

An Altarpiece by Giulio Cesare Procaccini

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THE ALTARPIECE of *The Madonna and Child with Saints Francis and Dominic, and Angels*, recently purchased for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, is one of the most significant works of Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1574–1625) to have appeared in the last decade, and among the most appealing of any of his paintings (Figure 1).¹ It is also one of the very few that may be related to contemporary documents.

The altarpiece is described in 1642 in an inventory of the property of the church of the Madonna dei Miracoli in Corbetta, just west of Milan: “Alla cappella di S. Fran. S. Dom. 1 Quadro con l’Effigie della Mad.^{na} di S.^{to} Fran.—di S.^{to} dom.—co’Angeli. Gran dipinto.”² At an undetermined date this picture was removed from its frame and replaced with a faithful but mediocre copy which hung in the chapel until the church was restored after the Second World War (Figure 2). The copy, still in the original, though heavily overpainted, frame designed by Procaccini, was then moved to a stairwell in an adjacent building.³

1. The picture is in remarkably good condition and has been sensitively cleaned recently; the only damages are some minor tears in the body of the putto at the right and some abrasion in the shadows.

2. Archivio della Chiesa della Madonna dei Miracoli, Proprieta del Santuario, Cartella VI, Fascicolo 2, Inventario, 1642. The chapel in question—“of St. Francis [and] St. Dominic”—is the second to the right upon entering the church; for its dedication see below, note 5.

3. The copy measures approximately 250 × 140 cm. It is listed in an inventory carried out by the Soprintendenza ai Monumenti della Lombardia in 1937 as “scuola emiliana procaccinesca, forse di G.C.” and has recently been published by M. B. Castellotti, “Aggiunta al catalogo di Melchiorre Gherardini,” *Paragone* 29, (1978) no. 345, pp. 89f., fig. 70, with a direct

The church of the Madonna dei Miracoli owes its name to an image of the Virgin and Child painted on its facade by Gregorio Zavattari in 1475.⁴ On April 27, 1555, while three children were playing in the piazza in front of the church, the Christ Child descended from the fresco to the street. One of the children, a deaf mute, witnessed the event and, finding himself cured, shouted to his companions. All three then enjoyed the spectacle of the Virgin herself descending from the fresco to take up her Child and return with him to their proper place. Overnight the church, then dedicated to S. Nicolao, began to attract pilgrims, and the following year funds were provided by Giovanni Ambrogio Spanzotta to restore and enlarge the old building, probably with a choir. A structure was also added to the facade of the church to permit access to the miraculous image; this was the forerunner of the present eighteenth-century chapel. The first plenary indulgences were procured through Charles Borromeo, cardinal archbishop of Milan, in 1560 and 1561 and then again in 1562. It was, in part,

attribution to Procaccini. It has all the characteristics of a later copy: there are none of the pentimenti found in the Metropolitan Museum’s painting and the execution throughout is extremely mechanical. The frame, on the other hand, compares favorably with those Procaccini designed for the two altarpieces in S. Maria Presso San Celso in Milan.

There is also a drawing that Castellotti correctly maintains is after the altarpiece (Figure 3, Ambrosiana, Cod. F.235, inf., n.1179; black chalk, heightened with white on gray tinted paper, attributed at the Ambrosiana to Giuseppe Vermiglio).

4. For the most complete history of the church, see P[rete] C[arlo] C[hierichetti], *Brevi memorie del santuario della Madonna de’ Miracoli* (Milan, 1871) and E. Cazzani, *L’archivio del santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli in Corbetta* (Milan, 1975).



FIGURE 1

Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1574–1652), *The Madonna and Child with Saints Francis and Dominic, and Angels*, 1612–13. Oil on canvas, $101\frac{1}{3} \times 56\frac{3}{8}$ in. (256.9 \times 143.2 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Enid A. Haupt Gift, 1979.209

FIGURE 2

Copy of Figure 1 in the frame designed by Procaccini for the original altarpiece. Corbetta (Milan), Madonna dei Miracoli (photo: Soprintendenza, Milan)



Charles Borromeo's association with the church and the celebrations following his canonization in 1610 that spurred a program of redecoration. On November 3, 1612 the deputies of the Madonna dei Miracoli met to confirm that an altar near the tribune was to be dedicated in perpetuity to St. Charles. At the same time three other chapels were assigned to various deputies with the understanding that within a year each patron was to supply an altarpiece by a reputable master, and that a year after construction of the interior of the chapels all other ornaments should be completed and a weekly mass established; failing this, rights to the chapel were to be forfeited. Among the three chapels was that "hora dedicata a S. Francesco," which was assigned to Gaspare Spanzotta and his

FIGURE 3

Seventeenth-century drawing after Figure 1. Milan, Ambrosiana (photo: Mario Perotti)





FIGURE 4
Saint Francis, detail of Figure 1

brother Filippo,⁵ descendants no doubt of the Spanzotta who half a century earlier had financed reconstruction of the church. It was thus Gaspare and Filippo Spanzotta who in all probability commissioned the altarpiece from Procaccini shortly thereafter.

