

Between Family Brand and Personal Ambition: Strategies and Limits of Collaboration in the Carracci Workshop

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In a crucial passage of the Carracci biography in his ground-breaking work on Bolognese painting, the *Felsina pittrice* of 1678, Carlo Cesare Malvasia labels the three artists a "Gerione pittorico",¹ in allusion to the triple-bodied monster Geryon which was killed by Hercules in one of his deeds. The somewhat (given the ill fate of the creature) unfortunate metaphor serves to underscore the stylistic unity of Ludovico, Agostino and Annibale Carracci which, according to Malvasia, already made it difficult to tell their works apart during their lifetime.

Over the past decades scholars have devoted much effort to solving this truly Herculean task. Yet, although in many individual cases some definite progress has been made and much new information has been gathered, one cannot help the feeling that in general, and especially in the field of drawings, the confusion is increasing rather than diminishing. In recent years, some scholars have tried to make sense of this "attributional havoc", as it has been aptly called,² maintaining that it is not due to our limited knowledge, but is a logical consequence of the Carraccis' intimate collaboration. Gail Feigenbaum in particular has insisted upon the teamwork among the three artists, claiming that they consciously "subordinated their individual propensities to a unity of purpose" – namely the creation of a suprapersonal, collective style, a view that has gained much consensus since.³

1 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 287.

2 The phrase was coined by Clovis Whitfield during a symposium on Carracci drawings held in Oxford in 1997 and is reported by Diane De Grazia, "Carracci Drawings in Britain and the State of Carracci Studies", in: *Master Drawings*, XXXIV (1998), pp. 292–304, here p. 294.

3 Feigenbaum 1990 (here, p. 155, the quoted words); Feigenbaum 1993, p. 70. Cf. also, among others: Luigi Spezzaferro, "I Carracci tra naturalismo e classicismo", in: Andrea Emiliani (ed.),

Collaboration and unity

As a matter of fact, the written sources supply ample evidence that, until the departure of Annibale for Rome in 1595, the Carracci workshop was organized as a kind of family enterprise whose members did not only cooperate in several larger commissions such as the frescoes in the palaces of the Fava, Magnani and Sampieri, but often also in single altarpieces or even small easel paintings – on the level both of conception and of execution.⁴

Malvasia states several times that Ludovico assisted his cousins by making compositional studies for their works, or, especially in the case of Annibale's early altarpieces, refinishing their paintings.⁵ Admittedly, the author might not be entirely trustworthy in this instance, since one of the chief aims of his biography is to emphasize Ludovico's role as the leading personality among the Carracci. He also asserts, however, that Agostino helped his brother and his cousin in the execution of their works and, in turn, received their help for his own paintings.⁶

Ludovico's inventive power is indeed confirmed by a large number of compositional drawings that cannot be connected with any of his known paintings. Modern scholarship has therefore tried to identify some of his proposals for the cousins' compositions. Gail Feigenbaum and Catherine Loisel have recognized that a series of three related studies for a *Lamentation* in Oxford, Stockholm and Copenhagen (fig. 1), which can be attributed to Ludovico and dated around the early or mid-1580s, shows marked similarities to the *Pietà with Saints* Annibale painted in 1585 for the main altar of the Chiesa dei Cappuccini in Parma (fig. 2).

Le arti a Bologna e in Emilia dal XVI al XVII secolo (Atti del XXIV Congresso Internazionale di Storia dell'Arte C.I.H.A., 10–18/9/1979), Bologna 1982, pp. 203–228, especially p. 206; De Grazia 1995, p. 166, 181 f.; Nicholas Turner, "Ludovico Carracci, Paris" (exh. review), in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 147 (2005), p. 54–56, here p. 55; Robertson 2008, p. 12, 78, 93. Scepticism concerning this view has been expressed by Boesten-Stengel 2008, p. 127.

4 On the collaboration in the Carracci workshop see also, apart from the contributions by Gail Feigenbaum (Feigenbaum 1990, p. 148–155; Feigenbaum 1993, p. 69–72); Longhi 1957, especially p. 33–36; Ostrow 1966/1974, p. 249; Stanzani 2006, p. 445 f., note 37.

5 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 267, 282, 345, 351.

6 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 284.



Fig. 1: Ludovico Carracci, *Lamentation*, ca. 1584–85.



Fig. 2: Annibale Carracci, *Pietà with Saints*, 1585.

