

Bergamo
Lorenzo Lotto

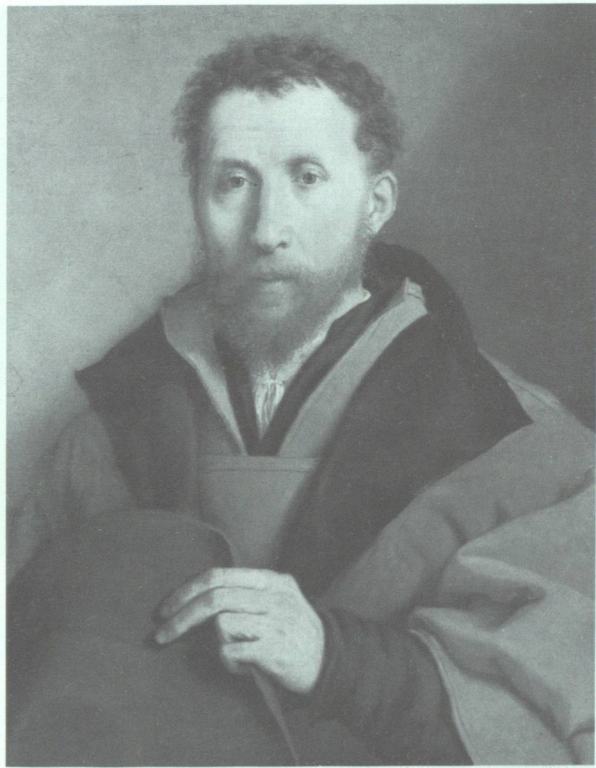
The life and work of Lorenzo Lotto have been intensively studied since the end of the nineteenth century: in 1887 Bartolomeo Cecchetti discovered the will he drew up in Venice in 1546; in 1892–93 Pietro Gianuzzi found in Loreto the moving *Libro di Spese Diverse*, which documents the painter's last years, from 1538–40 to 1556, and his movements between Venice, Treviso and the Marches; in 1895 Berenson wrote the first comprehensive monograph dedicated to him. Since then the documentary information available about Lotto's life – already extensive in comparison with that for other major artists of the sixteenth century – has considerably expanded: in 1962 and 1977 Luigi Chiodi published thirty-nine letters addressed by Lotto to the Misericordia in Bergamo concerning his designs for the intarsia-work in the choir of S. Maria Maggiore; and Francesca Cortesi Bosco has recently rediscovered another important document, due to be published in the journal *Bergomum*.

Equally copious is the modern literature on Lotto. After the exhibition in the Palazzo Ducale in Venice in 1953 and the many books stimulated by that event, the celebrations for the supposed fifth centenary of Lotto's birth in 1980–81 (Roger Rearick, and Peter Humfrey in his excellent monograph,¹ both think that the painter was born around 1483) produced a very detailed if controversial picture of the artist's historical significance and ambience. Furthermore, Lotto's apparently restless and hypersensitive personality seems so close to modern concerns that his works have triggered a plethora of interpretations, so much so that three or four journals could be awarded the honorary title of 'Lotto Studies'.

Even taking into account the demands of local marketing, it was therefore slightly misleading to introduce the painter to the American public as a 'rediscovered master of the Renaissance', in the subtitle of the



62. *Judith with the head of Holofernes*, by Lorenzo Lotto. 1512. Panel, 20 by 15 cm. (Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, Rome; exh. Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo).



63. *Portrait of a man with a felt hat*, by Lorenzo Lotto. 1541(?). Oil mounted on paper, mounted on canvas, 57.8 by 46.4 cm. (Piero Corsini, Inc., New York; exh. Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo).

outstanding exhibition which opened at the **National Gallery, Washington**, on 2nd November last year,² and it is significant that the Italian partners of this enterprise chose a different although no less problematic sobriquet for their show: *Lorenzo Lotto. Il genio inquieto del Rinascimento* (at the **Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo**, to 28th June; the exhibition is scheduled to move to the **Grand Palais, Paris**, from 12th October to 11th January).