The altarpiece was conceived as a glorification of the Virgin and of her chief devotion, the rosary. Traditionally it was St. Dominic who instituted the rosary at the Virgin's request, and although this account originated only with the fifteenth-century Dominican, Alan de la Roche (or de Rupe),⁶ numerous paintings

5. Archivio della Chiesa della Madonna dei Miracoli, Memorie storiche, Cartella I, Fascicolo I, Primo Libro delle Ordina-zioni: 1572-1689, f. 14. The relevant part of the entry for November 3, 1612, reads as follows:

"Hanno conchiuso che la prima capella à mano dritta vicina alla tribuna, alla quale fu portata processionalmente l'immagine di S. Carlo assegnatale da Pietro Cantoni Priore. l'anno 1600 à 12 di novembre [*sic*], reste perpetualmente sotto l'invocatione del detto santo.

E poiche i sudetti S. Simone Borro, et Gaspare Spanzotta in nome suo e del S. Filippo suo fratello, et il S. Girolamo Borra del q' S. Br . . . [illegible] hanno significato che perloro donazione desideranno d'abbellire una cappella per ciasuna come anche desidera il sudetto Pietro Cantoni, hanno deliberato che al S. Simone Borro si dia la capella d. S. Dorothea, fattane prima parola con la S. Ippolita Berla Rainolda, per l'interesse che detta S. in potere pretendere. Ai d. S. Spanzotta la cappella seguente, hora dedicata a S. Francesco. Al S. Girolamo Borro la cappella vicina a quella di S. Carlo. A Pietro Cantoni quella di S. Carlo, con questo che nel termine d'un anno prossimo à venire s'habbia à mettere à ciascuna delle dette cappelle una tavola o ancona fatta per mano di buon maestro, et che per un'altro anno doppio che sarà finita la fabrica interiore s'habbia à finire l'abbellimento et ornato le dette cappelle et farle celebrare da ciascuno di essi per S. respetivamente almeno una messa la settimana inperpetua et che cessandosi in alcuna delle dette cose, sia in arbitrio dei detti S. Deputati di disporre delle capelle sudette in altre persone."

The chapel assigned to Gaspare and Filippo Spanzotta was decorated in the sixteenth century with a fresco of the Pietà (now again visible), and the wording "hora dedicata a S. Francesco" thus refers to a recent rededication. The presence of the saint on the Virgin's right, the side of honor, doubtless results from this primary dedication.

6. On this see especially H. Thurston, "The Rosary," *The Month* 96 (1900) pp. 403-418, 513-527, 620-637; *ibid.* 97 (1901) pp. 67-79. Also E. Mâle, *L'Art religieux de la fin du moyen âge en France* (Paris, 1908) p. 216; *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1912) XIII, pp. 184ff., and *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1967) XII, pp. 667ff.

FIGURE 5
Madonna and Child, detail of Figure 1





FIGURE 6
Two angels, detail of Figure 1

from the sixteenth century onwards attest to its widespread acceptance. Perhaps the most famous and revealing example is Caravaggio's *Madonna of the Rosary* in Vienna, in which the Virgin instructs St. Dominic to distribute rosaries to the faithful who kneel before him with outstretched arms. The presence in the foreground of St. Peter Martyr underlines the significance of the event, for it was believed that the rosary had been a powerful weapon in combating the Albigensian heresy in the thirteenth century and could once again be employed against the new Protestant heresies. The same idea is explicit in Domenichino's fresco of *The Virgin Interceding for the Neapolitan People* (1633) in a pendentive in the cathedral of Naples, where a young woman holding a rosary kneels on the defeated figures of Calvin and Luther; the latter had denounced the rosary as an invention of the devil. The popularity of the devotion and the frequency of its representation thus went hand in hand with the progress of the Counter Reformation. The Dominican Pope Pius V had especially championed the devotion. Following his initiative, in 1573 Gregory XIII instituted the Feast of the Rosary to commemorate the fact that the victory over the Turks at Lepanto in 1571 had taken place on the day when in Rome confraternities of the rosary held their annual processions.⁷ In Milan the devotion was given special prestige when in 1584 St. Charles Borromeo, a strong supporter of Pius V, founded a confraternity of the rosary in the cathedral of the city. It was fitting, therefore, that as a deputy of the *Madonna dei Miracoli*, with which St. Charles had been associated, Gaspare Spanzotta should have been involved in commissioning an altarpiece in which the institution of the rosary figured so prominently.

