Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

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Publication date
2003

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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The Virgin made it snow on the Esquiline hill in Rome one hot August day in the year 352. The snow remaining on the ground formed the ground-plan of the church Mary wished to be constructed there in her honour, the church that would become Santa Maria Maggiore. She had announced this wondrous event the previous night in two simultaneous visions, appearing in the dream of Pope Liberius and in the dream of a patrician by the name of Johannes. With this miracle, Mary offered this childless patrician and his wife the key to the problem of what to do with their patrimony after their death.

Donna Ludovica Bertini faced a similar problem when her husband died in Siena on 20th August 1423, leaving her a rich, childless widow. When, in 1430, she commissioned Sassetta to paint the Madonna della Neve for her chapel in the Sienese cathedral, Ludovica harked back to this Roman legend (plate 1). Sassetta’s sudden introduction of the Roman snow-miracle on a Sienese altarpiece, no less innovative than the form the painter found to represent his Virgin of the Snow in the artistic climate of 1430’s Siena, must have seemed as miraculous as the unmelting snow under the solleone.

In 1862, Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve was discovered in the church of San Martino in little-known Chiusdino by Brogi (Appendix II. 4), who was alarmed at the deplorable state of the painting. Berenson devotes little attention to the Madonna della Neve since, in his appreciation of its ‘high solemnity and beauty’, he was hampered by its immense squalor. The fortune of the altarpiece was to change dramatically with the publication of De Nicola’s felicitous article in 1913. De Nicola identified the painting’s subject as a Virgin of the Snow and linked it with some published documents. He found that the Chiusdino Virgin of the Snow was the altarpiece commissioned from Sassetta in 1430 for the chapel of Santa Maria della Neve in the Sienese cathedral by Ludovica di Francesco Bertini, widow of Turino di Matteo, a former head of the cathedral-works (operaio). Furthermore, De Nicola followed the trail set out by the great hunter of dispersed panels, Mason Perkins, who supposed that the altarpiece had originally been crowned by three gables and who had put forward candidates for the two lateral ones: an angel and a Virgin of the Annunciation (figs. 20, 21). Interest in the Madonna della Neve regained momentum in the mid 1930s when some important documents, the contract and subsequent appraisals, were published in extenso. The altarpiece itself was then sold to Count Contini Bonacossi, who had it restored. The ground had thus been cleared for Pope Hennessy to give an informed description of the altarpiece in his

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1 Brogi 1897, pp. 123-124.
2 Berenson 1903, pp. 179-180.
3 De Nicola 1913.
4 Excerpts from Pecci 1731, as published by A. Lisini in Borghesi & Banchi 1898, p. 145; Milanesi 1854, vol. II, p. 244. De Nicola himself found the documents presented here in the Appendix I as docs. B.1, B.XII, C.I.
5 Perkins 1911, 1912 and 1913.
6 Laurent 1935.
7 For the 1936 sale see Salmi 1967, p. 223.
monograph of 1939. He praised its urge for innovation and its precocious and convincing representation of space, which he attributed to an undocumented trip by Sassetta to Florence. In Pope Hennessy’s theory about the development of Sassetta’s oeuvre, the Madonna della Neve formed the culmination of the painter’s most fertile, modern, and florentinocentric phase: ‘The central fact about the Madonna della Neve is that it is not a Gothic altarpiece.’

Authors such as Brandi and Carli subsequently extended this reputation of the Madonna della Neve as a fusion of contemporary, Florentine pictorial pursuits and traditional framework. New art-historical interests bore the painting to the foreground once again in 1968, when Van Os made a study of the iconography of the legend of the snow and its dissemination in Siena. He pointed out the particular fascination the snow legend held for Donna Ludovica, the patroness, and for the memory of her late husband, Operaio Turino di Matteo. Later, Van Os, together with Blauwkuip, would also turn to the construction of the Madonna della Neve. Blauwkuip’s study of the back of the altarpiece showed that it had never been crowned by gables. This was an important discovery, since the altarpiece, with its unified pictorial field and rectilinear crowning, thus formed an early stage in the birth of the tavola quadrata.

The altarpiece presents us with a Virgin and Child enthroned, crowned by two angels (plates 1, 11). The Virgin is flanked by two other angelic creatures, one carrying a platter full of snow, the other kneading a snowball from a second platter (plate 11). The Virgin is attended by Saints Peter and Paul, John the Baptist and Francis and on her throne can be seen two coats of arms. In the predella underneath, the snow legend develops over the full width of seven scenes (plates iv-x).

