

Brescia and Frankfurt Savoldo

During the last few years the city of Brescia and the director of its museums, Bruno Passamani, have promoted a series of memorable exhibitions in the **Monastero di S. Giulia** devoted to the city's pictorial heritage: following Ceruti in 1987, and Moretto in 1988, it is now the turn of Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo.¹

This is the first monographic show devoted to Savoldo, although the great exhibition of Brescian renaissance painting held in 1939 included sixteen autograph works by him. For the present occasion the number of original paintings exhibited has risen to about thirty (estimates will inevitably vary according to opinions as to replicas versus copies). This means that approximately three-quarters of Savoldo's surviving painted output is now available for scrutiny. To this one must add an excellent and almost complete selection of drawings catalogued by Gianvittorio Dillon.²

We know very little about this fascinating and enigmatic artist, not even the date or place of his birth or death: little contemporary evidence has survived (a few passages in the *Dialogo di Pittura* written by his mediocre pupil Paolo Pino, a letter by Aretino, and some limited archival material); and the first painting which might be dated with a certain degree of accuracy, the *Sts Anthony Abbot and Paul* in the Accademia, Venice, dates apparently from 1520 when Savoldo was probably about forty years old.³ Problems of attribution and chronology are further complicated by the fact that the artist was extremely slow and meticulous. Given the shaky foundations for Savoldo's stylistic *percorso*, and our ignorance about the first twenty years of his career, it was a wise decision to exhibit his paintings according to theme and type, and not according to what would inevitably have been a tentative chronological order.

The restructured spaces of the monastery of S. Giulia were unfortunately far from ideal for the purpose. The church itself was used for displaying altar-pieces – only the smaller, more easily transportable examples, since, for obvious reasons, the gigantic panels executed for the Dominican churches at Treviso and Pesaro (the latter now in the Brera) could not travel. Among the paintings exhibited in this section was an intriguing *Transfiguration* from the Ambrosiana (cat.no.1.8; Fig.42) which, in the view of the present writer and others, was wrongly catalogued as a copy, possibly by the Milanese Gian Paolo Lomazzo, of Savoldo's *Transfiguration* in the Uffizi (the latter unfortunately not present at the exhibition but reproduced on page 36 of the catalogue). The original location of the Ambrosiana painting, which is over eight feet high, is unknown, but we do know that it was purchased from the Asti family in 1674 with an attribution to Lomazzo, traces of whose name are on the back of the canvas. The author of the catalogue entry, Sandrina Bandera, notes that the colours of this painting are characteristic of Savoldo, but in the end she opts for the

traditional attribution, concluding that Lomazzo must have seen the original. It is true that the Milanese artist and theorist was an enthusiastic collector and, is known to have made copies of important works of art. However, the Ambrosiana canvas is an enlarged version rather than a precise copy of the Uffizi panel and many changes may be detected – the size, the shape, the spatial relationships of the figures, the postures of the apostles, the Leonardesque plant moved from the top right of the hill to the feet of St James. Confirming the attribution to Savoldo is the minutely rendered landscape to the left in the Ambrosiana picture: the beautiful castle and tiny figure of a wanderer (not present in the Uffizi panel) compare well with what we see in late works by Savoldo, such as the *Nativity* in Brescia (no.I.5), and slight variations of this kind are typical of the artist's working method. These observations are partly supported by technical evidence kindly provided by Nuccia Comolli Chirici, whose conservation work on the painting is outstanding. Previous scholars had seen the canvas obscured by a thick layer of dirt and the great majority concluded that it was a copy of the Uffizi panel: however, Cavalcaselle considered it to be by Savoldo, 'a large but inferior replica', adding 'original' in his footnote (the catalogue entry is incorrect on this point), and the cleaning of the painting, seems to confirm his opinion. Signora Comolli has also cleaned the splendid Albani *Rest on the flight into Egypt* (no.I.14), and informs me that the thin preparation of the canvases and the grey-blue tones of the colours are very similar in the two paintings: she therefore agreed that an attribution of the *Transfiguration* to Savoldo is conceivable. To this information we can add that the white robe of the Christ in the Ambrosiana *Transfiguration* is reminiscent of the dress worn by the angel in the recently discovered *Annunciation* from S. Domenico di Castello in Venice (no.I.4; Fig.43), another late painting; and, as Alessandro Ballarin pointed out to me, the blue in St James's sleeve is a pigment that was not used in the second half of the sixteenth century. Although its quality is undeniably less impressive than the Uffizi painting, there are good reasons to suppose that the Ambrosiana *Transfiguration* is by Savoldo himself.

