

STEFANO DE FEDELI





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STEFANO DE FEDELI

A series of Lombard panels between Gothic and Renaissance

edited by

MARCO TANZI

Mandragora

Stefano de Fedeli

Documented in Milan from 1464 to 1482

Annunciation

Agony in the Garden

Flagellation of Christ

Christ carrying the Cross

Crucifixion

Resurrection

Ascension

Tempera on panel

17.30 × 18.20 cm each











The seven 15th-century panels, executed in bright, radiant colours, are inserted inside a gable shaped, giltwood frame, made most likely at the end of the 1800s (the style of the carving seems datable to the last quarter of the century): at first blush the panels would appear to be the surviving parts of a larger work, probably a portable altarpiece or a dossal, consisting of a greater number of paintings representing *Scenes from the Life of the Virgin and Christ*.¹ The original model for the subjects and types of the gospel narrative is to be found in the large-scale fresco decoration of the rood screens in the Observant Franciscan churches between Lombardy and Piedmont: one of the most important chapters in the wide circulation of what was required during the Renaissance regarding the representation of sacred images in Valpadana². This statement is supported by the presence of the *Annunciation*, always the first scene in these series, which immediately precedes the *Agony in the Garden*, with an incomprehensible time jump in the narrative sequence. The impression we are given therefore is of a structure composed of small panels (possibly twenty-one, if we wish to follow the number of scenes in several of the main Franciscan rood screens, such as the ones frescoed by Giovanni Martino Spanzotti in San Bernardino in Ivrea or by Gaudenzio Ferrari in Santa Maria delle Grazie in Varallo in 1513) separated from its original framework, the shape of which remains unknown. We neither know

if the division/dispersion of the panels was indeed due to damage of the original frame, or to reasons connected to specific circumstances, such as the division of an inherited private collection: in any case, these seven panels are mounted in a neo-Gothic frame that, though on a smaller scale, reminds me very much of the ones which have framed the panels of the large polyptych executed in 1499 by Filippo Mazzola, the father of Parmigianino, since 1881, when they were placed above three internal doors of the collegiate church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Cortemaggiore (Piacenza).³

The Pinacoteca Malaspina in Pavia houses another small panel of similar size, representing the *Adoration of the Magi* (fig. 2), that undoubtedly comes from the same painted complex as our seven panels and that belongs to the original nucleus of the collection, i.e. the collection of the marquise Luigi Malaspina di Sannazzaro.⁴ The interesting fact is that the back of the panel in Pavia was originally painted too, with the *Marriage of the Virgin*, but in monochrome green (fig. 3): the wooden support was however cut during the restoration carried out in 1951 by Ottemi Della Rotta, in order to obtain two separate paintings. The story continues in the year 2000, when seven other monochrome panels, purchased by the Regione Lombardia and evidently belonging to the same series of the *Marriage* and representing further episodes from the life of the Virgin (figs. 5a–g), were placed on



2. Stefano de Fedeli, *Adoration of the Magi*. Pavia, Pinacoteca Malaspina.



3. Workshop of Stefano de Fedeli, *Marriage of the Virgin*. Pavia, Pinacoteca Malaspina.

deposit in the Pinacoteca Malaspina.⁵ I honestly find it difficult to believe that this is just a coincidence, whereas I'm more inclined to hypothesize that the above-mentioned monochromes in Pavia are nothing but the back of our panels, separated from their *recto* at some point in the past, maybe towards the end of the 19th century, when a wooden frame was made for the "coloured ones".

From a stylistic point of view, the front of the eight panels with Christological scenes is very close – we could easily affirm that they were painted by the same hand – to an enigmatic *Assumption of the Virgin*, formerly in the Lochis collection, in the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo (inv. 699; fig. 4), another painting on an *incamottatura* canvas laid down on panel which shows an iconography that is actually more complicated than what was generically declared in the past: it is in fact an *Assumption of the Virgin, crowned by Christ, among angels; the prophets Obadiah, Amos, Isaiah, Moses, Jeremiah, David, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Jonah, Micah, Habakkuk; the archangels Michael and Gabriel; the Apostles around the tomb; Saint John the Baptist and Saint Jerome holding a scroll; and the saints Bernard of Clairvaux, Bernardino of Siena, Francis, Dominic, Peter Martyr, Stephen, presenting a donor*.⁶ Around the middle of the last century the panel in Bergamo was so frequently discussed by scholars, that it was exhibited in the spring of 1958 in Palazzo Reale in

