

DISCOVERING PIER FRANCESCO FOSCHI Curiosities

by Graziella Cirri



Pier Francesco Foschi (Florence, 1502-1567) Detail,
The Holy Family with the Young St. John the Baptist
1526-1530, mixed tempera on wood
Florence, Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze

To be able to appreciate the artistic value of Foschi's work in full, it is crucial to understand the cultural and religious climate that dominated his formative years. Pier Francesco initially learnt the trade in the workshop of his father, Jacopo di Domenico di Papi, nicknamed "Jacopo di Sandro" because he was a pupil of Sandro Botticelli. Jacopo's bond with that illustrious painter played an important part in Pier Francesco's artistic and moral education. Botticelli and his pupil, together with a substantial group of painters known as the "School of San Marco", were heavily influenced by the preaching of Savonarola (1452-98). The personal religious crisis and the thoughts that this had triggered in each one of them had a direct impact on the style of their art. Pier Francesco, in his turn, inherited and cultivated that school of thought, which explains why he was popular with patrons fond of the religious sentiment inspired by the Dominican preacher in earlier years: the so-called "Piagnoni".

After teaching his son the rudiments of the trade, Jacopo brought Pier Francesco to the workshop of Andrea del Sarto, a more modern painter than he was at the time and rising fast in the profession. He was chosen on stylistic grounds because he, too, had remained loyal to the kind of painting that had no time for frills. In 1529 Foschi opened his own workshop across the Arno, near Santo Spirito, though he continued to frequent his master's workshop until Del Sarto's death in 1530. Foschi's early works as an independent artist reveal his strong stylistic and iconographical bond with Del Sarto. His skill in replicating Del Sarto's prototypes was very much appreciated in Florence. The explicit echo of his master's work recurs, in particular, in his religious paintings, both in his youthful phase and in his later years. In the 1530s Foschi assisted Pontormo on two important fresco projects: the first for the Loggia in the Villa di Careggi to a commission from Alessandro de' Medici, the second for the Villa di Castello to a commission from Duke Cosimo I. From the illustrious Pontormo he learnt bright, luminous colourism and the appeal of iridescence. After this experience, Foschi developed more complex compositions in his painting and his figures become more elongated, space started to become elusive and conformity became symmetry.

In the mid 1530s Foschi also turned his hand to portraiture. His patrons ranged from illustrious figures and cardinals to “artisans of Santo Spirito” and “members of the neo-Savonarolan confraternities”. Scholars have attributed over thirty portraits to Foschi to date. Taking his cue from Andrea del Sarto’s manner, he painted portraits remarkable for their depth of psychological introspection and their simplicity of composition.



Pier Francesco Foschi (Florence, 1502-67)
Detail, *Judith and Holofernes*
c. 1540-1545, oil on wood
London, The Spier Collection

He later updated his style, devoting greater attention to the symbolic value of objects surrounding the sitter, which were intended to help the observer grasp that sitter’s social and professional rank.

In many instances, these items are displayed in the guise of fully-fledged trophies. Stylistic variation, as in his religious paintings, was not simply a reflection of the changing tastes of the period, it was also influenced by models in fashion at the Medici court. Foschi updated his figurative language by drawing inspiration from the work of such contemporary masters as Pontormo and Bronzino. His most interesting and highest-quality work, which can be dated to the 1540s and ‘50s, is remarkable for its more sober expression, its wealth of detail and the sharp simplicity with which he depicts the folds of his sitters’ attire.

Foschi moved his workshop to Piazza Santo Spirito in 1542 and set to work shortly thereafter on the most important commission of his entire career, three altarpieces for the Augustinian Basilica of Santo Spirito. The paintings all shared the mysteries of the Holy Spirit as their central focus. This theme was not simply of crucial importance for the Augustinian hermits, it was also one of the most hotly debated issues at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Martin Luther (in his capacity as an Augustinian) was the first to devote time and energy to a reflection on the issue, reaching the conclusion that sins would be remitted on the strength of the sinner’s faith.

