

PARMIGIANINO. THE ENCHANTMENT OF MATTER

Fontanellato, Rocca Sanvitale, September 21st – December 31st

Exhibition curated by Gianluca Poldi

INTRODUCTION

Parmigianino (Parma 1503 – Casalmaggiore 1540) was among the most talented of artists and not only of the Italian Renaissance.

Dying at just thirty-seven years of age, he left behind just only fifty or so paintings including fresco cycles, but also hundreds of drawings, many of which are sublime. He was also a pioneer in the art of engraving, of etching in particular.

This year marks 500 years since the *Stories of Diana and Actaeon* were painted in Fontanellato. As it is not possible to organise an exhibition of original works in this space in order to complement this masterpiece from the artist's youth, this project instead celebrates the work on multiple levels, accompanying the viewer on an in-depth exploration using illustrative devices that offer insights into the various aspects of the work. Our enterprise explores the context, origins, and multiple meanings (or potential interpretations) of the cycle, as well as the methods used to produce it, shedding light on the painting techniques and materials employed by the painter, thanks to specific non-invasive scientific analysis carried out for this occasion by the curator which do not involve material sampling. Such analyses have also enabled us to map the current state of preservation, a quarter of a century on from the most recent restoration project carried out by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure laboratories in Florence.

The enchantment of matter, in which "matter" has different meanings: the actual "matter" of the painting and how it was produced – plaster, preparatory drawings, pigments – but also "material", in the sense of ideas, from the initial concepts set out in sketches to the progressively refined drawings of individual figures. "Matter" comprises all the elements that enabled the artist to translate an idea into an image. It is somewhat mysterious to us today, due to the distant and complex nature of the symbolism not easily decipherable: consider, for example, the "enchanted" heads of the corbels, Medusa heads presented in relief, in stucco, their mouths open.

And, on a more subtle level, matter that "enchants" becomes a metaphor carrying other meanings in an almost alchemical process whereby the substance of the real world tends towards spiritual elevation.

It is hoped that this project will enable viewers to approach the paintings with greater awareness and a desire to discover more.

1. THE PAINTER

We begin our exploration of Parmigianino with two self-portraits: one very well-known early piece in Vienna (**fig. A**), and the other dating from his later years (**fig. B**), as indicated by the inclusion on the sheet of figures matching those in the church of the Steccata in Parma, commissioned in 1531 but only painted – partially – between 1535 and 1539.

The intervening ten or so years between the two portraits were marked by such success and fame that, on his arrival in Rome in 1524 (he would return to Emilia, first to Bologna and then to Parma, following the terrible Sack of Rome in 1527), one commentator mused that the spirit of the divine Raphael had "passed into Francesco's body". Years of hard work followed, but not of wealth, as his meagre bequests attest.

Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola, known as Parmigianino, was born in Parma on 11 January 1503 and, in the words of Giorgio Vasari in his *Le Vite* [*The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*] (1568), "because his father died when he was but a few years old, he was raised by his two uncles – his father's brothers, both painters – who loved him dearly and instilled in him all the virtuous ways of a good Christian and citizen. Later, when he was old enough, no sooner had he a pen in hand to learn to write, and driven by the nature that saw him born to drawing, he began producing magnificent things".

The Arezzo-born biographer notes that, by the age of 16, Parmigianino had already "performed miracles of drawing" and painting, in the form of the *Baptism of Christ* (most likely the piece now in Berlin), in which his skill as a landscape painter is already evident. It is with a general tone of great admiration that Vasari begins his *Life of Francesco Mazzuoli, painter from Parma*, "amply bestowed by heaven" "with a particular skill for creating beautiful landscapes", and "all those elements required of an excellent painter, to produce figures vested with [...] a certain grace, tenderness, and elegance of manner, that was specific and unique to him". His work was so admired that, according to Vasari, "(an estimated) fifty copies" of one of his paintings were produced.

