

A. N. B 73523

MATTEO CIVITALI
(Lucca 1436-1501)

Although born in Lucca, Civitali was not trained there but most probably, as Middeldorf suggests, in the workshop of Andrea Guardi (active between 1451 and 1470) in Pisa, followed by further training in Florence, very likely in the Rossellino workshop. His first known work, the Tomb of Pietro da Noceto (†1467) in the Duomo of Lucca (f. 1472) is clearly dependent on the Rossellino tombs of Leonardo Bruni and the Cardinal of Portugal. Thereafter, as the only important Tuscan sculptor with a regular practice outside Florence in the later Quattrocento, Civitali obtained the bulk of the sculptural commissions in the city of Lucca and its region. His major surviving works in Lucca include the tomb of his main patron, Domenico Bertini (1479), the Chapel of the Volto Santo (1481) and the Altar-tomb of St. Regulus (1484-5) in the Duomo, a tabernacle for S. Frediano (1489), and the Tomb of S. Romano (1490) in the church of that saint. Payments for altars in the Duomo of Pisa are recorded in 1486-88, and towards the very end of his life he carved a lost group of St. George and the Dragon (1500) for the Palazzo Communale of Sarzana. He was working on a programme of statues, including Adam and Eve, Zacharias and Elizabeth, and the prophet Habbakuk, for the Chapel of St. John the Baptist in the Cathedral of Genoa when he died.

Christ

Marble,

H. 119.5 cm.

Youthful Female Saint

Marble,

H. 113cm.

Older Female Saint

Marble,

H. 113cm.

Civitali's first documented work is the tomb of Pietro da Noceto (†1467) in Lucca Cathedral, which was finished in 1472. By this date Civitali was already 36, yet nothing is known for certain of either his training or the focus of his early activity; since he was not a Florentine, Vasari, in proposing della Quercia as his teacher, was merely hazarding a conjecture from their common source of commissions in Lucca - della Quercia in fact died two years after Civitali was born.

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Professor Ulrich Middeldorf, in an ingeniously argued article ("Quelques sculptures de la Renaissance en Toscane occidentale", Revue de l'Art 36 (1977), pp. 7-26), has proposed to fill this lacuna by making deductions from a sculpture that has long been recognized as the product of a collaboration between Civitali and another sculptor: the Annunciation from S. Ponziano in the Museo Civico in the Palazzo Guinigi in Lucca (art. cit., fig. 7). Until now, it has always been assumed that the relief was a work begun by Civitali and completed by an inferior studio hand, despite the fact that the inferior hand is manifested in the most important feature of the marble, the figure of the Madonna. Middeldorf has much more plausibly suggested that the Madonna was by the master-sculptor, and the angel and the ornamental parts by his more brilliant pupil (with assistance from the studio in the latter) - Matteo Civitali. He then goes further, and on stylistic grounds identifies the anonymous master - hence Civitali's teacher - with Andrea Guardi, a Florentine sculptor active between 1451 and 1470 in Pisa, Carrara and Sarzana.

The present marbles derive from the oeuvre of Andrea Guardi, but they are evidently superior, above all in two of the heads. In Middeldorf's view that of the Youthful female saint reveals the clear influence of Agostino di Duccio's Tuscan Madonnas of the 1460s, as do the sharp-edged folds on her left side, whilst the head of Christ resembles that of Mino da Fiesole's Man of Sorrows in the Cappella Salutati of Fiesole Cathedral, which also dates from the 1460s. Even the head of the older female saint, which belongs within the studio type established by Guardi, is softened by influences from Antonio Rossellino. This admixture of influences, with those of Florence predominant, but overlaying a substratum from the Guardi studio, points strongly in the direction of Civitali. The filiation is underlined by the fact that the type developed in these statues remained in Civitali's repertoire, re-emerging in its clearest form towards the end of his career, in his St. Elizabeth in Genoa Cathedral of 1492 (art.cit. fig.3)

The provenance of the present figures (which was unknown to Middeldorf when he wrote his article) provides gratifying support for his hypothesis that Civitali was trained in Antonio Guardi's studio in Pisa, since they come from a chapel in Pisa which was disaffected in the second half of the 19th century. The statues reverted to the family owning the chapel, and were taken to Rome, where they passed into the hands of the principi Massimo. The fact that the statues are hollowed out like wooden figures behind (in this case to lighten their weight for greater ease in transport) indicates that they were not meant to be seen in the round, but were set in the retable - very possibly one like the Riccomanni altars in Sarzana Cathedral illustrated by Middeldorf (figs. 20 and 21). In this case, the statue of Christ, which is appreciably higher than the other figures, would

have occupied the centre of the retable, whilst the location of the areas of the other statues that are left rough makes it possible to say that the Older female saint (who alone wears shoes, which would seem to set her apart as the Virgin or - in view of her age - St. Anne, or even, as Middeldorf suggests, St. Elizabeth) was to the left of Christ as one looks at the group, and the Younger female saint to the right of him. It is very likely too that, as Middeldorf also proposes, the group originally consisted of more figures, since the Younger female saint is worked right around her right side, whilst her drapery flares out on this side too, to suggest that she was an outside figure, whereas the same is not true of the Older female saint, who is also inclined slightly inwards towards Christ, and must always have formed part of a group with him.

Hist: Unidentified family chapel, Pisa.

Principi Massimo, Rome

Private Collection, Switzerland.

Bibl: Ulrich Middeldorf, "Quelques sculptures de la Renaissance en Toscane occidentale", Revue de l'art 36 (1977), pp. 7-26, esp. pp. 12-15 and figs. 22-25.

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