

[p.81] Two sixteenth century fresco

Paintings representing

St. Paul's shipwreck in Malta

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In the Benedictine church of St. Peter at Perugia there hang on the inside of the East Wall two detached frescoes. These represent the *Shipwreck of St. Paul* and the *Landing of St. Paul in Malta*. These paintings date back to the sixteenth century; indeed we know the year in which payment was effected: 1556.¹ Intrigued by the pictorial quality of these paintings as well as by their iconography, the present writer has carried out research on these two paintings.² The writer feels moreover, that a particular painting in Malta should be singled out for special comment since it seems indebted to one of these frescoes. The panel representing the landing of St. Paul in Malta – which forms part of a polyptych at St. Paul's Parish Church at Rabat – in spite of its naiveté, owes its compositional syntax to the homonymous Perugia painting.

A brief outline of the life of the painter who carried out these paintings would not be amiss.³ Leonardo Cungi was born in Sansepolcro, in the province of Arezzo in Tuscany, in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. He moved to Rome where he came into contact with Michelangelo's followers. A declaration of Tommaso dei Cavalieri regarding a very close friendship between him and Buonarroti's coterie was published in 1938 by Bernard Berenson.⁴ Vasari, indeed, in the *Life of Perino del Vaga* refers to a series of sketches carried out by Cungi on the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel.⁵ These drawings which formed part of Perino del Vaga's collection, were sold by his heirs after the artist's death in 1547. It was Milanesi who first suggested that a group of sketches at the Uffizi [p.82] must be his.⁶ Berenson moreover, attributes other sketches to Cungi. These draw on the Cappella Paolina frescoes and on two well-known sketches of Michelangelo carried out for Tommaso dei Cavalieri (now at Windsor): the *Putti Bacchanal* and the *Fall of Phaethon*.

One must admit that the problem with Cungi's sketches is a thorny one, mainly because some of his sketches have long been attributed to Michelangelo himself, and museum authorities are reluctant to shift attributions from a major to a minor painter. For instance, when the present writer wrote to the Teyler Museum in Haarlem they wrote back stating categorically that "there are no drawings attributed to Cungi in the collection."⁷ And yet a critic of no less a stature than Bernard Berenson had identified a drawing as Cungi's.⁸ Other problems of attribution are due to the fact that Leonardo Cungi had a brother and a son who were also painters of some repute. In fact a drawing in the Louvre – the *Adoration of the Magi*

¹ U. Gnoli, *Pittori e miniatori nell'Umbria*; (1923), Foligno 1980, p. 91.

² The author thanks Prof. F.F. Mancini of Perugia Univeristy for helping him in this research.

³ F.F. Mancini, cf. *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, vol. XXXI, dec. 1985, pp. 370-371.

⁴ B. Berenson, *I disegni dei pittori fiorentini* (1938) Milan 1961, I, ad Ind.

⁵ G. Vasari, *Le vite...*, edited by G. Milanesi, Florence 1906, V, p. 632.

⁶ These drawings are thirty-two, and are from number 17336 to 17368.

⁷ Letter from Teyler's Museum, Haarlem, dated 27 Nov., 1991.

⁸ F. Mancini, *Dizionario biografico*, op.cit.

– has been ascribed by Monberg-Goguel to Leonardo Cungi⁹ while F.F. Mancini¹⁰ believes that its author is Giovan Battista owing to its Vasarian expressive modes.

The style of Leonardo Cungi has been aptly described by F.F. Mancini as a fusion of themes from Michelangelo with the expressive modes of Raphael.¹¹ This style is best exemplified in the *Ascension of Christ* executed in 1558 for the Confraternity of St. Francis at Perugia, two years after the St. Paul frescoes at St. Peter's Benedictine Church. This style owes a great deal to the art of Perin del Vaga and Raffaellino del Colle, who was also from Sansepolcro.

In 1561, Cungi worked in Rome in the coterie of Federico Barocci. He decorated Pius IV's suite in the Vatican with fresco paintings. From 1563 to 1566 Cungi was a collaborator of Daniele da Volterra in the decoration of the nave's coffered ceiling in San Giovanni in Laterano".

