Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

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THE MADONNA DELLA NEVE AS A HEIRESS TO THE OPERA MADONNA

There has been some confusion as to the way in which Sassetta's contract refers to Turino and Ludovica's altar. In this chapter we shall investigate all the descriptions of the altar in order to establish with certainty which altar was intended. We shall study the repercussions of the altar's location and of its previous history on Ludovica's project. We shall find that an image of great civic importance, the Opera Madonna, preceded the Madonna della Neve on its altar and left its trace on Sassetta's image.

The descriptions of the altar prior to its completion in the Turino-Ludovica documentation presented here all refer to the altar as being near the Porta del Perdono. From document A.II it appears that it was close to Francesco Tolomei's chapel which in turn was next to the chapel of the Crucifix, both of which locations are known (fig. 2 nrs. 13, 14).

The 1430 contract has been really confusing in this matter, since it is the only time that the titulus of the very same altar near the Porta del Perdono is recorded as San Bonifazio: 'altare cappelle Sancti Bonifatii, que cappella est prope portam ecclesie maioris prefate, que vocatur et dicitur la porta del Perdono'. Now, there was also an altar of San Bonifazio in the cathedral in the third bay at the right-hand side of the nave (fig. 2 nr. 18), which obviously could not have been intended. Both altars were moreover referred to as Santa Maria delle Grazie. It led to confusion of the patrons of both altars in the literature, especially when Pope Hennessy supposed that an endowment of the chapel of San Bonifazio by Antonio di Bartolommeo Benassai of 1475 was related to the altar next to the Porta del Perdono, whereas in fact the chapel in the south aisle of the nave was the beneficiary. However, it is worthwhile to expose the roots of the confusion, because it will enable us to understand the earlier history of Ludovica and Turino's altar.

Several Bonifaces were venerated in the Sienese cathedral. In the Kalendarium of the cathedral composed around 1140 appear no less than three Popes Boniface. In the calendar which accompanies the Ordo Officiorum of the Sienese cathedral of 1215, two feasts, of Bonifatii martiris and Bonifatii episcopi et confessoris are celebrated on 5th June and 4th September respectively.

The name day of Saint Boniface, 4th September, was also the cele-
Pertinent to the issue of a titular altar of the Badia is the possibility of a high altar provenance, sustained more forcefully by the same master, intended for the titular altar of the Badia. For the antependium-altarpiece hypothesis, see esp. Van Os 1988, p. 12; HAGER 1962, pp. 59, 92, 103-108, 115, 124, 128, 134, 152-153. Kempers 1994, esp. pp. 102-107, and idem 1987, pp. 117-119, in a quest to loosen the axiom of this thesis, justly disentangles the idea of a succession of three Madonna-altarpieces on the main altar, presuming they had complementary functions. He supposes that the Opera Madonna was an icon that from the outset was intended to be hung next to the Porta del Perdono, not just following the installation of Duccio's Maestà. He suggests the icon was occasionally taken down for processions and put on an altar for special worship. This idea is less likely, since Kempers extrapalates the Madonna’s location from late sources, Ventura’s chronicle and the 1435 and 1439 inventories, which are not unambiguous in this respect. Nor had the Opera Madonna the usual dimensions of an icon which was to be carried regularly in processions, but more of an altarpiece, to be likened to, e.g., the Salvator antependium by the same master, intended for the titular altar of the Badia Berardenga dedicated to the Salvator and to Saint Alessandro, see Argenziano 2000, pp. 147-170. The specific iconography of such antependia-type panels makes it hard not to see them tied to a specific altar-dedication. Moreover, the Opera Madonna antependium was unusually large for its type (217 cm [see note 133]) and compare Hager 1962, pp. 91, 103 again suggesting a high altar provenance. On the restoration of the Opera Madonna see, P. Torriti in Exh. Cat. SIENA 1979, pp. 16-17; Ventura 1442-43, fol. 5v, also mentions figures (stories) to the sides of the Virgin [see note 110 below]. Argenziano 2000, pp. 103-105, carefully probes the possibility of a high altar provenance, sustained more forcefully by F. Bisogni, ‘L'iconografia di sant'Ansano’, in Argenziano & Bisogni 1990, pp. 102-103.

The confusion between the images is enormous. Both the Opera Madonna and the Madonna del Voto were designated in the fourteenth and fifteenth century as ‘Madonna delle Grazie’. Around the middle of the fifteenth century the Opera Madonna was moved to another church (see p. 38 below). The Madonna del Voto remained in the cathedral and acquired the title ‘Madonna degli Occhi Grossi’, because of the large number of silver ex-voto plaques that kept growing around the image. From the nineteenth century onwards, when the Opera Madonna entered the Museo dell’Opera, the Opera Madonna even more confusingly similarly received that epithet because of her bulging eyes. In the nineteenth century the Madonna del Voto in the cathedral received a third name: ‘Madonna del Voto’, as retained in this study (because the image was incorporated in the Cappella del Voto in the cathedral). Twentieth-century authors have coined self-made names for clarity’s sake. The denomination ‘Opera Madonna’ here is taken from Kawsky — so that both images in this study are differentiated more or less by their toponymes as at present. See Kawsky 1995, pp. 139-45; Garrison 1960-62, 1.

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99 Kempers 1994, pp. 109-110, suggests a second possibility: that the Opera Madonna was put in the newly constructed Cappella delle Grazie (see following note). By the fifteenth century the Madonna del Voto was in any case in the aisle chapel and at the beginning of that century the Opera Madonna was next to the Porta del Perdono, a situation which seems to weaken the suggestion. Kempers 1987, pp. 119, 372 note 43; see also Middeldorf-Kosegarten 1984, p. 27; Zdekauer 1897, p. 29, dist. 1, cap. XIII. Only the 1423 inventory associates the Madonna del Voto with the
persistent hypothesis that the Madonna del Voto, datable to circa 1280, would have been intended for the high altar, in substitution of the Opera Madonna. Only when Duccio’s Maestà was installed on the high altar in 1311 was the venerable image of the Opera Madonna removed.

