GIOVANNI DA BISSONE
DOCUMENTED IN GENOA AND CARRARA FROM 1448 – 1484

TWO LOW RELIEFS DEPICTING THE ANNUNCIATION

CIRCA 1460 – 1465

Marble from the Apuan Alps (Carrara)

Angel: 52.5 x 52 x 12 cm (finial modern restoration)
Virgin: 63.5 x 52 x 11.5 cm

Provenance:
Collection of the Villa Torre de' Pice'ndardi, Cremona, Italy

The subject, while created according to the rules of a century-old iconographic tradition, presents a remarkable dynamism. From the left the angel moves decisively towards the Virgin Mary, greeting her with a commanding gesture and holding a lily - symbol of purity - while in front of him unfolds a long cartouche, almost like a red carpet. The Virgin, taken by surprise as she was reading, looks downwards demurely and raises her left hand as if to protect herself. Both figures are depicted very young, only a little older than children, with full oval faces, compact bodies that press under their garments, large expressive eyes and a slightly melancholic air.
Both marble reliefs, similar in shape and size, are contained within pentagonal frames that feature six rampant acanthus leaves, three on each of the sloping sides; at the top, on a moulded base, stands a large flower. The one above the angel has been restored, but this is the only loss to note on this otherwise complete work, except for a few slight abrasions on the leaves. The format and iconography indicate that the Angel and the Virgin used to form the upper part of a larger ensemble, which is confirmed by the presence of holes of square section measuring 2.5 cm, and positioned exactly at the centre of the base of each relief. Metallic pins would have been inserted to place the present marbles on the elements underneath, in all likelihood those missing parts formed the main register of a marble altarpiece.

These two sculptures from the Quattrocento are fascinating on many accounts: above all for their quality, but also for the refinement of their figurative style, which is not easy to define, and last but not least, their provenance from Villa Picenardi (Fig. 1-2), a place famous in Italy and throughout Europe at the end of the 18th century and during the first decades of the following century. This patrician residence is located near Cremona (in Lombardia) in Torre de’ Picenardi, a village that received its name from the related aristocratic family. The building, of remote origins, had belonged to the family since the 16th century, but from 1780 it was turned into its current form by the twin marquess Luigi Ottavio (1750-1816) and Giuseppe (1750-1829) Picenardi. The latters created a place of delight and erudition, particularly celebrated for its exceptional garden, which was created in several phases. Transforming with determination and ingenuity the local uniform plain into a succession of hills and small lakes, the brothers dotted this artificial Arcadia with temples and triumphant arches, thickets inspired by Aristotle and fake Roman ruins, a Caffehous called “the house of friendship”, and a “Gothic hermitage” inspired by the poet Edward Young, with the inscription Dieu et la Raison above its entrance and an automaton-statue of a hermit and his dog

Fig. 1 - Villa Torre de' Picenardi, Cremona, Italy

Fig. 2 – Annunciation reliefs in the interior of the Villa Torre de' Picenardi, Cremona, Italy
In 1816, a little before Luigi Ottaviano’s death, the “Gemini fratres, unanimi semper”, both unmarried and without offspring, left the entire property to their great nephews Gerolamo (1801-1863) and Antonio (1802-1848) Sommi, who from then on took on the double-barrelled name of Sommi-Picenardi. They embellished the villa with a vast library and a very important collection of paintings they had inherited from conte Giovambattista Biffi, a figure of the Lombard Enlightenment and a refined collector. In the course of the 19th century the Villa Picenardi, along with its collections, changed hands several times: in 1848 it was acquired by Massimiliano Trecchi (1819-1880), who sold it only two years later to the Mantuan conte Luigi d’Arco (1795-1872), who in turn on 12 November 1852 sold the property to the marquess Pietro Araldi Erizzo (1821-1881). The latter, a prominent figure of the Risorgimento in Cremona, first mayor of the city and senator, ended ruined for having financed beyond his means the cause of the Italian unification, giving generously to help exiles and refugees and to support the wars of independence. In a vain attempt to cover his enormous debts, Araldi Erizzo was forced to sell his belongings in bulk. A large part of the medieval and modern sculptures, as well as the celebrated collection of Roman epigraphs, were bought in 1868 by the then called Museo Patrio Archeologico di Milano, located in the former church of Santa Maria di Brera; at the beginning of the following century the sculptures entered the Castello Sforzesco, where they are still today.