Next to the church of S. Giulia is a room where a useful selection of engravings by Schongauer, Dürer, Giulio Campagnola, and Raimondi, among others, were exhibited. This section, catalogued by Dillon, documents the print sources used by Savoldo: some were selected simply because they show affinities with themes investigated by the artist, and it is not at all clear whether he ever saw them; others, such as the St Jerome by Dürer dated 1512 (cat.III.7e), constitute direct sources for his paintings.

Another part of the monastery housed Savoldo's devotional paintings, his celebrated Magdalens,⁴ portraits, and the drawings. This was by far the best part of the exhibition, full of superb paintings and a real feast for the eye: at times the quality leaves much to be desired, as in two versions

of the *Rest on the flight into Egypt* (nos.I.12 and I.13), but when we see unquestionable Savoldos, such as the Albani *Rest*, the National Gallery *Magdalen* and *St Jerome*, the *Tobias* from the Galleria Borghese, the damaged *St Matthew* from the Metropolitan, the so-called *Gaston de Foix* and many more, we realise that he was one of the greatest painters active in northern Italy in the sixteenth century. It is rare to see an exhibition of this extraordinarily high level, and the organisers must be sincerely congratulated.

A second, substantial, part of the *mostra* was devoted to Savoldo's 'context'. This was originally intended to illustrate Longhi's theory that the origins of what he called 'Lombard realism' or 'naturalism', culminating in the painting of Caravaggio, lay ultimately in the works of the fifteenth-century Brescian painter, Vincenzo Foppa, and could be traced through other Lombard artists, such as Moretto, Savoldo, Moroni, and the Campi. In homage to Longhi's centenary this section is entitled *Da Foppa a Caravaggio*, although it also shows paintings by Venetian artists.

However, Creighton Gilbert, the scholar who has written the most substantial monograph on Savoldo and is on the scientific committee of the present exhibition, has often and rightly insisted on the Venetian elements in Savoldo's work, and this may perhaps explain why the title of Section Four has been transformed on the frontispiece of the catalogue to 'Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo tra Foppa Giorgione e Caravaggio' (but Leonardo's crucial influence is hardly mentioned). To make things even more confusing the organisers have also taken into account Carlo Volpe's insistence on the mutual cultural relationship between Lombardy and the Veneto. With a more judicious selection of paintings, this could have been a good opportunity to document all the different hypotheses about Savoldo's stylistic relationships, but the final result was rather chaotic. One moved in some confusion from the beautiful portraits attributed to Giorgione to a *Pietà* by Cima, via works by Foppa, Boltraffio, and Piero di Cosimo, the latter 'documenting' what Savoldo might have seen during his Florentine sojourn in 1508 (another of Longhi's ideas strongly supported by Mina Gregori). Wandering along corridors and badly lit rooms one encountered paintings by, among others, Bartolomeo Veneto, Giovanni Agostino da Lodi, Dosso, Patinir, Scorel, Civetta, Lotto, Moretto, Romanino, Moroni, Cambiaso, Saraceni, Honthorst, Bigot, and of course Caravaggio. It was like being in Alice's Wonderland where everything could be experienced – except a sense of perspective.

