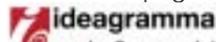


Viviana Farina

*A newly discovered
painting by the Neapolitan
Francesco Curia:
the 'Holy family with the young St. John
the Baptist'*



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28/10/2013
DOI 10.4482/28112013
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1. F. Curia, *The Holy family with the young St. John the Baptist*, Paris, Jacques Legeenhoek (1600/1603)

A newly discovered painting by the Neapolitan Francesco Curia: the 'Holy family with the young St. John the Baptist'

by Viviana Farina

Absolutely out of the context I recognized as being a Neapolitan work this beautiful picture for a private chamber representing the *Holy family with the young St. John the Baptist*, in extraordinary condition and unknown until now (oil on canvas, 91,5x72,5cm; **fig. 1**).

On the plaster frame of the 19th century I could read «Coreggio» (**fig. 2**), a wrong supposition that was one important information about the author's culture anyway. Because I had immediately realized that the raphaellesque composition and soft and mellow 'colorito' could only identify the hand of Francesco Curia from Naples (a. 1560/1565-1608), one of the most brilliant artists of South Italy of the second middle of 16th, as ancient sources recognized at first.

Just Curia's biographer Bernardo De Dominicci compared master's ideas and colours to those of Correggio's, when he described a lost picture by Francesco, *The Virgin with the Child between angels appears to St. Francis from Assisi*, once in the Parthenopean church of San Francesco delle Monache. It was only a literature *topos*, but the reference to the culture of Emilia Romagna remains interesting.¹

I will discuss the attribution to Curia below. Meanwhile, I would underline that this picture is exactly the nineteenth piece for Curia's catalogue of paintings. That is a quite small group of works, compared to the larger *corpus* of the drawings, formed by only seventeen pictures, all of them



2. F. Curia, *The Holy family with the young St. John the Baptist* (picture before the cleaning)

still kept in private chapels in many churches of South of Italy or in Italian museums, and just by one canvas of unknown whereabouts.² This latter, a *Saint Christine martyr*, was the only oil painted by Curia for a private cult display known until now.³ It means that the *Holy Family* here presented is the second work by Francesco Curia discovered on the art market. In addition to this,

^{*} I want to thank Carlo Milano and Magdalena Sobieszek who revised the English text.

¹ B. De Dominicci, *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani* [Napoli 1742-1745], ed. commentata a cura di F. Sricchia Santoro e A. Zezza, Napoli 2003, vol. I, II, p. 813 and note 4 by I. di Majo.

² I am referring principally to I. di Majo, *Francesco Curia. L'opera completa*, Napoli 2002.

Ivi, pp. 103, fig. 73, 134, cat. n. 15.



3. F. Curia, *The Virgin with the Child, St. Leonard and two donators*, once Colobraro (Matera), San Nicola, in deposit at the Soprintendenza della Basilicata (1595)

3a. F. Curia, *The Virgin with the Child, St. Leonard and two donators*, once Colobraro (Matera), San Nicola, in deposit at the Soprintendenza della Basilicata (1595)



1a. F. Curia, *The Holy family with the young St. John the Baptist*, Paris, Jacques Legeenhoek (1600/1603)

I suspect that both pictures date back to the same time, about 1600, as it will be clear for the *Holy Family* later.

The beginning of the artist, approximately 1585/1590, shows a good knowledge of the style of the Zuccari brothers, especially of International Mannerism born around them and Farnese family's patronage between Rome and Caprarola (for ex. the great *Allegory of St. Francis' Order* at San Lorenzo church, Naples). At the same time, Francesco was working with his father Michele, his first master. Then, during the period 1588-1594, the painter took under his supervision the family's *atelier* and probably finished some commissions assigned to Michele at first. Full of inventiveness, Francesco looked to the most various suggestions, from great Roman themes of the first part of the century to the raphaellesque style of Andrea Sabatini da Salerno and Giovan Filippo Criscuolo; from Marco Pino da Siena's elegant torsions to Barocci, Agostino

Carracci, Goltzius and Spranger as engravers. To this multicoloured base he also connected his strong attraction to the inspired and capricious art by Dirck Hendricks, the Flemish artist named in Naples Teodoro d'Errico, and to the fantastic and pre-Rudolphine motifs of the Flemish masters who arrived in Rome from Parma. From the beginning of the new century until the end of his activity (1608), as Francesco Abate at first and Ippolita di Majo acknowledged later, Curia chose to paint in the International Mannerism way or in devoted and religious style, according to his patrons' desire.⁴

Consequently to that, we can understand why the neo-sabatinian *The Virgin with the Child, St. Leonard and two donators* at Colobraro (1595; fig. 3), the baroccesque *Our Lady of the Rosary* at Prepezzano (1601) and the picture of the same subject at Orta di Atella (1603; fig. 4) could be born side by side with an absolutely visionary painting as the *Baptism of Christ* in the Dome of Naples (1605).

As I said before, the *Holy family with the young St. John the Baptist* shows a strong reference to the forms of Raphael and his circle. This is proven especially by the composition, where the painter had fitted circular *Holy Family* raphaellesque prototypes to the square size. The complete work of Francesco Curia proves indeed the artist's deep interest in a Southern Italian version of the great manner of Raphael as adapted in Naples by Andrea da Salerno and Giovan Filippo Criscuolo. But in this particular case I believe that Curia had processed an important original of the master from Urbino, as the famous so-called *Our Lady of the fish* (Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado; fig. 5), visible in the del Doce chapel in San Domenico Maggiore, Naples, until 1638, a few years before the vice-king duke of Medina de las Torres brought it to Spain (1644).⁵ There is almost no doubt that the pose of the right bent leg of Jesus child had been inspired by that celebrated canvas.