Leaving aside the question of the location of the early Madonnas in Siena Cathedral, of direct relevance to our story is the fact that in Sassetta’s day, they were associated with the Virgin’s protection of the Sienese at Montepertelli. The Opera Madonna had found shelter on an altar in between the Porta del Perdono and the wall of the bell tower. Such a location, next to the entrance of a church, was often given to images which had built up a tradition of great veneration. This move gave the Porta del Perdono altar its dedication to the Madonna delle Grazie. In the fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century inventories, it was known as the altar of ‘Sancta Maria da la porta’ or as the altar of ‘Santa Maria delle Grazie’. The two Madonnas were closely associated with the battle of Montepertelli, one as protagonist, the other as ex-voto per grazia ricevuta, and by the beginning of the fifteenth century the images were, confusingly, both known as the Madonna delle Grazie. In 1442-1443, Niccolò di Francesco di Giovanni Ventura in his chronicle of the Montepertelli battle, attempted to straighten out the matter. It therefore comes as no surprise that both these chapels of the Madonna delle Grazie...
were also both referred to as chapels of San Bonifazio, whose feast was celebrated on the same day as the festive commemoration of the intervention of the Virgin in the battle of Monteaperti.\textsuperscript{107} It was indeed common practice that altars would have different denominations, \textit{voci}, each of which could then be given separately to different patrons.\textsuperscript{108}

So, when Ser Leonardo suggested to Turino, on his deathbed, that he should adopt the altar of Santa Maria delle Grazie next to the Porta del Perdono, in front of which Turino would be buried, he was suggesting an altar which was already adorned by a worshipped image loaded with civic associations. In the 1423 inventory, made up a few months after Turino's death, the altar and its early thirteenth-century image of the Virgin is described in some detail, and it seems that it had been neglected, lacking a curtain.\textsuperscript{109} When Sassetta's altarpiece was installed at the beginning of 1433, the older image was removed, but found shelter in the immediate proximity of its previous altar, where Ventura saw it, attached against the Campanile wall, without an altar of its own.\textsuperscript{110} Following the description of the newly decorated altar of Santa Maria della Neve, the inventory of 1435 continues 'e rincontra al detto altare si è la tavola antica di Nostra Donna che stava prima al detto altare' (Appendix 1, doc. B.1) (fig. 3). In the inventory of 1439 a later hand scribbled down in the margin of the Opera Madonna entry that it had been removed to the church of Sant'Ansano in Castelvecchio (Appendix 1, doc. B.11). In the next inventory, of 1440, the Opera Madonna has altogether disappeared from the cathedral and the image figures in the inventory of the recently constructed church of Sant'Ansano in Castelvecchio, where it was put over the high altar: 'Una tavola antica con la predella con figura di Nostra Donna di mezzo rilievo e più figure di più santi.'\textsuperscript{111} By this time a salient 'transference of veneration' had occurred, in which the religious and civic importance of the two images seems to have coalesced into the later Madonna del Voto, as is observed by Kawsky.\textsuperscript{112} Yet, in the sentence inscribed around Mary's halo on Sassetta's Madonna delle Neve, we may well find a reminder of the wonder-working Opera Madonna which had for some time preceded it on the altar. 'SI. CONFIDIS IN. ME. SENA. EREIS. GRATIA. PLENA.' ('If you trust me, Siena, you will be full of grace') (plate 11), as the Virgin had demonstrated so memorably at Monteaperti.

\textsuperscript{107} A point made by KEMPERS 1994, p. 115. The altar next to the Porta del Perdono was, after its rededication to the Virgin of the Snow, usually only referred to by that title, with some exceptions, as f.e. 'Bonifatius ad altare Nive Virginis' (12th May 1447), AAS, Sante Visite 15, fol. 5v.
\textsuperscript{108} In the sixteenth century the altar of San Bonifazio of the Madonna del Voto counted no less than 8 \textit{cappelle or tituli} with different patronal rights and related chaplains; AAS, Sante Visite 24, fols. 5v-6r; AAS, Sante Visite 25, fol. 6r (both 11th May 1484).
\textsuperscript{109} AAS, Opera Metropolitana 29, fol. 18v: 'L'altare di Santa Maria de le Gratie a lato a la porta del Perdono con una tavola antica a la figura di Nostra Donna con predelle da piei e ferro di tende senza tenda'; the situation (as well as the description) remained unaltered in June 1429: AOMS, 867 (num. Mosc. 1492), fol. 7or (insert 2, fol. 18r).
\textsuperscript{110} VENTURA 1442-43, fol. 5v: 'la Madonna che stava all'altare maggiore di Duomo la dove fu fatta tale donazione, era una tavola pur piccola e molto antica con figura di Nostra Donna di mezzo taglio, cioè di mezzo rilievo e così le figure di torno, la quale sta attachata al chanpanile drento in duomo allato alia porta del Perdono senza altare'; see also GARRISON 1960-62 II, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{111} AOMS, 867 (num. Mosc. 1492), fol. 29or (insert 6, fol. xi.111r); published by GARRISON 1960-62 I, p. 6. For the Opera Madonna in the church of Sant'Ansano in Castelvecchio, see note 133 below and KIRCHEN 1985, vol. I, pp. 330, 334, 336.
\textsuperscript{112} KAWSKY 1995, pp. 139-170, esp. 144.