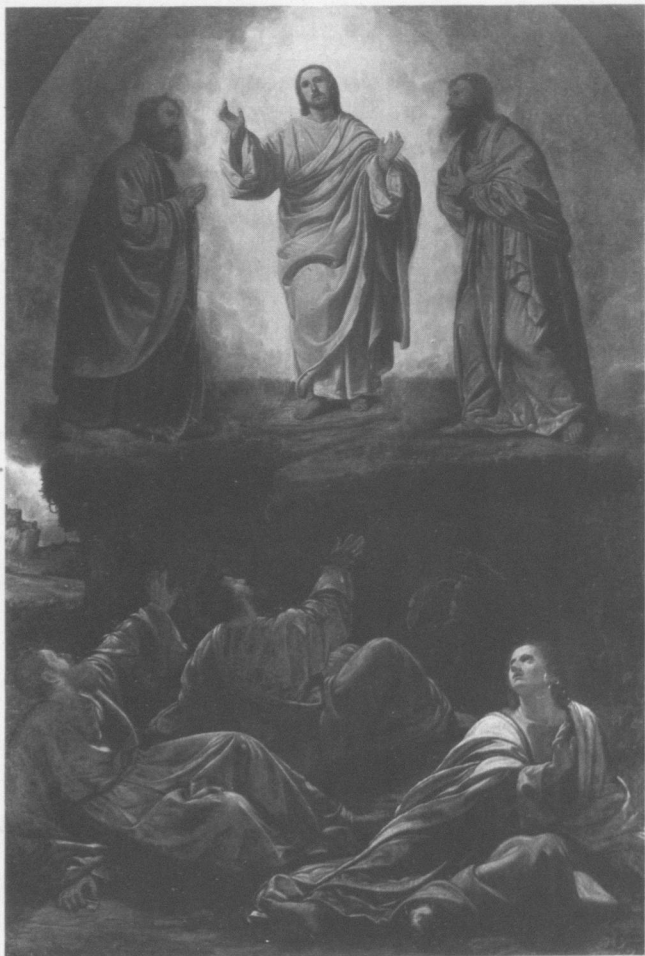
Some choices were undoubtedly pertinent. The very fine Patinir helps us understand Savoldo's *Rests on the flight into Egypt*, although the vision of the Brescian master is far more complex. Lotto's *Adoration of the shepherds* has much in common with Savoldo's *Nativities*, where the patrons are also seen participating in the event. Romanino's *St Matthew* demonstrates the tremendous impact of Savoldo on his Brescian colleagues: there can be little doubt that

Savoldo's canvas for the Milanese Zecca, probably painted in 1534, precedes and does not follow – as is usually maintained – Romanino's painting for the chapel of the Sacrament; this impact is further documented by the works of the mysterious 'Master F.V.'. Finally, Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* from the Prado offers an excellent opportunity to test Longhi's theory, since Savoldo's way of painting flesh in the Borghese *Tobias and the Angel* does seem to have been an important source for Caravaggio, although it is not clear how he knew Savoldo's work. Moreover, this section enabled one to admire more closely other masterpieces, such as Titian's Averoldi polyptych, or works not on public display, such as the damaged *Christ leaving the house of Pilate* (from a private collection in Milan), which Longhi attributed to Lotto.

Unfortunately, this section was almost as disorientating for the specialist as for the layman, and it was only with considerable efforts of imagination that the choice of some works could be intelligibly linked with the catalogue essays. For example, Bigot's *Vanitas* was probably selected because the woman holds a mirror in a candlelit room, while Cariani's *Luteplayer* was chosen because the sitter holds a musical instrument, thus referring respectively to the excellent essays by Pierluigi De Vecchi ('La mimesi allo specchio') and Augusto Gentili ('Savoldo, il ritratto e l'allegoria musicale').

The catalogue is equally uneven, but its essays address some interesting issues. A few deal with well known but nevertheless important topics – Francesco Frangi's valuable survey of the *fortuna critica*, Sybille Ebert-Schifferer's and Bert Meijer's essays on the relationship between Savoldo and the North, and Mina Gregori's pages on the Lombard origins of Caravaggio. Others attempt new ground: in addition to those by De Vecchi and Gentili, it is worth citing Gilbert's contribution on 'Savoldo cortese'; in this the author convincingly argues that the enigma of the sitter portrayed in the Getty's *Shepherd with a flute* (no.I.30; Fig.44) might be explained by Castiglione's claim in the *Cortegiano* that a nobleman, in order to show his *sprezzatura*, can dress himself for a party as a shepherd without losing his courtly identity. If, as Gilbert suggests, we are looking at a sort of fancy-dress portrait, this would provide further evidence of Savoldo's prolonged relationship with the Marches; it was, after all, to S. Domenico in Pesaro that he sent his most important altar-piece.