Autoritratto allo specchio [Self-portrait in a mirror] (**fig. A**), a convex tondo with a diameter of just 24 cm, was painted before travelling to Rome, and therefore in 1523-1524, in the same period as the Fontanellato series, which also features a (flat) mirror, at the top of the vault. His features in the tondo are those of an adolescent, his youth perhaps exaggerated to greater emphasise his precocious skill, and the whole room revolves around him, deformed by the curvature of the "barber's" mirror. His hand is lengthened in his distinctive style, which saw his later paintings featuring long slender fingers, and is "so beautiful as to appear truly real; and because Francesco had a truly beautiful air and elegant features and appearance much more akin to an Angel than a man, his likeness on that rounded surface took on a divine quality" (Vasari, 1568).

It is a work so magnificent that it was acquired by the famous poet and critic Pietro Aretino, and later by Valerio Belli, a highly talented goldsmith from Vicenza, by the sculptor Alessandro Vittoria, and finally the eclectic emperor Rudolph II.

More than ten years appear to have passed, however, between that work and the *Autoritratto con figure della Steccata* [Self-portrait with figures from the Steccata Church] (**fig. B**), in which his face is squarish and drawn "with a beard and long hair and in a bad state, almost a feral man, and quite unlike he once was", a limp hat pulled back, the expression of a melancholy and proud man, and a gaze that continues to interrogate the viewer. Behind him is his last great project, with the elegant virgins holding hands as though in a dance; less elaborate than in the final version, showing lanterns lit and unlit and, in the frieze below, vessels inspired by alchemy. The figures appear to be there with him, alive and sharing the same space, in a selfie taken almost 500 years ago.

The decoration of the Steccata Church in Parma was a major project, but one left unfinished despite being granted extensions of months and years; the contract was ultimately cancelled and he returned to Casalmaggiore with his three young assistants. Something had distracted him. Perhaps, as Vasari suggested, it was his alchemical practice, or perhaps it was a personal crisis, disinterest in a project that paid less than other works, or maybe a poor relationship with the clients.

Having become "melancholy and strange", perhaps depressed, he took ill with a "bad fever" and died within days. One pupil claimed Mazzola "was wrongly accused" of engaging in alchemy, because there was never a "philosopher who had less regard for money" (Lodovico Dolce, 1557), stating that his interest in things alchemical was speculative, "philosophical", rather than venal.

2. BEFORE AND AROUND FONTANELLATO

Parmigianino's *Baptism of Christ*, referred to by Vasari as the painter's first work, produced at just sixteen years of age, and the Bardi altarpiece, previously at Viadana, a sacred conversation featuring a depiction of the *Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine*, were followed by other works, including the murals (1522-1523) produced using fresco and secco techniques in the vaults of two chapels in the church of San Giovanni Evangelista in Parma. These include a picture at the top of one vault, now quite damaged (**fig. B**), in which putti and various objects are arranged around a circular shield with a large central boss, sometimes interpreted as representing the four temperaments: sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic.

The ability to compose large-scale mural scenes is evident in the subsequent Fontanellato frescoes, the primary inspiration for which, at least for the vault, was likely the Chamber of Saint Paul or “of the Abbess” in Parma, with frescoes Correggio painted in 1518-1519.

Yet even just a couple of paintings (one religious, one secular) suffice to convey the quality that Parmigianino achieved at twenty years of age, or a little younger: the small *Saint Barbara* now in the Prado (**fig. A**) and the *Portrait of a Collector* now in London (**fig. C**).

The first – so intense and original that, in fact, it also seems like a portrait – has a clear air of magic, of freshness in its ability to capture adolescence and vitality, but also of the young woman's concern with the tower symbolising her martyrdom, which she holds as though it were a model. Her gaze, lost in the contemplation of a life of faith, is full of concentration. Her dress, in cyclamen tones, is delicate and floaty. Her mouth is slightly open, a favourite expression used elsewhere by Parmigianino [**see panel 11**].

The *Portrait of a collector* (**fig. C**), meanwhile, with its subject dressed in black velvet with fur lining, showcases the painter's skill in depicting the avaricious gaze of the collector, who is depicted posing in front of a bas relief with four antique coins and a small bronze statue on the table, and a book with precious binding in his left hand. A portrait whose quality is not far from Lorenzo Lotto, this piece is also interesting due to its tiny brushstrokes, which are almost filamented and not fully blended, a technique that Parmigianino appears to have invented. Behind the collector, a window looks out over a horizon that is now a dull grey, perhaps once a smalt blue sky that has since lost its colour (as happens when mixed with drying oil). The theory that the sky was once a brilliant, lighter shade of blue is corroborated by the bright, almost unattainable green of the tree, worthy of Dosso Dossi. Inspiration may indeed have been drawn from Dossi's canvasses produced between 1518 and 1520 for the so called *Camerino d'Alabastro* of Duke Alfonso I d'Este in Ferrara.

