

743/3078

FEDERICO ZUCCARO
(S. Angelo in Vado 1540-Ancona 1609)

According to Vasari, Federico Zuccaro joined his elder brother Taddeo in Rome in 1550 and became his pupil. Taddeo's style had a strong formative influence on Federico, who assisted him in a number of commissions, the most notable being for Pius IV in the Vatican. In the early 1560s, Cardinal Grimani summoned Federico Zuccaro to Venice to undertake the decoration in his palace at Santa Maria Formosa and for the family chapel in S. Francesco della Vigna. During this period he also worked on theatrical scenery, both for Palladio and for the marriage celebrations of Francesco de'Medici in Florence. In 1566 Zuccaro returned to Rome and after Taddeo's death in September of that year he completed his brother's unfinished commissions. He travelled extensively, working not only in Italy, but also during 1574-5 in France, the Netherlands and England. In 1575 he completed the frescoes of the cupola in Florence Cathedral which had been left unfinished by Vasari († 1574), while in 1580 Gregory XIII commissioned him to complete the decoration of the Cappella Paolina. Philip II summoned him to Spain as court painter in 1585, but by 1589 Zuccaro had returned to Rome and started building the palazzo Zuccaro (the present-day Biblioteca Herziana). Four years later he helped establish the Academy of St. Luke in Rome becoming its first Principe. His artistic achievement, combined with his academic prowess exemplified in his treatise L'Idea de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti, (1607), earned him the title, as Baldinucci records, of "padre della pittura".

The Vision of St. Catherine de' Vigri

Tempera on poplar panel

269 x 184 cm.

Monogrammed and dated: ZFA 1608, with the device of the sugar-loaf and lilies

Inscribed left: ET GLORIA EIUS
IN TE VIDEBITUR

Inscribed centre: FEDERICUS ZUCCARUS
BEATAE CATHERINAE BONONIAE PINXIT ET
INVIDA LINGUA TULIT
OCULIS NON FICTIS HOC OPUS MUNERE DEDIT
ET DONO GRATIARUM TEMPLO DICAVIT
IN GRATIAM. R.P.M. HIRONYMI HONOFRI
ROMANI PRIORIS
ANNO SALUTIS 1608 ET AUCTORIS AETAT. 69.

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According to Zuccaro's own account (cf. Federico Zuccari, Passata di Bologna e Ferrara, 1609; republished, D. Heikamp, "I viaggi di Federico Zuccari", Paragone, 1958, 107, p. 45), this impressive panel, painted for the church of the Corpus Domini, Bologna, was commissioned by "un de' principali cavallieri di questa citta", Count Ulisse Bentivoglio, for his family chapel dedicated to the Blessed Catherine of Bologna. Zuccaro also records that the panel, which was one of his last works, was executed between June and November 1608. This, together with the inscription indicating that Zuccaro was then in his sixty-ninth year, is important in establishing a birth date for him of 1540 (cf. J. A. Gere, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi; Mostra di disegni degli Zuccari, Florence, 1966, p. 36, no. 48 and R. Maiocchi and A. Moiraghi, Gli affreschi (del) Collegio Borromeo di Pavia, Pavia, 1908, p. 41).

Zuccaro's description of the commission correponds closely to the painting: "Il soggetto dell'opera fu una visione che hebbe questa Beata Vergine Catterina alla quale apparve N. Sig. e la gloriosa Vergine in un giardino, e S. Lorenzo e S. Vincenzo e molti angiolli." The subject is taken from St. Catherine de' Vigri's last vision before her death when she was suffering from a serious illness. The vision of Christ with the Virgin and Saints and an angel playing the lute and singing, "ET GLORIA EIUS IN TE VIDEBITUR", apparently restored her temporarily to health.

There is a pen drawing of 1594 by the Bolognese artist, Giulio Morina, in the Vita Beata Caterina Descritta in Pittura (Libro I, no. 16, Archivio della Reverende Suore del Corpus Domini, Bologna) which also corresponds closely to this painting and with which it seems Zuccaro must have been acquainted.

When Zuccaro presented his painting to the convent, the sisters rejected it, substituting a similar work by the above-mentioned, Giulio Morina (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna). Morina's painting, also, is based on his pen drawing of the subject. Zuccaro, angered by this rejection, retrieved his painting and presented it to the Fathers of the Congregazione Fiesolana di San Gerolamo for their Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie (no longer extant) in Bologna. At this time Zuccaro added the inscription (cf. C.C. Malvasia, Felsina Pittrice, Bologna 1678, ed. 1841, vol. I, p. 199), which records that it was painted for the Blessed Catherine of Bologna and since it was critized, he gave it to those who would appreciate it by donating it to the church of the Grazie, in gratitude to the Roman prior Gerolamo Onofri. It seems that at this time Zuccaro also added the two kneeling figures on either side, St. Jerome and St. Francis, who are not mentioned in his description of 1609.

In 1686 Malvasia describes this altarpiece as being in the Rugieri family chapel in Santa Maria delle Grazie (cf. C. C. Malvasia, Pitture di Bologna Bologna, p. 209), but by the 1706 edition it was no longer in situ and in a footnote in the 1841 reprint of Felsina Pittrice, p. 186 Gaetano Giordano records the painting as having been transferred to the Galleria Hercolani, Bologna.

St. Catherine de'Vigri (1413-63), also known as Catherine of Bologna, was well-born. She became lady-in-waiting to Margherita d'Este and in 1431 entered the convent of the Corpus Domini in Ferrara, where she took the vows of the Poor Clares. In 1456 she was made abbess of the sister foundation at Bologna and in Zuccaro's painting is depicted in the habit of the Poor Clares and is referred to as Blessed, because she was not canonized until 1712. She is celebrated for her celestial visions, poetry and love of art and music. Thus the iconography of the painting is entirely appropriate to her life.

The small device, above the inscription, of the sugar-loaf (zucchero) with lilies was a play on Zuccaro's name, which he sometimes added to his work.

Hist.: Church of the Corpus Domini, Bologna
Church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, Bologna
Galleria Hercolani, Bologna
Private collection, Bologna before 1900
Private collection, Switzerland

Bibl.: Federico Zuccari, Passata di Bologna e Ferrara, 1609
C.C. Malvasia, Felsina Pittrice, ed. Zanotti, Bologna, 1841, vol. I, p. 186 and p. 199
C.C. Malvasia, Pitture di Bologna, Bologna, 1686, p. 209
D. Heikamp, "I viaggi di Federico Zuccari"; Paragone, 107, 1958, p. 45

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