Their logical conclusion was that Ludovico was assisting his younger cousin in the invention of one of his first major commissions.⁷ Tempting as this suggestion might be, it is contradicted by the fact that, apart from the main theme, the iconography of the altarpiece and the drawings is not the same. Not only do the latter lack the motif of the cross carried by angels; they also show, except for the obvious presence of the Virgin, St. Mary Magdalene, and a group of angels, a very different set of saints. While in the painting the death body of Christ is mourned by St. Claire, St. Francis and St. John the Evangelist, the drawings feature all three Maries, St. Anthony Abbot and another elderly, long-bearded holy monk (thus hardly identifiable with St. Francis, usually represented as a middle-aged man with short beard).⁸ Since the personnel to be depicted in such an important commission was surely defined by the patrons, these discrepancies could be explained only by a radical change of mind on the part of the monks after the beginning of the work, a hypothesis which seems rather remote. Moreover, the presence of St. Anthony Abbot appears unsuitable for the high altar of a Franciscan church. Therefore, the drawings must have been produced for another commission which is currently lost or was never executed. Though these sheets might well have inspired Annibale while he was working out the design for his Parma *Pietà*, the inventions Ludovico made on purpose for his younger cousin's paintings still await identification.

A main source for the Carracci's cooperative method is the above-mentioned section opened by the image of the "Geryon of painting", in which Malvasia highlights the homogeneity of the Carracci's style as a result of their close collaboration and mutual help. According to their biographer, the artists themselves often contributed to the confusion of attributions, in order to maintain their union; so when asked about the

⁷ Feigenbaum 1993, p. 69 f.; Loisel 1995, p. 5 f.; Loisel 2004, p. 25, 30. A fourth drawing in the Louvre (without saints), also discussed by Feigenbaum in this context, seems much later in style and is probably a copy or, as Loisel proposes, a shop drawing (Loisel 2004, p. 141, no. 155). According to Feigenbaum, Malvasia reports that Annibale's *Pietà* "was one of the low-paying commissions Lodovico passed along to his younger cousin, promising the patron to provide every assistance and retouching" (Feigenbaum 1993, p. 70). Malvasia, however, mentions among these commissions only the *Crucifixion* and the *Baptism*: cf. Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 265. For the *Pietà* see Daniele Benati, in: *Annibale Carracci* 2006, p. 174 f., no. III.21 (with earlier bibliography), and Robertson 2008, p. 50 f.

⁸ The Oxford drawing represents the actual moment of the deposition and consequently also includes Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus (see Loisel 1995, fig. 2).

responsibilities in a collaborative work, they would respond with the often quoted words: “Ella è dei Carracci. L’abbiamo fatta tutti noi.” (“It’s by the Carracci: we all of us made it.”)⁹

Among the examples of doubtful authorship, Malvasia mentions Ludovico’s *Martyrdom of Saint Ursula and Saint Leonard* (now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna)¹⁰ and reports Francesco Albani’s claim that all three Carracci participated in both the invention and the execution of the altarpiece. While dismissing this opinion as due to Albani’s bias in favour of Annibale, Malvasia acknowledges that the correct attribution of the painting’s invention to Ludovico alone is possible only thanks to a drawing then in possession of Lorenzo Pasinelli (and unfortunately since lost).¹¹ It is hard to say how this doubt could have arisen, as the painting seems so perfectly consistent in design and execution with the style of Ludovico around 1592. However, regardless of its truthfulness, Albani’s opinion testifies that such cooperation for a single work was, if not a regular practice, at least a possibility. Malvasia himself mentions elsewhere a “Madonna in Egitto” (i.e. a *Holy Family on the Flight into Egypt*) on copper, hitherto unidentified, painted by all three Carracci together, as a gift for the nun who would clean their collars.¹² Two decades earlier, Francesco Scannelli had already reported in his *Microcosmo della Pittura* (1657) an apparently widespread opinion (“fama”) that both Ludovico and Annibale contributed to Agostino’s highly praised *Last Communion of St. Jerome* then in the Certosa (now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna);¹³ a state-

9 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 287 (translation in Summerscale 2000, p. 148).

10 Brogi 2001, I, p. 155f., no. 45 and plates XXIV–XXV.

11 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 287. A few years earlier, Albani’s view had been endorsed in print by Luigi Scaramuccia, *Le finezze de’ pennelli italiani* [...], Pavia 1674, p. 56. Of course, Malvasia’s argumentation is not entirely convincing, since Annibale and Agostino could well have contributed compositional ideas or figure studies to a final compositional drawing executed by their cousin. As for the execution of the altarpiece, the passage is somewhat ambiguous, as it does not explicitly exclude a participation by the younger Carracci; however, in his later guidebook *Le pitture di Bologna*, Bologna 1686, p. 78, Malvasia emphasizes that the painting is “tutto e totalmente” Ludovico’s.

12 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 332. Cf. Feigenbaum 1993, p. 71, for another possible Carracci team-work painting representing an *Ecce Homo* (Piero Corsini Gallery, New York). I have some doubts about the attribution, but not having seen the original, I prefer to leave the question open.