[p.83] He must have died some time before 1569 since a document of that year attests that he was already dead.¹²

The two paintings representing the *Shipwreck of St. Paul* and the *Landing of St. Paul* in Malta belong therefore, to a rather minor painter, although not that minor if his first-class drawings ("eccelenti", as Vasari puts it) may be mistaken for Michelangelo's. However, as regards the commissions of paintings, we find him collaborating with other well-established artists, such as Barocci and Daniele da Volterra. The same happened with the frescoes under discussion. In fact, when he carried out these paintings, Cungi was working under the direction of the painter Orazio Alfani (1510-1583). According to a seventeenth century historian, C. Crispolti,¹³ he painted this for Alfani himself, to whom payment was effected. This gives rise to a fundamental question: were these original paintings by Cungi? Or were they executed after some preparatory drawing by Alfani? It is not easy to answer this question, since very little is known of Orazio Alfani. As recently as 1985, F. Santi, compiler of the catalogue of works of art in Umbria, complains that the stylistic development as well as the complex artistic activity of this painter are still to be properly studied.¹⁴ Moreover, his style is inconstant owing perhaps to his diverse culture stimuli. If one observes one of the two frescoes carried out by Orazio Alfani – the *Liberation of St. Peter* – one notes that he draws heavily on Raphael.¹⁵ One might safely infer that it must have been this common concern with Raphael's art which brought these painters to work together.

⁹ I.C. Monberg-Goguel, *Inventaire général des dessins italiens*. Musée du Louvre, Cabinet des dessins in Vasari et son temps. Paris, 1972.

¹⁰ F. Mancini, op. cit., p. 370.

¹¹ R. Mancini, op. cit., p. 370.

¹² A. Bertolotti, *Artisti Lombardi a Roma*, Milan, 1881, pp. 136-40.

¹³ C. Crispolti, *Perugia Augusta Descritta*, Perugia, 1648.

¹⁴ F. Santi, *Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria*, Rome, 1985, p. 181: "il cui percorso stilistico ed anzi la sua complessiva figura artistica sono ancora da ricostruire."

¹⁵ Only later (in c. 1560) Orazio Alfani produced two very important Mannerist paintings in Parmigianino's style: the *Sacra Famiglia* and the *Riposo nella fuga in Egitto* (Perugia Gallery).

When analysing these frescoes of Cungi, one necessary premise should be kept in mind: these paintings have been heavily retouched¹⁶ during the operation of detachment from the apse where they originally were. Nonetheless, the retouchings do not seem to have altered the overall characteristics of the painting.

[p.84] In the *Shipwreck* scene, the Mannerist postures are inspired by Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, carried out fifteen years earlier, and whose vast range of anatomies L. Cungi has observed and sketched. The present writer is certain that Cungi utilised at least three of these drawings, namely n.17354, 17360 and 17364. These portray twisted figures of human beings, or demons clutching humans: Cungi used them as models for the people overboard clutching bulks of wood. Cungi's drawings of the *Fall of Phaethon* (n.17351) inspired the reclining figure on the left of the painting. The figure clutching at the vessel echoes a similar figure of the *Fire in the Borgo* of Raphael.

As regards the forms of the figures both in the foreground and in the background, one notes that the movements are poised and formalized, and instead of creating drama, they have a decorative and graceful air: it suggests a rite rather than catastrophe. Most probably, for the forms on the vessel, he drew inspiration from a cartoon of Perino del Vaga: the *Martyrdom of the Ten Thousand*¹⁷; for the figures of St. Paul and St. Luke in the foreground, Perino's *Fall of the Giants* serves as inspiration: gracefully twisted torsos, typical of Mannerist art.

If, in the *Shipwreck*, Perino del Vaga's expressive modes were merged with Michelangelo's, in the *Landing in Malta*, only those of the former may be observed. One notes especially the elegant figures of St. Paul – in a slightly mannered contrapposto – and of the group of Maltese delegates who have come to greet him; their gait is poised and rhythmically articulated. One of these – St. Publius perhaps lifts – in a stylish and sophisticated mode – his robe, creating a web of folds, which is echoed in those of the central figures, St. Paul's and the couple's on the right. A model for such a fine treatment of forms was certainly Vaga's *Visitation* at S.S. Trinità dei Monti, in Rome, Cungi also based the frieze-like structure of the foreground setting on this painting.

As regards the composition of the painting one notes that it is made up of a number of planes which are kept quite distinct: there are at least four clear-cut planes. This division into clearly visible planes is a Renaissance technique, which laid a premium on symmetry and order, and which Cungi could have observed in the paintings of Perin del Vaga, who in turn had drawn on Raphael. We not however, the mediaeval trait of portraying twice St. Paul.