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2 This is how they were defining themselves on the many inscriptions on the arches and temples in their garden (Bianchi 1791, p. XVIII).

3 In order to accommodate these works, the Sommi asked the architect Luigi Voghera to add to the villa a vast hall *ad hoc*, mentioned in descriptions as the “Biblio-Pinacoteca”.

4 On the property’s changes of hands, see Sonia Tassini, La “collezione perduta” di Torre de’ Picenardi. *Dalle carte d’archivio una intrigante storia artistica finora poco indagata*, in “Bollettino storico cremonese”, n.s. XIX, 2013-2014, pp. 129-156.

5 Federico Sacchi wrote in *Notizie pittoriche cremonesi*, Cremona 1872, p. XI: “Our illustrious fellow citizen, last owner of the Picenardi collection, forced to face inescapable demands (the result of many noble sacrifices made for the sacred cause of the Italica Redenzione), after many hesitations, had to resign himself to the painful loss of his possessions, dear to him and to his native land” (these words sound somewhat cynical written by someone who acted as a very diligent intermediary during those sales. See later)

6 The operation was supervised by Antonio Caimi and Giuseppe Bertini who identified at Torre de’ Picenardi “28 pieces of sculpture and [...] 46 memorial stones XXX inscriptions” (Roberto Cara, in *Il portale di Santa Maria di Piazza a Casale Monferrato e la scultura del Rinascimento tra Piemonte e Liguria*, exhibition catalogue [Casale Monferrato, Museo Civico 9 May - 28 June 2009], by G. Agosti, J. Stoppa and M. Tanzi, Milano 2009, pp. 163-165, n.V.4; see also *Notizie sul Museo Patrio Archeologico in Milano*, Milan 1881, p. 11, n. 4).
The collection of paintings began to be dismantled the following year, and a series of large and important Cremonese Renaissance paintings (as well as a portrait by Giovanni Bellini) entered the National Gallery in London, thanks to the efforts of its then director William Boxall, and his right-hand man in Italy, Federico Sacchi, who was from Cremona. In 1873 Araldi Erizzo eventually had to sell the house itself, along with what was left of its content; the entrepreneur Giuseppe Sacerdoti and his wife Enrichetta Neustaedter acquired it. Not much later however the Sommi-Picenardi family was able to enter in the possession of the house once again, keeping it until 1954; since 1962 it belongs to the Cassani family.

While it is clear that the most significant part of the painting collection at Torre de’ Picenardi was inherited from Giovambattista Biffi, it is more difficult to trace the origins of the group of Medieval and Renaissance sculptures. Numerous between the late 18th century and the early 19th century, the descriptions of the villa and its garden never explicitly mention it, due to the fact this was not an ordered collection exhibited within the vast villa, but instead a series of diverse elements distributed among the Neo-gothic oratory and some of the small edifices dotted around the garden, with the intention of imparting them with a suggestive aura of antiquity. In particular the Annunciation that interests us - and which was not included in the 1868 sale - was mounted on a wall, like an architectural ornament, on both sides of the oratorio’s façade that was opening onto the villa’ main courtyard, as indicated by several testimonies dating from the early 20th century. The first one of these is a detailed description of the two marbles left by Diego Sant’Ambrogio in an article published in the Catholic daily newspaper “Lega Lombarda” in 1904. The author wrote that the two sculptures had occupied that position “for more than a century”, and mentioned that it was “an old tradition in the patrician family that own them to attribute these marbles to Gian Antonio Omodeo” (or, as we would call him today, Amadeo). Sant’Ambrogio, concurring with this attribution, trusted that the reliefs in the Picenardi collection would be recorded in the “special monograph” on Amadeo “that is being prepared by an eminent scholar”. This is a reference to Francesco Malaguzzi Valeri who in 1904 published an extensive volume dedicated to the artist from Pavia and which indeed reads: “The two figures of the Annunciation at the front of the chapel in the villa of the marquess Sommi Picenardi seem to belong to the artist’s early style. But due to the height at which they are placed and the complete lack of related documentation, it is not possible to determine if these are works by the master or by imitators”. Reiterating the reference to Amadeo, Guido Sommi-Picenardi in 1909 added a precious photographic reproduction of the façade, where

