

Marcello Provenzale

(1575-1639)

by Stefano L'Occaso - Biographical Dictionary of Italians - Volume 85 (2016)

He was born in Cento, near Ferrara, at Melchiorre and Maria Conforti. The date of birth is unknown, while the date of baptism is known on 8 January 1576 (Bagni, 1996, p. 225). The wealthy family of origin boasted origins from a mythical ancestor named Provenço and the Provenzale prosapia was also celebrated by decorations made in his house by Guercino in 1614 (Fiore, 2010, p. 30).

He had to learn the first rudiments of art at home, and it was after an apprenticeship with another centese artist, Paolo Rossetti, that Provenzale moved to Rome; this happened by 1600, the year in which he obtained his first prestigious position in St. Peter's in the Vatican (p. 30).

The hypothesis that he abandoned painting "after seeing the work of Guercino" (Barbanti Grimaldi, 1966, p. 43) is perplexing, because his mosaicist activity is already attested in 1600 and Guercino was born in 1591.

In 1600 the pope was the fanese Clemente VIII Aldobrandini and it was then that Provenzale participated in the realization of the mosaics in the dome of S. Pietro, on cartoons by Cristoforo Roncalli, called the Pomarancio. The mosaic decoration of the apsidal dome and of the apsidal arch of S. Cesareo, in Rome, is immediately prior to around 1599, based on designs by Giuseppe Cesari, known as Cavalier d'Arpino; the attribution of this work to Provenzale, suggested by Edouard Gerspach ([1881], p. 208), is favorably received by Camilla Fiore (2010, p. 32).

From 1600 Provenzale lived almost uninterruptedly in Rome specializing in mosaic art, which in those years enjoyed a moment of strong rebirth, thanks to the impulses given by the pontifical commissioning and the new technical solutions elaborated by Girolamo Muziano. Provenzale already experimented in the 1600s a particular technique destined to the realization of easel paintings with particularly minute tesserae. His works are characterized by polymateriality, albeit with a prevalent use of enamels; Giovanni Baglione (1642, p. 350) speaks of «mosaic up to imitation of the ancient, rarely worked with the wheel», that is not only realized with the traditional martellina cut, but with a finishing of the tesserae through the use of grinding wheels .

His production of minute mosaics is known through a few works still existing: in 1600 the *Madonna and Child in Glory*, signed and dated, of the Galleria Borghese in Rome. Roughly of the same age must be the *Head of Christ* already in the Zeri collection in Mentana (González-Palacios, 1976), made with a technique more vibrant and contrasted than the one that would have characterized his subsequent production, aimed mainly at a made purely pictorial. If the first of the two works was born with certainty as a gift for Scipione Borghese, the original destination of the second is unknown (Fiore, 2010, pp. 74-76).

Immediately after the engagement in the construction site of the "great dome" of St. Peter, based on designs by Pomarancio first and then by Cavalier d'Arpino, Provenzale - here flanked by artists such as Paolo Rossetti, Donato Parigi, Ludovico Martinelli and others - was engaged in the mosaic decorations of the Clementina chapel (1601-02), also on cartoons by Pomarancio (pp. 67 s.).

In the first decade of the century we find the only documented return to Italy (1604-06), which allowed Provenzale to make the two centesic altarpieces, today the only certain proof of his not low skill as a painter. It deals with the *Transfiguration* in the church of S. Biagio (pp. 92-95) and of the *Orazione nell'orto*, today in the Civic Art Gallery but once in the male dormitory of the Annunziata hospital (pp.

96-101). The large *Transfiguration* merges references to the Raphaellesque archetype and the knowledge of Federico Barocci's work.

A Sorrowful Madonna, already preserved in the church of S. Biagio in Cento and stolen in 1976 (p. 32), has also been referred to as Provençal, in doubt and with a dating to the same years. However, the painting has a strong 'alla Guercino' structure and is referable to the same; in any case, it should be given a date much later than the two shovels.

From the moment he returned to Rome in 1606, Provençal was part of the Accademia di S. Luca and was also a candidate for the post of prince in 1619 and 1627 (p. 37).

In the following years, the activity of Provenzale for the Petrine yard continued regularly, and payments were attested until 1612 for the mosaics of the "great dome" (pp. 121-123).

In 1614 he was asked to create the coat of arms of Pope Paul V in the center of the vault of the central nave in St. Peter's. For this work, completed in 1615 and destroyed in the eighteenth century, Provenzale also provided for the preparation of the preparatory drawing (p. 69): for a heraldic subject, his design capacity was considered adequate.