13 Francesco Scannelli, *Il microcosmo della pittura*, Cesena 1657, p. 341: “la celebratissima Tavola della Communionne di S. Girolamo, [...] alla di cui straordinaria formatione è

ment which, however, has been ignored by most writers, since the altarpiece is quite unmistakably signed “AGO. CAR. FE.” and had already been attributed to Agostino by Lucio Faberio in his funeral oration in honour of the artist in 1603.¹⁴

Yet there is a much more valuable testimony for collaboration at the level of execution, which has not received the attention it deserves: namely, Annibale's letter of July 1595 to Giulio Fossi, member of the Confraternità di S. Rocco in Reggio Emilia which had been waiting for the completion of the huge *St Roch Distributing Alms* (fig. 3) for some seven years.¹⁵ Because he was burdened with works to be done before his departure for Rome at the end of the summer, the artist offered either to give up the commission and to return the down payment already received, or to finish the canvas later in Rome. Alternatively, were the confraternity to insist on delivery of the painting before his departure, Annibale promised: “I will try the impossible, I will make an effort, I will ask for the help of my brother and my cousin, and in short, I will tie wings to my hands to fulfil your desire”.¹⁶

fama, che unitamente vi concorressero gli trè eccellentissimi Maestri coll'opera, e ponderato consiglio [...]”. On this painting, see Ann Sutherland Harris, in: *L'Idea del Bello. Viaggio per Roma nel Seicento con Giovan Pietro Bellori* (exhibition cat. Roma, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 2000), 2 vols., Roma 2000, I, p. 212f., 217–221, no. III.5.

- 14 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 310. Scannelli's assertion was discarded explicitly by Giovan Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*, Roma 1672, p. 109, and by Longhi 1957, p. 36, whereas Ostrow 1966/1974, p. 249, did not completely rule out the possibility of some collaboration by Annibale and Ludovico as part of the Carracci's workshop practice. The doubts about Agostino's authorship in the 17th century had arisen probably because the signature was barely visible in the dim light of the church, as is testified by Malvasia's annotation about his discovery of the inscription in 1680 (Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 284, note 1; cfr. Ostrow 1966/1974, p. 248, note 1).
- 15 Posner 1971, II, p. 35–37, no. 86. On this commission see also Daniele Benati, “L'oratorio di San Rocco. Il ruolo di Reggio nella prima attività di Annibale Carracci”, in: *Il Seicento a Reggio. La storia, la città, gli artisti*, ed. by Paola Ceschi Lavagetto, Milano 1999, pp. 51–65, here p. 51; Ulrich Pfisterer, “L'Elemosina di san Rocco di Annibale Carracci e l'innovazione della historia cristiana”, in: *Programme et invention dans l'art de la Renaissance* (Collection d'histoire de l'art de l'Académie de France à Rome, 7), ed. by Michel Hochmann and Julian Kliemann, Paris 2008, pp. 247–269.
- 16 “Tentarò l'impossibile, sforzerò mè medesimo, ricercherà l'aiuto di mio fratello e cugino et in somma mi cingerò l'ali a le mani per adempiere il loro desiderio” (cit. Posner 1971, II, p. 36; translation by the author). Moreover, earlier in the same letter, Annibale states that, when departing for Rome in November 1595, he will leave a number of unfinished works to his cousin Ludovico, “il primo pittore di questa Città”, to be completed.



Fig. 3: Annibale Carracci, *St Roch Distributing Alms*, ca. 1594–95.

In his reply, a letter written in the name of the confraternity, Fossi resolutely opted for this third possibility.¹⁷ Since Annibale apparently finished the canvas before leaving for Rome, it seems plausible to presume that he was indeed assisted by either Agostino or Ludovico (or both) in the painting's execution.

Few scholars have commented on this evidence, and even fewer have taken such a collaboration into serious consideration. Gian Carlo Cavalli in 1956 suspected Ludovico's intervention in the bearded man in the left foreground, the design of the garment of the seated woman to his right, and the young girl at the left edge, an opinion which has been at least partly accepted by Denis Mahon,

17 Cfr. Posner 1971, II, p. 36f. Both Benati 1999 (note 15), p. 60, and Alessandro Brogi in: *Annibale Carracci* 2006, p. 234, maintain that Fossi refused Annibale's proposal to ask for help from his brother and his cousin; however, this seems to me an overinterpretation of Fossi's words "di pugno di V.S." and "di suo mano et di suo giudizio", as he refers explicitly to Annibale's offer of "tentare l'impossibile, di fare sforzo a sè stessa, di ricercare aiuto, et di accingersi ali alle mani per dare compimento alla pittura sua di San Rocho" and in no way excludes a participation of the artist's brother and cousin.

Anton W.A. Boschloo, and recently Catherine Loisel, but rejected or ignored by most other writers.¹⁸ Together with the girl at the left already pointed out by Cavalli, the group of the young man pushing a sick or crippled man in a wheelbarrow at the right seems to me a more likely candidate for Ludovico's hand: in contrast to the other foreground figures, set in a sharp chiaroscuro and painted with a thicker impasto, these three figures are illuminated by a pale and flickering light and painted mostly with thin, transparent layers of colour which often leave visible the dark preparation. These characteristics recall Ludovico's work of the early and middle nine-ties, when he experimented repeatedly with a similar *alla prima* manner (fig. 4).¹⁹ Also the somewhat exaggeratedly bulbous anatomy of the young man's torso is more akin to the elder Carracci's figures of those years. Generally, the rather sketchy handling of large parts of the canvas might indicate both a certain haste in the execution and equally the participation of Ludovico. On the other hand, I cannot detect any intervention by Agostino, whose more finished manner is, however, at times difficult to distinguish from his brother's. Yet regardless of the attribution question, Annibale's letter is crucial to our understanding of the Carracci's collaboration, being the most authoritative source for their mutual assistance even in commissions contracted by one of them alone.