Milan, in the momentous exhibition edited by Longhi and dedicated to the *Arte lombarda dai Visconti agli Sforza*, in room 11, with an attribution to Bonifacio Bembo.⁷ Since the 1950s its attribution has shifted back and forth between Bonifacio, his brother Benedetto and the "Circle of the Bembo": in 1949 Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, besides considering it a masterpiece, was the first to compare it to the frescoes in the ducal chapel of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, which he considered to be "the major piece of work" in the fascinating but heterogeneous oeuvre of 'his' Bonifacio.⁸ Ferdinando Bologna, on the contrary, more rightly refuses to assign the painting to Bembo, asserting that the author shows "a direct participation in the culture expressed in the vault of the Milanese chapel and non-elusive relations with the environment of the Squarcionesque artists".⁹

It is on this basis that in more recent years I have come to the conclusion that the painting in Bergamo has its origin in the milieu of the 'building sites' of Galeazzo Maria Sforza at the beginning of the 1470s, in a precarious balance between the persistence of Late-Gothic forms, gold tooling and a more attentive eye towards Ferrara. Its first reference is to be found, in my opinion, precisely in the decoration of the ducal chapel in the Castello Sforzesco.¹⁰ The Lochis *Assumption* did not however come out of the Bembo workshop: nor from Bonifacio, nor from Bene-



4. Stefano de Fedeli, *Assumption of the Virgin*. Bergamo, Accademia Carrara.

detto nor from other brothers; it is sufficient to observe the folds of the draperies to notice that they are more ragged and geometrical and on the point of becoming paperlike: the author may not have seen the first sculptures by Giovanni Antonio Piatti yet, but he has certainly observed, and also quotes, Foppa in the Portinari chapel in Sant'Eustorgio in Milan and the opening of the pro-Ferrarese season in Lombardy. It is a situation however which concerns the last chapter of Bonifacio Bembo's activity, full of ducal commissions: a succession of noteworthy works carried out with heterogeneous companies. Lost are those of Vigevano, Caravaggio and, above all, Pavia – whilst in the rooms of the Castello Visconteo the restoration of the previous mural decoration accompanies the execution of new frescoes and of the enormous “*ancona delle reliquie*” on the ground floor; the rood screen in San Giacomo alla Vernavola was also completed, which only leaves the decoration of the chapel in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, executed in 1473 with Stefano de Fedeli and Giacomino Vismara. We can benefit from the observation of what is left in the Castello di Porta Giovia: in the vault in fact, several of the soldiers, shocked by the dazzling *Resurrection*, show facial features which may remind us of the pronounced expressiveness of some of the Saints in the Bergamo panel. A Morellian clue can be found in the structure of the face, with its impressive nose,



5a–g. Workshop of Stefano de Fedeli, *Nativity of the Virgin*, *Visitation* and *Presentation in the Temple*, *Flight into Egypt*, *Jesus among the Doctors* and *Wedding at Cana*, *Christ taking leave of his Mother* and *Apparition of Christ to the Virgin*, *Death of the Virgin*, *Funeral of the Virgin*. Pavia, Pinacoteca Malaspina (deposit of the Regione Lombardia).

of the soldier on the ground who is holding a spear and a sword to the right of the sepulchre, above the lunette with the *Virgin Annunciate*: it resembles that of several saints: John the Evangelist, Peter Martyr, Stephen; the other guard at his feet, constricted inside the rib vault, appears to belong to the same clique. As we are discussing a damaged work (and the condition of the vault of the chapel of San Donato, which is closely related to this, is even more irksome), we need to move carefully, and Marco Albertario's observations and his distinguishing different hands may prove useful: Bonifacio Bembo must be ruled out, whereas Giacomino Vismara, who was paid with his "fellow painters" (*compagni depintori*), "defies any attempt made to identify him".¹¹ The only one left is Stefano de Fedeli, to whom Albertario attributes the *Risen Christ* and, most importantly, the soldiers at the foot of the sepulchre, these with the help of assistants. What we know about the Milanese artist is that in 1466 he is already an independent master, but the few works that are undoubtedly by him, executed for the Duomo in Monza (and, maybe, for the Basilica dei Santi Siro e Materno in Desio), are datable to 1478–80.¹² While waiting for new studies to readjust his oeuvre, I will just observe that the author of the Lochis painting was