Thus scholars argue that it is no mere coincidence, in view of Foschi’s particular interest in the religious sentiment of the “Piagnoni”, that the Augustinians of Santo Spirito considered him to be the painter best placed to paint the three important altarpieces. After the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and right up to his death in 1567, Foschi turned away from contemporary artistic trends to return to the style of his master Andrea del Sarto, a move which, apart from anything else, earned him numerous commissions for religious works in the countryside around Florence.

THE EARLY YEARS



Pier Francesco Foschi (Florence, 1502-1567)
*Madonna and Child Enthroned with an
Angel Musician, St. Benedict and St.
Bernard of Clairvaux (Lotti Altarpiece)*
1523-1526, oil on wood
Florence, Church of San Barnaba

Madonna and Child Enthroned with an Angel Musician, St. Benedict and St. Bernard of Clairvaux (Lotti Altarpiece)

A Florentine merchant named Benedetto di Bernardo Lotti ordained in his will, drafted on 3 September 1523, that his children should commission a painting for the family altar at a cost of 20 florins three years after his death. If they failed to do so, the will specified, that same year they would be bound to donate 40 florins to the Ospedale degli Innocenti. Benedetto died a few months after drafting his will, and by 1526 his children had commissioned Foschi to paint the altarpiece. This major painting was one of the artist's first "external" commissions before he opened his own workshop in Santo Spirito. In painting the picture, Foschi drew his inspiration from the famous altarpieces by Andrea del Sarto known as the Sant'Ambrogio Altarpiece and the *Madonna of the Harpies*, though he placed greater emphasis on the pathos in his figures' expressions. We should note the circular exchange of gazes between the figures depicted, in particular between the little angel looking at the small devil and between the latter and the saint holding him on a chain, St. Bernard adoring the Virgin Mary, who is gazing intensely at the observer in her turn. The altarpiece originally adorned the church of Santa Trinita, but following the Napoleonic suppressions in 1810 it was moved to the church of San Barnaba where it may still be admired today.

Curiosity: il Foschi, a lover of music, frequently painted musical instruments in his pictures. Here he has painted a viola. To impart an illusion of depth to the space, he has depicted a book in perspective, resting on St. Benedict.

IN HIS MASTER'S FOOTSTEPS

Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini, Passerini Altar Frontal (to a design by Raffaellino del Garbo and Andrea del Sarto)

In 1521 Cardinal Silvio Passerini, who had recently been appointed Bishop of Cortona, commissioned a set of liturgical furnishings consisting of an altar frontal, a cope, a stole and other smaller items. The preparatory cartoons for them were designed by Raffaellino del Garbo and Andrea del Sarto. Del Sarto designed a tondo depicting the *Madonna and Child* for the centre of the altar frontal. His original drawing has been lost, but we can imagine what it must have looked like thanks to a faithful replica of it produced by Foschi. Curiosity: according to Vasari in his *Lives of the Artists*, Del Garbo died in 1524, yet a census taken in the spring of 1525 shows that he was still alive and working with his son and an assistant in his workshop in Via del Garbo in Florence.



Passerini Altar Frontal embroidery (to a design by Raffaellino del Garbo and Andrea del Sarto)

Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini (Florence, 1477-1548)

1521-1526, crinkled gold brocade and crimson velvet, embroidered
Cortona (Arezzo), Museo Diocesano, Diocese of Arezzo-Cortona-San
Sepolcro

Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist
Foschi's work is a faithful replica of the Holy Family (known as the *Bracci Altarpiece* after Zanobi di Giovanbattista Bracci, the patron who commissioned it) painted by Del Sarto in 1526-7 and now in the Galleria Palatina in the Pitti Palace. Initially attributed to Del Sarto, the painting is one of a group of copies/derivations produced using various different techniques (such as painting and engraving) by a number of Foschi's contemporaries, thus testifying to the popularity of Del Sarto's original. Curiosity: Foschi also drew the same subject on a large cartoon. Recorded as still intact in the collection of the Marquis Giacomo Durazzi (1717-94) in Genoa, the cartoon was probably broken up in 1872 when the Marquis's heirs auctioned off his collection. The drawings are closely related to the picture on display, which Foschi painted a few years after the celebrated original.



