

Discovery at Genazzano

In « L'Osservatore Romano » of May 18, 1974 Geremia Sangiorgi OSA published a report on his discovery concerning the author of the miraculous picture of the Mother of Good Counsel at Genazzano, Italy. An English translation was printed in the Weekly Edition in English of the same « Osservatore » of June 20, 1974, pp. 5 and 12. At the author's request we offer this report to the readers of our review.

Genazzano (Rome) has a Marian Sanctuary that has enjoyed world fame for over five centuries. A very beautiful and miraculous Madonna is venerated there. Since 25 April 1467 when its sensational appearance took place, people have always remained in puzzled wonder before its beauty and its origin.

When the inhabitants of Genazzano saw it for the first time on



The letters « AVIVA » on the edge of the Child's dress.

those spring vespers, they thought it had come from Paradise ¹⁾. Nor would they accept the later Albanian version, that it had left the wall of a little church in the suburbs of Scutari as a heavenly sign at the arrival of Mahomet's hordes. For the people of Genazzano the beautiful Madonna « came from heaven and was so lovely that only the angels could have painted her » ²⁾.

Early beliefs

After the first decades had passed in this dispute, the conviction gradually prevailed that the Albanians were right and that in any case the fact that the Madonna had moved to their little town still signified a supernatural privilege.

We do not wish to make a critical study here of the sermons held in 1630 on the occasion of Pope Urban VIII's august visit to the Sanctuary ³⁾. Furthermore, the concession of the rite of the Mass and of the divine Office by Pope Pius VI in 1779 confirms the pious belief ⁴⁾.

The premises for our discovery were already outlined between the years 1957-61, when, on the initiative of H. E. Mons. Pietro Canisio Van Lierde, pontifical sacristan and Vicar of His Holiness for Vatican City, in agreement with the Augustinian superiors and with the community of the Sanctuary, restoration work was carried out by the illustrious Prof. Redig de Campos. The miraculous image gained immensely from this work. In fact De Campos washed the fresco with water, treated it with fixing, made it more adherent to the wall at its back with injections of lime caseate and brightened its colour by applying trietanolamina acetate. Thus part of the distemper added

¹⁾ Ambrosii Choriolani Gen. Augustinianorum, *In defensorium ordinis eiusdem scilicet ordinis fratrum heremitarum sancti Augustini responsivum ad maledicta canonicorum assertorum regularium congregationis Frisonarie*, Rome, Georgio Herolt de Bamberg, 1481 (= Hain 5684), p. [230]: ... quaedam ymago beate Virginis in pariete dicte ecclesiae miraculose apparuit. Ad quam visendam tota Italia sic commota est, ut processionaliter illuc oppida et civitates confluerent cum signis, miraculis et elemosinis inexcipabilibus...

²⁾ D. Perini O.S.A., *Genazzano e suo territorio*, Roma 1924, 86-97; see also: A. Addeo O.S.A., *Apparitionis imaginis B. Mariae Virginis a Bono Consilio documenta in Analecta Augustiniana* 20 (1945-46), 3-139.

³⁾ *Relazione del Ricevimento fatto in Genazzano della Santità di N.S. Papa Urbano VIII*, Foligno 1663; D. Perini, *o.c.*, 132-33.

⁴⁾ *Memoriale pro Officio Proprio obtinendo Apparitionis Imaginis B. Mariae Virginis a Bono Consilio*, Roma 1776, 26.

subsequently disappeared; all the Child's neck, his dress and the halo became clear again ⁵).

Discovering a name

It was then that we noticed that on the edge of the Child's dress what seemed to be an arabesque was in fact letters, as if it were a signature. Others, too, had the same impression. So that after careful study of the original and of recent artistic photographs, I, Fr. Geremia Sangiorgi, an Augustinian in the Sanctuary, was able to decipher with certainty the following :

« A. VIVA... » (there follows a superimposition of sealing wax used in the centuries to support votive necklaces).

In the black mark at the edges of the halo (which is certainly not original) we can still read :

« FE...IT... »

Everyone was amazed! I submitted my reading to experts and confirmation was unanimous. Therefore the conclusion is logical and the proof of the authenticity of the author of the fresco is indisputable.

So my final reading is as follows :

« A. VIVA...(RINI) - FECIT ».