No 'rediscovered master' and perhaps not always a '*genio inquieto*', Lotto is certainly not an unknown entity for the educated Italian public. Nonetheless, the three chief organisers of this exhibition, David Alan Brown, Peter Humfrey and Mauro Lucco, helped by a committee of well-known Lotto scholars, have succeeded in creating an unforgettable event: even if the fifty-one works in the catalogue have been already analysed in an extensive critical literature,³ their rigorous selection, informed by the highest criteria of quality, has assembled a group of the best paintings by the Venetian master, including some relatively inaccessible items. Not everyone can travel to Allentown or to Bucharest, and three works are still in private hands: the splendidly crisp *Judith with the head of Holofernes* (Fig.62; no.9) purchased by the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, Rome, in 1984, the *Virgin and Child with Sts John the Baptist and Catherine* (no.18) in the Palma Camozzi Vertova Collection in Costa di Mezzate near Bergamo, and the portrait (Fig.63; no.44) auctioned by Christie's in 1991 and now in the hands of Piero Corsini, New York, alone make a journey to Bergamo worthwhile.

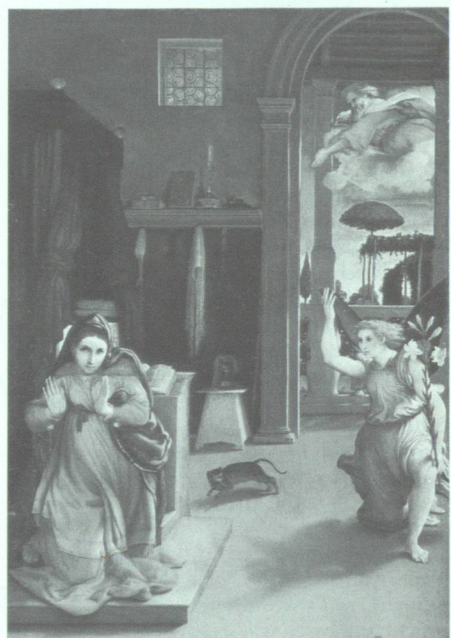
The superb exhibition is organised according to a strictly chronological scheme, which is justified by Lotto's sojourns in different areas of the Italian peninsula. If the surprises are inevitably limited, this

structure allows one to evaluate some new datings suggested by the authors of the catalogue. In most cases the adjustments are minimal, but some of Humfrey's proposals contribute to a better understanding of Lotto's stylistic evolution: above all the *Adoration of the shepherds* in Brescia (no.39) and the *Annunciation* in Recanati (Fig.64; no.40), which have been almost unanimously dated to the late 1520s, are here convincingly placed in a later period around 1534–35.

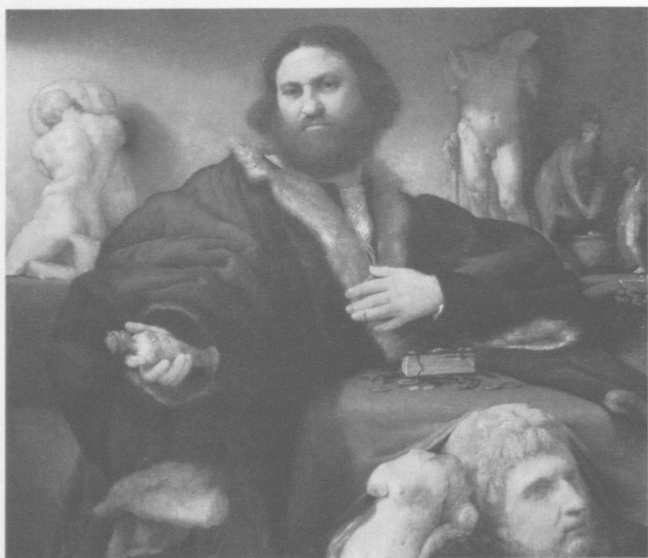
Another interesting aspect of the exhibition is the comparison between some real oriental carpets, discussed also in one of the catalogue's introductory essays, and Lotto's prodigiously analytical reproduction of such items in his paintings: the artist owned an example of these luxury imported rugs, and when he lived in Venice in the house of his younger cousin Mario d'Armano between 1540 and 1542 he even came into contact with a Turkish woman enlisted to make him a fur coat.⁴ In Washington the carpets and the connected paintings by Lotto framed the altar-piece for S. Spirito in a theatrical set-piece. This effect is lost in Bergamo, but the great advantage there is the opportunity to see other works by Lotto in the local churches and the surrounding area. Those who travel to Trescore Balneario will see not only the celebrated frescoes in the Oratorio Suardi, but also a fragment representing the *Pietà*: once in a lunette above the entrance, it has been recently rediscovered in a room near the sacristy by Simone Facchinetti, who will publish it in a forthcoming issue of *Paragone*; it has been attributed to Lotto himself by several experts.⁵ By contrast, it is to be regretted that the intarsia-work in the choir of S. Maria Maggiore will not be seen by the public: the four major *tarsie* with their covers are as always visible, but the entire series can be admired only through colour photographs in a

