

Grechetto and Paggi's library: reading and painting about natural philosophy in the XVIIth century.

(fig 1) On the 10th March 1627, the painter Giovanni Battista Paggi died in Genoa, Italy. Following his death, the notary responsible for the creation of the inventory of his property, an exceptional documentary survey of his house, allows us to locate and to analyse not only the nature and number of the objects possessed by the painter, but also what might have been their uses and where they were located.

Among a large number of artefacts, paintings, drawings and technical tools, a separate inventory list details the contents of an outstanding library. Peter Lukehart produced a remarkable work of reconstruction from this list of books to bring the messages of the compiler, often grossly inaccurate, near to very specific texts that Paggi could have owned actually in his library. Paggi's library consisted of two hundred texts and represented a major dimension amongst the libraries belonging to artists who lived at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, now known and cited by Lukehart. Even in the Ligurian environment examples are not many: Giulio Benso, Bernardo Strozzi and the Casa Piola library. However, Paggi's library is distinguished not only by its sheer size, but also in terms of the thematic range present in the collection. The libraries of many artists are often largely comprised of 'technical texts' that substantially represent and reflect working materials useful for an artist. This primarily consists of iconographic (*Iconology* by Ripa, *Images of the Ancient's gods* by Cartari, the botanical books by Ferrari) and technical (volumes about architecture, perspective and anatomy) repertoires, however, as noted by Lukehart, in the library of Giovanni Battista Paggi, these texts are - somewhat unusually - flanked by 17 texts concerning alchemy, hermetism and natural magic. Paggi probably accumulated at least part of his collection during his stay at the court of Ferdinand I de' Medici in Florence, whose brother Francesco I produced the famous *Alchemical Cabinet* and commissioned many works on similar subjects to the painters Giorgio Vasari, Giovanni Stradano, Jacopo Zucchi.

Paggi's library therefore presents an interesting case of an *à la page* character and by which we are able to understand the phenomena of renovation in literary production, thereby providing a conspicuous example of knowledge that is today almost completely ignored. The fact that some

texts owned by the painter were published for the first time at the beginning of the XVIIth century, clearly shows that Paggi's passion for these topics did not diminish following his return to Genoa, when he began to accept a large number of promising students into his tutorage.

(fig 2) Between 1626 and 1627, Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, later called Grechetto, began to study in Paggi's workshop. He was a young, promising artist who, according to the biography written by the biographer Raffaele Soprani, exhibited a passion for deep cultural education from a young age. Whilst do not have very accurate information concerning the apprenticeship of Castiglione at the atelier of Paggi, some documents mention them together in the last few two years of Giovanni Battista's life, complementing information detailed in the biographies. Although the time that Grechetto could have spent with Paggi was certainly short, it is easy to imagine that an eclectic, cultured, and lively personality would have been fascinated by finding such a variety of cultural aspects in the home of an important artist. In fact, even amongst nobles, not many would have had a library crowded with more than two hundred volumes, and with such a diverse range of subjects: a young man educated in the humanities would have been naturally emotionally inspired by the possibility of gaining practical teaching and the opportunity of learning about a very particular philosophical approach, such as hermetism, and natural philosophy from the books that filled the painter's house. Amongst these volumes there are in fact some works that marked the evolution of the hermetic-chemical doctrine, from the primal idea of 'making gold', up until the Paracelsus revolution in which the goal of the alchemist became to fully understand the generative dynamics of Nature.

(fig 3) The text that best represents this idea is the *Basilica Chymica*, written by Oswald Croll, who had eighteen editions printed between 1608 and 1658, and that was a conspicuous component of Giovan Battista Paggi's library. In the *Basilica Chymica*, Croll argues that in order to understand the real essence of the phenomena, a philosopher should take education from direct contact with nature rather than from books:

«Sell your lands, your houses, clothes and jewelry, burn your books. In place of these things, buy sturdy shoes and travel to the mountains, valleys, deserts, seashores and the deepest cavities of the earth; note carefully the distinction between animals, difference in plants, various kinds of minerals and properties and the origin of all things that exist. Do not be ashamed to diligently studying astronomy and natural

philosophy of the peasants. Finally buy coal, built a furnace, watched the fire and operate with it without ever getting tired. In this way, and in no other, you will come to the knowledge of things and their properties».¹

After highlighting the strict relationship between natural philosophy and medicine of Paracelsus, Oswald Croll also provided a new pharmacological repertoire in order to propose an anatomy 'of the similar' that would allow man, the epitome of the macrocosm, to identify signatures within things of which the outward appearance is only a partial indication. These programmatic lines that would appear to prompt research into transmutation towards a reflection on understanding and iteration with the natural world, make it clear that the hermetic and alchemical doctrine were not distant from research conducted by personalities such as the Jesuit Father Athanasius Kircher and Giovanni Battista della Porta, whose treaties were considered scientific texts in every respect until the middle of the XVII century. The presence of alchemy in the Baroque age should not therefore be reductively judged as a 'dark' (or worse obscurantist) relic from the past and to be devoid of any value. Alchemists continued to practice laboratory research in order to develop doctrines that were appreciated most prominently in 'anti-meccanic' environments, and where no real walls were erected between them and the representatives of 'chemical'. **(fig. 4)**

