

T O M A S S O



Giovanni de Fondulis (1430/1437–1486/1491)

1. Madonna and Child

A rare testimony to the most restless and experimental season of northern Italian sculpture in the 15th century, this *Madonna and Child* is a work of uncommon scale and ambition, in which constructive intelligence and finesse of execution transcend the apparent simplicity of the material.

The spatial illusionism is mostly entrusted to a solemn perspective of antique architecture, conceived as a real frame for the sacred image. A wide barrel vault, decorated on the front with a thick garland of leaves and fruit, frames the figure of the *Madonna and Child* and rests on two pillars decorated with finely modelled lit candelabras, which accentuate the vertical course of the composition. At the base, a rich phytomorphic decoration of acanthus leaves is articulated in racemes populated with leaves and flowers, in an ornamental swarming that accompanies the figure's ascent.

The state of conservation is excellent and allows us to fully appreciate the quality of modelling, the precision of the details and the complex spatial articulation of the composition, based on a carefully calibrated balance between architecture, figure and ornamentation.

The references that emerge most clearly point the work towards a decidedly Donatellian horizon, and more precisely towards the lexicon elaborated by the Florentine master during his long and extremely fruitful stay in northern Italy, starting in 1443, when Padua became the privileged workshop of a radical re-foundation of artistic language. In those years, the Tuscan master fielded a repertoire of astonishing inventions - formal vigour, incisive naturalism, expressive tension, illusory depth obtained by means of perspective, recovery of the antique as a contemporary grammar - that marked an irreversible watershed in the history of western sculpture.

It is, however, in the mid-15th century Lombard area that certain features of the work find particularly strong parallels. In the face of the Madonna, which is almost geometrical, with lowered and swollen eyelids, and in the figure of the Child, with his slightly averted eyeballs, there are clear similarities with the work of a lively anonymous sculptor active between Crema, Brescia and Lodi, whose corpus has been reconstructed by Aldo Galli and brought together under the conventional name of Master of the Singing Angels (for two beautiful reliefs with this subject today in the Louvre and Pushkin Museum).¹² It is in this direction that those components of decorative taste and exuberant elegance can also be traced, vaguely Gothic residues that seem rather to reflect the influence of a Lombard tradition capable of mediating naturalism and formal measure. Certain solutions of the Master of the Singing Angels seem, in this sense, to have exercised a far from marginal attraction on the author of our terracotta.

Particularly eloquent is the comparison with the angelic heads conserved in the Museo Civico in Crema, from the monumental terracotta altar dedicated to St. Mark, created in the 1450s for the city cathedral: the heavy eyelids, the large eyebrow arches, the elongated faces and the deeply incised wings of the nose find exact correspondences in the physiognomy of our Madonna. Similarly, the heavy Child of the terracotta examined here closely resembles the one depicted on the knees of a Madonna seated on a throne preserved in Rubbiano, near Crema, which can be traced back to the ambit of the same master.

In recent times I have proposed identifying this anonymous craftsman with Fondulino de Fondulis, a multifaceted figure recorded in the sources as a blacksmith, goldsmith and hydraulic engineer, also active as an altar decorator and organiser of ephemeral apparatuses for town festivals, as well as a municipal councillor, before taking hermit orders under the name of Fra Germano. Fondulino is also the father of Giovanni de Fondulis, one of the greatest sculptors of the Po Valley Renaissance, whose work reveals a profound dependence on the inventions of the so-called Master of the Singing Angels. It is within this family and cultural line, marked by a direct transmission of models, practices and formal solutions, that the relief examined here finds a particularly coherent place, and it is Giovanni de Fondulis himself who is the author of this exceptional sculpture, suspended in a subtle and conscious balance between the Lombard sculptural tradition and the bursting innovations of the Paduan Renaissance.

Giovanni was born in the 1430s and was initially trained in the family workshop, within that artisan and artistic milieu dominated by his father's strong personality. After Fondulino's religious turning point, Giovanni took up his legacy not only on an artistic level, but also in terms of civic commitment: he took a seat on Crema's city council and held various public offices.