Two crucial and interrelated themes were, however, neglected in the catalogue: the problem of replicas and copies, and the network of Savoldo's patrons. The first is as difficult to formulate as it is to answer. First, if Savoldo was, as it appears, a relatively unimportant artist, why do so many copies of his works exist – even to the extent that we can document one of his lost paintings (the *Continence of Scipio*) through a copy? The answer lies paradoxically in his unfavourable *fortuna critica*: his name was soon eclipsed and many of his paintings were subsequently attributed to



42. *Transfiguration*, here attributed to Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo. 276 by 186 cm. (Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan; exh. Monastero di S. Giulia, Brescia).

43. *Annunciation*, by Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo. 173 by 114 cm. (Museo Civico, Pordenone; exh. Monastero di S. Giulia, Brescia).



43.

qual cose hanno più vera imagine del proprio, che li Fiamenghi"), and Aretino also emphasised this aspect of his art. Even Vasari, often dismissed as inaccurate on Savoldo, insists on his being *'capriccioso e sofisticato'*. It is necessary only to look at a painting such as the ex-Crespi di Morbio *Nativity* (no.I.18) to understand what they meant. As in Raphael's *Deliverance of St Peter from prison*, so here Savoldo plays with the effects of three different types of light (natural, artificial, and supernatural), an intellectual exercise which must have greatly appealed to his patrons, evidently sophisticated connoisseurs well equipped to appreciate his virtuoso achievements.

It is perhaps surprising that none of the catalogue essays deals with the Dominican network with which the artist was connected, and that his relationship with Lotto is referred to exclusively in terms of intellectual affinities. Yet both artists often worked in or for the provinces, and both had strong ties with the Dominicans. Lotto's first known painting is a *Madonna and Child with St Peter Martyr* in Capodimonte which was painted in Treviso; some of his most impressive altar-pieces, such as the Recanati polyptych, the gigantic Pala Martinengo, the *Madonna del Rosario* in Cingoli, and the celebrated *St Antoninus giving alms* in SS. Giovanni e Paolo, were commissioned by Dominican institutions; and two of them were executed for churches in the Marches. The commissioning pattern for Savoldo would appear to follow that of Lotto: he painted his most important altar-pieces for Dominican convents outside Venice, although one, the *Annunciation* for S. Domenico di Castello, was executed for a Venetian church, just like Lotto's *St Antoninus*. This cannot be coincidental, and indeed the contract (15th June 1524) for the high altar-piece of S. Domenico at Pesaro, recently discovered by the historian Pietro Bonali and published in the documentary appendix of the catalogue, confirms our

better-known artists such as Giorgione, Titian and Pordenone – and therefore widely copied. But even more interesting is the problem posed by his many autograph replicas: in an *œuvre* of less than fifty paintings we possess four versions of the *Magdalen*, three very similar *Nativities* for churches, two equally similar *Nativities* for private devotion, four or perhaps five *Lamentations* in which the figures grouped around the body of Christ are constantly based on the same models,⁵ two almost identical *Transfigurations*, and a number of *Rests on the fight into Egypt*, these last reminding us of the extraordinary testament of Pietro Contarini, who left no less than four *'telleri de la madona che va in Egipto, facto per man de mistro hier.o pictor da bressa'* to decorate his funerary chapel. Of course, Savoldo was not the only renaissance artist to paint many versions of the same composition – Cima, Sarto and Titian come immediately to mind – but if Pino was correct in saying that his teacher spent his life on a few works, then the fact that approximately one third of his surviving output is made of replicas must be explained. Why did he do it? Who were his patrons? Who collected his works? What was their function?

In some cases, the answer can be straightforward. As pointed out by Lucchesi Ragni's entry on the signed Terlizzi *Nativity* (no.I.7), the church of S. Maria la Nova in Puglia was in the hands of the Franciscan Observants who also held S. Giobbe in Venice, and this is certainly the reason why the two *Nativities* are almost identical. But in other cases explanations are not so

simple. What about the stunning series of *Magdalens*, with their virtuoso effects of light on satin mantles? Since they belong to different years of Savoldo's career, it is likely that he was commissioned by one patron to paint the first version and was then asked by others to repeat it. But who were the public for whom Savoldo's peculiar devotional and secular works were painted?