trained during the descent of Gothic art in Lombardy, in close contact with the most modern phase of Bembo's career, and merges Foppa and Ferrarese influences with the "heraldic, ultraprofane folly" of the Cremonese: an identikit that seems to fit in well with the personality of Stefano de Fedeli. Even the spatiality, weak but growing in awareness, and the inclination for complicated compositions, heaped together on different levels, seem to form the background of a slightly confused painter during a change of direction. This is how Stefano's early years, hitherto lacking in works, may have been. As for comparisons, the Monza panels have a more solid Renaissance nature but they also show insinuating, and once again Morellian, similarities between the executioners of the *Beheading of the Baptist* and the figures in the painting in Bergamo, and between the saints in Monza and the heads of the Prophets surrounding the Virgin.

It was useful, in my opinion, to recall the attribution I proposed for the panel in Bergamo, because, as I mentioned before, I believe it to be undoubtedly by the same author of the panels under consideration. These also show a closer proximity to Bembo's models from the seventh and eighth decades of the 15th century, both from a stylistic – a good example, above all, is the *Annuncia-*

tion (fig. 1) – and an iconographical point of view. For instance I find the representation of the *Ascension of Christ* particularly striking, as it quotes the unusual iconography of a larger panel, now in the Saibene collection in Milan, but formerly belonging to a Christological cycle painted by Bonifacio's workshop around the middle of the century, of which only a few elements are known: they might be the surviving panels of the movable decoration of the Cavalcabò chapel in Sant'Agostino in Cremona.¹³ As in the Saibene painting in fact, Christ moves towards the sky following an odd ascensional trajectory that pushes him outwards, while the Apostles witness the scene.¹⁴ In these episodes, however, Bembo's models appear to have been updated on the innovations that shape the Milanese artistic scene between the end of the 1460s and a good part of the 1470s: first of all, the very strong influence of Ferrarese painting that injects new Renaissance lifeblood into an environment which is still saturated with that courtly, international style that Roberto Longhi masterfully recalled when speaking of the dying Gothic season in Lombardy. Scenes therefore with an "ultragothic" (*arcigoticissima*) structure, such as the *Annunciation* and the *Agony in the Garden* – set in a beautiful nocturne with a sky embroidered with gold stars and a garden populated by frisky hares, a real *hortus conclusus* – are juxtaposed with evangelical episodes which show a more complex scenic design, such as *Christ carrying the Cross* and the *Crucifixion*, where we can also observe elegant noblemen wearing fine, contemporary clothes or a Deacon Saint at the foot of the cross that doesn't have the usual features of Saint John the Evangelist. In the *Flagellation* there is an experimental light effect that almost reaches the "level of *Quesiti caravaggeschi*", with the figure in red, right at the centre of the background, holding the oil lamp, and a second light source on the upper right, where the burning candle appears. The scene where Gothic art and Renaissance better co-exist is perhaps the *Resurrection*, where the foreshortened sepulchre, the soldiers and the rose-coloured apparition of Christ are immersed in a fairy-tale landscape, still consistent with Bembo's inventions of thirty years earlier.

If we wished to, we could examine all the different figures, several with a yet uncertain stylistic profile, active in the above-mentioned Bembesque decorative campaigns: Leonardo Ponzoni and Zanetto Bugatto are documented with Bonifacio in the ducal chapel in Vigevano; Stefano de Fedeli, Giacomino Vismara "and fellow painters" in the chapel of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan; for the so-

called *ancona delle reliquie* in Pavia Zanetto Bugatto, Vincenzo Foppa, Giacomino Vismara and Costantino da Vaprio (whilst the mural decoration of the Cappella delle Reliquie, also lost, was executed by another team of painters including Giovanni Pietro da Corte, Melchiorre da Lampugnano, Stefano de Fedeli, Gottardo Scotti and Pietro Marchesi); the same artists, with the addition of Bernardo Zenale, worked in San Giacomo alla Vernavola. I believe that the decoration of the rood screen of the church in Pavia with scenes from the life of Christ, *ab Annuntiatione usque ad Mortem inclusive*, divided into twenty-one *capituli*, could be an important iconographical model for the execution of the work that originally included our panels.