18 Gian Carlo Cavalli, in: Gian Carlo Cavalli, in: *Mostra dei Carracci* (exhibition cat. Bologna, Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio), Bologna 1956, p. 209; Denis Mahon, "Afterthoughts on the Carracci Exhibition", in: *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, XLIX (1957), pp. 193–207, 267–298, here p. 282, note 63; Anton W.A. Boschloo, *Annibale Carracci in Bologna. Visible reality in Art after the Council of Trent*, Den Haag 1974, II, p. 187, note 31; Loisel 2004, p. 58. Longhi 1957, p. 33, generically asserts that "il dipinto stesso sembra confermare" the hypothesis of Agostino's and Ludovico's assistance, whereas Posner 1971, p. 35 f., no. 86, maintains that "the picture shows no evidence" of such a collaboration. See also note 17.

19 The most pronounced example of this technique is the *Pool of Bethesda* of ca. 1595–1596 (now in the Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna); cf. Gail Feigenbaum in: *Ludovico Carracci* 1993, p. 94, no. 43. Compare also with the *Trinity with Dead Christ* (ca. 1592; Rome, Pinacoteca Vaticana; fig. 4) or the *Crowning with Thorns* and the *Flagellation* (ca. 1592–1594; both Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale; see *Ludovico Carracci* 1993, nos. 34, 47, 48).



Fig. 4: Ludovico Carracci, *Trinity with Dead Christ* (detail), ca. 1592.

As regards the organization of the Carracci workshop, Malvasia depicts Ludovico as a kind of *capobottega* who handed over to his cousins and his pupils commissions he could not or would not execute himself.²⁰ While, for the above-mentioned reason, the leading role of Ludovico may be questioned, there is clear evidence that, at least by the average client or patron, the Carracci were not perceived as individual artists but as a team. A case in point are the letters sent by Cornelio Lambertini in November and December 1592 to Giovanni Galeazzi, administrator of Cesare d'Este, to accompany the shipment of, among other pictures, four ovals representing antique deities for a ceiling in the Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara. Though art historians since Malvasia agree that Ludovico, Agostino and Annibale each executed one of the three surviving paintings (the fourth remaining at present untraced), Lambertini refers to these works simply

20 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 267, 274. This view is accepted by, among others, Gail Feigenbaum, "Ludovico Carracci. Un profilo", in: *Ludovico Carracci* 1993, pp. LXXXV–CVIII, here p. LXXXVI, and Benati 1999 (note 15), p. 54.

as by "the Carracci".²¹ A similar picture emerges from the letter by the historian Pompeo Vizzani written on December 4 1593, in which he informs Monsignor Dionigio Ratta in Rome about his negotiations for a *Transfiguration* that Ratta was commissioning for the high altar of the Church S. Pietro Martire. Vizzani writes that

as far as the painting of the altarpiece is concerned, I have spoken with the Carracci, and I made also others speak with them to convince them, and they have decided that they will serve you; but when it came to talk about the price, I did not like their determination, because they said they want two hundred scudi, which seems a big payment to me, since up to now they made their altarpieces for sixty and seventy [scudi].²²

Vizzani's report indicates that the three artists would negotiate their commissions together and even fix their prices by common consent; and it suggests also that they might execute such commissions as a team.²³

Competition and individuality

While these testimonies do indeed lend credit to the view that the Carracci aimed to establish through their collaborative practice a kind of family brand with a recognizable and unitary style, there is, on the other hand, as much evidence indicating the contrary: individual

21 Sonia Cavicchioli, "I Carracci per Cesare d'Este: due lettere inedite e una precisazione su Gaspare Venturini", in: *Paragone*, XLIII, no. 513 (November 1992), pp. 69–76, for the letters especially p. 75f. On the paintings, a *Salacia* by Ludovico, a *Pluto* by Agostino and a *Venus and Cupid* by Annibale, now in the Galleria Estense, Modena, see also Giovanna Degli Esposti, in: *Sovrane Passioni: Le raccolte d'arte della Ducale Galleria Estense* (exhibition cat. Galleria Estense, Modena, 1998), ed. by Jadranka Bentini, Milano 1998, p. 240–243, nos. 49–52; Brogi 2001, I, p. 147–149, no. 36; Alessandro Brogi, in: *Annibale Carracci* 2006, p. 244f., no. V.3 (all with further bibliography).