didactic exhibition nearby.

Like other major enterprises of this kind, the Lotto exhibition has stimulated significant conservation work and scientific analysis, with at times important results. We now know for example that Andrea Odoni (no.28), whose portrait is unfortunately reproduced in the catalogue in its pre-cleaned state, originally held a small crucifix between the fingers of his left hand (Fig.65; a detail which was, however, already clearly visible in the old photograph published in Berenson's monograph): this crucial iconographic element was painted over during



64. *Annunciation*, by Lorenzo Lotto. c.1534–35. 166 by 114 cm. (Pinacoteca Civica, Recanati; exh. Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo).



65. *Andrea Odoni* (before cleaning) by Lorenzo Lotto. 1527. 104 by 116.6 cm. (Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II; exh. Accademia Carrara di Belle Arti, Bergamo).



65a. Detail of Fig.65, showing the crucifix revealed during removal of paint.

the restoration of 1952–53, and this accident has inevitably influenced the many modern interpretations of the composition. Odoni now emerges not only as a proud collector surrounded by the objects of his passion, but as a sitter who is aware of the contrast between the rewards of faith and the frailty of earthly vanity – the colossal but fragmentary head of Emperor Hadrian in the right foreground, the coins scattered on the table, signifying the transience not only of the antique world but also of the patron's passion for the venerated memory of that world. Equally stunning are the results of the technical examination of the *Portrait of a lady as Lucretia* in London (no.38) which will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*: both the tablecloth and the background at one stage showed a pattern of stripes, similar to that of the woman's dress, which was painted over by Lotto himself.

This observation leads into a set of problems which have been relatively neglected in the most recent studies on the artist. As pointed out by Humfrey in the catalogue (p.11), 'three new areas for discussion and research came into prominence at the conference [held in Asolo in 1980], namely, Lotto's religion, Lotto's use of allegory and symbol, and Lotto's patrons. These same three areas remain at the center of Lotto studies today'; the introductory essays in the catalogue explore such issues. They are of course very important and demand further scrutiny, but it is also to be hoped that in the future Lotto's working methods and theoretical interests will receive the attention that they deserve. We are so profoundly seduced by the peculiarities of his tormented soul, melancholy, ethical approach to life

and painting, sense of friendship, adamant honesty and religious fervour – all laid bare in his letters, will and diary – that we tend to forget that these same documents are also crucial sources for the most traditional art-historical questions. A thorough investigation of his deep concern for the intellectual as well as formal aspects of his profession is still a pressing desideratum. As pointed out by Humfrey in his monograph, the portrait of a *Goldsmith in three views* (no.33) from Vienna, possibly an effigy of his friend Bartolomeo Carpan, shows that Lotto was well aware of the *paragone* debate; furthermore, when the artist wrote to the administrators of the Consorzio della Misericordia, who did not seem to understand the complex *impresa* (Lotto's word) for the choir's covers, he explained to them that because his designs 'do not follow any written programme they must be interpreted by the imagination'. 'Imagination' here does not mean that the interpretation is left to the beholder's fantasy, but is more likely to have philosophical implications. At any rate, the passage proves that Isabella d'Este was not alone before Vasari's time in demanding written programmes, since Lotto's words imply that such instructions were the norm rather than the exception; at the same time however, this text also reveals the great freedom enjoyed by an artist such as Lotto in his troubled relationship with his patrons. This remarkable source documents in a clear and undogmatic way the flexibility of a real-life situation very remote from the preconceived stereotypes of modern art historians. Other passages in Lotto's letters related to the choir of the Misericordia deal with *inventio* and *compositio*, and also deserve detailed analysis. But equally interesting are the