A preparatory drawing of the man's head for this portrait has survived. Now at the Louvre, it bears marks where the salient features have been traced onto the panel.

3. CULTURED CLIENTS GIAN GALEAZZO SANVITALE AND PAOLA GONZAGA

A magnificent portrait by Parmigianino (**fig. A**) depicts Gian Galeazzo I Sanvitale (Fontanellato, 1496 – Parma, 2 December 1550). Now at Capodimonte, and previously part of the Farnese collection, it is thought to have been painted around 1523-1524, while Parmigianino was painting the Fontanellato room, and was apparently commissioned by Sanvitale and his wife, Paola Gonzaga.

Gian Galeazzo sits on a Savonarola chair turned left and rotates left facing the viewer. A young man of around thirty, his eyes are wide, and his moustache and beard are resplendent and groomed. In one hand he holds a glove, in the other a medal. His gear as a condottiero is on clear display on a table behind him, while a lush and lively patch of verdant foliage dominates the right-hand side of the work.

The sleeves of the long black coat do not fully cover the weighty red fabric (perhaps velvet) underneath, which in turn features slits that reveal a voluminous white shirt with embroidered cuffs. His hat is a more vibrant red, again with slits, and decorated with a feather and a gold pin.

The hilt of the sword culminates in a shell, while the numerals 7 and 2 on the money/medal would appear to refer to the 72 names of God, in accordance with Jewish and also Christian tradition, but also to the astrological and alchemical universe, in which 7 refers to Saturn and 2 to the Moon and, by extension, to the Goddess Artemis/Diana (as in **fig. B**). Saturn in this case may also be interpreted as a reference to character, suggesting one of a saturnine temperament, a lover of art and beauty, and thus akin to the painter in his tendency towards melancholy. All this is in a syncretic vein consistent with Humanism, drawing multiple layers of significance together in a single symbol, for a richer, more enigmatic result.

A number of surviving pen sketches are associated with the work (**figs. C-E**), two of which (recto and verso) are at the Louvre: the chair is the same and the garment similar, but the head is turned three-quarters of the way back. Greater insight into the positioning of the head is offered by a sheet held in a private collection, in which the man is depicted turning towards a woman behind him. In this case the scene is set outdoors, in a tree-filled landscape (**fig. E**). It is reasonable to imagine it may have been a double portrait of the spouses, or perhaps a simple study captured from real life.

As for the subject: a nobleman from a pro-French family, Gian Galeazzo was orphaned as a child and, upon his father's death, inherited a number of fiefs with his older brother, including Fontanellato and Noceto. In 1516, he married Paola Gonzaga, from a pro-Empire family, the oldest daughter of Ludovico, Marquis of Sabbioneta. Paola's great-grandfather was the famous Ludovico II Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, who had employed Mantegna as a court artist.

From 1516, the Rocca di Fontanellato became a centre of intense cultural activity; as well as Gian Galeazzo and his wife, key figures on this scene included Gian Galeazzo's brother Gian Lodovico, who studied in Pavia and, in particular, Girolamo Sanvitale, count of Sala Baganza. Among the artists, philosophers and poets who contributed to the cultural fervour at the court, the Calabrian philosopher Tiberio Rosselli, known as Russiliano, stands out. With support from Girolamo Sanvitale, he succeeded in publishing his text *Apologeticus adversos cucullatos* clandestinely in Parma between 1519 and 1520; in it, he presented ideas regarded as heretical, including positing that the stars influence everything in the sublunar world, drawing subversive conclusions.

Among his military honours, Gian Galeazzo was appointed colonel to the king of France in 1522, later receiving a Knighthood of the Order of Saint Michael and French citizenship.