22 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 174: "quanto alla pittura della tavola, io ho parlato con i Carracci, e li ho fatto parlare anco da altri per disponergli, e si sono risoluti, che serviranno; ma venuto a trattar del prezzo non mi è piaciuta la loro risoluzione, poichè hanno ditto di voler ducento scudi, che mi pare un gran pagare, avendo essi fino ad ora fatto le loro tavole per sessanta e per settanta [...]" (translation by the author). Nevertheless, the painting was eventually executed by Ludovico for a price close to the original request: cf. Gail Feigenbaum, in: *Ludovico Carracci* 1993, p. 92, no. 42.

23 Cf. on this evidence also Feigenbaum 1993, p. 70, 75, note 41.

ambitions, competition and even tensions between the artists, who at times seemed to seek personal fame. More than once, Malvasia mentions the frequent disputes between Agostino and Annibale, “always disagreeing and competing” (“discordi sempre e garosi”), and speaks even of aversion (“avversione”) and hate (“odio”) between them.²⁴ According to the biographer, these conflicts extended also to the professional sphere: in open contradiction to the “union” of the Carracci workshop he evokes elsewhere, Malvasia affirms that both brothers competed for the commission of the *Last Communion of St. Jerome* for the Certosa, which was eventually entrusted to Agostino, much to the distress of his brother.²⁵

Malvasia’s insistence on the alleged jealousy of Annibale in the face of the artistic achievement of Agostino²⁶ may of course be due to his notorious tendency to reduce the human and artistic stature of the youngest – and most famous – Carracci. Earlier sources such as Giovanni Battista Agucchi, Giulio Mancini, and Giovanni Baglione confirm, however, at least their fight at the time of the Farnese Gallery which led to Agostino’s departure from Rome.²⁷ And their “quarrelsomeness” (“litigiosità”) already present in early years can be inferred from a passage in one of Annibale’s Parma letters transcribed by Malvasia (about whose substantial authenticity I agree): “for I assure him that things will be peaceful between us, and we will not have quarrels”.²⁸

24 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 265 (translation by the author).

25 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 284f.

26 Cfr. Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 285, 290, 294f.

27 Giovanni Battista Agucchi, in: Denis Mahon, *Studies in Seicento Art and Theory* (Studies of the Warburg Institute, 16), London 1947, p. 255; Giulio Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (1617–1621), ed. by Adriana Marucchi and Luigi Salerno, Roma 1956–1957, I, p. 217f.; Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de’ pittori, scultori et architetti. Dal Pontificato di Gregorio XIII del 1572 In fino a’ tempi di Papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642*, Roma 1642, p. 105. Cf. also the fragment of a letter written by Annibale in Rome to Ludovico and published by Malvasia, in which he complains about Agostino’s “insopportabile saccenteria” (Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 295).

28 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 269: “perché l’assicuro, che staremo in pace, né vi sarà che dire fra noi” (translation by Summerscale 2000, p. 96). On the authenticity of the letters, see De Grazia 1984, p. 36f.; Giovanna Perini (ed.), *Gli scritti dei Carracci: Ludovico, Annibale, Agostino, Antonio, Giovanni Antonio*, Bologna 1990, p. 69–77; Charles Dempsey, “Introduzione”, in: *ibid.*, p. 9–31, here p. 18 f.; more sceptical in this regard are John Shearman, *Raphael in Early Modern Sources (1483–1602)*, New Haven/London 2003, II, p. 1279–1282, and Boesten-Stengel 2008, p. 210–227.

The purported competition for the *Last Communion of St. Jerome* may or may not really have occurred; that the Carracci were not exclusively committed to the unity of the workshop, but cared about their renown as individual artists is, however, unmistakably proven by their signature practice. All three Carracci signed their paintings occasionally, always taking care to spell out the first name or to abbreviate it in a way that avoided any doubts about individual authorship.²⁹ The same applies for the majority of the prints, which are much more regularly signed.³⁰ Among the fifty-three signed prints by Agostino (almost a quarter of his total output of 220 prints), only nineteen carry a slightly vague inscription such as “Carracius fe.” or, more frequently, “A.C.F.”;³¹ and these works mostly date from Agostino’s very beginnings or from his later years, when his reputation as Italy’s leading printmaker was firmly established, whereas his relatives were known almost exclusively for their painted work. Conversely (and perhaps consequently), the latter labelled their occasional copperplates even more methodically: Ludovico signed three of his four prints (always including his first name), Annibale at least half of his twenty-one, omitting only in three cases to state his identity unambiguously.³²

Admittedly, in the late 16th century there were many reasons for and circumstances in which artists signed or did not sign a painting.³³ Nevertheless, if we accept the hypothesis of the Carracci’s “unity of purpose”, of their will that the “collective should dominate the personal”,³⁴ it is

29 For Ludovico’s signatures, see Brogi 2001, I, p. 133, 152, 156, 162, 179, 185, 200, 221, 223, 228, 231 f., 240, nos. 25, 41, 46, 50, 65, 71, 87, 108, 111, 115, 120, 121, 131; for Agostino’s, see Ostrow 1966/1974, nos. cat. I/12, I/19; for Annibale’s, see Posner 1971, II, p. 20, 28 f., 31, 34, nos. 45, 67, 68, 72, 73, 81.