Regarding the iconographical details, one observes in the first plane that St. Paul has a chain round his neck, which he holds in his left hand. His right arm is [p.85] outstretched over the fire and the viper is in the act of biting his hand. St. Paul is wearing a short tunic which reaches just above his knees. This tunic seems to be woven out of a very fine fabric since it is tight-fitting and transparent in such a way as to allow anatomical forms to be better assessed. The painting underlines the meeting of St. Paul with Malta's leaders. This iconographical details are to be appreciated within the context of Renaissance art: faithfulness to the historical text (St. Paul, a prisoner, meeting Malta's representatives and shaking off the viper, as well as St. Paul healing Publius' father); the shipwrecked vessel in the middle-ground with the name *DIOSKOUROI* (the twin brothers Castor and Pollux displayed on the sail of one of

¹⁶ Verbal communication by Prof. F. Mancini.

¹⁷ For more information on this drawing, cf J. Shearman, *Mannerism*, 1967, England, p. 62.

its masts); the importance assigned to ideal beauty: all figures, both nude and dressed, have harmonious proportions; ordered and rhythmically articulated composition – note the balance created by the two groups flanking St. Paul, as well as the two walled cities and mountains, in the distance. The identification of these walled cities is rather problematic. Certainly the bay portrayed does not refer to St. Paul's Bay: it is indeed a harbour above which there arise a number of small bastions. In the middle there appears to be a basilicalike structure with two storeys. On the far left a classical gate with a triumphal arch, architrave and pediment may be observed. A round Pantheon-like structure in the centre is also visible. These details are certainly not the product of the painter's imagination; Malta, being under Roman rule at the time, would have had classical buildings. The Benedictines moreover, who commissioned this work, would have been familiar with Cicero's *Verrines*, where it is explicitly stated that very near a promontory there was the temple of Juno: "Ab eo oppido non longe in promontorio fanum est Junonis antiquum..."¹⁸ So Cungi must have been told to draw the vessel in a harbour, on one side of which there arose a promontory near which there was the shrine of Juno (the Pantheon-like structure, most probably). He was not aware, however, that, by so doing, he amalgamated two scenes which referred to two different places. Cungi's settings is nonetheless stimulating since Paul's visit is set in its Roman pagan context.

It would be fruitful if this topographical aspect were to be further studied. According to the Maltese Biblical Scholar, Paul Guillaumier¹⁹ the scene seems to be set in the Salina harbour, which was still operative in Roman times. If this interpretation is correct, the two hills are the Wardija one (on the right) and the Mdina one (on the left) respectively. It seems to the present writer that the fact that the scene represented is that of "Malta Africana" is of the utmost importance [p.86] since it is the earliest known shipwreck painting wherein reference is clearly made to the island of Malta and not Meleda, as the landing place mentioned in the Acts.²⁰ This importance in the island of Malta is to be seen in the context of the island's growing prestige due to the presence of Knights of St. John. If one takes into account that these came to Malta in 1530 and that a very important book about Malta (the *Insulae Militae Descriptio*) was published and also translated in Italian in 1545,²¹ one understands why in 1556 in an important Benedictine church it is deemed fit that the scene of St Paul should be Malta's and not Meleda's.

Apart from this iconographical importance, these two paintings are indeed very interesting, pictorially since they are rare – if not unique – exemplars of a particular amalgam or Renaissance and Mannerist modes of expression as applied to the shipwreck of St. Paul. One may synthesise these as: historical veracity; ideal beauty; graceful elegance.

From 1556 to 1580, that is from the date of the execution of the Perugia frescoes, and that of St. Paul's Shipwreck at the homonymous Church at Valletta, dramatic and important events took place within the Church which changed its attitude to religious art. In the 25th session of the Council of Trent, strict norms were set by which artists had to abide when

¹⁸ Cic. Verr. II. 4. 103-104.

¹⁹ Verbal communication.

²⁰ In the 'shipwreck' scene in earlier paintings, either no reference is made at all to Malta (as, for, instance, in the Mdina International Gothic Polyptych which has been recently restored and the walled city scene as been removed since it has been a later addition), or reference is made to Meleda (as in the copy of the lost fresco of "San Paolo fuori le mura").

²¹ Cf. H.C.R. Vella, *Quintinius (1536) and St. Paul's Shipwreck in Malta*, Melita Historica, vol. VIII, 1980, Malta, p. 61.

executing works of art commissioned by religious authorities. Paintings were expected to be free from superstition (*superstitio*), voluptuousness (*lascivia*), excessive charm (*procax venustas*) and lack of order (*nihil inordinatum aut praepostere et tumultuarie accomodatum*). This type of Counter Reformation act is associated with the Jesuit culture. In fact da Lecce, better known locally as D'Aleccio before moving to Malta, was imbued with these ideas and had had the opportunity to see them carried out in the Oratorio of the Gonfalone in Rome. Father John Azzopardi has most usefully shifted the attribution from Paladini to Matteo d'Aleccio²² since now art historians may [p.87] better appreciate this painting. The painting in Valletta is certainly very important, and its iconography, as M. Buhagiar has justly underlined,²³ has been a point of reference for subsequent 'Shipwreck' representations.