More in general, it is correct to recognize in 'our' *Holy Family* the memory of Raphael's Virgin Mother beautiful oval, with Sabatini as mediator

or not. We can notice Raphael's influence also in the bright pink of Tobias' tunic, starting point of the Virgin's mauve-rose dress. Indeed, both these elements are very typical in works by Curia. For example, the same kind of Virgin Mary is in a picture signed and dated 1595 and mentioned earlier the *Virgin with the Child, St. Leonard and two donators* once in San Nicola at Colobraro, around Matera, and now in deposit at the Soprintendenza della Basilicata (fig. 3).⁶ Here as there we can imagine the Holy Mother's big eyes, now dipped down but exalted from the wide 'chiaroscuro' of the nose's zone. Eyes, hairstyle and delicate features come directly from Barocci's repertoire. For example, as Ippolita di Majo had illustrated, the so-called print with the *Virgin of the Clouds* was the model for the *Virgin with the Child, St. Anthony, St. Leonard and the donator* by Curia at Santa Maria della Consolazione, Altamura (Bari).⁷ In our *Holy Family* the beautiful *perfil perdu* of the Lady hides the high reference just in part.

The *Annunciation to the Virgin*, the main part of a drawing at Louvre Museum (inv. N. 1623; fig. 6) formed by three papers and dated to around the same time of *Our Lady of the Rosary* at Prepezzano (1600-1601),⁸ presents an equivalent girl's face. Moreover we have to retain the wrong ancient attributions of the drawing to the barroccesque artists Francesco Vanni and Ventura Salimbeni from Siena most significant in relation to the barroccesque style of the painting by Curia.

Then, we can compare St. Joseph's attitude and model, coming from raffaelesque repertoire (fig. 7) and from one Perin del Vaga's type respectively, with the main figure of a second composition on paper at least, as *Studies for God the Father and for the Announce to the Virgin* at the Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe of Rome (inv. N. FN 9113; fig. 7).⁹

Both models, of the Virgin and of God Father, are also in a beautiful drawing at the British Museum (inv. N. 1946-7-13-325; fig. 8), in relation to the lost *Purification of Christ* at Santa Maria della Pietà a Carbonara (1599-1600).¹⁰

Regarding the Child and the Baptist, we can

⁴ F. Abbate resumes his opinion about the artist in F. Abbate, *Storia dell'Arte nell'Italia Meridionale. Il Cinquecento*, Roma 2001, pp. 210-217.

⁵ On that see V. Farina in B. De Dominicis 1742-1745, p. 998, note 102. About Sanzio highlight and its importance for South Italy artistic context see L. Giusti-P. Leone de Castris, *Pittura del Cinquecento a Napoli, 1510-1540. Forestieri e regnicoli*, Napoli 1988, pp. 62, 71-72, note 15, with literature.

⁶ di Majo 2002, p. 131, cat. n. 8.

⁷ Ivi, pp. 70, figg. 44-45,

⁸ Ivi, p. 151, cat. D22.

⁹ Ivi, p. 143, cat. D11.

¹⁰ Ivi, pp. 147-148, cat. D18.



4. F. Curia, *Our Lady of the Rosary*, Orta di Atella (Caserta), San Massimo, Congrega del Rosario (1603)



6. F. Curia, *The Annunciation to the Virgin*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des arts graphiques (inv. N. 1623; a. 1600/1601)



4a. F. Curia, *Our Lady of the Rosary*, Orta di Atella (Caserta), San Massimo, Congrega del Rosario (1603)

see the same type of child, especially that impersonating St. John, seated at Virgin's feet in *Our Lady of the Rosary* in San Massimo church at Orta di Atella (Caserta, **fig. 4**), painted by Curia in 1603.¹¹

For all these reasons, I believe the artist executed the *Holy Family* between the time of 1595 and 1603, among the paintings of Colobrarò and Orta di Atella, preferring the latter period. In effect, I can place the strong contrast between the deep dark of the background and the precious colours of pink, light violet and green-blue, now returned to its original splendor by the cleaning, more in the 17th than in the 16th century. I suppose the same looking at the loose and free manner of St. John's hair and fur coat. Furthermore the original position of the same Baptist, who is trying to climb the wood chair of the Virgin, together with the brilliant colours are the only signs of the painter's mannerist great fancy.

In the *Holy Family* tender feelings come from Barocci's world, but the general idea of the



1b. F. Curia, *The Holy family with the young St. John the Baptist*, Paris, Jacques Legeenhoek (1600/1603)

¹¹ Ivi, p. 134, cat. n. 16.



5. Raffaello, *The Virgin with the Child, the angel Raphael, Tobias and St. Jerome (Our Lady of the fish)*, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado (1513-1514)



7. G. F. Penni (attributed to), *The Holy family (The Virgin of the book)*, Firenze, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti (1512/1514)



8. F. Curia, *Studies for God the Father and for the Announce to the Virgin*, Roma, Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe (inv. N. FN 9113; a. 1600)

canvas seems to belong to Francesco Curia. His protagonists are not smiling as it's happening in the quiet and reassured compositions by Barocci, nor they are too serious as in the Counter Reform Neapolitan paintings at the end of the same century. It is also almost unusual to see the Baby looking at the Mother as asking what is happening to himself, while the young St. John is kissing his arm.

We can be sure that with this new work the Neapolitan Francesco Curia confirms his independent rule in Italian Painting at the end of 16th century.



1c. F. Curia, *The Holy family with the young St. John the Baptist*, Paris, Jacques Legeenhoek (1600/1603)



9. F. Curia, *The Purification of Christ in the Temple*, London, The British Museum, Department of Prints & Drawings (inv. N. 1946-7-13-325; 1599-1600)

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28/10/2013
DOI 10.4482/17062013
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