Since De Campos had given his authoritative opinion that the fresco of Our Lady of Good Counsel could be the work of masters of the first half of the 15th century, bearing evident signs of the so called international or late Gothic style, and was inclined, without proofs, to attribute it to Gentile da Fabriano ⁶), I was able to draw my conclusions with more serene tranquillity. Antonio Vivarini, in fact, belongs to the late Gothic movement and shows the influence of the style of Gentile da Fabriano and Pisanello in his work at the Doges' Palace in Venice ⁷).

So the signature superimposed on the fresco of Our Lady of Good Counsel, even though written upside down (so much so that it can be read obliquely), despite all the precautions taken by the young painter

⁵) *Nova documenta de Imagine Miraculosa Genestana in Acta Ordinis Sancti Augustini* 6 (1961), 25-33.

⁶) *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁷) G. Vasari, *Le vite de' piu eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architetti*, II (Firenze 1948), 556; P. D'Ancona, *Umanesimo e Rinascimento*, Torino 1948, 339-41, 358; V. Moschini, *I Vivarini*, Milano 1946.

of Murano, was read at last on 24 January 1974 by me, with the joy of having served charity and the History of Italian Art. Unfortunately in the History of Art the period of Antonio Vivarini's early activity has always been skipped, for lack of information. I am of the opinion that from now on it is necessary to study it better and begin to draw up the catalogue of his works, beginning with the fresco of Our Lady of Good Counsel venerated in Genazzano.

Illustrious name

Therefore, the illustrious name of Antonio Vivarini, master of the Veronese School in the first half of the 15th century, might have been put forward even without my amazing discovery; but it would have been just a conjecture worthy of respect and a very questionable induction. I, on the contrary, do not presume, do not attribute, but read, as everyone can do from today.

Antonio Vivarini's works are well-known; but his personal data are not known exactly. He is supposed to have been born in Murano about 1410 and to have died about 1476. When we meet him he is already a successful painter but no one has ever been able to discover his period of training and the places where he went to paint.

In view of the rich and marvellous story of the appearance of the Image of Our Lady of Good Counsel, we do not wish to attack or minimize the faith and tradition of the people. I can point out, however, that in 1436 Scutari passed under the protection of the Republic of Venice. So nothing prevents a Venetian from having been present and active in a city not far from the lagoon. The style of the fresco of Our Lady of Good Counsel is that of a formation period in the life of the painter. So it is a work of his early youth.

Since nothing is known about where Antonio Vivarini operated before 1440, the conclusion could be drawn that the date of our fresco lies between the years 1437-1440. Thus a historical gap is filled in and another precious source is added to history.

In this Genazzano fresco Antonio Vivarini still shows the uncertainties of the late Gothic period, but there are already traces of the innovations present in Pisanello, Jacopo Bellini and his brother Bartolomeo Vivarini. The position of the Blessed Virgin (who is on a throne) expresses a movement that is already attempting to break away from the late Gothic and orientalizing period; there are already

traces of a suffused pre-Renaissance humanity in the faces; and it shows a placid spirituality obtained with the fine incisive strokes and the rosy colour of the flesh shaded by soft pink transparencies ⁸).

Style unfolds

Reassured by the author's signature, we can discover the stylistic vein from other works painted soon after the Genazzano fresco. It is enough to compare it with Our Lady of the Adoration of the Wise Men in the Frederick Museum in Berlin; with the Annunciation of St. Job in Venice; with St. Ursula and the virgins now in the Museum of the Brescia Seminary; with the triptych of St. Francis of the Vine in Venice. But the identities are evident particularly in the Virgin with Child in the Galleries of Venice Academy, attributed to our author by Valcanover in 1960 ⁹).

So the discovery of the signature and therefore of the authenticity of the author of the beautiful picture of Our Lady of Good Counsel in Genazzano, embellishes the Sanctuary even more. In the five centuries since those «fateful vespers on 25 April 1467» it has seen miracles, the pilgrimage of Popes, Saints, apostles and faithful from all walks of life and from every continent. Antonio Vivarini is certainly growing in glory since the Mother of Jesus and of the Church has used a youthful work of his to work miracles and to smile at afflicted humanity through the centuries.

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⁸) F. D'Arcais, *I Vivarini*, Milano 1963.

⁹) *Ibidem*; Moschini, o.c.