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Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage

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Publication date
2003

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Israëls, M. (2003). *Sassetta's Madonna della Neve. An Image of Patronage*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. Primavera Pers.

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Appendix II – Later vicissitudes of the Madonna della Neve and its chapel

1. Successors to the patronage

Donna Ludovica had the last word over the chapel in her own testament (Appendix I, doc. A.VII), as also appears from a note by the chaplain datable to around 1436 (Appendix I, doc. A.IX). The hereditability of the *ius patronatus* had been stipulated in 1426 (Appendix I, doc. A.V.I). The fact that the patronage of the chapel of Santa Maria della Neve once instituted by testamentary bequest by Turino di Matteo passed on in the Bertini family shows how Ludovica appropriated this chapel. Turino himself had not yet explicitly given his wife this freedom. She had become the patroness of the chapel in 1424 by a decision of the vicar of the bishop (Appendix I, doc. A.III). In a 1489 pastoral visit to the chapel, its chaplain recalls that it was founded by a one-time operaio by the name of Turino and that the patronage was now Francesco Bertini's (Appendix I, doc. B.VIII). In 1575 Bossio records, somewhat more hazily, that the chapel 'ut pretenditur, est de iure patronatus domus et familiae Bertinorum' (Appendix I, doc. B.XII). In 1576, 1578, 1584 and again in 1591, the chapel results under the patronage of Beatrice Bertini (Appendix I, docs. B.XIII, XIV, C.I).¹ Beatrice must have been the only remaining member of the family. She was the daughter of Ascanio Bertini and she had been married to Guido di Mariano Venturi. After her death, the chapel ended up in her husband's family, since it is recorded as Augusto Venturi's in 1616 (Appendix I, doc. B.XVI). The altar next to the Porta del Perdono had by then been demolished and the chaplaincy of the Virgin of the Snow was joined to the altar of the Visitation (Appendix I, doc. C.I). Augusto Venturi was adopted by the Gallerani family in 1611, because the Gallerani too threatened to become extinct, and Augusto assumed the surname Venturi-Gallerani.² The Venturi-Gallerani family thus became heir to the Bertini heritage, part of which consisted of the patronage over the chapel of the Virgin of the Snow in the Sienese cathedral, which they preserved until at least 1891.³

1 AAS, Cappelle 3469, Filza I. 3, loose papers, 'Copia de' beni di Santa Maria de la Nieve, cioè della cappella di duomo', notice of 23rd February 1576 [old style]: 'la cappella de la quale ne ha padronato Beatrice Venturi'.

2 GUIDA INVENTARIO 1977, vol. III, p. 148.

2. The Arte dei Merciai at the altar of the Santa Maria della Neve

Since its institution by a private patron, the chapel of the Madonna of the Snow had earned the devotion of other worshippers too. On 3rd August 1517 the guild of the haberdashers, the *Arte dei Merciai*, paid the Opera for a marble step that they wanted to have installed at the altar of Santa Maria della Neve (Appendix I, doc. D.I). In 1525, the date of the earliest preserved statute of the Arte dei Merciai, the feast of the Madonna of the Snow on 5th August appears to be the main feast of the guild: 'l'Arte delli Merciai habbi per advocata la gloriosa Vergine Maria, e che di lei si facci festa, e solennità nel dì di Sancta Maria della Neve' (Appendix I, doc. D.II). The members of the guild were bound to offer wax candles at the altar (its location is not further specified in the statute) on the day of their patron-saint and there were fines for not attending the feast. When the altar was removed in 1591 their relation with the altar was recapitulated 'al medesimo faceva la festa sua e vi portava l'offerta l'Arte de' Merciai' (Appendix I, doc. C.I). According to Gigli, writing in 1723, the guild still brought a wax offer of 12 *libbra* to the *Metropolitana* at the feast of the Virgin of the Snow.⁴

3. Removal of the altar

Later in the sixteenth century the ravages of time must have shown on the altar of the Madonna della Neve and the rector of the cathedral accused the patrons of reluctance to restore the altar. On 23rd September 1563 the advisory board of the Opera del Duomo asks the rector to end the querulous case of the patrons and insists with great force on 22nd October of the same year that the rector renews the altar, wherever and at the cost of whosoever it seems befitting to him 'a dove giudicará a proposito a spesa di chi li parrá conveniente' (Appendix I, doc. B.X). In fact from the inventory of the Duomo drawn up later that year we learn that the altar was broken and that the altarpiece had been temporarily put on the altar of Saint Anthony, in the southern aisle (Appendix I, doc. B.XI) (fig. 2 nr. 17). The Madonna della Neve was replaced by a large painting on

3 AAS, Cappelle, 3469, Filza I. 3, loose papers. On the Venturi Gallerani as heirs to the Bertini dynasty, see also note 52 to chapter I.

