident reduction of the scenographic elements, sacrificed to a greater imposing of the figures locked in a rhythm of closer relationship.

Also for the hometown Mercati realized the *Madonna that offers the Child to s. Felice da Cantalice* in S. Michele Arcangelo and the *Immaculate Conception and saints*, today in the local Civic Museum.

A precious chronological notation given to 1633: this year, in fact, a payment for the registration tax dates back to the Roman Academy of S. Luca. It is a belonging that greatly involved Mercati, who between 1637 and 1643 was present at numerous meetings of the academics.

In 1639 he created the painting depicting the *Noli me tangere* for the church of S. Maria delle Vergini in Rome and in 1642 the engravings of four of the eight Hadrian rounds of the Arch of Constantine dedicated to Paolo Giordano Orsini, Francesco Borromini and Carlo Paolucci count of Calboli, dean of Segnatura.

Still in the interest of the ancient, it is possible to trace the reproduction of the front of a Roman sarcophagus depicting a marine thief, to be recognized in the sarcophagus that once was in the church of S. Francesco a Ripa and today is in the Louvre; this last work could perhaps be part of Cassiano Dal Pozzo's choices for his *paper museum*, where three drawings taken from this front appear in the Royal Library in London.

Mercati died in Rome presumably in 1645, the year of his testament drawn up in January.

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