30 On the Carracci’s prints, see De Grazia 1984; Bohn 1995; Bohn 1996.

31 The statistics are based on Bohn 1995. It must be borne in mind, however, that some of the signatures appear only on later, perhaps posthumous, states; on the other hand, a large part of Agostino’s graphic oeuvre consists of book illustrations, where signatures were less common.

32 Bohn 1996, nos. 10, 14, 16. The total number of signatures on Annibale’s prints is sixteen, of which, however, up to five were added surely (no. 13) or possibly only after his death.

33 For the most recent survey on the signature practice of Italian painters from 1300 to 1600, see Tobias Burg, *Die Signatur: Formen und Funktionen vom Mittelalter bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* (Kunstgeschichte, 80), Berlin 2007, p. 280–311 (with further references); for the specific situation in Bologna in the 16th and 17th centuries see Bohn 2004, here especially p. 107–109.

34 Feigenbaum 1993, p. 70.

puzzling that none of their known paintings bears a collective signature, as we would expect as a kind of a written equivalent to their purported assertion “ella è dei Carracci”.

Not surprisingly, many of the signatures appear in works painted for non-Bolognese destinations; this holds true especially for Ludovico's altarpieces from his later career. Yet, it is significant that in the late eighties and in the early nineties, all three also signed some of their most important altarpieces for their hometown: Annibale the *Madonna with Saints* for San Giorgio and the Lucchini *Resurrection of Christ* (both dated 1593),³⁵ Ludovico the *Madonna dei Bargellini* (1588) and the *Preaching of St. John the Baptist* (1592)³⁶ and Agostino the aforementioned *Last Communion of St. Jerome* (ca. 1592–1597), which was put right in front of the latter painting by his cousin.³⁷ In this period, the three were collaborating with particular intensity and were already emerging as the leading artists of the city; it would not seem that there was any special need for signatures. It is therefore difficult to interpret these inscriptions otherwise than as a means to underscore each painter's artistic identity and independence. This intention becomes most obvious from the fact that when Ludovico and Annibale each painted, probably contemporaneously in 1592, a chimneypiece in Palazzo Lucchini, representing *Alexander the Great and Thais Putting Persepolis into Fire* and *The Death of Dido* respectively, they both signed their work with their first names.³⁸

That the Carraccis' concern for individual visibility bore some fruit at least among the better informed patrons can be inferred from a dispatch written in December 1593 by Pompeo's brother Giasone Vizzani to the Marchese Onofrio Santacroce in Rome. As we learn from this letter, Santacroce wished to have not just a work by the Carracci, but explicitly one “by the hand of messer Aniballe Carazza”.³⁹

35 Posner 1971, II, p. 31 f., nos. 72, 73.

36 Brogi 2001, I, p. 133–136, 156 f., nos. 25, 46.

37 For the Carraccis' signature practice, see also Bohn 2004, p. 108; Keazor 2007, p. 222.

38 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 357, note 2. While Ludovico's signature has been mutilated, Annibale's bears also the date 1592 (Brogi 2001, I, p. 161 f., no. 50).

39 Roberto Zapperi, “The Summons of the Carracci to Rome: some new documentary evidence”, in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 128 (1986), pp. 203–205, here p. 205.

The recent publication of the documents for the lost Paleotti chapel in San Pietro in Bologna gives another hint that the Carracci studio was not, indeed, a collective workshop in the strict sense. In 1588, both Ludovico and Annibale, among other artists, were involved in the fresco decoration of the chapel, the former with one large scene representing the "Historia del Psalmo Magnificat", his younger cousin with the adjacent two smaller fields dedicated to the *Purification* and the *Visitation*.⁴⁰ Although this commission could well have been considered a joint enterprise, both artists signed a separate contract for their share of the work. This means that towards their patron each of them was responsible alone for the invention and execution of his part, regardless of any mutual help and advice they might have exchanged during the work.

Workshop organization in the joint decorative projects

Thus, literary tradition and documentary evidence present a highly contradictory picture of the Carraccis' professional relations which is characterized by fraternal cooperation as well as by competition and personal ambition. But how can these two apparently inconsistent tendencies be reconciled in a convincing way, given that it seems impossible to explain away half of the historical evidence?

The key to solving this dilemma lies, in my view, in a more pragmatic interpretation of the aims and limits of collaboration in the Carracci workshop. These can perhaps best be analysed in the vast joint projects, the decorations in the Fava, Magnani and Sampieri palaces, though there is considerable disagreement between scholars about the extent of cooperation in these undertakings. The genesis of the painted frieze depicting the *Founding of Rome* in Palazzo Magnani (1590–1591),⁴¹ for

40 Rosaria Greco Grassilli, "Da Annibale e Ludovico Carracci a Lazzaro Casari. I pagamenti agli artisti della cappella Paleotti nella cattedrale di San Pietro in Bologna", in: *Deputazione di Storia Patria per le Province di Romagna. Atti e memorie*, n. s., LVI (2005), pp. 331–399, here p. 361–363.