The answer should therefore emerge from this short-list: if we exclude in the first place, for obvious stylistic reasons, Bembo, Foppa and Zenale, and also Zanetto Bugatto, known only from the fresco in Santa Maria degli Angeli in Vigevano, and Gottardo Scotti, author of the triptych in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli (inv. 1633), the choice should fall on Giacomino Vismara, who, as we mentioned before, "defies any attempt made to identify him", or on the various Costantino da Vaprio, Giovanni Pietro da Corte, Melchiorre da Lampugnano and Pietro Marchesi, of whom we know nothing with certainty. I ultimately wish to pronounce myself in favour of Stefano de Fedeli, for the same argumentations provided for the attribution of the complicated Lochis *Assumption* in the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo: we would be looking at early works by the Milanese painter, executed in close contact with a more mature Bonifacio Bembo who was already orientated towards the so-called "Rinascimento umbratile". The comparison is therefore once again with the damaged frescoes in the chapel of the Castello Sforzesco in Milan (in particular with the facial features of the soldiers at the foot of the sepulchre), convincingly attributed to him by Marco Albertario, but also with those works where his increased awareness of Renaissance innovations is more evident, such as in the panels in Monza. A certain manner of expression, certain formal and execution types in fact remain the same, despite the significant change of season; let's analyse, in detail, the saints of the dismembered altarpieces from the cathedral in Monza, now in the local Museo del Duomo, side by side with the figures that inhabit our panels: along this thin borderline between two seasons of the artistic scene in Lombardy, I believe Stefano de Fedeli is the most convincing candidate for the authorship of this small painted cycle.

NOTES

1 Some of the most famous examples of these typologies can be found, e.g., in the Lombard area, in the small triptych by Bernardino Butinone in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan (inv. 342), or in the dossal by Andrea De Passeris, formerly in the Cologne collection in Milan; among the panels representing single episodes, coming from similar works, we can mention once again those by Butinone, now to be found in different collections, and those formerly attributed to the Cremonese Antonio Della Corna and then reunited under the conventional name of Maestro di Palazzo D'Arco a Mantova. For the triptych and the dispersed panels by Butinone see respectively S. Zuffi, in *Museo d'Arte Antica del Castello Sforzesco. Pinacoteca*, I, Milan, 1997, pp. 138–43, no. 72; A. De Marchi, in *Mantegna 1431-1506*, exhibition catalogue (Paris, Musée du Louvre, 2008–9), edited by G. Agosti and D. Thiébaud, Italian edition, Milan, 2008, pp. 174–5, no. 59; for the Cologne dossal by De Passeris see instead S. Buganza, 'Intorno a Baldassarre d'Este e al suo soggiorno lombardo', *Solchi*, 9 (2006), pp. 3–69; fig. 19; lastly, for the Mantuan panels, see A. Galli, 'Antonio Della Corna e il Maestro di Palazzo d'Arco', *Arte Cristiana*, 83 (1995), pp. 275–88; figs. 10–11. With the exception of De Passeris, these subjects were dear to Federico Zeri (*Two Contributions to Lombard Quattrocento Painting* [1955], and *Panels of "The Passion of Christ" by Antonio Della Corna* [1966–7], in F. Zeri, *Giorno per giorno nella pittura. I. Scritti sull'arte dell'Italia settentrionale dal Trecento al primo Cinquecento*, Turin, 1988, pp. 330–1, 333–6, figs. 247, 252–7).

2 For the Franciscan rood screens see, as the most recent publications, G. Agosti, J. Stoppa, M. Tanzi, 'Il Rinascimento lombardo (visto da Rancate)', in *Il Rinascimento nelle terre ticinesi. Da Bramantino a Bernardino Luini*, exhibition catalogue (Rancate, Mendrisio, Pinacoteca cantonale Giovanni Züst, 2010–11), edited by G. Agosti, J. Stoppa and M. Tanzi, Milan,

2010, pp. 21–70: 29–30, with previous literature.

3 For these works see M. Papotti, 'Ricerche, diagnosi e restauro delle tavole', in *Il polittico di Filippo Mazzola a Cortemaggiore. Storia di un ritorno*, Piacenza, 2003, pp. 45–61: 46, 48, figs. 1, 4.

4 Invv. P 170-170 bis; 18.1 x 19.5 cm. See M. G. Albertini Ottolenghi, in *Musei Civici di Pavia. La Pinacoteca Malaspina*, edited by S. Zatti, Milan, 2011, p. 266, no. 104.