A partial answer is provided by Marcantonio Michiel, although here we face another enigma. According to Paolo Pino, Savoldo painted only a few works (or did he mean subjects?) *'con poco preggio del nome suo'*, and yet Michiel lists four pictures by him in two of the best and most selective Venetian collections: in the house of Andrea Odoni Michiel saw (1532) *'the large nude stretched out'* and the *Continence of Scipio*, while in the house of Francesco Zio (c.1530) he saw *'a painting in guazzo'* and a *'Washing of the feet'*. From Michiel's description of these Venetian palaces it is clear that Savoldo's paintings were displayed in a sort of *Wunderkammer* where one could also admire the works of the best artists of the time (Giorgione, Titian, Cariani, Palma, Lotto) mixed with Roman antiquities, precious crystals, medals and all sorts of natural and unnatural curiosities. This atmosphere of rarity and exclusive elitism perhaps relates as well to Savoldo's slender output, his meticulousness and slow working procedures. Pino described him as a *'huomo raro'* who specialised in landscapes enriched by the effects of light (*'vidi già alcune aurore con riflessi del sole, certe oscurità con mille discrizzioni ingenuosissime, et rare, le*



44. *Shepherd with a flute*, by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. 97 by 78 cm. (J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu; exh. Monastero di S. Giulia, Brescia).

assumptions. Surprisingly, this vital document has been quoted only to infer that Savoldo must have enjoyed a considerable reputation at the court of Francesco Maria della Rovere (see the entry no.I.14). Though the catalogue appropriately notes how many friars of S. Domenico at Pesaro were of Brescian origin and how Savoldo had originally been asked to paint an altarpiece closer to the panel in S. Nicolò at Treviso than to what we now see in the Brera, no commentary is offered about its three most interesting witnesses: '*domino Magnifico Antonio bononiensis musico, domino Juliano eius sotio, magistro Sebastiano pictore de Bononia*'. The profession of the first two can be used to support Gentili's brilliant intuition that Savoldo, like Leonardo, Giorgione, Sebastiano and many others, played music.⁶ But it is even more interesting to encounter the Bolognese artist, Sebastiano Serlio.

Following the fall of the Bentivoglio, Serlio had moved in 1510 to Pesaro,⁷ where he became acquainted with Girolamo Genga, and stayed until at least the end of 1514; we can now demonstrate that his ties with the Marches did not cease at that date. By 1524 Serlio was already known as an architect, but he is similarly referred to as a painter in documents of 1522 and 1525. Moreover, he had prolonged and strong ties with the Dominicans. In his testament he expressed the desire to be buried in SS. Giovanni e Paolo, and Manfredo Tafuri has pointed out that in 1537, when Serlio applied for a fifteen-year copyright on his books on architecture, it was established that one third of any fines should devolve to the hospital there.⁸

Now the picture begins to come into focus. Lotto was such a close friend of Serlio that he witnessed the latter's Will (1st April 1528); Lotto worked for many important Dominican institutions, as did Savoldo; Lotto and Serlio lived for prolonged periods in the Marches, and now we know that the Pesaro altarpiece was not the only work produced by Savoldo

for that area;⁹ Serlio was acquainted with Genga, who in a letter of 10th May 1530 asked the agent of the Urbino court in Venice to contact Savoldo for help in purchasing pigments and brushes. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Savoldo belonged to, or at the very least was in contact with, the Serlio-Lotto circle.

In recent years there has been considerable debate about the possible heterodox religious inclinations of Lotto, Serlio and their friends. There is no question that Serlio belonged to a circle (Delminio, Citolini) of spiritually restless *antipapisti*, although, as Tafuri puts it, we have still to identify which kind of Christian ideal they embraced. The problem is whether we can assume that Lotto shared their ideas simply because he was connected with the hospital of SS. Giovanni e Paolo and was asked to serve as a witness for Serlio's testament. Whatever the truth, it is difficult to believe that such unorthodox ideas could be made explicitly manifest in Lotto's works, and this is the reason why, following Gentili's advice (cat. p.70), I have no intention of transforming Savoldo into a heretic. Indeed, the greatest problem inherent in this effort to establish Savoldo's intellectual and cultural context is that of creating dangerous associative chains. However, it may be that, if we want to know more about this elusive painter, we should direct our research towards the Dominican network and its members.