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7 V. Tassini, La “collezione perduta” cit.; Susanna Avery-Quash, Silvia Davoli, ‘Boxall is interested only in the Great Masters . . . Well, we’ll see about that!’: William Boxall, Federico Sacchi and Cremonese art at the National Gallery, in “Journal of the History of Collections”, XXVIII, 2016, 2, pp. 225-241.

8 Diego Sant’Ambrogio, Di due bassorilievi dell’Omodeo a Torre de’ Picenardi, in “Lega lombarda”, XIX, 1904, n. 224 (24-25 September). This important article was drawn to my attention by Matteo Facchi, whom I warmly thank (see also M. Facchi, in Museo d’arte antica del Castello Sforzesco. Scultura lapidea, II, Milano-Verona 2013, pp. 284-285 n. 676).

9 Francesco Malaguzzi Valeri, Giovanni Antonio Amadeo, scultore e architetto lombardo, Bergamo 1904, p. 86
our two reliefs are seen mounted on a wall at the base of the two spires\textsuperscript{10} [fig 3]. Notwithstanding this attribution, today obviously not defensible, these references are important because they connect the acquisition of the sculptures to the initiative of the two founding marquesses, to whom the construction and decoration of the oratory is also due\textsuperscript{11}. That they were responsible for bringing the sculptures to Villa Picenardi is also confirmed by the fact that, among the pieces sold in 1868 in Milan, were four elements from the famous Arch of the Persian Martyrs, which Giuseppe Picenardi had acquired in 1805 when, in the role of ‘fabbriciere’ of the Cremona Cathedral, he was able to acquire the fragments of this masterpiece from the Lombard Renaissance\textsuperscript{12}.

\textsuperscript{10} Guido Sommi-Picenardi, \textit{Le Torri de’ Picenardi}, Modena 1909, p. 59 and tav. III.
\textsuperscript{11} One can hypothesize that the completion of the façade dates from 1799, or the years immediately after, when the chapel was the main centre of attention for the owners, who had the body of the blessed Elisabetta Picenardi, an ancestor of theirs who lived in Mantua in the 15th century, transferred there.
\textsuperscript{12} See on this subject Cara, in \textit{il portale di Santa Maria di Piazza} cit., pp. 163-165, n.V.4 (from Torre de’Picenardi come three statuettes of \textit{Angels} and a \textit{Nativity} relief). The Arch of the Persian Martyrs, begun in 1478 by Giovanni Antonio Piatti and completed in 1482 by Giovanni Antonio Amadeo, was placed in the church of San Lorenzo in Cremona. After the deconsecration of the church in 1797 it was dismantled, and in 1805 it was left in pieces in the Cathedral: eight low reliefs with stories of the martyrs and other decorative elements were reemployed in the construction of two new pulpits entrusted to the architect Luigi Voghera by Picenardi; the rest passed in private hands.
Surprisingly, neither Sant’Ambrogio, nor Malaguzzi Valeri, nor even Sommi-Picenardi seemed to be aware that, while the Annunciation remained in its place at the time of the 1868 sale, a third gable was sold on this occasion; representing God the Father blessing, its shape, material, style and dimensions (71 x 53 x 11) indicate that it certainly formed part of the same group. In 1904 this third relief was already on display at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, where it can still be admired today (inv. 964) [fig 4]. It is difficult to explain the three reliefs’ diverse destiny: it is possible that the arrangement of their neo-gothic fantasies led the Picenardi to separate God the Father from the two other reliefs, and it was placed in a position that was perhaps more easily reached by the delegates of the Milan museum than

Fig. 3 – Façade of the Oratory Sommi Picenardi
the upper part of the oratory’s facade\textsuperscript{13}. It is certain however that the relief today in Milan used to be placed between the Angel and the Virgin, in accordance with the iconography customary in the 14\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} centuries for both painted and sculpted altarpieces.

