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Lodi
The Piazza family

The purpose of the Piazza exhibition at **Lodi** (to 17th December) is to make the town's considerable sixteenth-century artistic heritage more widely known. It starts with the older members of the family, represented by the brothers Martino and Alberto Piazza, moving on to the better-

known Callisto (son of Martino) and his mediocre brothers and sons. This is therefore a good opportunity not merely to study a single personality, as has unfortunately again become fashionable with artists of greater calibre, but to examine an integral pictorial culture.

The exhibition is in three locations, to allow the works to be seen as far as possible in context: the **Museo Civico,** where works on panel, mostly by Martino and Alberto, are exhibited under controlled conditions; the **Incoronata,** the architectural masterpiece of Giovanni Battaggio, where the original decoration which documents the activity of the Piazza workshop over half a century has been rightly left *in situ;* and Tibaldi's superb church of **S. Cristoforo,** an important chapter in the definition of Counter-Reformation church typology (well analysed in Luisa Giordano's essay in the catalogue),[1] where the largest and most important canvases by Callisto and his brothers are displayed. It also includes a series of buildings in Lodi and its surrounding territory where other works by the Piazzas can be seen. Most of the works exhibited have undergone conservation treatment for the occasion (although some, such as the Berinzaghi polyptych, have been over-cleaned). The catalogue is less easy to evaluate, especially as the average length of the entries often exceeds that of the present review. It must be said that the size of this catalogue stems less from the importance of the issues discussed or the accuracy of the material data reported than from lack of editing. One reads, for example, that during the course of conservation treatment 'pentimenti have emerged' without any indication as to *where* they emerged or *how* this important information may affect our understanding of the painting. Equally disconcerting is the way in which documentation about patronage is dealt with. Although much new information has been brought together and will be useful for further research, there is no attempt to analyse or reconstruct the social network of the Piazza family, and of Callisto in particular, or to examine the type of patron attracted by these artists. References to the rôle played by individual monastic orders in the career of Callisto occasionally emerge, but they are rarely developed, and it would seem that the authors' somewhat reductive concept of patronage prevents them from doing more than accumulate data on specific figures or institutions.

It is therefore not surprising that the most interesting remarks on patronage occur in the essay of M. Bascapé, the historian co-opted for the occasion. Bascapé discusses fascinating material concerning lay confraternities, forms of collective prayer, devotional images believed to have direct powers of communication, and the rôle of religious images in private houses. What is the art historians' response to such stimuli? The entry on the Berinzaghi polyptych is typical in this respect, though it does clarify the complex attributional problems concerning the scarcely documented personalities of Martino and Alberto Piazza (there are neither dates nor signatures to help the connoisseur, although two paintings by Martino are probably initialled with a monogram). The polyptych is first recorded in the seventeenth century, unattributed, and the entry spells out at length its full attributional history in many publications, which seesaw between Martino and Alberto or both, from Ciseri in 1729, who opts for Martino, to Moro in 1987, who opts for Alberto. The entry itself argues well for Alberto but the process of trial and error does not seem to lead to real knowledge, being based on a sort of associative 'chains' in which each connecting link is weaker than its immediate predecessor. This is the reason why, sooner or later, someone will re-ascribe the work to Martino. At this point it is legitimate to ask what advantages these rather pedantic surveys of previous opinions provide, and whether such diligent bibliographic erudition conceals a reluctance to address alternative issues.

Here and there in the catalogue different issues emerge – for example the question of how the Piazza workshop functioned; but this too is reduced to a dull, and sometimes over-ingenious, distinction of 'hands', or, at the most, to an inventory of the Piazzas' more or less accurate quotations from Dürer's prints. There is no analysis of how the German master was quoted, nor any explanation as to why his prints were most frequently, though not exclusively, plundered for background architectural elements. Moreover, the fact that Alberto and Callisto continually repeated their own models is virtually ignored. For example, the executioner and the dead body at his feet in Callisto's *Beheading of the Baptist* (no.35) at the Incoronata are precise quotations from the fresco of the same subject at Erbanno (reproduced at p.166). If the author of the entry is correct in noting the intervention of the workshop in the Incoronata *Beheading* (although it is signed by Callisto and dated 1530), interesting questions arise. Did the workshop rely upon a series of stock figures, and if so, how and when were they used? Is it reasonable to maintain that Callisto and his contemporaries would have considered a painting 'autograph' if he had provided drawings or cartoons?

