

# Giovanni Battista Ricci

(da Movara)

Italian Painter

(c.1550-1627)

Son of Bartolomeo, he was born in Suno, near Borgomanero, in today's province of Novara. The year of birth is uncertain: by some fixed around 1545, it could instead fall in 1552, based on information from Giovanni Baglione (1642, p.150), who says he died at seventy-five. There are few and confused the news concerning the formation and activity in Lombardy: in 1576 it was paid together with Bernardino Lanino for paintings in the chapel of St. Benedict in the cathedral of Novara, work to be identified perhaps with the *Crucifixion among saints*, which would therefore be the only one currently known of its production in Novara.

In 1578 the dowry was established in favor of his wife, Cassandra Cattanea (Cattanei), originally from Novara and living there. His wife would have followed Ricci in his Roman trip, dying on April 5, 1622, in the parish of S. Giacomo in Scossacavalli in Borgo, then buried in S. Maria in Traspontina, in the chapel of Ss. Pietro e Paolo (or delle Colonne), chosen by the artist for the family tomb.

In 1581 Ricci had already moved to the City, setting his home in Borgo Pio: in that year he was accepted in the company of Virtuosi al Pantheon and among the members of the Academy of St. Luca (Noack); in 1585 his brother Bartolomeo reached him. The fervent construction of Sixtus V saw him constantly engaged: to him Baglione attributed frescoes in the Scala Santa, in the Lateran Palace and in the Sistine Library, where his hand was identified by modern historiography (Zuccari, 1993).

The activity in the Sistine pictorial worksites allowed the artist to bring to light also to illustrious curial patrons: in the years 1585-92 he conducted, in partnership with the Ferrara company Ludovico Lancione (or Lanzone) and the Marches Vincenzo and Cesare Conti, several important pictorial decorations of Roman palaces: date back to this period the frescoes in the library of cardinal Ascanio Colonna in the Palazzo ai Ss. Apostoli (1588-92) and those in the palace of Monsignor Pietro Vento (later Giustiniani, 1585-90); in 1591-93 and 1599 he participated, with Giovanni Guerra, in the decoration of the papal palace on the Quirinale. Probably within the Sistine pontificate we must also date the frescoes of the chapel of S. Monica in S. Agostino in Rome, and just beyond those in the chapel of S. Francesco (Colonna) to the Ss Apostles (lost, Baglione, 1642, p. 149).

In the pontificate Aldobrandini the works of Ricci in the churches of Rome multiplied, especially in view of the 1600 Jubilee: he participated in the campaign of frescoes in the nave of S. Maria Maggiore for cardinal Domenico Pinelli (about 1593) and that in the so-called clementine ship, the grandiose space of the Lateran transept, a key site of the Clementine propaganda entrusted to Cavalier d'Arpino. Also between 1594 and 1600 fall the paintings of the wooden ceiling and the frescoes with *Stories of the Virgin* for the apse in S. Marcello al Corso, commissioned by Giulio Vitelli.

Among the patrons of this period stands the figure of cardinal Antonio Maria Salviati, protector of the hospital of S. Giacomo degli Incurabili: on commission of the cardinal, Ricci executed a lost for the church of the *last Last Supper* for the high altar (Baglione, 1642, p.149, Wiedmann, 2004) and frescoes in the choir, by the year of the prelate's death, 1602. Probably immediately after 1600 the artist also realized the decoration of the cardinal's chapel in S. Gregorio al Celio, concluded by Carlo Maderno in the jubilee year: his are all the frescoes of the interior - among which the vault stand out with *Christ in glory among angels* and the *Procession of s. Gregorio Magno in castel S. Angelo* - and *Isaiah* and *S. Gregorio* on the entrance arch.

The altarpiece of the chapel - lost - with *St. Gregory the Great in prayer*, was entrusted to Annibale Carracci, who had to perform it in the years 1601-02, just in coincidence with the *Assumption of the Virgin* in another chapel created by Maderno and frescoed by Ricci, the Cerasi in S. Maria del Popolo.

In 1600-01 Ricci obtained the commission of the frescoes in the chapel of the treasurer of Clement VIII, Tiberio Cerasi, in S. Maria del Popolo, the *Four Evangelists* in the vault and two lunettes with the *Doctors of the Church* : these are paintings of intensely classicist taste, which fully interpret that "recovery of the Renaissance" (Spezzaferro, 1993) that was spreading in Rome at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Immediately afterwards (1601-05) he frescoed the chapel of Cardinal Ludovico Madruzzo in S. Onofrio.

