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Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

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The chapel of Santa Maria della Neve was instituted in the Sienese cathedral in fulfilment of the last wish that Turino di Matteo (operaio 1420-1423) uttered at his deathbed. Previously, he had pledged to dedicate a chapel to the Virgin and Saint Francis, because he believed that it was they who had restored him to health after a serious illness. Turino therefore actually stood at the cradle of the chapel, as it were, and tributary references to his life as operaio of the cathedral can indeed be found in Sassetta's eventual altarpiece. His widow, Ludovica di Francesco Bertini († 1433), took the reins in realising the project. With the aid of influential characters such as bankers and wealthy merchants as well as two consecutive bishops of Siena, Antonio Casini and Carlo Bartoli, she managed to obtain and realise the chapel that she and Turino had wished to erect in the prestigious cathedral. She showed an

unprecedented degree of autonomy for a woman patron in achieving her aspirations. Donna Ludovica commissioned Sassetta to paint the *Madonna della Neve* altarpiece in 1430.

Both in its construction and in its imagery the altarpiece is a carefully formulated response to the exigencies of its location. Its altar was squeezed in between the Porta del Perdono and

Conclusion

the Campanile wall. Sassetta invented a frame with a baldachin with an intended curvature, which, when originally combined with a gypsum superstructure, set off the altarpiece in its corner. The baldachin enhances the impact of the majestic image of the Madonna and saints on a unified rectangular field and makes it interact with the cathedral space. This is a partial and practical explanation for the early occurrence of this type of *tavola quadrata*, which was fully developed in Florence in the following decade. Sassetta's unified pictorial surface optically exploits space to the maximum. At the same time it should not be forgotten that the altarpiece was seamlessly crowned by a canopy of plasterwork, probably with a fresco of the Salvator, which would have been an integral part of the altarpiece's design. Architectonically, the altarpiece formed a chapel in itself. It must have been this interplay between circumstances and the artist's own inventiveness that induced Sassetta to resort to such a novel type of altarpiece. Sassetta's thorough understanding of the devotional requirements of the iconography of the *sacra conversazione*, to involve the various figures of the celestial court as well as the spectator, provides an additional explanation for his choice of a unified group of figures in perspectively quite convincing surroundings. It is therefore unnecessary to look back to florentinocentric tendencies in Sassetta's career to account for his innovativeness.

The Madonna della Neve succeeded the venerated Opera Madonna on its altar near the entrance. This early thirteenth-century image had played a crucial role in the famous Sienese victory of Monteaperti (1261), to which the inscription around the halo of Sassetta's Madonna still alludes. The Porta del Perdono was traditionally associated with Pope Alexander III's consecration

of the cathedral. The snow-iconography of Sassetta's altarpiece, based on the foundation legend of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, embellished this theme.

The scope of Turino's and Ludovica's chapel went further than a genuflection towards the traditions of the city and the cathedral. The chapel was one of the first private chapels in Siena Cathedral after the predominantly civic commissions of the preceding century. The introduction of a new Marian theme on its altarpiece was in keeping with a general renewal and intensification of the devotion towards the Virgin in the cathedral at the beginning of the fifteenth century. We are therefore witnessing in Siena the belated introduction of the patronage of individuals over public altars, which brought along a novel religiosity with related imagery, an iconography previously restricted to more individual settings (the Madonna of Humility; the *Pietà*; an early form of the *sacra conversazione*) as well as a Renaissance manifestation of the person who was the patron. In tracing this tendency at work on neighbouring altars in the cathedral, we came across new facts about the institution and decoration of chapels by various patrons. Bishop Antonio Casini, Bishop Carlo Bartoli, Canon Francesco di Biagio Tolomei, Canon Giorgio di Andrea di Pietro Tolomei, banker Jacomo Pecci and notary Galgano di Cerbone, almost all pertained to donna Ludovica's social circle. In addition, the background of the commission of another altarpiece by Sassetta, commissioned by an individual patron, was tentatively reconstructed. Francesca Tolomei, widow of Niccolaccio Petroni, commissioned an altarpiece for an altar in the mendicant church of San Francesco.

Ludovica carefully manipulated the design of the chapel to build an image of herself and her late husband for posterity and their own afterlife. The iconography of the snow legend was used to reflect their social position as well as the pious nature of their patronage. It offered the opportunity to display the importance of Turino's rectorate and his position, midway between the civic authorities and aristocracy on the one hand and the Church on the other. Sassetta distilled from his patron's wishes an altarpiece that is essentially a *sacra conversazione* in honour of the Virgin, reserving for the predella an exposition of the snow legend tailored to fit Ludovica and Turino to such an extent as to include their portraits and to add extra scenes that had not appeared before in representations of the theme. Sassetta's comprehensive depiction of the legend on the predella, the first of a triad of such altarpieces in Siena, was informed by the direct contact of his patrons with the archpriest of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, the legendary foundation of which is central to the snow-legend.

Antonio Casini was their man. Bishop of Siena from 1409-1427, bishop of Grosseto from 1427-1439, cardinal from 1426, and archpriest of Santa Maria Maggiore from 1437-1439, he is the pivot of our story. As an adviser, he instructed Ludovica and her circle of intimae on the legend and its aptness for her chapel. He himself had supervised the restoration of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. In this study it was found that it was Casini who, as a relative and close associate of Martin V, ordered the double-sided altarpiece from Masaccio and Masolino, to be erected over the canon's choir in the nave of the

basilica, close to where Casini's own tomb would be. Casini's role in the genesis of Ludovica's *Madonna della Neve* brought him into contact with Sassetta. Shortly afterwards, around the year 1433, he himself commissioned Sassetta to paint an altarpiece for his chapel of the Crucifix in the cathedral of Grosseto, which the present study identifies with the fragmentary *Madonna delle Ciliegie*. A crucifix by Vecchietta completed the chapel.

It is the network of the patron that ties together the threads of the present story. Contacts between artists as well as relations between art-works were mediated through patrons and their advisers in the early fifteenth century. In mobility the elite of patrons still superseded an artist such as Sassetta, who was more locally bound, thus maintaining a local style, his territory essentially restricted to the Sienese city walls, with a few excursions, to his native Cortona and to Borgo Sansepolcro. The taste of a *mecenas* such as Casini could range from the works of Masaccio, Masolino, Jacopo della Quercia, Vecchietta and Sassetta to Nicola di Ulisse. The deliberate invitation to Masaccio and Masolino for an excursus to Rome formed one of the first deviations from the principle of opting for the availability of local artists. The momentum of a group of high-brow patrons determined the outlook of Sassetta's career during the first half of the 1430s. In a functional and iconographical respect, the patron's exigencies left their imprint on the new art. In great self-consciousness, Turino di Matteo, Ludovica Bertini and Antonio Casini entrusted Sassetta to create an image of their patronage.