As the catalogue rightly points out, Callisto's name was employed as a sort of trade-mark, so much so that when his son Fulvio was asked in 1561-62 to repaint the damaged *Lamentation* (no.42) at the Incoronata, Fulvio changed neither signature nor date ('*Calistus de Platea Laûd faciebat 1538*'). This procedure could perhaps help provide a solution to a problem posed at the beginning of Callisto's career: what appear to be his two earliest paintings, both signed and dated 1524 (nos.20-21), are remarkably different in quality. It is possible that the altar-piece for the church of SS. Simeone and Giuda (no.20), which is an immature although autograph work, might have been partly repainted at a later date.

These problems make a brief account of Callisto's career desirable. In its early stages Callisto was principally dominated by the example of Romanino; Romanino might even have been his master since, as Marubbi reveals in the catalogue, Martino Piazza was the artist who favourably evaluated Romanino's controversial frescoes in Cremona Cathedral. Although Callisto's own stylistic language was highly individual and he never followed Romanino's anticlassical expressionism, Romanino nevertheless remained a fundamental point of reference in his art both up to 1529, when he returned from Brescia to Lodi, and later, as witness the Incoronata *Baptism of Christ* (no.35)[2]. After his return to Lodi, Callisto entered an overtly Morettesque phase, corresponding to the irresistible ascent of the other great Brescian master and the relative decline of Romanino who was forced to find work outside Brescia. Callisto's dialogue with Brescia continued until the beginning of the 1540s, when he began working for Milanese patrons and assimilated the language of Central Italian Mannerism which spread all over Lombardy. The last phase of his career is characterised by a noticeable decline in quality, and the intervention of his untalented son Fulvio is increasingly recognisable.

This linear '*percorso*' is well outlined in the catalogue, though there are few references to the problematic Ferrarese-Venetian component detectable in some of Callisto's

93. *Christ on the way to Calvary*, here attributed to Callisto Piazza. 87.5 by 109 cm. (Gemaldegalerie, Dresden).

94. *Mystic marriage of St Catherine*, here attributed to Callisto Piazza. (Private collection, Brescia; exh. Museo Civico, Lodi).

works. In this context it is worth mentioning the interesting letter, published for the first time by Sciolla (p.18), in which the Lodigian poet and scholar de Lemene corrects Malvasia, pointing out to him that Callisto belonged to the school of Titian. Lanzi also listed Callisto in the '*stuolo de' tizianeschi*', and Cavalcaselle, too, emphasised the Venetian aspects of Callisto's paintings. Indeed the fragmentary and apparently unpublished *Christ carrying the Cross* now in Dresden (there tentatively attributed to Romanino) with its precise, albeit inverted, quotation from Titian's *Bravo* must be taken into account in future discussions of Callisto's career (Fig.93).[3] This canvas is not mentioned in the catalogue despite its aspirations to comprehensiveness (it should also be noted that not all his works are reproduced), but has good claims to be by him.[4] The *Mystic Marriage of St Catherine* reproduced here (Fig.94) should also be added to Callisto's *œuvre*. Treating a theme dear to the artists and patrons of Brescia, it belongs to the period between the frescoes at Erbanno and the *Herodias* (no.32) of the Museo di Castelvecchio, not far away from the altarpiece for Cividate (no.29) which is dated 1529 and in which workshop intervention may be detected.[5]

Despite the drawbacks mentioned above, the catalogue will remain a fundamental reference work on an aspect of sixteenth-century Lombard culture for many years to come. Apart from the essays discussed below, it contains a bibliographical survey by G.C. Sciolla; an essay on painting and sculpture at Lodi at the turn of the sixteenth century by S. Bandera, who makes interesting connections between painting and mystery plays; one by M. Rossi on Callisto's relations with the Cistercians; an archival appendix, with many new discoveries, by M. Marubbi, and a contribution by Mauro Natale warning the reader that there is more to the rich artistic culture in Lodi at the beginning of the sixteenth century than Martino and Alberto Piazza. A few detailed points follow.

