

Giovanni d'Ambrogio

Italian sculptor
c.1350-after 1418

Sculptor and architect, documented from 1382 to 1418 in Florence, where he probably was born not before 1350. Probably it is not to be identified with the homonymous stonemason active in 1366 in the Fabbrica del Duomo of Florence. Giovanni was the most significant sculptor of the last two decades of the century in this city, he studied and received the works of antiquity thus giving the decisive impulse that prepared the Renaissance. He left his artistic imprint on the early Renaissance sculptors, in their early years, in particular on Nanni di Banco.

It is testified for the first time on May 23, 1382 in a payment of the Cathedral Fabbrica. From October 1383 to October 1386 he worked on the large statues of seats depicting *Justice* and *Prudence* in the Loggia della Signoria. In the years between 1386 and 1395 he completed, in the chapel of the Sacro Cingolo of the cathedral of Prato, the architrave of the door, the threshold and other similar works; he did it in 1388-89 in the church of S. Cecilia in Florence. In 1388 he received the task of carrying out three unidentified statues for the façade of the Florentine cathedral. For the removal of the door of the Almond placed on the north side of the same factory, near the choir, he executed in 1391-92 and in 1393 two works, one with an indication of the measure of 2 braccia and 1/8, identifiable with the upper marble block of the left disengagement. He worked in 1394 at the frame of the same portal creating a shelf and other works. Moreover, in 1395-96, he sculpted the monumental statue of *St. Barnabas* for the facade of the cathedral. From the end of 1397 until 1400 Giovanni stayed outside Florence, in an undocumented place. In 1401 he took over the Fabbrica del Duomo of Florence which he held until 1418, with some interruptions, of which the longest lasted from December 1413 to July 1415. In this period the chapels, the tribunes and the choir drum were built. Giovanni's sculptures relating to these years are not documented; but he made a project, dated 1408, for the decorations of the archivolts of the door of the Almond, for which he continued the decoration of the sguanci and of the cornice. For reasons of age in 1418 he resigned from the office of master builder of the Cathedral Fabbrica.

With his first documented work, Giovanni demonstrates his superior quality as an artist: in the Loggia della Signoria, within the cycle depicting the seven virtues, *Justice* and *Prudence* stand out for their calm dignity and monumentality, for their safety in the construction of the figure and the plasticity, as well as for the flowing drapery, for the classical harmony of the proportions of the shapes, for the skillful insertion of the figures in the complicated field of the trilobed shape relief. These qualities refer not so much to the drawings of Agnolo Gaddi - which are also the basis of the *Virtues* performed by Giovanni di Francesco (called Fetti) and by Iacopo di Piero Guidi - as for other sculptural works; Giovanni clearly shows that he studied the seated figures of the *Planets*, the *Virtues* and the *Liberal Arts* on the bell tower of the cathedral (1334-41), the reliefs with the *Virtues* executed by Andrea Pisano for the bronze doors of the Florentine baptistery (1330- 32) and, above all, of being inspired by the figures,

sessions, the *theological virtues* and the *Assumption* in the tabernacle of Andrea di Cione, called l'Orcagna, in Orsanmichele (1352-59). Even before the statues of *Justice* and *Prudence* Giovanni had to perform, around 1380, the statuette of an *adoring Angel* for the door of the bell tower of the cathedral and also two small figures of *Prophets*, originally in pairs, placed in 1430, respectively, on door of the Cornacchini del Duomo and on the lower portal of the bell tower (now all in the Museo dell'Opera del duomo).

The six marble blocks of the Mandorla's door have been attributed by Kauffmann, for stylistic reasons, to the four sculptors documented for this work: in the left disassembly he attributes the lower and upper block to Giovanni (1391-92 and 1393) and the median one to Piero di Giovanni Tedesco; in the right disengagement the upper and lower blocks to Pietro Lamberti and the median blocks to Iacopo di Piero Guidi; these attributions are confirmed by the dimensions of the marble blocks handed down by the documents. The upper block of the left door is undoubtedly the work of Giovanni. The three angels half-figure of Giovanni show a rapid evolution in the conception of the figure for the autonomy with which the bodies are rendered under the clothes.

While the lower angel has a flattened surface on the marble block, the figure of the second angel hovers thanks to a more incisive plastic representation of the forms; if the lower angel still appears tied to the conception of the draped gothic figure, in the following angel the dominance of the body which determines the fall of the drapery is evident. In the superior angel, the figure built in contrast shows a vigorous influence of the ancient sculpture which, on the thematic plane, becomes visible in the figures of Hercules and Apollo among the acanthus leaves in the form of lyre; in these reliefs the reception of ancient models is also manifested in the modeling of the musculature and in the structure of the faces.

