

Giovanni Domenico Piestrini

Italian Painter
(1680-1740)

He was born in Pistoia on 4 September 1680 to Francesco Maria of Arezzo origin, a painter and his first teacher. The exact surname of the artist is not known, who sometimes signs himself Pistrini and sometimes Pestrini. In the "States of Souls" he is recorded as Pistrini, while in the birth and death records he is remembered as Piestrini. Sometimes his name has been mangled into Piatini.

His father, a pupil of Salvator Rosa, was active above all in Pistoia. Francesco Maria involved his son, in his work there. Piestrini continued his apprenticeship in Florence or in Pisa with the Sienese Giuseppe Nicola Nasini, in turn a pupil of Ciro Ferri.

In Florence Piestrini met his patron, as well as fellow countryman: Cardinal Carlo Agostino Fabroni, who facilitated his transfer to Rome in 1702. Here the prelate housed his protégé in his own palace located on the slopes of the Campidoglio, where Piestrini remained at least until 1719. During that time he received a monthly commission.

In Rome Piestrini frequented the workshop of Benedetto Luti, revealing himself also open to the stimuli that came to him from other artists present in the city, such as Pietro Bianchi, Giacomo Triga, Giovanni Paolo Pannini and Placido Costanzi. The relationship with Luti was certainly facilitated by the common Pistoian origin and by the intervention of Fabroni himself, who esteemed Piestrini to the point of possessing three paintings: a *Madonna*, a *Savior* and a portrait of himself.

With the sanguine *Romulus and Remus made adults persecute and kill the robbers*, Piestrini won the third prize of the second class equally with Giovanni Battista Calandrucci in the clementine competition of the Academy of S. Luca in 1704. The following year he obtained the second prize of the first class with the black pencil drawing representing the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, equally with Ludovico Mazzanti.

In 1706 Fabroni, raised to purple by Clement XI, and his cousin, Duke Rospigliosi, pushed Piestrini to return to Pistoia to obtain the allocation of a *Coronation of the Virgin* for the ceiling of the church of the Holy Trinity, which had been destroyed. A little later he executed the altarpiece with *S. Filippo giving help to a castaway* for the church of Ss. Prospero and Filippo. Also Cardinal Fabroni sent his protege to Pistoia to paint a room in his villa in Celle in the Santomato area, but no trace remains of these works.

In 1712 Piestrini was welcomed as a member of the Congregazione dei Virtuosi al Pantheon.

The Pilgrim Teocles delivers the image of the Blessed Virgin to the bishop of Bologna and its counterpart, *The recovery of the table stolen by the Venetians* destined for the church of the Madonna di S. Luca, now housed in the left sacristy of the Sanctuary of the Virgin of 1714. *S. Luca di Bologna*, signed and dated, in which Piestrini demonstrates that he has

assimilated Luti's lesson but that he is not immune from the formal delicacies of the Emilian environment and from the Venetian colorism probably learned in Rome through Francesco Trevisani. The adherence to the fashion of the time also emerges thanks to the presence of costumed characters.

For Fabroni, Piestrini also painted the painting with *S. Giovanni Guadalberto multiplying bread and wine to distribute to the poor*, for the church of the Vallombrosani Fathers of S. Trinita in Florence, signed and dated 1714, and an altar table, dispersed, with the *Annunciation* for the church of S. Iacopo of the Fathers of the Mission. It should be emphasized that the intermediary between Piestrini and the Vallombrosans was, again, Cardinal Fabroni, who since 1709 had held the role of protector of the Congregation.

In 1716 Piestrini frescoed *The Miracle of 1490* in the atrium of the church of the Madonna dell'Umiltà in Pistoia, *The Prayer of the faithful before the image of the Madonna*, *The construction of the new temple and the translation of the image from the ancient church at the altar of the sanctuary*, the only works, among those commissioned by Fabroni, to have survived. The assignment was due to the solemn coronation of the Holy Image of the Madonna of Humility. The scenographic layout of the stories and the narrative taste reveal the link with the Tuscan environment, in particular with the Cigoli. The balance for these works was issued in 1720 by the Banco di S. Spirito.

Between 1716 and 1717 Piestrini painted a lost painting for the Roman church of S. Maria della Pace. The definitive consecration in the Roman environment came in those years with the pontifical commission, obtained thanks to the intermediation of Fabroni, of *St. Ignatius condemned to death by the emperor Trajan*, for the central nave of the basilica of St. Clemente in Rome, of for which there is a preparatory painting, decidedly more dynamic and less rhetorical than the finished work, in the Castelbarco Albani collection in Milan. Another sketch was donated in 1999 by Fabrizio and Fiammetta Lemme to the National Gallery of Ancient Art of Palazzo Barberini in Rome.

In 1717 the Vallombrosani of S. Prassede of Rome commissioned him, for the interest of Fabroni, the *Martyrdom of S. Tesouro Beccaria*, signed and dated, for the chapel of S. Bernardo degli Uberti. The unusual iconography with the villain from behind, instead of next to the saint, shows Piestrini's creative vein, who accentuated the pathos of the episode by resorting to the intense luministic effects derived from his teacher Luti.

In *The Presentation of Mary in the Temple*, also signed and dated 1717, for the Cathedral of Forlì, the costumed characters, the golden light and the delicate colors denote influences from the other artists present in Rome, in particular Luca Giordano.

Still between 1716 and 1717 the Patricians called Piestrini to decorate the room of Mars and the vault of the main staircase of their villa on the Salaria, which was completely destroyed.

