

355 No 264

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MAYFAIR 3408.

2nd July, 1962

Dear

I was delighted to meet you and your wife the other evening at Claus Bulow's. I have spent several happy afternoons at the villa Favorita, and haunted the exhibition of your pictures at the National Gallery day after day, so it was pleasant to discover at first hand that the owners of all those marvellous things really deserve to possess them - (not always the case with famous collectors).

Here, since you seemed so interested in what I told you last Wednesday, are some more precise details regarding your Ercole Roberti painting of the Argonauts.

I have discovered, from the arms on another painting of the same series which I have identified in a private collection in England, that they were executed for a noble Bolognese family called Guidotti. This does not mean that they were necessarily painted in Bologna, but it is most probable that they were, since Roberti was constantly there between 1480 and 1486, and the style of the Argonaut series belongs exactly to that period. As you know, certain of the Argonaut pictures have been attributed to the youthful Laurence Costa, a Bolognese whose style was certainly formed under Ercole's domination in the 1480's. That they were commissioned for a not particularly grand Bolognese patron rather supports this attribution.

Of the subsequent history of the series I know very little, but I think it almost certain that in the early 17th-century they were in the magnificent collection of Vincenzo Giustiniani in Rome. The inventory of his collection turned up a few years ago, and items 97 and 98 are described as follows: "Two pictures on panel, overdoors, with the history of the Argonauts divided with columns painted in perspective from the hand one believes of Ercole da Ferrara"

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The man who has edited this inventory identifies a painting in the Contini Collection, Florence, as one of these two "ever-deers", but as it is by Dosso Dossi (admittedly a Ferranese, but of fifty years later) and contains only one scene and no columns of any sort he is obviously mistaken. The description, however, excellently describes the appearance which the various Ercole-Costa panels must have presented before they were cut up into separate episodes.

I assume that each panel in the Giustiniani Collection contained three scenes, of which three have remained intact; these in the museum at Padua, the Musée de Beaux-Arts in Paris, and the one I have found here in England. Two scenes have been cut down to approximately half the size of the others, yours and one in the possession of Countess Ruccellai, Florence. And the sixth survives only in a tiny fragment now in the possession of Peter Wilson.

I would not like to have to say exactly what part either Ercole or Costa had in these pictures. The one in Padua and the one in Paris seem to be by Costa, and are less dramatic and less crisp than any of the others. Yours and all the others look much more like the work of Ercole, but I would have to make a life-long study of Ferrarese pictures before insisting on an attribution.

I look forward to seeing you in Lugano one day soon.

with best wishes,