In 1602 Ricci sent from Rome to the Church of the Real Colegio of Corpus Domini di Valenza a painting with the *Gloria della Trinità with all the saints*, which, together with a painting by Giovanni Baglione, was perhaps commissioned by Cardinal Camillo Borghese (future Paolo V) as thanks for the hospitality received in 1593 by the archbishop of Valencia, Blessed Juan de Ribera. It is dated 1606 the print with the *Fall of the rebel angels*, signed by Ricci (Rome, near Giovanni Giacomo de 'Rossi).

The pontificate of Paul V saw him among the supporting actors of the great bourgeois art season, expression of a transitional taste between postridentine austerity and new classicist tendencies, still very much in vogue with the Roman patrons. For the pontiff he took charge of completing, in close continuity with the sistine decorations, the two Paoline rooms in the Vatican Library (1610-12); in the second decade of the seventeenth century the lost frescoes of the triumphal arch of St. Joseph of the Falegnami fell to the Roman Forum (1610-12; Baglione, 1642, 149) and the decoration of the Annunciation chapel in the church of the Holy Trinity Pellegrini, painted in 1612 for the countryman Giulio Maffioli from Novara, with *Storie di s. Giulio* and the altarpiece of the *Annunciation*, badly repainted in the eighteenth century and moved to the sacristy in the nineteenth century.

It would seem to belong to 1613, based on the dedicatory headstone of the altar, also the canvas with the *Ss. Giuseppe and Benedetto* that frames the miraculous image of the Virgin in the chapel of the Madonna. The *Four Evangelists* painted by Ricci in the pendentives of the dome of the same church should not be chronologically distant.

In 1612-13 he returned to S. Marcello al Corso to perform the *stories of the Passion* in the nave, including the grandiose *Crucifixion* in the counter-façade (signed and dated 1613), the frescoes in the Grifoni-Weld chapel, and those in the baptistery (lost; 1642, pp. 149). By 1614 the *Stories of the Virgin* should be dated in the chapel of the Spanish bishop Tommaso Gargall in S. Maria

di Monserrato, and the lost *Last Supper* for the refectory of the monastery of S. Onofrio. Approximately 1615 is the decoration of the chapel of S. Nicola da Tolentino in the right transept of the church of S. Agostino, led by Ricci together with the Marches Vincenzo Conti and Andrea Lilio. For the same Augustinian convent the novarese executed some years later other lost works, but documented (for all see: Tosini, 2006, p.72): the frescoes in the archive (1620), in the sacristy (1625) and the drawing for the burial of a sacrist (1620).

The artist was also involved at full capacity in the large building site of the Vatican Basilica renovated by Paul V, called to fresco and provide drawings and cartoons for the stuccos of the choir chapel (1618-27), for the bell tower portico, for the chapels della Boccia, the Madonna del Parto and for the corridors of the Confession (1615-20) and for the stuccos with *Stories of s. Peter* of the new Petrian portico (1618-20).

In 1619 he left his signature and date on the frescoes of the Chapel of the Columns or of the Saints Peter and Paul in S. Maria in Traspontina, already begun around 1605 after testamentary will of Count Giovanni Battista Stanga from Cremona, and for which he executed the altarpiece altar with the *Flagellation of the two saints* (1605). Around 1612 in the same church he frescoed and executed the altarpiece of the chapel of S. Angelo Carmelitano, commissioned by the General of the Order, Enrico Silvio. In 1622 he agreed with the Ticinese painter and stucco artist Cristoforo Greppi to decorate the Rustici Castellani chapel in S. Francesco a Ripa and in the same church he also realized the frescoes of the choir (lost, Baglione, 1642, p.149). The frescoes in the chapel of S. Nicola dei Lorenesi in S. Luigi dei Francesi are perhaps of these same years.

Elected Prince of St. Luke in December 1621, Ricci refused the task perhaps because of poor health conditions. On 7 October 1623 he paid a penalty for not having delivered "the picture of his hand", perhaps the self-portrait foreseen for the Accademia (Canestro Chiovenda, 1992, p.222).

In this period he also sent works outside Rome, such as the *Delivery of the keys*, signed and dated 1620, for the church of S. Pietro a Jesi, and the *Marriage of the Virgin* in S. Michele Arcangelo in Canepina (Viterbo), signed and dated 1624, commissioned by the brothers Attilio and Alberto de Nicolai, merchants originally from the village of Tuscia.

In 1627, shortly before his death, the artist undertook to perform an altarpiece of S. *Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi* for the same church of Traspontina, returning part of the compensation for the realization of the family burial in the chapel of the Saints Peter and Paul .

He died in Rome on 5 August 1627, without making a will, and was buried in that chapel with his wife and daughter Lucia, the latter who died in 1624 ( *In Search of "Ghiongrat"*, 2011, p.360 ). A vast activity of designer of Ricci is now progressively emerging, starting from the reconstruction made by John Arthur Gere and Philip Pouncey (1983).

by Patrizia Tosini - Biographical Dictionary of Italians - Volume 87 (2016)

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