41 For the most recent survey on this fresco cycle, see Samuel Vitali, "Palazzo Magnani: le decorazioni pittoriche e scultoree del Cinquecento", in *Palazzo Magnani in Bologna*, ed. by Sergio Bettini, Milano 2009, pp. 91–135, here p. 102–119, with further bibliographical references.

instance, has been imagined in quite divergent ways. While Gail Feigenbaum maintains that the close collaboration at all stages of the creative process renders the discerning of the different hands an almost futile exercise,⁴² Alessandro Brogi or Albert Boesten-Stengel assume a clearly defined distribution of the scenes between the three Carracci and tend to exclude the possibility that one artist would paint a scene designed by a colleague.⁴³

My position is a somewhat intermediary one. Even if Malvasia's assertion that, while painting the frieze, "one artist entered into what the other had begun, and the other passed on to what was already half done by the first one"⁴⁴ should not be easily dismissed as a literary fiction, I suppose that, at least at the outset, a rather clear distinction between the artists in terms of their fields of competence governed the execution of the frescoes, also as a means of ensuring a rational working process. As a matter of fact, the handling in most of the scenes is fairly homogeneous; only in a few cases does the presence of a second hand seem detectable.⁴⁵

Feigenbaum has expressed the opinion that, in this as in other collaborative projects, it was the "exception rather than the rule that one artist carried out a scene from conception through execution".⁴⁶ Since there are few unanimously attributed studies for the scenes of the *Founding of Rome*, it is difficult to verify this assumption. Yet, the existing preparatory material and the design of the scenes point rather to the opposite conclusion: namely, that it was possible that one of the Carracci executed a scene designed by one of his colleagues, but that this was the exception rather than the rule. Of the four scenes painted by Ludovico, for instance, at least three (episodes IV, VII and X)⁴⁷ show so distinctly the characteristics of his compositional style – such as the preference for circular figure arrangements and for "centrifugal" compositions which tend to leave empty the centre of the pictorial space –

42 Feigenbaum 1990, p. 148–150.

43 Brogi 2001, I, p. 143 f.; Boesten-Stengel 2006, p. 576 f.; Boesten-Stengel 2008, p. 34–37.

44 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 287: "così l'uno entrar nel principiato dall'altro, e l'altro trapassarsene nel già dimezzato da quello [...]" (translation by the author).

45 For the distinction of hands in the Magnani frieze, see Vitali 2011.

46 Feigenbaum 1993, p. 70.

47 Cf. Brogi 2001, II, fig. 73, 77, 80.

that we may surmise they have also been invented by him. The same applies to most of the scenes assigned to Agostino and Annibale, although a definite statement is more difficult, as their compositional styles were more akin and less idiosyncratic than Ludovico's. Evidence for a change of hand from invention to execution has been produced only in two cases, namely scenes I and III, where Ludovico and Agostino might have contributed preparatory drawings for compositions eventually painted by Annibale.⁴⁸

Whereas the separation of hands in the early friezes of Palazzo Fava (1583–1584) remains, also because of their poor state of conservation, somewhat of a riddle,⁴⁹ a similar picture is offered by the Carraccis' teamwork in the Palazzo Sampieri.⁵⁰ Here, they decorated around 1593/1594 three rooms, each with a ceiling fresco and a sopracamino, mostly dedicated to the deeds of Hercules, and with three "storie sacre a olio" (now in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan): while there might have been some collaboration on the level of invention,⁵¹ in the execution of the frescoes the three artists appear to have observed a rather clear separation of competences. Though most writers tend to divide the responsibility for the second and the third room between Annibale and Agostino, the examination of the originals, which after many decades of near-total inaccessibility was possible during the Annibale Carracci exhibition in Bologna in 2006/2007, reveals – at least in my view – a striking

48 In both cases, however, the attribution of the drawings is still open to debate; cf. Vitali 2011, p. 72 f., notes 12, 28.

49 For the most recent examinations of the Camerino d'Europa and the Sala di Giasone in Palazzo Fava, see Keazor 2007, p. 149–192, Robertson 2008, p. 77–81, and Andrea Emiliani, *Le storie di Giasone in Palazzo Fava a Bologna di Ludovico Agostino e Annibale Carracci*, Bologna 2010.

50 Cf. on this commission most recently: Eugenio Riccòmini, *L'Ercole trionfante. I tre Carracci a casa Sampieri*, Bologna 2006; Robertson 2008, p. 95 f.