painter's concerns for the practical aspects of his profession: the correct illumination of his *istorie* (in Alberti's sense) is, for example, at the centre of his preoccupations; having erroneously planned a story with the light coming from the right, he advised Capoferri to reverse the composition so that it would conform to the other panels because only in this way – he explained – would it acquire more strength.

Lotto's letters finally confirm how important drawings were for his work. The exhibition would have greatly benefited from a small but equally judicious choice of sketches, above all considering that some recent attributions have enriched our picture of the artist as a draughtsman: see for example the head of *St Jerome* in black chalk, a preparatory study for the spectacular painting in Bucharest,⁶ or the study now in Avignon for one of the apostles in the *Assumption of the Virgin* in S. Francesco delle Scale in Ancona.⁷

These observations are, however, minor quibbles when set against the splendid achievements of this exhibition which rightly sought to present Lotto at his best. If Aretino in his famous 1548 letter to the painter wrote that Titian was a better and more celebrated artist, adding with a touch of irony that Lotto would instead receive his superior glory from God because of his pious life, this exhibition and the many important publications devoted to Lotto have contributed to restore a reputation that he should have already enjoyed in his own days but that perhaps might not have set his brooding mind entirely at rest.

ALESSANDRO NOVA

J.W. Goethe Universität, Frankfurt-am-Main

⁶P. HUMFREY: *Lorenzo Lotto*, New Haven and London [1997], p.7.

⁷Catalogue: *Lorenzo Lotto. Rediscovered Master of the Renaissance*. Edited by D.A. Brown, P. Humfrey and M. Lucco with contributions by A. Gentili, R.E. Mack, L. Matthew, A. Prosperi and W.S. Sheard. 237 pp. (National Gallery of Art, Washington/Yale University Press, 1997). ISBN 0-89468-257-1 (PB), 0-300-07331-3 (HB).

⁸As is customary, some paintings discussed in the catalogue were not exhibited in Washington (nos. 8, 30, 43 and 45) and others are not shown in Bergamo (nos. 8, 17, 30, 32, 43, 46, 47 and 49). In Bergamo the damaged *Compianto* from S. Alessandro in Colonna (not listed in the catalogue) is added, while the altar-piece for S. Spirito (no.16) hangs in the church and not in the Accademia. Those who visit the Dominican church of S. Bartolomeo are moreover greeted with an unexpected extra: the *Angel* from Budapest, which originally crowned the imposing Martinengo altar-piece, is also exhibited in the church even though the panel is not discussed in the catalogue.

⁹For this curious episode, see the *Libro di Spese Diverse (1538–1556)*, ed. P. ZAMPEITI, Florence [1969], pp.211–16; for an English translation, see HUMFREY, *op. cit.* at note 1 above, pp.177–79.

¹⁰Those who cannot travel to Trescore can instead consult two splendid photographic surveys in colour which reproduce many details lifesize, see F. CORTESI BOSCO: *Lorenzo Lotto. Gli affreschi dell'Oratorio Suardi a Trescore*, Milan [1997]; and C. PIROVANO, ed. (with essays by P. HUMFREY, M. LUCCO and C. PIROVANO): *Lotto. Gli affreschi di Trescore*, Milan [1997].

¹¹Reproduced in HUMFREY, *op. cit.* at note 1 above, p.55; now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

¹²See S. BÉGUIN: 'Un disegno di Lorenzo Lotto', *Dialoghi di Storia dell'Arte*, III [1996], pp.110–11.