Research project

Artists, men of letters and ducal secretaries at the court of Cosimo I de’ Medici (1537-1554)

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By sending a letter to Cosimo de’ Medici on the 3rd of January of 1546 (Gaye 1839-1840, II, p. 347, n. CCXLII), Pietro Aretino aimed at starting a fight against Pierfrancesco Riccio, the highly esteemed secretary of the Medici court. One main cause for the occurring of this conflict, which was already expected, was a portrait painted by Titian; a portrait which Aretino had sent as a gift to Cosimo, in order to receive his favour, and that the secretary took care of hiding in order to limit communication between the duke and the writer (Mozzetti 1996).

The research project being proposed here starts-off from this episode, aiming at reviewing the artistic commissions promoted by Cosimo I de’ Medici during the first phase of his government – between his enthronement (1537) and the re-arrival of Giorgio Vasari in Florence (1554) – in the light of the many personalities forming his entourage and who supported him in this field. Even before the entry of Giorgio at court, Cosimo I de’ Medici tries, in fact, to create his own image as a protector and patron of the arts, yet only with the arrival of Aretino did his respective cultural programme, aiming at presenting himself as new Augusto, take an actual unified vision and a programmatic and coherent organization. The first artistic commissions promoted by the duke, while always leaning at the glorification of the house of the Medici, seem on the other hand as the result of more autonomous experiences, being also the result of the participation of the various collaborators by whom he surrounded himself in this phase, who participated in various levels of his projects, ending up becoming the actual promoters, curating the iconographic programmes while choosing the executors.

A group made up of personalities that shows as main exponents, amongst the artists, Giovan Battista di Marco del Tasso and Niccolò Tribolo; amongst the men of letters, Pierfrancesco Giambullari, Cosimo Bartoli and Benedetto Varchi; also Cristofano Rinieri e Pasquino Bertini like ducal secretaries. As it has been proven by the most recent studies (Cecchi 1998, Firpo 1997, Fragnito 1986) and as it has been testified by the episode cited in the beginning, the Riccio in particular – already indicated in the vasarian Vite as the right hand of the duke – played a main role in the artistic commission; but he was not the only one and surely did not follow a well-defined “programme”. Proving this, it is the direction of the first decorative cycles in fresco at Palazzo Vecchio, less organic when compared to the following one, prepared by Vasari with the help of Vincenzo Borghini (Allegri-Ceccchi 1980).

Apart from the Riccio, amongst the “fedelissimi” of Cosimo and Eleonora there was also Cristofano Rinieri, personage who deserves to be studied with higher attention and who received critical attention only recently (Trimboli 2008). As ducal secretary, Rinieri favoured the rise of Tribolo and Salvati, for example, but he was above all a fine collector, patron of Tribolo and Bugiardini, as of Cecchino, to whom he commissioned a series of arazzi with Stories of Lucrezia and Tarquino (Vasari 1568, V, p. 524), a commission that even preceded the participation of the artist in the cycle with Stories of Joseph destined at the Salone dei Dugento (Adelson 1985).

A personality of a far superior intellectual stature was Benedetto Varchi, of whom critics have frequently underlined the particular interest towards the world of art (Mendelshon 1982, Quiviger 1987, Barocchi 1998, Collareta 2007). An attention which became substantial through the intricate network of relationships with artists, of which the Inciβesta sulla maggioranza delle arti (1547) and the funeral oration for the death of Michelangelo (1564) form only the most elevated achievement. In the light of the most recent studies dedicated to the man of letters (Varchi 2007; Id. 2008) and of published and unpublished material – several sonnets dedicated to artists, still unpublished and found in the Varchian
papers – it would be important to re-evaluate his ties with some Florentine artists, of whom he appears as not just a friend and companion, but also a patron. Amongst these ties, the one with Bronzino is surely well-known (Cecchi 1990; Cecchi 1991; Geremicca 2013), but yet to be explained are the ones, with no less implications, grown by him with Francesco Salviati and Leone Leoni, with the medallist Poggini, the embroider Bachiacca and the engraver of precious stones Grechetto.

Through published and unpublished material kept at the State Archive and the National Library in Florence – and with the help of letters by artists published by Giovanni Gaetano Bottari (1822-1825) and Giovanni Gaye (1839-1840); of the correspondence by Giorgio Vasari (1923-1940) and Michelangelo (1963-1985), some of the sources that are intended to be at the centre of this research – the aim of the project is that of revising the relations that bonded the artists, the men of letters and the ducal secretaries during this initial phase of Cosimo’s government (partly reduced by Vasari in the *Vite*), in the attempt to restore variety and complexity of these relations, and propose a more precise description and interpretation of them. In the case of Bronzino, for example, it appears quite clearly that the protection given to him by Riccio did not interfere with his relationship with Benedetto Varchi, who was surely not a friend of the pratese secretary (Geremicca 2013).