51 The exchange of ideas for the Sampieri commission seems to be testified by a drawing reasonably attributed to Agostino which shows a first draft for Annibale's *Christ and the Woman of Samaria* (Claire Robertson, Catherine Whistler, *Drawings by the Carracci from British Collections* [exhibition cat. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, London, 1996–1997], Oxford/London 1996, p. 80, no. 36). I do not, however, agree with Feigenbaum 1993, p. 71 f., who maintains that the same cartoon has been used for the arms of Hercules in the *Hercules and Jupiter* and of Atlas in the *Hercules and Atlas* fresco, a hypothesis that is already contradicted by the different proportions of arm and shoulder in the two frescoes. The similarity of the figures might be due to the use of studies from a common academy session.

difference between the frescoes in these two rooms. Whereas the *Hercules and Virtue* and the *Fall of Enceladus* are characterized by Annibale's warm flesh tones and lighting and more rounded, soft forms, the *Hercules and Cacus* and the *Hercules and Atlas* show markedly cooler hues, harder lighting and a stronger emphasis on modelling which are typical features of Agostino's contribution to the Magnani frieze. I would therefore suggest that each artist was indeed responsible for one room, as the 18th-century sources maintain: Ludovico for the first, Annibale for the second, and Agostino for the third.⁵²

In spite of the Carracci's (or Malvasia's) comment "L'abbiamo fatta tutti noi", the individual responsibilities appear indeed to have been no secret to their contemporaries: in his funeral oration for Agostino Carracci, Lucio Faberio mentions a decorative figure from the Jason frieze in Palazzo Fava and the *Hercules and Atlas* ceiling fresco in Palazzo Sampieri as examples of the deceased artist's work, and the way he does so indicates that the statement was not based on his own attribution but on common knowledge.⁵³

The dialectics of cooperation and competition

What I am suggesting is that the Carracci resorted to collaboration mainly for practical reasons, rather than considering it a value in itself. First of all, their artistic cooperation gave them a greater working flexibility and therefore an advantage on the art market: if one or more of the artists were overburdened with work, the studio could still accept commissions and entrust them to whoever had time and resources available. Larger works such as fresco cycles could be painted quickly without having to rely on the help of assistants – in short, the Carracci studio could offer steady quality in a restricted time span, a clear advantage over the traditional workshop headed by a single master. Along with a policy of rela-

52 In recent years, this opinion has been sustained only by Giampiero Cammarota, in: *Il restauro. Intelligenza e progetto dalla ricostruzione ad oggi: il decennio 1978–1988*, ed. by Anna Stanzani, Bologna 1990, p. 150 f., and by Albert Boesten-Stengel: Boesten-Stengel 2006, p. 575; Boesten-Stengel 2008, p. 32f.

53 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 308, 310.

tively low prices, this was probably an important element of the Carraccis' marketing strategy in the early years of their career, when they were still struggling to succeed on the Bolognese art scene.⁵⁴

While the large, collaborative projects were executed in teamwork and were run under the workshop label "Carracci", single commissions were usually carried out by one master alone who was responsible to the patron and might possibly sign the work with his own name. This single authorship, however, did not preclude the option of assistance from the colleagues, if needed – as is testified in the case of the *St. Roch Distributing Alms*.

Although it was certainly useful in establishing the Carracci "brand", the stylistic unity of the three artists is in my view a result of their close collaboration (and of their common artistic experiences) rather than its ultimate purpose. To be sure, in his most emphatic passage about the Carraccis' union and solidarity, to which I referred earlier, Malvasia, too, depicts the often deceptive similarity of the Carraccis' personal styles as an effect of their close cooperation and not vice versa; and the necessity to maintain their union was not, in his account, prompted by the ideal of a suprapersonal style, but by the hostility of their fellow artists – or, if we try to sort out the more novel-like elements of Malvasia's report, by the sheer difficulty they met when attempting to make a breakthrough onto the Bolognese art market.⁵⁵ Yet, as this need became less and less pressing, given the growing success of the Carracci in the early nineties, the more the thoughts of each member of the trio must have turned to the search for personal glory.

As a matter of fact, I cannot help feeling that the idea of a suprapersonal style forged by a collective is more appealing to a generation brought up with Roland Barthes's "death of the author" than to the one born around the middle of the Cinquecento. The Carraccis' century had witnessed the apotheosis of the individual and the beginning of the cult of the artistic genius, in the person of heroes such as Michelangelo, Raphael or Titian. It is therefore highly probable that, in spite of their commit-

54 For the Carraccis' low-price strategy in their early years, see Samuel Vitali, "A new document for the Carracci and Ruggero Bascapè at the Palazzo Magnani in Bologna", in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 143 (2001), pp. 604–613, here p. 607–609.

55 Malvasia 1678/1841, I, p. 287.

ment to the group, the Carraccis' individual ambitions were indeed prodded by the "who did it" questions which, one may trust Malvasia in this instance, were surely asked about the Magnani or Sampieri frescoes; hence the desire to underscore their individual achievements with signatures, particularly in those years of strong cooperation. The apparent contradiction between intimate collaboration and competition or even rivalry in the Carracci workshop, which emerges from the analysis of the works and the sources, should then be explained rather in a dialectical way, as the two faces of the same medal: the decision for a strong group cohesion produced, in counterbalance, the urge to assert individual artistic identity.

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