4 GIGLI 1723, vol. II, p. 90; also in G. Faluschi, *Agguinte al Diario Senese di Girolamo Gigli. Luglio-agosto*, BCS, ms. C.II.14, fol. 138v.

linen representing the Nativity, until Sassetta's altarpiece was moved back to its original altar around 1572.⁵ All the same, when Bossio visited the Duomo in 1575, the snow-altar was still in a desolate state: its sacred stone was in the sacristy; mass was said there only once a year at the *Festum Nivis*; there were no longer revenues to maintain a chaplain; the crucifix and the candles were missing and the step paid for by the Merciai was now old and undignified. Bossio also criticised the proximity of the altar to the pillar of the Duomo Nuovo, which protruded from the Campanile wall (Appendix 1, doc. B.XII). More gravely, the functioning of the altar was impeded by the congestion in the narrow space between it and the Porta del Perdono, where not only were candles sold, but where the poor of Siena received their alms. Furthermore there blew a fierce draught from the Porta del Perdono, which must have been a health hazard for those saying and attending mass. These conditions may explain the poor state of the picture, above all the areas of Saint John the Baptist and the smiling angel, and of course the left-hand side of the predella, all of which were nearest to the door.

Some improvements were made following Bossio's visit: the number of masses increased again to at least two Sundays and eight weekdays a month (Appendix 1, doc. B.XIV). In the summer of 1578 the wooden benches clinging to the Campanile close to the altar, mentioned in the inventories since 1446, were replaced by marble 'murelli' that are still in place. 'Murelli' with their 'schalini' were not only made 'sopra l'altare della Nieve' but also 'acanto l'altare di Santa Caterina' (fig. 2 nr. 7).⁶ This is an indication of the efforts made by the Opera to reaffirm these two locations as symmetrical counterparts, just as the project for the Chigi Chapel or Cappella del Voto was to echo the chapel of Saint

John the Baptist. The snow-altar's fate was sealed, however. In 1590 it is last mentioned in the cathedral inventories (Appendix 1, doc. B.XV) and by 1591 the transformations set in motion by rector Giugurta Tommasi meant there was no longer room for the two altars of Santa Maria della Neve and Santa Caterina. Their removals occurred simultaneously on 1st April 1591 and the altarpieces were stored in the 'stanze del Opera' (Appendix 1, doc. C.1). The altar of Santa Maria della Neve had remained in place just long enough to witness the extinguishing of donna Ludovica's family-line with Beatrice di Ascanio Bertini.

4. Sojourn in Chiusdino

The altarpiece had hardly been a year in the chambers of the Opera when it was sold on 8th June 1592 for 84 *scudi* to Matteo Biagini (Appendix 1, docs. C.II, C.III). Matteo Biagini probably represented 'una compagnia di Iusdino' (Appendix 1, doc. B.XVI).⁷ He is in fact listed in 1579 as prior of the twelve members of an exclusive lay confraternity, the Compagnia di San Galgano in Chiusdino.⁸ The confraternity still exists and practices in the church of San Sebastiano in Chiusdino, but it used to be housed in the Romanesque birthplace of Saint Galgano next door, before the suppression of the confraternities by Pietro Leopoldo of Lorraine in 1785. This house consisted of two oratories, one above the other, of which the lowest one is still intact.⁹ The lower oratory was to be the home for Sassetta's altarpiece for at least three centuries, although it appears that Matteo Biagini himself may have had a private destination for the altarpiece, perhaps a family altar in one of the churches in Chiusdino. Sassetta's altarpiece was only donated to the confraternity some eighty years later by descendants of Matteo.¹⁰

5 This date *ante quem* is provided by Pomarancio's new altarpiece with the *Virgin and Child with the infant Saint John and Saints Anthony Abbot and Agatha* for the altar of Saint Anthony, signed 1572 (now in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena); CARLI 1979, p. 137.

6 Other altars were provided with new marble steps. *Murelli* were also put up next to the altar of the Crucifix and 'dentro la porta del Perdono' (probably directly to the left of the entrance for those facing it from the inside, at the spot of the candle-sellers chest, and thus destroyed during the construction of the Capella del Voto). The framing around the door of the Campanile was made on the same occasion. See note 125 to chapter IV above.