In his essay on Callisto's early career, Bruno Passamani points out that it is necessary to explain why the artist moved from Lodi to Brescia, where his brother Scipione is documented as early as 1523. The catalogue itself helps us answer this question. We have seen how Callisto's father, Martino, had in 1520 evaluated Romanino's frescoes at Cremona, and it has been suggested that the Piazza family may have been related to the vicar of the Dominican church of S. Clemente (see entry no.21 by R. Stradiotti). If these facts explain why Callisto and his brothers moved to Brescia, they do not tell us why they left Lodi. It is probably not far-fetched to attribute this to the violent sack of 1522 which must have seriously disrupted artistic activity, and could have driven the Piazzas towards a more advanced and opulent market; it might also explain the strange lacuna that scholars have noticed in the late career of Alberto Piazza, after 1523. Alberto did not entirely cease activity following the sack but it is possible that Lodi's subsequent economic depression might have reduced his market.

G. Bora tries for the first time to reconstruct a plausible catalogue of Callisto's drawings (though none were exhibited), a particularly difficult task due to the paucity of previous research and the absence of preparatory drawings. Previous tentative attributions to Callisto are all rejected in order to start afresh, but the catalogue offered is not homogeneous; for example, I still think that the pen drawing in the Ashmolean (p.242) is by Romanino as is usually maintained, but Bora has established a set of fixed points from which to begin. The homogeneous group of playing putti (p.240), which in the past decades has oscillated between the names of Romanino, Gambara and Altobello Melone, is now solidly connected with Callisto's frescoed frieze in the Incoronata, although they cannot be considered preparatory drawings in the strictest sense of the word. Also convincing are the attribution of the *Concert* in the Uffizi (p.238), the *Female 'portrait'* in the British Museum (p.242), the sketches for the decoration of a pillar (p.246), and above all the Copenhagen sheet (p.252) which bears on its verso what seems to be a sixteenth-century inscription related to Callisto.

On p.198 a splendid *Madonna and Child with two donors* tentatively ascribed to Romanino is published. The work is reproduced in the catalogue because it had previously been attributed to Callisto, but both Sciolla (p.209) and Fossaluzza (p.232) seem to prefer, although with some doubts, the name of Romanino. This canvas is one of the masterpieces of Romanino's mature career, and it was previously published by the present writer in 1986.[6] On that occasion, in addition to clarifying the chronology of the painting (executed in the late 1530s) I thanked Alessandro Ballarin, who was the first to put forward the name of Romanino, for indicating this work to me.

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[1] *I Piazza da Lodi*. Edited by G.C. Sciolla. 406 pp. + 48 col. pls. + 254 b. & w. ills. (Electa, Milan, 1989). L.It.50,000.

[2] The *Baptism of Christ* is so markedly different in style as well as in proportions from the other paintings of the chapel, that one is tempted to suggest that the panel was originally painted for a different purpose and then re-used at the Incoronata.

[3] I should like to thank Angelo Walther for his kindness in showing me the painting which is in the deposits of the Gemäldegalerie (inv.no.222, Romanino?, oil on canvas, 87,5 by 109 cm. but cut on both sides and at the top). H. Posse's 1929 catalogue, giving it doubtfully to Romanino, cites an attribution to Callisto Piazza (by Beenken) recorded in the 1835 catalogue. It was engraved as Giorgione by F. Hortemels (1729); this was independently recognised by G. Fossaluzza during a visit to the Dresden Gallery in 1984 (oral communication of A. Walther, 1989).

[4] It is also worth noting that a number of works illustrated in the catalogue as well as a painting for which a detailed entry appears (no.26) were not present at the exhibition.

[5] Brescia, private collection, oil on canvas (relined in the twentieth century), 96 by 75 cm. Adolfo Venturi wrote the following 'expertise': '*Genova, 3 Maggio 1938. Il Romanino ha profuso la gaiezza dei suoi colori in questo Sposalizio di Santa Caterina, squillante di verdi smeraldo, di rossi fiamma, di gialli d'oro vecchio, fulgidi al sole: manto d' autunno alla figura della santa studiata dal vero con ritrattistica crudezza, con turbante e vestimenti giallo oro. Tipico del Romanino è il paffuto Gesù, fresco di carni, rosa fiorente sul grembo materno*'. The face of St Catherine has been partly repainted but the canvas is generally in very good condition.

[6] A. Nova: *Girolamo Romanino. Introduzione a un catalogo ragionato*, Università degli Studi di Milano. [1986], pp.294-95.