\textsuperscript{13} Possibly in the sacristy of the same oratory, recorded by Camilla Fassati Biglioni as “ornate with low reliefs in marble suitable for a sacred place” (C. Fassati Biglioni, Reminiscenza della Villa Picenardi: lettera di una colta giovane dama, che puo’ servire di guida, a chi bramasse visitarla, Cremona 1819, p. 24). Other sculptures however must have been placed here and there around the garden, as mentioned for example by the architect Voghera in a description of the monument he erected on the shore of a small lake in memory of the visit made at Torre de’ Picenardi by Ranieri, Archiduke of Austria, in 1816. There, in addition to the epigraph, were antique and modern marbles put together, and in particular two “pedestals adorned with sculptures in low relief in white marble from Carrara, a work from the golden Medicean age. In the shape of an ‘s’, two elegant and intertwined grotesque figure with fish, and birds” (Dragoni, L’amor patrio... 1817, p. 105).
It would be meaningful to momentarily bring the three marbles together again in order to study their style and define their most probable origin. Firstly, their provenance from the Villa Picenardi does not necessarily mean that they always found themselves in or near Cremona. If indeed at least part of the sculptures at the villa were found locally, as in the case of the Arch of the Martyrs, among the pieces sold in 1868 there are some that are certainly not from Cremona, nor even Lombardy. Furthermore, neither the works surviving in Cremona, nor written sources, lead us to believe that there existed in the city, during the Quattrocento, an altarpiece in Carrara marble of the same importance as that of our gables.

Marble altarpieces of this kind tend to evoke instead Liguria or Western Tuscany where, along with famous works by Jacopo della Quercia in Lucca or the Riccomanni in Sarzana, there exist less noted examples that can however give us a more faithful idea of the dismantled group. For example, the triptych dated 1475 in the parish church of San Remigio in Castiglione Vara (La Spezia, Liguria) [fig. 5], a later work and certainly of more modest quality than ours, presents a top register that shows well how the three gables could have originally been placed\(^{14}\). Regarding the style, in the recent catalogue of sculptures in the Castello Sforzesco, Luca Tosi described *God the Father* formerly in Torre de’ Picenardi as a work by a “Lombard or Venetian sculptor” from the Quattrocento, while pointing out that

\(^{14}\) Caterina Rapetti, *Storie di marmo. Sculture del Rinascimento fra Liguria e Toscana*, Milano 1998, pp. 145-147, n° 33. To an altarpiece of this kind, but from an earlier date (as indicated by the type of gable in late gothic style), must have belonged the *Annunciation* at the Institute of Arts, Detroit [fig.6](Peter Barnet, in Alan P. Darr, P. Barnet, Antonia Boström, *Catalogue of Italian Sculpture in the Detroit Institute of Arts*, 2 voll., Detroit 2002, I, p. 152, n. 76, as Lombard school, 1425-1450 c.).
“the circle of potential candidates cannot be far from that of the Caronesi masters. The author makes reference to a sculptors’ workshop on which some light has been shed only in the last 25 years, and that enjoyed great success between about 1425 and 1450, leaving altars, funeral monuments, tabernacles, baptismal fonts and portals disseminated all across northern Italy, between the Veneto, Lombardy and Liguria. Two masters, born on the shores of Lake Lugano, were at the head of this very well organised workshop: Filippo Solari da Carona and Andrea da Ciona (a suburb of Carona). While the Picenardi gables cannot be directly attributed to Filippo and Andrea’s workshop, the sculptor who carved them had a good knowledge of their art; this becomes evident when comparing the Milan relief with God the Father in the centre of a marble altarpiece signed by Andrea da Ciona and dated 1434 at the Cloisters Museum, Metropolitan Museum, New York (originally from the church of San Giovanni Battista in Savona, Liguria) [fig. 7], or, even more tellingly, with a figure of God the Father blessing on the gable of a marble altarpiece by the Carona masters in Verona [fig. 8].