He and Paola had nine children, including a son who was thought for decades to have died in infancy in September 1523, in connection with a letter of request for an urgent baptism, on the basis of which several scholars considered that the son was dying and that the Diana and Actaeon room is dedicated to the memory of this sinless child. More recent studies (Mary Vaccaro, 2004) have instead refuted this hypothesis on the basis of a document from Parma dated November 1545 that reports the existence of nine of the couple's children at that date, indicating their ages (but not their dates of birth): Eucherio, aged 22, appears as the eldest, therefore the first-born (around 1523), followed closely by Federico, aged 21 (who must have been born in 1524).

This fact, however, does not exclude that the painted cycle is part of a broader reflection on existence and death, on the link with fate, and with the divine.

4. POETRY: OVID

There was a valley men called Gargaphia,
thick with pine and sharp-pointed cypress trees,
sacred to Diana, who wears her tunic
tucked high up on her legs. Deep in this place,
there is a wooded cave, not formed by art,
for nature with her own ingenuity
has imitated art, by tracing out
a natural arch of native limestone rock
and lighter sandstone. A sparkling fountain pool
of limpid water murmurs on the right,
and grassy banks enclose its open streams.
Here the forest goddess, when exhausted
from her hunting, would bathe her virgin limbs
in the clear waters.

[...]

While the Titanian goddess
is bathing there in her usual stream,
lo and behold, Actaeon arrives there,
at that very spot. He has set aside
his hunting and is wandering around
the unknown wood, uncertain where he is.
The Fates have led him there. Once he enters
the cave watered by those springs, all the nymphs,
naked as they are, once they see a man,
beat their breasts and fill the entire forest
with their sudden cries, rushing to surround
and conceal Diana with their bodies.
But the goddess herself, who is taller,
stands there head and shoulders above them all.
Since she was being watched without her clothes,
Diana's face changed colour to the blush
one sees quite commonly when clouds are struck
by sunlight from an opposite direction
or by the purple dawn.

[...]

How she wished she had her arrows with her!
But she did have water. She scooped some up
and splashed it in Actaeon's face, sprinkling
his hair with her avenging drops, adding
words which prophesied his future ruin:
"Now you may say you have seen me naked,
if you still retain the power of speech!"

Without any further threats, she places
the horns of a full-grown stag upon his head
where she has sprinkled. She stretches out his neck,
alters his ears so the tops are pointed,
changes his hands to feet, his arms to legs,
and covers his body with dappled hide.
Then, added to that, she makes him timid.
The son of Autonoë runs away,
astonished, as he flees, he is so fast.
Still, when he gazes in the water and sees
his face and horns, he is about to say
"I feel so wretched."

But no voice comes out!
He groans. That is his voice. Tears trickle down
a face that is not his. All that remains
from what he was earlier is his mind.
What is he to do?

[...]

While he is in doubt,
his dogs see him. First of all, Melampus
and keen Ichnobates give a signal
by howling (Ichnobates comes from Crete,
Melampus from a Spartan breed) and then
all the other hounds run up, more swiftly
than racing winds [...]

The pack of hounds
is driven by its eagerness for prey
over remote cliffs, rocks, and pinnacles,
where the going is rough, without a path.
Actaeon flees through places where often
he pursued before. Now, alas, he runs
from his own helpers! He longs to cry out:
“I am Actaeon. Know your own master!”
But he has no words to express that wish.
The barking echoes in the upper sky.
Melanchaetes is the first to wound him
along the back, and then Theridamas.

[...]

His companions,
quite ignorant of who he is, urge on
the ferocious pack with their usual cries,
while their eyes are searching for Actaeon.
They keep calling eagerly, “Actaeon!”
as if he were not there (he turns his head
when he hears the name). They criticize him
for not being present, for being too tired
to enjoy the spectacle of their prey.
He might well prefer he could be absent,
but he is there. And he might well desire
to see and yet not feel the savage acts
of his own dogs. They stand all around him,
sinking jaws inside his body, ripping
to pieces their own master, whom they see
as the deceiving image of a stag.
Men say quiver-bearing Diana’s rage
was not appeased until Actaeon’s life,
after countless wounds, finally was gone.

(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book III, translated by Ian Johnston)