These reliefs, although documented as the work of Giovanni, have been repeatedly referred to masters of the next generation for their modernity: to a Master of Hercules, to the son of Giovanni, Lorenzo, to the young Iacopo della Quercia. These attributions, which contrast with the data provided by the documentation, disregard the dynamics of the artistic development of Florentine sculpture at the end of the fourteenth century.

The reliefs of Giovanni in the lower block of the left door of the Almond door agree stylistically with two statues representing the *Annunciation* (Florence, Museo dell'Opera del duomo) whose heads show extraordinarily classical characters, a reason for which more than once they have been dated to the first fifteenth century. The figure of Mary, however, still presents the full features of a draped Gothic figure; while the angel Gabriel already announces a statue built in opposition. The statues were originally intended for the decoration of the tympanum of the door of the Almond, within which, later (1488-90), Domenico and Davide Ghirlandaio created the mosaic of the *Annunciation*. Giovanni also the reliefs of the left jamb and those on the left block of the architrave of the Mandorla gate; his participation in the frame of the door is recognizable with certainty because one of the two shelves of the cornice is documented as his work (1394); the other is documented as the work of the sculptor Piero di Giovanni Tedesco also author of the decoration and the central block of the architrave; the right-hand group of the architrave was probably executed by Giovanni and his son Lorenzo. Only the marble sections decorated by Giovanni present

numerous small depictions of Hercules and the Muses (Himmelmann) which highlight his humanistic interest; for the decoration there was not in fact a unitary iconographic program and therefore Piero di Giovanni Tedesco was not required to observe it. Coluccio Salutati, humanist and chancellor of the Florentine Republic, in the early nineties of the fourteenth century had published his treatise on the labors of Hercules; and it is very probable that the work was known to Giovanni d'Ambrogio.

In the years 1395-96 Giovanni performed, as is documented, a large statue of *St. Barnabas* for the facade of the Florentine cathedral, identified by Wundram with a statue, now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo of Florence, flanked by two *Angels* of Piero di Giovanni Tedesco. Like the *Angel* in the upper section of the left door of the Almond Door, documented as the work of Giovanni, in the mighty statue of *St. Barnabas* the body under the drapery acquires its own autonomy and is characterized by a balanced upright position. In November 1397 Giovanni left Florence together with his son Lorenzo and had to return there before 1 January. 1401, since on that date he assumed the office of master builder of the Fabbrica del Duomo of Florence. The two sculptors in that period probably stayed in Rome involved in the realization, in S. Maria in Trastevere, of the chapel of cardinal Philippe d'Alencon, who died in 1397.

At the direction of the Fabbrica del Duomo of Florence, with few interruptions, from 1401 to 1418, Giovanni was left with little time for his activity as a sculptor. The decoration of the archivolt of the door of the Almond was made in this period, between 1404 and 1409. Giovanni should have made the left side of the frieze in the form of a branch on the tympanum, with two figures of naked children, respectively with a dog and a violin, while the right side can be assigned to his son Lorenzo. Between 1401 and 1408 the northern tribune of the cathedral choir was erected. On the outside of the window of the western chapel of this tribune, there are two *Putti* with the function of supporting the spiral columns that frame this window: while the left one is probably the work of Lorenzo di Giovanni, the one on the right shows Giovanni's masterful hand Ambrogio.

From December 1413 to July 1415 Giovanni was not at the service of the Cathedral Fabbrica. In this period he probably created the four statues of *Prophets* for the fretwork decoration of one of the two western arches of the Orsammichele ground-floor portico, three of which have come down to us (National Museum of Florence: Bargello). The remarkable quality of these sculptures is underlined by the fact that they were attributed by Brunetti (1969) to the young Donatello.

The figures are characterized by the summariness, the smoothness of the work, the contrasting composition and, finally, the tension towards a realistic rendering of the man that manifests itself in the modeling of the hands, with veins emerging on the back, and in the structure of the lively faces with eyebrows moved over eyes full of expression. These statuettes show that Giovanni, even at an advanced age, was still able to compete with the sculptures of the young generation of the early Renaissance (Donatello and Nanni di Banco, in the front line), who had started by him. Indeed with them Giovanni, just in his last years, is placed among the sculptors of the beginning of the Renaissance.

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