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15 Luca Tosi, in Museo d’arte antica del Castello Sforzesco. Scultura lapidea, II, Milano-Verona 2013, pp. 382-383, cat. 775. Already in the Guida sommarià del Museo archeologico e artistico nel Castello Sforzesco di Milano, Milano 1900, p. 17, there is a reference to “the sculptures of Castiglione Olona”, that are indeed works by Caronesi masters.


18 Attributed to Caronesi masters by Giancarlo Gentilini (as mentioned by Tiziana Franco, «Statuit hoc d(omi)na Bea/trix priorissa loci huius»: il trittico del 1436 per San Martino di Avesa, in Il cielo, o qualcosa di più: scritti per Adriano Mariuz, ed. by E. Saccomani, Cittadella 2007, pp. 39-45).
Fig. 7 - Andrea da Ciona, New York, Cloisters, da Savona. 1434

Fig. 8 - Maestri Caronesi, Dio padre (part. di un trittico). Verona, Hotel Due Torri
Among the various regions in Italy where the career of Filippo and Andrea unfolded, the context in which our *Annunciation* fits the best is certainly Liguria. Both masters had a thriving and long career in that region: Andrea, as mentioned above, signed in 1434 the marble altarpiece in Savona, which is now in New York; later the workshop reappeared in Genoa where it created a sumptuous funerary monument with an equestrian figure for the condottiere Francesco Spinola, who died in 1442 (formerly in the church of San Domenico, it is today in the courtyard of the Palazzo Spinola in Pelliceria). In addition there is an imposing marble portal at the palace of the banker Brancaleone Grillo, and also, dating from 1448, a Eucharistic altarpiece for the Cathedral. While in Genoa, the masters were sent for by the nobleman Vitaliano Borromeo to execute a marble mausoleum for his family (formerly in the church of San Francesco Grande in Milan, it was transferred in the 19th century to the chapel of the Palazzo Borromeo on Isola Bella on Lake Maggiore); undoubtedly the workshop’s masterpiece, it was the starting point for the reconstruction of their career. The two masters executed this work, with collaborators, between 1444 and 1447, before returning to Liguria.

The Ge
noese origin of the Picenardi reliefs is first and foremost suggested by the valuable material in which they are carved and which was easily accessible in a city that was, then as today, a large port located near the Carrara quarries. Furthermore, it is precisely in Liguria that an actual workshop was formed around the two sculptors originating from Lake Lugano, composed of masters of varying aptitudes but all clearly influenced by their style. The closest affinities with our *Annunciation* can be found on a famous relief that decorates the architrave of an aristocratic palace: the *Adoration of the Magi* on via degli Orefici in Genoa [fig. 9]. It is first and foremost the folds of the draperies, the way they fall to the feet of the figures, almost forming a tent, their structure delineated with decisive rectilinear strokes, that signal that we are in front of a work by the same sculptor; this is also confirmed by the full, oval faces, the large eyes with incised pupils, as well as minor but significant details, such as the unusual halo ‘with petals’ that is identical on both the head of the angel on the Picenardi relief and the Madonna on via degli Orefici [fig. 10]. Besides, one can note that the *Annunciation* was most likely executed later, because it does not feature the anecdotal, narrative, essentially still late-gothic manner visible on the relief on via degli Orefici; instead it displays a more assured manner and great expressivity.

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19 On this work, regrettably lost but for which documents relating to the commission to the Caronesi masters have been found, see Maria Falcone, *Andrea da Ciona, Filippo Solari, Giovanni da Campione e l'acopo da Barchino a Genova: la custodia eucaristica della Cattedrale*, in *Nelle terre del marmo: scultori e lapicidi dal secolo di Castruccio all’età di Leone X*, proceedings of the conference held in Pietrasanta and Seravezza (currently under impression).

