

THE PLACE OF INSPIRATION OF THE FLEMISH TRIPTYCH BY ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN. A CONTRIBUTION OF THE *LANDSCAPE* *BUSTING TO ONE OF THE VEXATA QUAESTIO* OF THE SICILIAN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest masterpieces of Flemish art of global importance has been analyzed, through geological and geomorphological evidence, in order to identify the ‘hidden landscapes’ depicted within it. The conclusions of this study suggest that the views may be Sicilian. This fact is particularly important as it is believed that the masterpiece was imported into Sicily, but the history of its origin is not yet well known, indeed, it is still under discussion. Reasonably, therefore, in the light of the results achieved, the possibility that it has been realized on the island itself can be seen.

INTRODUCTION

A manuscript of the XVIII century defines the painting of «cossi bella sottile artificiosa, et meravigliosa fattura, che par non da mani humane ma angeliche depinto» («so beautiful subtle studied, and astonishing workmanship, that was painted by angelic hands, not human» [1]. It is undoubtedly the masterpiece of a Flemish artist. At the beginning the painter, active in the XV century, was considered anonymous. From Friedländer [2] on, he was defined as ‘Meister mit dem gesticketen laub’, ‘Maitre au feuillage en brodeire’, that is ‘Master of the embellished foliage’. The traditional assignments of the work – except for the most ancient and remote to Dürer or Van Eyck – have always swung among Memling, Hugo Van der Goes and, more unanimously, Rogier Van der Weyden, pseudonym of Rogier de la Pasture [3,4,5,6,7].

In the central panel the Virgin with Baby Jesus on her knees is depicted, she is seated on the throne under a sort of fabric baldachin. There are four angels next to her. In the side panels Saint Katherine of Alexandria and Saint Barbara are illustrated seated and in meditative attitude. Both of them carry the attribute of their martyrdom (fig.1).

Recently the Triptych has been at the centre of a futuristic project, the “I’perion_Ch.it”, through which it has been possible to analyse the work with cutting-edge technologies, to better guarantee the renovation and preservation. In the same project there are also involved the mosaics of Pompei, the paintings by Pollock at the Guggenheim in Venice and the altarpiece of Saint Bernardino by Piero della Francesca, kept in Milan.

The story of this masterpiece is covered by mystery. As far as seventeenth-eighteenth-century sources show, in the wake of a lost manuscript, it has been handed down its unlucky arrival in Polizzi. Indeed the precious work was delivered from Luca Giardino, captain of a ship survived to a storm, to a monk that he met when he arrived in Palermo. The monk immediately brought it to Polizzi through a series of other exciting vicissitudes [8].

Apart from the really surprising dimensions (162x237 cm), the masterpiece confirms that at the beginning of the sixteenth century even in Sicily and in the Madonie there was a predilection for the Flemish painting from noble environments, court and ecclesiastics.

The execution of the work, oil on durmast wood, is very accurate and painted in great detail. Everything is made with mastery: the embroidery of the dresses, the carvings of the throne, the nestled gems, the flora, even the scroll with the musical notation that refers to the well-known Ave Regina by the English composer Walter Frye [9].

METHODS AND RESULTS

In the study the new discipline of the *landscape busting* has been applied. It represents the avant-garde in culture, connecting the geology-geomorphology with the human-artistic disciplines in a relation of synergy. This scientific-cultural original cross method can pave the way to surprising results in research, scientific divulgation and fruition *en plein air* of the artworks.

This approach was first studied by the researchers who traced back the “invisible landscapes” by Piero della Francesca in Montefeltro between Marche and Romagna [10]. These places are the backdrop of the well-known “Gioconda” (Mona Lisa) by Leonardo da Vinci in the Valmarecchia [11]. The same approach was also found in the landscape of the famous “Crocifissione” by Antonello da Messina kept in Anversa, which has been identified into the Stretto di Messina [12].

The method used to identify the landscape in the painting by Rogier van der Weyden is based on the observation of both the pictorial work and the real view. The technical analysis has been followed by a bibliographic research that has allowed the finding of a particular perfectly dated cartography. Its study has permitted to verify and compare the landscape of that time with the elements of the area recognised in the painting.

In this very detailed representation of the Triptych of the ‘Gran Signora’ (big Lady), there is also a small but peculiar landscape detail, which is painted in the central altarpiece, behind the two angels that play the flute and the lute. It is a characteristic relief that, after a careful observation, can be identified with “Monte San Calogero”, geologically part of the mountains of Termini Imerese. It is the background of Polizzi in North-West direction. The comparison between this detail represented in the painting and the picture taken from the central square of the village shows that the two profiles match each other from a morphological point of view (fig. 2).

Indeed, undoubtedly both reliefs raise themselves isolated from a valley and present a truncated conic form with an indented summit (white dotted arrows). In particular, on the right side for the observer, both of them exhibit a small tooth (white dotted arrow). The similarity is more evident if the photo is compressed. The compression was already known with Piero della Francesca and Leonardo da Vinci and it was a technique that allowed to capture an extended landscape in a painting. Leonardo often used it in a complex way to paint the “Gioconda” (Mona Lisa). Even the bluish color of this detail suggests the lithology of the impressive massif, formed of limestone and dolomite originated in the Mesozoic. Under the geological point of view “Monte San Calogero” is a big anticline, broken by normal faults, arising towards North with relevant displacement [13]. One of them is well put in evidence in the painting (red dotted line).