In 1468 Giovanni de Fondulis moved definitively to Padua, launching an extraordinarily fertile career as a sculptor, destined to make him one of the leading figures of northern sculpture in the second half of the 15th century.

As soon as he arrived in the city, the artist began to receive major commissions. Among the first was the creation of no

less than three altars in terracotta and Nanto stone, decorated in total with more than twenty-five figures, for the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Este. It was in this type of terracotta altarpieces crowded with sacred figures, conceived as real populated architectures, that Giovanni specialised throughout his career. The result was the production of statues of saints and devotional groups, today dispersed in the most important museum collections in Europe and the United States, that attest to a rare ability to combine monumentality, naturalism and a lively narrative sensibility.

In 1474, Giovanni also produced a large terracotta altarpiece depicting the Baptism of Christ for the high altar of the church of San Giovanni Battista in Bassano del Grappa, confirming his full integration into the artistic circuits of the Veneto. Although this part of his activity still remains partly unclear, it is now clear that Giovanni de Fondulis was also a first-class artist in bronze. So much so that he found himself competing with the greatest specialists of the time - such as Bertoldo di Giovanni and Bartolomeo Bellano - for the creation of the Old Testament stories destined to adorn the marble curtain of the altar of the Saint, designed by Donatello.

His activity brought him into contact with very high-profile commissions. In the 1480s, he worked for the heirs of James II of Lusignan, King of Cyprus in exile in Padua, and for the city's castellan Andrea Pesaro, for whom he created a Madonna and Child flanked by Saints Sebastian and Rochus, as well as a series of twenty antique-style heads. He also designed an imposing bronze monument dedicated to the jurists Paolo and Angelo da Castro for the church of Santa Maria dei Servi, which remained unfinished due to his death in 1491.

Once the authentic physiognomy of the Cremanese sculptor has been restored, also thanks to new documents, the complexity of his language emerges with greater clarity, played on a constant tension between formal discipline and plastic vitality, between Lombard memory and the critical assimilation of Donatello's vocabulary. It is within this unstable but consciously governed balance that the terracotta presented here finds a particularly convincing collocation: not as an isolated episode, but as an early expression of an artistic personality who had just come into contact with the most advanced Renaissance ideas in northern Italy.

This interpretation finds concrete confirmation within Giovanni de Fondulis' own production, where a series of timely and convincing comparisons can be made, useful both to reinforce the attribution and to clarify the chronological collocation. The first obligatory reference is constituted by the climbing Putti in the cloister of San Lanfranco, in which we find a fleshy fullness surprisingly akin to that of the Christ Child in our terracotta.

The comparison with the Madonna conserved in the abbey of Santa Giustina in Padua is eloquent, a work that could be placed among Giovanni's first realisations after his definitive move to the

Veneto.

It is difficult to imagine that this sophisticated elaboration of drapery matured exclusively within the Lombard plastic tradition. Evidently, Giovanni, who had just arrived in Padua - or perhaps already on the occasion of previous and occasional youthful incursions into the Venetian territories - must have been deeply impressed not only by Donatello's inventions and Giovanni da Pisa's terracottas, but also by contemporary painting, and in particular that of Andrea Mantegna. In the Ovetari Chapel at the Eremitani, Mantegna had in fact proposed (perhaps for the first time with such radicality), precisely this kind of intricate, contorted and highly plastic drapery, conceived as hard, angular volumes, capable of competing with sculpture on the terrain of formal construction. In this close dialogue between painting and sculpture, between relief and painted surface, the work presented here is therefore placed: not only as a reflection of a precise stylistic genealogy, but as evidence of the extraordinary permeability of artistic languages in Padua in the

second half of the 15th century.

This openness towards a shared formal lexicon finds particularly concrete confirmation when we move from the level of models to that of works. It is in fact with two pairs of reliefs depicting saints that the comparison becomes more stringent and revealing: in this case, the analogy does not end in a generic stylistic consonance, but invests deeper aspects, such as the conception of the work as a fragment of a larger whole and the technical solutions adopted during modelling and firing.