The ability of Provenzale in the technique of the mosaic also earned him the commission of the restoration of a work of extraordinary artistic and historical value, the *Navicella* of Giotto, already in the atrium of S. Pietro, from there detached in 1610. The intervention it dates back to 1617-18 and its extension is known thanks to archival documents (pp. 72, 124-126, doc. 3.19-3.25) and to the biography written by Baglione (1642, pp. 349 s.), which states that Provençal completely restored the four prophets that face from the clouds, the personifications of the winds, the figures of s. Pietro and the fisherman, but also intervened in a generalized manner on the remaining surface of the work, which of the fourteenth-century appearance now essentially preserves only the plant.

Provençal carried out a skilfully mimetic restoration also on a mosaic, probably an "ancient mosaic of birds", already in the Villa Montalto in Rome and today unidentified. The work is believed to depict crane-like birds hunting snails (Fiore, 2010, pp. 72-74).

The second half of the second decade of the seventeenth century saw Provenzale establish itself in the technique of the minute mosaic through the creation of a series of three masterpieces, signed and dated: the *Civetta and birds* (Florence, Museo degli argenti), of 1616, the *Orpheus*, of the 1618, and the slightly later *Portrait of Paul V*, from 1621 (both Rome, Galleria Borghese). The first of these three mosaics was probably made for Scipione Borghese and in fact in the background celebrates the Acqua Paola and the façade of S. Pietro: architectural achievements of his uncle, Camillo Borghese, Pope Paul V. In 1631 the mosaic had already entered in the collections of the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Ferdinando II (González-Palacios, 1976, p. 31 n. 10). The *Orfeo* is certainly due to the Borghese client: the dragon, symbol of that family, occupies an important space among the represented beasts and is therefore a clear tribute to Cardinal Scipione, for whom the work was made, as evidenced by the inscription dedicated to the engraving taken from Giovanni Battista Pasqualini in 1622 (Fiore, 2010, pp. 83-88). The *Portrait of Paul V* dates from the year of the pontiff's death and received unanimous consent, thanks to the strongly pictorial rendering of mosaic weaving (pp. 88-90).

For the Borghese family, who protected the artist for several decades, Provençal also executed a work described in 1650 as "small mosaic of two birds on a branch" (Manilli, 1650), but now dispersed. Fiore, author of an excellent monograph on Provençal, has found news of this mosaic in a note of donation of the goods by the artist in favor of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, from 1624 (2010, pp. 32 s., 111 s., doc. 1.7a): Provençal states that "not only the work ad musaicum confecerit quo servitio illustrissimi and

reverend domini Scipionis" and among them "a Madonna, an Orfeo, a Civetta, a painting with doi bird and a portrait of the happy memory of Pope Paul V ».

For the same client, in 1620, Provenzale perhaps created mosaic inserts on the floor of the church of S. Crisogono in Rome (Antinori, 2005), as well as, undoubtedly, two carved seals of red stone in 1625 (Bertolotti, 1886, pp. 210, 244). Not disdaining to lend his talent to the 'applied' arts, Provenzale participated in the organization of the work and in finding the materials for the *Borghese Table*, created by Alessandro Algardi in 1634-35 and today in a private collection (Montagu, 1977).

The sources recall some other works not known today, including a *Martyrdom of s. Sebastiano*, for the Medici, and a triptych with the *dead Christ supported by angels* and two *Angeli ceropori* in the valves (Fiore, 2010, pp. 35-37).

The artistic legacy of Provençal was collected by his mosaic student Giovan Battista Calandra from Vercelli.

Provençal was in friendly relations with his fellow countryman Guercino: he commissioned a canvas depicting *Erminia who finds wounded Tancredi*, now at the Doria-Pamphilj Gallery in Rome, and helped him expand the client's circle in Rome (Mellini, 1987).

He was repeatedly portrayed by Ottavio Leoni, of whom he was a wedding witness in 1616 (Fiore, 2010, p. 40); in 1623 he also witnessed the signing of the agreement between Paolo Alaleoni and Simon Vouet for the latter's paintings in S. Lorenzo in Lucina (Marini, 1974).

It was in this church that he wanted to be buried, and for this burial he foresaw the realization of a bronze bust: we ignore whether this is identifiable with the one preserved in the external portico of S. Biagio a Cento, which could even document an otherwise unknown activity of sculptor (Fiore, 2010, pp. 91 s.).

He died in Rome, in the Borghese palace in Campo Marzio, on 4 June 1639 (pp. 37, 114).

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