Moreover, two *skylines* can be noticed faraway. The first is a tabular upland (yellow dotted line), which seems leant on the right side of the mountain and probably represents “Monte Pellegrino” with the extremity of “Monte Gallo”. Both belong to the so-called “Monti di Palermo” (mountains of Palermo). The second, imperceptible, wears away towards the left (yellow dotted line): it is “Monte Catalfano”, which dominates the city of Bagheria.

The landscape continues in the right side of the painting, where there are other details that can further confirm its real location. Behind Saint Barbara, seated and covered by a dark red mantle with a palm in her hand, it can be noticed the architectural perspective belonging to the Flemish world and to the descriptivism typical of the sumptuous painting of the Netherlands of the second fifteenth century. The Flemish city with its noble palaces, towers, entrance door, lies on a series of morpho-structures, which look like some little hills. It can seem a chance, but this detail is shown a few years later (1548) in another pen and watercolour drawing. It is kept in Rome in the “Angelica” Library and it stylises the city of Polizzi Generosa [14]. On the right side, indeed, it can be seen the castle with its towers, the walls and the entrance door to the city: coincidentally, everything lies on a series of small mountains (fig. 3).

Looking for documentary proofs from the past, it has been very helpful the observation of paintings by minor painters who worked in Polizzi Generosa. Among these there was Joan Matta, the ‘nobilis’ Mata, de Matta, Mat, Matt, Matth. As recent documents attest, in the first twenty years of the sixteenth century he moved from the Reign of Valençia to Polizzi. He was surely attracted by

the booming economic conditions of the city, that guaranteed him private and public orders for long time [15]. The mentioned work is the “Compianto sul Cristo morto con i santi Sebastiano e Caterina d’Alessandria” (that is the “Grief on the dead Christ with the Saints Sebastiano and Caterina of Alessandria”), at the moment kept in the Church of Saint Girolamo (fig. 4). It was realised around the third decade of the XVI century. At the top, on the right, it shows a small mountain made bluish by the truncated conic shape. From there, two jagged mountains raise, probably separated by a line of fault. Could it be a further reference to “Monte San Calogero”? We like to think it is.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After these assertions, it is obvious to wonder some questions. Is it possible that the Flemish author of the Triptych knew Polizzi Generosa? Could the painting have been realised *in loco*? Is it possible to track the name of the author among the Flemish artists who travelled in Sicily? These are unavoidable questions and to find an answer is not easy. We can only make hypothesis, even though they are not proved by evident proofs. On the other hand, the whole history of the Triptych is mysterious, from the name of its author to its arrival in Sicily. However, this does not alter its importance. Certainly, the art of the fifteenth century found out the ‘real’ in its wider meaning. In most of the north countries a religious sensitivity spread out: it looked for a closer relationship between God and the human being, such that it encouraged the identification with the divinity. This different spirituality was one of the reasons that pushed the artists towards a figurative more realistic research, which paid attention to the details of the daily life. The backgrounds of the Renaissance works were not pure invention or result of the big evocative power of the artists. They were, instead, fascinating real landscapes, known by everyone. Therefore, analogously to the Italian contemporary painters, also the Flemish ones showed an interest more and more marked for the reality and the naturalistic representation.

In addition, the characteristic and happy geographic position of the main Flemish cities stimulated the trade with the other European cities. As a result, there was an increase of the business travels, along with the study, work and pleasure ones. Merchants, bankers, diplomats, cartographers, scientists, masters in every art began to move from a place to another [16].

To remain in the context of our analysis, many historical documents, for instance, tell that Van Eyck travelled a lot on behalf of the duke Filippo III. It is known the one in 1428-1429 in Portugal to portray Isabella, Filippo’s fiancée, but also other diplomatic expeditions. In addition, in his paintings there are naturalistic elements that show his knowledge of the landscape and of the typical colours of the Mediterranean world. The representation of the bluish mountains in the background of some of his well known paintings let think about a possible trip in Italy [17].

It is then legitimate to believe that other famous names, like Van Eyck, left the Flanders to explore different places, following caravans that moved for business reasons or because called by the Royal European Houses or simply for craving for knowledge.

Hence, it is very likely that famous painters went to the inner parts of Sicily and here accepted commissions and left works of great perfection. The backgrounds were very accurate landscapes connected to emotions so intense to be represented in a painting, as a memory of that sweet upset which went through the soul and arrived to the mastery of the painter. Such hypothesis could be related to the Triptych of Polizzi Generosa, with its “Monte San Calogero” at the horizon. It could have been painted *in loco* by a Flemish artist arrived in the island during one of his trips. Or it might have been sketched on a notebook and then realised in homeland, going through memories and spontaneous feelings, whose intense taste could still be perceived.

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Fig. 1. Rogier van der Weyden (attributed), Triptych of Polizzi Generosa, XV century (© Antonio Schimmenti Photography).



Fig. 2. Comparison between the particular of the Flemish Triptych and the calcareous massif of Mount San Calogero (© Antonio Schimmenti Photography).



Fig. 3. Detail of the right door of the Flemish Triptych compared with a watercolor drawing of 1548, kept in Rome in the Angelica Library, and depicting the city of Polizzi Generosa.



Fig. 4. Joas Matta, Lamentation over the Dead Christ with Saints Sebastian and Catherine of Alexandria, XVI century.

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