5 The news of the purchase of the seven monochromes by the Regione Lombardia can be found in P. Gasperini, *Le future acquisizioni*, in *Tesori salvati. Acquisizioni della Regione Lombardia 1995-2000*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, Palazzo Bagatti Valsecchi, 2000), Milan, 2000, pp. 116–17.

6 See M. Tanzi, in *I tarocchi dei Bembo. Dal cuore del Ducato di Milano alle corti della valle del Po*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera, 2013), edited by S. Bandera, M. Tanzi, Milan, 2013, pp. 90–3, no. 13. M. G. Albertini Ottolenghi, in *Musei Civici* 2011, cit., p. 266, no. 104, also connects the panel in Bergamo with the Malaspina *Adoration of the Magi*.

7 See F. Mazzini, in *Arte lombarda dai Visconti agli Sforza*, exhibition catalogue (Milan, Palazzo Reale, 1958), edited by R. Longhi, Milan 1958, p. 83, no. 255; for the photo of the room: R. Longhi, 'Una mostra d'arte lombarda', edited by S. Facchinetti and F. Vittucci, *Solchi*, 6/1–3 (2002), n.p.

8 C.L. Ragghianti, 'Studi sulla pittura lombarda del Quattrocento. 2', *Critica d'Arte*, 3rd series, 8 (1949), pp. 288–300: 298, no. 27.

9 F. Bologna, 'Un San Girolamo lombardo del Quattrocento', *Paragone*, no. 49 (1954), p. 49, no. 1.

10 See M. Tanzi, in *I tarocchi* 2013, cit., pp. 90–3, no. 13.

11 M. Albertario, "'Ad nostro modo". La decorazione del Castello nell'età di Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1466-1476)', in *Il Castello Sforzesco di Milano*, edited by M.T. Fiorio,

Milan, 2005, pp. 99–134: 103–7. We also ought to mention other important writings by the scholar, particularly devoted to reconstructing the decorative ducal campaigns: M. Albertario, 'Documenti per la decorazione del Castello di Milano nell'età di Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1466-1476)', *Solchi*, 7/1–2 (2003), pp. 19–61; M. Albertario, 'La cappella e l'ancona delle reliquie nel Castello di Pavia', *Museo in rivista. Notiziario dei Musei Civici di Pavia*, 3 (2003), pp. 49–116; M. Albertario, *Pavia 1475. Gli affreschi della cappella Castiglioni*, Pavia, 2004.

12 See J. Shell, G. Sironi, 'Stefano de' Fedeli nel Duomo di Monza e altri documenti relativi alla sua attività di pittore', *Studi Monzesi*, 4 (1989), pp. 29–44; J. Shell, *Fedeli*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Rome, 1960–, 45 (1995), pp. 557–80; M. Boskovits, 'Poscritto per Stefano de' Fedeli', *Arte Cristiana*, 86 (1998), pp. 343–52; M. Boskovits, 'Pittura lombarda di secondo Quattrocento: qualche aggiunta e commento', *Arte Cristiana*, 97 (2009), pp. 351–64; L. Tosi, 'Il perduto politico desiano di Stefano de' Fedeli: vicende e ipotesi', *Arte Lombarda*, no. 150 (2007), pp. 103–8; R. Delmoro, 'Per l'antico aspetto del Duomo di Monza: appunti dalle visite pastorali tra XVI e XVII secolo e alcune precisazioni sui politici di Stefano de Fedeli', *ACME – Annali della Facoltà di Studi Umanistici dell'Università degli Studi di Milano*, 67/2 (2014), pp. 41–81.

13 See M. De Petris, in *I tarocchi* 2013, cit., pp. 70–2, no. 7.

14 In the analogous frescoed episode, once probably on the rood screen of the former monastery of Santa Chiara in Milan, now detached and housed in the headquarters of the Monte di Pietà, the image of Christ "diving" onto the group of the Virgin and the Apostles is quite amusing (see A. Galli, in *Pittura a Milano. Rinascimento e Manierismo*, edited by M. Gregori, Cinisello Balsamo 1998, pp. 194–5, though the episode is not reproduced).



6. Stefano de Fedeli, *Annunciation*, detail.



7. Stefano de Fedeli, *Assumption of the Virgin*, detail.
Bergamo, Accademia Carrara.