A maturation of Piestrini's language in a marathon direction, albeit less refined in the design and in the rendering of the colder color, is found in the ovals with the *Madonna del Rosario* and *Risen Christ appearing to the apostles*, executed between 1721 and 1725 on behalf of the cardinal Benedetto Pamphili for the church of S. Maria in via Lata.

It is assumed that in this lapse of years Piestrini also painted the *Redeemer* and *S. Ignazio* in the church of S. Sisto in Pisa, where the same iconography of the *Risen* can be traced, found in the painting of S. Maria in Via Lata. In the same city, but for the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, he painted *The Virgin in Glory with San Giuseppe, Santa Vittoria and San Ranieri* (2014 restoration by Lisa Venerosi Pesciolini under the supervision of Alba Maria Macripò).

In 1722 and 1723 Piestrini's candidacy as a member of the prestigious Accademia di S. Luca was not accepted, and he was never part of that important institution.

Between 1723 and 1724 the Servite fathers, with whom Piestrini had already had excellent relations in Pistoia, taking advantage of the conspicuous legacy of the theologian of the Order, Gherardo Capassi of Florence, commissioned him to fresco the vault of their church of S. Maria in Via. After having made two preparatory sketches, lost, probably at the suggestion of the same fathers, Piestrini represented the unprecedented episode of the *First Mass of S. Filippo Benizi*, canonized only a few years earlier, in 1671.

The work, much admired by contemporaries, is one of the first examples of the introduction of architectural elements that mark the space of the scene, within the decoration of the past. Piestrini proposed a synthesis between the baroque teachings of Pietro da Cortona and the typically Rococo lightness of touch. Today the fresco is impoverished by subsequent restoration interventions which have removed its original freshness.

At the moment of maximum prestige reached by the Conti family, which had seen one of its members become pope, the Duke of Poli, brother of Innocenzo XIII, commissioned Piestrini to decorate the vault of a room in his palace. The allegorical scene alludes to the good governance of the prince and testifies to Piestrini's reflection on Bolognese painting which can also be found in the frescoes in the hall and gallery of the palace of the Marquis Onorati in Jesi, marked by a unitary iconographic program with an ethical background, where Piestrini could express all his inventive freedom from both a compositional and a chromatic point of view.

In 1726, Cardinal Fabrizio Paolucci, Secretary of State, after having promoted the restructuring of the church of Ss. Giovanni e Paolo al Celio, commissioned his nephew, Camillo Merlini Paolucci, also a prelate, to have three paintings painted for the tribune. Piestrini created, signing it, the fresco with the *Almsgiving* of the two titular saints, in which he repropounded already tested physiognomic models.

The following year Cardinal Fabroni died. In his will he left to his lawyer, Ferdinando Valenti, the painting by Piestrini *The Nativity of Jesus* (the current location is unknown). Also in the inventory of the prelate's possessions are mentioned a *S. Bonaventura appears to S. Francesco Solano*, a *Deposition* and a *Resurrection* by Piestrini.

Piestrini had also painted the portrait of his client several times: one effigy is kept in the Fabroniana Library in Pistoia, the other, of a qualitatively better workmanship and for this reason attributed with some reservations to him, belongs to the Molinari Pradelli di Marano di Marano collection. Castenaso (Bologna).

In 1737 Piestrini made two altarpieces, with an unknown subject, for the chapels on the noble floor of the Palazzo della Consulta. Perhaps the two paintings deteriorated, as a painting of one of the two chapels was replaced with one by Giovanni Domenico Porta, considering that the conservation conditions of the previous canvas were so compromised that it did not allow its reheating.

In those years Piestrini was engaged in the decoration of the Cathedral of Monterotondo, where he frescoed the vault with *The Coronation of the Virgin* and two medallions: one with the *Triumph of the Theological and Cardinal Virtues* and the other with the *Glory of St. Mary Magdalene and the Instruments of Penance*, the latter in the ceiling above the main altar; he also painted the three frescoes in the gallery representing the episode of *Noli Me Tangere*, the *Penitent Magdalene* and the *Supper in the house of Simon the Pharisee* as well as two panels with an unidentified subject above the entrance door.

Also in Monterotondo he had decorated the church of S. Maria della Costa, now in ruins.

At the behest of Cardinal Annibale Albani, Piestrini frescoed *The Coronation of the Virgin* in the apse of the Cathedral of S. Liberatore in Magliano Sabina, where he also added images of seraphs, angels and a *Glory of the Assumption*. In the two side apses he left in the one on the right a *S. Lorenzo* and *S. Eutimio* and a monochrome *Episode of the life of S. Liberatore*, on the left *S. Liberatore with S. Carlo Borromeo*, and another scene, always monochrome, taken from the life of the saint.

The enterprises of Monterotondo and Magliano in Sabina denote a full maturity of Piestrini who, abandoning some stereotyped typologies, showed greater creative freedom. An involution is recorded, however, in the last known production, the representation of the salient moments in the life of *Saints Marciano and Giovanni* in the gallery of the cathedral of Civita Castellana, commissioned from him by Cardinal Camillo Cybo in 1739.

In that year he turned to the Capitoline judge to ask for compensation for a sum of money given on loan. In the Piestrini case he declared that he owned a house in Monterotondo. He was married to Olimpia Patrizi, a native of the town, with whom he had many children. The origin of the wife justifies the assignments for the local Duomo. From the documents it is clear that Piestrini lived in Monterotondo until 1731, to move to Rome in the district of the parish of S. Lorenzo in Damaso, on the third floor of a house owned by the Pamphili, for whom he had worked in the immediate preceding years in S Maria in via Lata.

He died in Rome on 11 May 1740 and was buried in the church of S. Lorenzo in Damaso.

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