7 CARLI 1957, p. 20; without references to documents. CONTI 1986, p. 55, records the curious local tradition that Sassetta would have painted the altarpiece for Chiusdino out of gratitude for the hospitality he had received during a putative stay with a family there.

8 ASF, Compagnie Religiose Sopresse da Pietro Leopoldo, S. Galgano, 2940, vol. 1, fol. 113v (Matteo Biagini is not yet listed in

1574, and is first absent on the list of 1609).

9 The upper oratory was first converted into a prison and is now a private house. I thank Andrea Conti and Simonetta Mugnaiuoli for their valuable information on the history of Chiusdino; see also CHIUSDINO 1995, pp. 54-55.

10 'donato al nostro Collegio dal dottor Giulio Vincenzo, e Giuseppe Isidoro figli del fu dottor Galgano Maria Biagini', see Appendix 1, doc. C. V. Giulio Vincenzo Biagini can be found in the confraternity's books from 1649-1699; ASF, Compagnie Religiose Sopresse da Pietro Leopoldo, S. Galgano, 2940. The altarpiece is not yet mentioned in the pastoral visit of 1618, though this says little, since altarpieces only rarely receive attention in these records: AVV, Visita pastorale di Monsignor Inghirami, 1618, 1, fols. 513-515 for 'San Galgano in Iusdino' and fol. 508, for a Biagini altar in 'San Joannis'. The Biagini were influential and had several religious assets. In 1537 monna Piera, the widow of another Mattio Biagini, had commissioned the painters Passalacqua and Bergamino to paint a Nativity of Christ for the church of San Martino in Chiusdino; MILANESI 1856, vol. III, pp. 129-130 doc. nr. 68.

Monsignor Carlo Filippo Sfondrati was the first to furnish a rather elaborate description of the Madonna della Neve in the *Oratorio di sotto* in his pastoral visit of 1678. He apparently wrote from memory, since he mixed up the position of the principal saints, but he did recall the predella and the profuse presence of gold (Appendix I, doc. c.IV). There exists an even more elaborate description of the Madonna della Neve in the documents of the Compagnia di San Galgano, dating to 1682 (see Appendix I, doc. c.V). Its altar was positioned directly opposite the entrance, against the north wall. Sassetta's altarpiece was much appreciated, judging by the lyrical description 'un quadro in tavola di pittura celebre et antica con colori a ricami et oro'. A decade later the confraternity was concerned about its preservation, because it suffered from the humidity. The conditions in the oratory must have been critical: the vaults of the upper church were filled with water, which came down by the bell-cord and the altar of the Madonna della Neve leaned against a humid wall and was built on terrain where 'da due parti trapelava qualche poca d'acqua'. It was moved to the upper oratory and put up on a new altar against the east wall.¹¹ Its ordeal of suffering the humidity in Chiusdino, combined with the hardships it endured while next to the Porta del Perdono, account for the present state of Sassetta's master-

piece. Nicola McGregor, who recently restored the painting, remarked that it probably rained or leaked on the painting, as only such an intrusion could explain the damage to the paint surface.

Following the 1785 suppression by Pietro Leopoldo, the altarpiece was moved to a building adjacent to the Compagnia di San Galgano. This house was then sold with everything that it contained (*a cancelli chiusi*) to the Atticciatti family. They wanted to move the altarpiece to another of their houses, but unfortunately the panel would not fit through the door. The family therefore placed it at the parochy's disposal. Consequently it was put up in the church of San Martino, where Brogi discovered it in 1897 and signalled its alarming state. A few years later it was transported to the municipal office, where Alessandro Contini Bonacossi saw it and managed to buy it in 1936 for 700.000 lire, because it was still private property (due to the Atticciatti *cancelli chiusi* sale). The sale was vehemently contested and the case even reached the court of cassation, but without success.¹² It is now in the Contini Bonacossi collection in Florence, recently transferred from the Pitti palace to the western wing of the Galleria degli Uffizi in the via Lambertesca.

11 Sassetta's altarpiece had replaced another one in the lower oratory, subsequently hung above a door in the upper oratory and put back on the lower altar in 1682 'sopra la porta si collocarono due parti della vita di San Galgano in tavola con la Beata Vergine Maria sopra ad essi, qual tavola era prima nella chiesa di sotto'; see Appendix I,

doc. c.V and ASF, Compagnie Religiose Soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, S. Galgano, 2940, fol. 10v (in between 1684 and 1692).

12 Verbal information from Andrea Conti. CARLI 1979, p. 115; SALMI 1967, p. 223 note 5; PERKINS 1911, p. 5, & IDEM 1912, saw the Madonna della Neve in the Municipio of Chiusdino.