Employing a traditional format derived from *sacre*

conversazione, Procaccini draws attention to the rosary's efficacy in overcoming Original Sin and to its status as the Virgin's preferred devotion. These points are made clear by the apple held by St. Francis, a symbol both of the Fall of Man and of the Virgin's role as the second Eve (Figure 4). The Virgin's melancholic mood arises from the dual nature of this symbol as well as from the cross St. Francis holds in his right hand, and this mood in turn lends a special poignancy to her gift of the rosary and the ecstatic fervor with which St. Dominic receives it.

If the conditions agreed upon by the church deputies at their meeting in 1612 were carried out, Procaccini's altarpiece was not only commissioned in late 1612 or early 1613, but was also probably finished within a year. The manner in which the space has been at once filled and compressed by figures describing sweeping curves across the surface is characteristic of Procaccini's work in the first half of the second decade.⁸ So, too, are the densely applied pigment, the flashes of bright color—whether the red of the Virgin's dress, the white of St. Dominic's habit, or the swatch of blue on the left-hand putto—and the soft shadows which are the only indication of the environment that the figures inhabit. The picture occupies a position between the scenes of the life of the Virgin in S. Antonio Abate in Milan, which were painted in 1612, and the altarpiece in the Santuario dei Miracoli at Saronno.⁹ These works show nothing of Procaccini's earlier dependence on Cerano, still traceable in the scenes from the life of St. Charles Borromeo, finished for the cathedral in 1610. Nor yet are their compositions open and developed in depth as in *The Circumcision* at Modena, commissioned in 1613 but only delivered in 1616. They are the first fruits of Procaccini's maturity when, as Borsieri wrote in 1619, the artist "turned from sculpture to painting, having formed a manner that closely approached the spirit of Parmigianino, especially in brushwork."¹⁰ Indeed,

7. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, XII, p. 670, and L. Pastor, *History of the Popes*, ed. R. Kerr (London, 1952) XVIII, pp. 423ff.

8. The characteristics of this moment were first outlined by N. Pevsner, "Giulio Cesare Procaccini," *Rivista d'arte* 11 (1929) pp. 326ff., and have been restated, more comprehensively, by M. Valsecchi, "Schede lombarde per G. C. Procaccini," *Paragone* 21, no. 243 (1970) pp. 16ff. See also H. Brigstocke, "Il seicento lombardo at Milan," *Burlington Magazine* 115 (1973) p. 697, and N. Neilson, "An Altarpiece by Giulio Cesare Procaccini and Some Further Remarks," *Arte lombarda* 17, ii (1972) pp. 22–25.

9. A summary of documents and opinions relating to these paintings is contained in the catalogue entries by M. Valsecchi for *Il seicento lombardo* (Milan, 1973) II, pp. 41f., with bibliography.

10. "... dalla scoltura [Procaccini] passò al dipingere, essendosi formata una maniera, la quale molto si accosta allo spirito del Parmigianino, particolarmente nel macchiare" (G. Borsieri, *Il supplimento della nobiltà di Milano* [Milan, 1619]; see Valsecchi, "Schede lombarde," p. 16).

the Metropolitan Museum's altarpiece confirms the aptness of this judgment and the date of the group of works to which it refers. The upper half of the composition (Figure 5) is, in a sense, a recollection of Parmigianino's *Madonna dal Collo Lungo*, until 1698 on an altar in S. Maria dei Servi in Parma. From that work Procaccini has evolved his own concept of the *grazia* and *bellezza* which Vasari admired in Parmigianino. But much more than his ideal of feminine grace, the technical virtuosity Procaccini has mastered discloses a close study of Parmigianino. This is especially apparent in the shimmering highlights of the drapery, the melting colors of the angels' wings (Figure 6), and the manner in which the stem of lilies held by St.

Dominic has been defined by a few deftly placed brushstrokes. However, unlike Parmigianino, Procaccini employs this mastery not as an element of a perfected *maniera*, but to communicate the sense of immediacy and vitality that is at the heart of Lombard Baroque painting.

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