The first dyad is now in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where it arrived in 1893 as a gift from the collector Jules Maciet, who had acquired it a few years earlier. The two reliefs depict St. Catherine of Alexandria (101.3 x 28.5 x 12 cm), easily identifiable thanks to her martyrdom palm and cogwheel, and a second saint in monastic dress, long indicated as Catherine of Siena but more plausibly recognisable as St. Clare of Assisi (103.9 x 26.8 x 11 cm), by virtue of the knot encircling her robe, typical of Franciscan iconography. Since their appearance on the market, the two terracottas have imposed themselves as problematic objects: not only because of the quality of the modelling, but above all because of their singular form, which cuts out the figures by following their profile, as if they had literally been 'contoured' from a larger whole.

At first, they were referred to the circle of Giovanni Minelli, on the basis of the opinions expressed by Fabriczy at the beginning of the 20th century; in 1968, André Chastel put forward a hypothesis of a connection with the school of Pietro Lombardo, albeit only orally. The discovery, in 1972, of another pair of stylistically similar reliefs - then exhibited at the Heim Gallery in London - reinforced the idea of a single complex provenance and led some scholars to attribute the entire group to Nicolò Pizzolo, considered at the time to be the author of the Ovetari Altarpiece. However, discordant voices were not lacking: Francesco Negri Arnoldi was quick to point out the profound differences between these reliefs and the Paduan work, correctly assigned to Giovanni da Pisa.

It is only in more recent times that the Parisian pair has been traced with greater conviction to the sphere of Giovanni de Fondulis, placing them in the seventh decade of the 15th century. A proposal further strengthened by precise analyses that have related the faces of the saints to other Venetian works in the Fondulian sphere, without however completely excluding a possible participation of the Master of the Singing Angels (Fondulino de Fondulis?).

The second pair of reliefs - formerly in the Sackler collection and now in a private collection - depicts a St. Francis and a saint traditionally identified as Clare, but who, in light of the attribute of the cross, is more plausibly recognised as St. Helena. Here, too, the collector's provenance and critical fortune tell a complex story. First published with an attribution to Pizzolo, the two reliefs were later compared to the Parisian terracottas and considered part of the same dismembered altar. The differences in size and the unusual iconographic juxtaposition between a Franciscan and the mother of Constantine do not prevent one from recognising a substantial unity of conception, based on technical, typological and formal affinities. In 2010, following their appearance on the antiquarian market, these reliefs were also traced back to the sphere of Giovanni de Fondulis, with a similar dating to that of the Parisian saints.

The correspondences between the Madonna and Child and these four figures are so profound - in style, technique and even size - as to legitimise the hypothesis that all or part of them originally belonged to a single sculptural complex. In some cases, the shaped profiles even seem to fit together: the Saint Helen and the Saint Francis seem to fit naturally on either side of the Madonna's throne, while the Saint Catherine seems perfect to flank the Saint with the cross. The vertical curvilinear cuts, made before firing along the contours of the figures, are also found in certain and later works by Giovanni de Fondulis, suggesting a technical practice that is anything but episodic, one thinks for example of the Deposition in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

To this nucleus of dispersed Fondulian fragments could perhaps be added a terracotta of more problematic interpretation, the current location of which I do not know and which is only known to me through a photograph in the photo library of the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence. As far as it is possible to judge on the basis of the photograph, it would seem to be another Madonna seated on the throne with Child, updated on the inventions of Donatello and Giovanni da Pisa and probably traceable to the Fondulian sphere, although it shows an overall inferior quality compared to the work examined here, particularly in the drapery - especially those that fall over the shoulders and along the sleeve. However, there are significant similarities in the construction of the faces, especially in the rendering of the eyelids, nose and mouth, as well as in the physiognomy of the Child.

In this sense, the present work represents not only a rare survival, but a true first; a fundamental piece in the reconstruction of the career of one of the most original protagonists of North Italian Renaissance sculpture, and, at the same time, an invitation to rethink with a fresh look, the fortune, diffusion and material destiny of an entire artistic season.

Marco Scansani, 2026

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