Pier Francesco Foschi (Florence, 1502-1567)
Madonna and Child with the Young St. John the Baptist c. 1528-1530, oil on wood
Genoa, Musei Nazionale di Genova Galleria
Nazionale della Liguria e Palazzo Spinola

The Sacrifice of Isaac

Andrea del Sarto produced three versions of the same subject, including this unfinished panel which was commissioned from him by Battista della Palla, the King of France's art agent. It was acquired by Filippo Strozzi in 1530, but Del Sarto had kept it in his workshop until his death. Pier Francesco Foschi, in the meantime, had painted a faithful replica of the picture for a patron whose identity is unknown to us. A comparison of the two pictures highlights the expressive force in the faces and gestures of the barely sketched figures in Del Sarto's unfinished panel, as opposed to the more static, icy poses of the figures copied by Foschi.



Andrea del Sarto (Florence, 1486-1530)
The Sacrifice of Isaac c. 1528., oil on wood
Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art

ALTARPIECES

Madonna del Piano Altarpiece with St. Peter and St. Philip Benizzi.

This major altarpiece was commissioned from the artist for the new Florentine Servite convent at San Benedetto a Settimo di Cascina (Pisa). The altarpiece framed a Late Gothic work depicting the Virgin Mary which was held to be miraculous at the time. In this instance, the role of the saints depicted is to act as go-betweens interceding with the Blessed Virgin on behalf of the faithful.

Pier Francesco Foschi (Florence, 1502-1567)
*Madonna del Piano Altarpiece with St. Peter
and St. Philip Benizzi*
1538-1539, oil on wood
San Benedetto a Settimo (Pisa), Church of
Santi Benedetto e Lucia



The Resurrection (Bettoni Altarpiece).

The altarpiece displays, for the first time, a spiritual tension that differs from Andrea del Sarto's models. The background almost disappears and the figures have become symmetrical and elongated. The folds of their clothing form scalene geometries; the warmer and chillier hues are accentuated in their contrast and for the first time dramatic gravitas can readily be detected in the saints' expressions. *The Resurrection* was commissioned from Foschi by a merchant named Antonio Bettoni between 1542 and 1544. Curiosity: the artist's monogram can be seen by the soldiers' feet.

Pier Francesco Foschi (Firenze, 1502-1567)
The Resurrection (Bettoni Altarpiece)
1542-1545, oil on wood
Florence, Basilica of Santo Spirito, owned by the Fondo Edifici di Culto

PAINTINGS FOR PRIVATE DEVOTION

Tobias and the Angel.

Foschi took his cue for this composition from Andrea del Sarto's *Morelli Altarpiece*. Now on display in the Galleria Borghese, it was owned by Olimpia Aldobrandini who inherited it from her uncle Ippolito, a Cardinal and great-nephew of Pope Clement VII. The painting's strong points are the figures' mutually engaging gazes and the emotional intimacy and gentle grace of their gestures. Curiosity: the landscape with a hilltop village and a traveller.



Pier Francesco Foschi (Florence, 1502-1567)

Tobias and the Angel

1530-1535, tempera on wood

Rome, Galleria Borghese

FOSCHI THE PORTRAIT ARTIST

Portrait of Bartolomeo Compagni

The man portrayed by Foschi was not simply a wealthy merchant, he was also related to the artist on his mother's side. The items depicted are inspired by Flemish artists' love of plays on words: the clock symbolises the passage of time (*memento mori*) while the gilded plaque with St. George and the Dragon is clearly a tribute to Bartolomeo's second home, England. Curiosity: the knob on the armrest, carved to resemble a young angel.



Pier Francesco Foschi (Florence, 1502-1567)

Portrait of Bartolomeo Compagni

1549, oil on wood

Jacksonville (Florida), Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens

Educational project devised by Graziella Cirri, Maria La Venuta and Elena Perla Simonetti
Translated into English by Stephen Tobin

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