Fig. 9 - Giovanni da Bissone, *Adoration of the Magi* Genova, via degli Orefici, circa 1450

Fig. 10 - Giovanni da Bissone, detail of the *Adoration of the Magi* Genova, via degli Orefici, circa 1450
In 1977 Giuliana Algeri compared the Adoration of the Magi with another celebrated Genoese sculpture on a lintel of Giorgio Doria Palace in piazza San Matteo and featuring Saint George slaying the dragon\textsuperscript{21} [fig. 11]. This suggestion has been met with various reactions, yet it appears fully convincing after close examination: all details correspond, from the elegant female types with high foreheads and slightly swollen eyelids, to the horses’ harnesses and even the presence (slightly incongruous in the case of the Saint George) of young shepherds accompanied by a flock of lambs with distinctive, carefully detailed fur [fig. 12]. The most remarkable aspect of the Doria lintel is that the name of its author is known. Indeed, it was commissioned on 14 February 1457 from the sculptor Giovanni da Bissone, who created a work that shows the influence of a lintel sculpted by Caronesi masters on the Brancaleone Grillo Palace\textsuperscript{22}.

Reconstructing Giovanni da Bissone’s career is rendered very difficult by the presence in Genoa, at the same time, of Giovanni Gagini, another sculptor with a similar name and who also originated from Bissone (a village on the shores of the Lake Lugano, the same area the Caronesi masters came from). But this study is not intended to settle such a complicated and intricate issue\textsuperscript{23}. A very important and distinguished work of clarification was conducted on

\textsuperscript{21} Giuliana Algeri, La scultura a Genova tra il 1450 e il 1470: Leonardo Riccomanno, Giovanni Gagini, Michele D’Aria, in ”Studi di storia delle arti”, I, 1977, pp. 65-78 (pp. 66-67).


\textsuperscript{23} Which is still shrouded in mystery, see for example, Piero Boccardo, Le vicende ottocentesche di una parzialmente inedita opera di Giovanni Gagini: il deposito di Lazzaro Doria, in Il più dolce lavorare che sia. Mélanges en l’honneur de Mauro Natale, F. Élsig, N. Etienne and G. Extermann ed., Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2009, pp. 459-463.
the basis of new archival research by Michela Zurla\textsuperscript{24}; it is hoped it will be published soon. It is sufficient to highlight here that Giovanni da Bissone, demonstrating notable artistic independence in comparison with other followers of the Caronesi masters, was able to reinterpret their lesson in a more modern manner, blending accentuated stylistic effects with a tendency for pure forms that are almost abstract. The drapery of the angel and the Virgin is rendered in a series of dense parallel folds that renounce any decorative gothic tendencies: see how Gabriel’s tunic, where it is gripped by its belt, remains suspended in space, like a horizontal puffball sleeve. Or how the sleeve that covers the Virgin’s raised arm (similar on the God the Father in Milan) is wrung in a series of angular geometrical folds. One can also notice the rectilinear fall of the angel’s stole and of Maria’s elegant belt. This almost aggressive manner to carve the marble does not prevent however the presence of delicate and very elegant details, such as the angel’s animated locks of hair, or the pictorial undulations on the hair and beard of God the Father. A true sculptor, Giovanni da Bissone knows how to project his figures away from the background with powerful and decisive volumes; they come out of their frame (so much so that the angel seems pressed within the space that encloses him), made lively by an intense carving and drilling that accentuates the undercutting and makes the surface vibrate with a chiaroscuro effect. It is remarkable to see, in this vein, the beautiful effect created by the angel’s superimposed wings, one almost entirely in the round and the other ‘a schiacciato’.

While Giovanni da Bissone’s stylistic development still remains to be defined more precisely, the Picenardi reliefs can be convincingly placed between the Doria lintel from 1457 (which in turn follows the Adoration of the Magi by only a few years) and before the funerary monument of cardinal Giorgio Fieschi in San Lorenzo Cathedral, which is documented as dating from after 1465\textsuperscript{25}. In the current state of our knowledge it is therefore possible to date from the years 1460-1465 this recently rediscovered fascinating pair of reliefs.

Aldo Galli, February 2017


\textsuperscript{25} Federigo Alizeri, \textit{Notizie dei Professori del disegno in Liguria dalle origini al secolo XVI}, IV, 1876, pp. 152-158; see also on this subject Algeri, \textit{La scultura a Genova} cit.