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¹The exhibition closed at Brescia on 31st May; it can be seen at the **Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt** from 8th June to 3rd September. Catalogue: *Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo tra Foppa, Giorgione e Caravaggio*, 356 pp. + 80 col. pls. + 149 b. & w. ills. (Electa, Milan, 1990), L.It.70,000. A Conference on the artist was held in 1983. See *Giovanni Gerolamo Savoldo pittore bresciano* (Atti del Convegno, Brescia, 21st-22nd May 1983), ed. G. PANAZZA, Brescia [1985].

²Missing are the study for the St John the Evangelist of the *Transfiguration*, published by Hans Tietze in 1949 when it was in the collection of J.G. de la Gardie (it is now in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm, no.375/1973), and the beautiful head of *St Paul* formerly in the Loeser and Calnan collections, which was purchased by the Getty Museum in May 1989. In the entries there is no mention of the impressive *Head of a bearded man* exhibited in 1971 in the gallery of Claude Aubry in Paris (*Drawings from private collections*, Paris [1971], n.99): it comes from the Vallardi Collection (black chalk, heightened with white, on blue paper, 30.5 by 22.9 cm.), and to judge from the photograph it could well be by Savoldo.

³Unfortunately, the panel could not be lent to the exhibition because of its fragile support. During the conservation work carried out in 1977 the apocryphal inscription '*Jacopus Savaldo 1570 pinx Brixia donavit*' was removed and the original signature revealed. In the past the apocryphal date was thought to be a misunderstanding of the original 1510, but Valcanover has shown that the figure of the St Paul is based on Dürer's *St Jerome* engraving of 1512. Valcanover reports the original inscription as '*opus Jovan . . . Jeronim . . . | brixia de Savoldis 1520*', but the date is difficult to read (F. VALCANOVER: *Gli 'Eremiti' di Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo delle Gallerie dell' Accademia*, in the *Atti* cited in note 1 above, pp.43-49).

⁴The Contini version is unfortunately not displayed owing to a legal dispute, but by way of compensation it was possible to study the recently cleaned Warwick version, now in a Swiss private collection, which conservation work has revealed to be an original, although partly repainted, canvas by Savoldo.

⁵The catalogue does not mention the version sold in London (Sotheby's, 8th December 1976, lot 84, 84 by 123 cm.) as 'Savoldo and studio', but sold with a certificate from Pallucchini who evaluated it as an original. This *Lamentation* is identical to the Vienna version, but is of higher quality than the copies in Venice (S. Maria dell'Orto) and Budapest.

⁶Gentili's hypothesis is even better supported by what we know about Pietro dell'Olmo, the Brescian gentleman twice cited in Savoldo's testament. Indeed, from the sixteenth-century chronicle of Brescia written by Pandolfo Nassino we learn that Pietro was '*sonatore de liuto et cornetto, che certamente de notte tutti alegrava*' (see catalogue, p.319).

⁷R.J. TUTTLE: 'Sebastiano Serlio bolognese', in *Sebastiano Serlio* (Sesto Seminario Internazionale di Storia dell'Architettura, Vicenza, 31st August-4th September 1987), Milan [1989], pp.22-29, demonstrates that, although he is first documented in Pesaro on 19th June 1511, he must have arrived there by July 1510 at the latest. The 1524 contract demonstrates that Serlio did not spend the whole of 1523-25 in Rome, as is usually supposed.

⁸M. TAFURI: 'Ipotesi sulla religiosità di Sebastiano Serlio', in *Sebastiano Serlio*, cited at note 7 above, pp.57-66.

⁹For Savoldo's activity in the Marches see P. ZAMPETTI: *Gian Gerolamo Savoldo e la pala di Pesaro*, in the *Atti* cited at note 1 above, pp.51-57.