The Madonna della Neve by Stefano di Giovanni, better known by the apocryphal name of Sassetta, has received ample documentation and attention in the literature. Yet an examination of the altarpiece during its recent restoration yielded new insights into its iconography and exposed the inventive construction of, for example, the intended curvature of the baldacchino-frame. Moreover, a detective-hunt organised through various Italian archives in quest of Sassetta, his patrons and advisers, produced rich booty, resulting in the following clues which are presented in this book (see Appendix 1): the testimonies of the last wishes that Turino di Matteo uttered at his deathbed, which considerably anticipate the generally accepted date for the inception of the chapel; the documents surrounding the institution of the chapel as well as Donna Ludovica’s testament, which expose the character of this self-willed female patron and which greatly refine our image of the commission as outlined by Van Os; various fifteenth- and sixteenth-century descriptions of the altar of the Madonna della Neve, which give new insights into its remarkable

8 Pope Hennessy 1939, pp. 25-36, quotation on pp. 34-35.
9 Brandi 1949, pp. 48-52; Carli 1957, pp. 19-30. This is still the most prevalent opinion about Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve, as f.e. in G. Chelazzi Dini, ‘Pittura senese dal 1250 al 1450’, in Chelazzi Dini, Angelini & Sani 1997, p. 224.
10 Van Os 1968; Hubach 1996, pp. 139-198, recently picked up the theme again.
location and construction; the testament of Cardinal Antonio Casini, which brings the previously unnoticed figure of adviser into the light, revealing him to be a patron of grand stature as well as a binding factor in our story and the Apostolical Visit by Francesco Bossio to Grosseto, which shows how the impact of the Madonna della Neve commission extended to another Sassetta altarpiece, this time ordered by Casini for the Grossetan cathedral, the provenance and patronage of which were hitherto unknown. In the following discussion we shall examine, and attempt to follow, these clues.

The questions at the core of this study stand in an art-historical tradition that aims to elucidate artistic form through a functional approach. Such a method of studying altarpieces in particular was heralded by Jakob Burckhardt and his concept of ‘Kunstgeschichte nach Aufgaben’. Burckhardt distinguished three main challenges: liturgical functionality, the undivided picture field and iconography, categories which were later diversified and broadened. One of these later categories in particular, the intended audience, whether clergy, devotee or patron, has blossomed in recent scholarship. The extraordinarily ample survival of documents surrounding Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve allows for the piecing together of a wide variety of social-historical and functional factors into a fairly complete jigsaw of this single altarpiece’s genesis and patronage, together determining its appearance. The resulting image could provide an art-historical model for similar case studies of altarpieces whose memories have been more scarred by history.

The present quest into the circumstances surrounding the birth of Sassetta’s Madonna della Neve was stimulated by two related viewpoints that I wished to explore. Firstly, the conjecture that the influence of patrons was decisive for much of the innovativeness of the iconography and shape of altarpieces in the early fifteenth century and of this work in particular. And secondly, the presumed indebtedness of Sienese Renaissance art to Florentine developments, which has been maintained since Vasari and which I wished to put into perspective. This study is based not only on the presumption that the novel Madonna della Neve pre-dated similar experiments in shape and spatial representation in Florence, but that the Sienese Renaissance, of which this altarpiece constitutes one of the earliest and most pronounced examples, was motivated by an inner drive rather than by Florentine forces. This drive


13 See previous note. Concerning the use of images by the Orders, see e.g. on the Franciscans in Venice in the sixteenth century Goffen 1986; on the Dominicans Cannon 1980. Study into devotional ideas with regard to larger scale images in Cremona De Klerck 1990. To name just a few studies into particular situations of patronage by individuals with regard to altarpieces: Israels 2003; Henry 2002; Paardekooper 1996 and 1993; Baehr 1987; Kempers & De Blaauw & 1987. Hope 1990 tries to play down the complexity of ideas often imputed to patrons. Thematical studies on the impact of images, not necessarily altarpieces, on their beholder: Beltin 1990; Freedberg 1989; Shearman 1988.

was sought not primarily in painterly skill, but in the impact of social and physical setting.

From the wealth of information now at our disposal, we shall distil the social-historical, religious, architectonical and technical exigencies which compelled Sassetta and his patrons to find considerable ingenuity and innovativeness, determining artistic challenges and shaping the Madonna della Neve altarpiece. Apart from resulting in a monograph on Sassetta's altarpiece, the analysis of these specific issues will clarify problems of a broader significance: the nature of patronage in fifteenth-century Siena; the patron's stake in the work of art; continuity and innovation in the cult, decoration and symbolism of the Sienese cathedral space; the spread of the snow legend from Rome to Siena and the development of the tavola quadrata. In the wake of Sassetta's Madonna della Neve and its history we shall resolve questions, up to now unsatisfactorily or not at all addressed, pertaining to the original location and the commissioning of two other altarpieces: the Masaccio-Masolino altarpiece for Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and Sassetta's own Madonna delle Ciliegie in Grosseto.