One notes that Mannerist modes are prevalent in this painting. The ability of the painter lay in following the vein of the Gonfalone painters²⁴ in fusing as if on a stage-set three episodes related to the shipwreck of St. Paul in Malta. The *mise-en scène* contains three moments: the shipwreck; the viper incident; the quasi-apotheosis of St. Paul. In other words, what other previous painters – Gothic and Renaissance – had treated as separate incidents by assigning different paintings to different sources such as in polyptychs (including Cungi's approach), d'Aleccio amalgamated in a superbly dramatic canvas; wherein the iconographical originality of this painting certainly lies. What interests us here is the shipwreck scene in the background. It appears to us that D'Aleccio might have drawn the Cungi 'Shipwreck': there are the broken masts, a figure clinging to the vessel (very similar to the one in Cungi's) as well as various figures trying not to drown in the billowing waves. Certainly, D'Aleccio treated differently certain details, but the overall *idea* was Cungi's. However, by setting St. Paul's shipwreck at St. Paul's Bay, Cungi's topography had to be drastically changed.

Some eight years later, in 1588, an unknown painter executed a polyptych for St. Paul's Parish Church at Rabat. The polyptych has a big central painting which represents Saint Paul holding a sword and the Bible. Around this central panel there are a number of panels representing significant episodes of the life of St. Paul. On the extreme left the shipwreck scene is represented. To my mind, this scene is basically Cungi's, especially in composition. If, at first glance, this does not seem so, it is because the painter saw to it that it should be *censored*: that is, it had to abide by the Counter-Reformation precepts to which reference has already been made. In the first place, he eliminated those elements which the Counter-Reformatory mentality termed as "*procax veunstas*", that is provoking beauty. So this painter removed the semi-nude male and female figures. St. Paul's tunic was lengthened so that no elegantly sinuous legs be seen. All the figures wear also full-length robes. What is indeed striking in St. Paul's figure is its similarity to Cungi's: the saint is portrayed in the act of walking with his right-hand shaking off the viper and his left-hand lifting his robe, while in Cungi's [p.88] it lifted the chains; which I interpret as an attempt to temper veracity with decorum: one of the Counter-Reformation tenets explicitly prohibited indecency (*nihil profanum nihilque inhonestum*). Cungi's topographical details had to undergo a radical surgical operation.

In fact the painter – a Maltese one most probably – eliminated the cities, since in what is believed to be the traditional landing place there was no such city. In this regard,

²² Father J. Azzopardi, *In-Nawfragju ta' San Pawl fl-Arti*, Malta 1984.

²³ M. Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands*, Malta 1988, p.51.

²⁴ On the various painters who worked in the Oratorio of the Gonfalone, cf. S. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy 1500-1600*, England, 1971, p. 443, p. 513.

D'Aleccio's had already set the pattern. So, the Rabat Polyptych had observed that fundamental tenet of Gregory the Great, who had required that art should serve to teach and strengthen one's faith: "*Erudire et confirmare populum.*" For this very reason, the word DIOSKOUROI on the vessel was removed, since it might have evoked pagan connotations.

May I add one last comment? It is intriguing that no panel illustrates the grotto; it is indeed strange that the grotto, which was already enjoying a certain reputation, should not be included in the Polyptych, which must have served as the main altarpiece of a church abutting on to this grotto. But, there is a possible reason. The 'grotto' episode, being of a legendary kind, might have seemed offensive to the Counter-Reformatory mentality of the ecclesiastical authorities, since no episodes which were the result of "superstitio" were to be accepted.

The two Cungi's frescoes in Perugia, at about the same date suffered the same fate by the same Counter-Reformation mentality. In 1591 the apse was totally renovated and they were replaced by a new altarpiece representing the *Death of St. Benedict*.

[p.89]



'Shipwreck of St. Paul in Malta', Benedictine church of St. Peter, Perugia.

'Shipwreck of St. Paul in Malta', Benedictine church of St. Peter, Perugia.



'Landing of St. Paul in Malta', Benedictine church of St. Peter, Perugia.