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As you know, I have just recently completed the restoration and conservation work which I felt was required on the painting representing The Sacrifice of Abraham by Giovanni Battista Piazzetta. The following may help to answer some of the questions which you put to me during the progress of the work, and may, I hope, also illustrate generally the painting's present condition.

Upon first seeing this canvas, I was struck by that typical appearance which Italian XVIIth and XVIIIth Century paintings often have if an English provenance can be identified. I would characterize this as an overall opaqueness, particularly evident in the shadow areas where the red-earth ground tone would normally be visible. I have always suspected that this 'glazed' or 'oxydised' condition may be traced to the long-standing predilection by English conservators for the use of highly volatile solvents such as Acetone for the removal of older varnishes. Although the use of such agents is not in itself harmful to the original surface of antique oil paintings, it may, I believe, alter minimally the physical structure of the oxydised oil film, so that the refractive index is affected. The new varnish applied to the surface can therefore no longer thoroughly 'wet' the film in a way that its full transparency is revealed. In paintings where large portions are deliberately left close to the dark underpainting, the effects of an impaired refractive function such as I described, can be unusually disturbing.

It has been my practice, when dealing with this rather complicated problem, to approach it with a 're-forming' technique, which can be described as the application, either in vapor or liquid form, of very low-volatility solvents such as Pyridine - for extended periods of time. Although not always entirely successful, I feel that in this instance the desired effect was amply achieved.

Thus being able to 'read' the surface in its full transparency for the first time, it became evident that what, at first, might have appeared as partially abraded passages, was clearly revealed as the characteristic looseness of the 'bozzetto' or unfinished composition. There is no question that the lack of half-tones is very much part of this intended effect and not the result of past over-cleanings: this becomes evident if one considers the absolute integrity of the shadow detail,

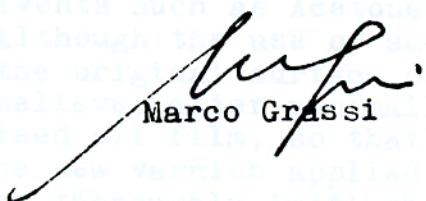
heretofore invisible, and, of course, most delicate and prone to obliteration. It is not surprising that with a subject which was so dear to the artist's heart, certain of these experimental compositions were not carried to their full completion; 'full completion' being, with artists such as Crespi, Piazzetta and even Tiepolo, a very unsatisfactory term.

To conclude, I would reconfirm my opinion that the Sacrafice which I have had the privilege of attending to, is a painting having certain unequivocal characteristics of a study-piece; or more precisely a work to which the master did not feel compelled to add further. As such, its conservation may be considered excellent, apart from some minor losses which in no way compromise the structural integrity of the work. My own restorative work was limited to closing these original areas and to some slight reconstruction of highlights in the figure of the Angel.

Final varnish, applied in several stages was AW-2 resin in pure mineral spirits solution.

Please think of me at your disposal if you should have any further questions on the subject; and for the moment, I take the opportunity of sending you best and cordial regards,

Yours very sincerely



Marco Grassi