It is therefore possible that, along with other texts, the "Basilica Chymica" could have motivated Grechetto to transpose certain themes in his own artistic production? The artist's desire to communicate with a higher cultural level, probably relatively appreciated by the Genoese patrons, was borrowed from a deep love and a not common knowledge of book production and philosophical speculation that was contemporary to him: this view allows us to observe Paggi's library in a new light, one in which Grechetto must no doubt have had at hand. Whilst remaining in the field of hypotheses, it does not seem to be an exaggeration to say that the books that were probably read by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, most likely because of his early immersion in literary culture, were already found to be convincing as a key to understanding some of his works. The hermetic-alchemical matter is often cited when trying to read the works by Castiglione, but this process often originates from speculation guided by the desire to find a rational explanation in clarification of symbols and allegories used by the artist; Instead, what we now aim to do is to rebuild the creative path that could have led Grechetto to paint those

¹ CROLL, 1608, p. 35.

subjects, starting from the cultural context that he probably experienced during his training as an artist.

(fig. 5 - Journey of Abraham) Together with the *Basilica Chymica*, where the idea of travel and of the encounter with the multifaceted identity of nature, of animals and of the world (macrocosm) - themes that were omnipresent in the artistic production of Castiglione - is nothing but a path to the discovery of identity and knowledge of the human soul (microcosm), in the library of Giovan Battista Paggi there are two other highly significant texts: *Della Tramutatione metallica sogni tre*, by Giovan Battista Nazari and *La espositione di Geber filosofo* by Giovanni Bracesco. **(fig. 6)** The first text retraces the tradition of initiatic narration that became famous in the Italian courts due to the *Hypnoerotomachia Polyphili* by Francesco Colonna: in an ideal world created by the dream the protagonist travels through three different approaches of the hermetic-chemical philosophy, by the demonstration of the false doctrine of fools, until the revelation of the secrets of the «divino Lapis». It is the philosophical approach to the knowledge of «divini secreti» of nature that the Nazari wants to deal with through this dreamlike adventure. **(fig. 7)** As in typical constructions of initiation stories in the sixteenth century, the protagonist of *Tramutatione metallica* falls asleep **(fig. 8)** in order to be transported to a world inspired by the models of Arcadia that had been rediscovered by Jacopo Sannazaro, worlds populated by nymphs, satyrs and from any form of Nature in the most surprising and overflowing shapes. On a path along which he is led by several nymphs, the protagonist comes across several ruins and classical monuments, **(fig. 9)** minutely described by the author and accompanied by inscriptions in Latin, describing to the protagonist the philosophical route that were being experienced in an extremely wild world and one that is very similar to the representations made by Castiglione in many etchings. **(fig. 10)** It therefore appears possible to juxtapose this suggestion at the iconography of the so-called *Temporalis Aeternitas*, elaborated in numerous painted and engraved versions **(fig. 11)**. This subject, undoubtedly linked to the motto *Et in Arcadia ego* originally proposed by Guercino (1618) and later used by Nicolas Poussin (1627 and 1640), is partly transformed by Castiglione, perhaps due to the reading of Nazari's philosophical work. In fact, **(fig. 12)** the hieratic presence of classical remains, bas-reliefs and the eloquent inscription «*Divinae, et infinitae aeternitati unius essentiae*» that is extremely close in his *lectio* to that proposed by the artist in engraving and pictorial versions of this subject, **(fig. 13)** offers into

doubt a possible suggestion made to Grechetto by the text that was present in the Paggi's library. There is no doubt that this is not a simple transposition of a subject from the text to the painting, but a reworking of the text itself inside a more complex poetry of painting of which Castiglione was an extraordinary interpreter, where the paintings become the privileged place in which it accomplishes the crisis of a cultural context expressed by images. **(fig. 14)** It is also emblematic the closeness that can be seen among the list of flowers, plants, and musical instruments reported in the volume by Nazari with the so-called *Allegory of Vanity* in Kansas City in which, perhaps, it is possible to recognise the flower essences **(fig. 15)** and other objects described in the *Tramutatione metallica*. The attitude of Grechetto to the the natural representation from life, as was typical to some of Paggi's students (particularly Sinibaldo Scorza), provides to the painter a significant predisposition to the representation of still life, where the human image appears to most often play the role of a mere *comprimario*. **(fig. 16)** It's the same idea borrowed from the text by Nazari: the long list does not include human beings - the bipedal closest to man are in fact satyrs, nymphs and fauns, beings that are abundantly popular in most of the works by Castiglione - while the rest of the 'natural generation' dominates the scene unchallenged. **(figg. 17-18)** The idea of a non-contrasted nature clearly emerges from the works of Grechetto, which plays the leading role instead of man himself (for example in *Four elements* in the Doria collection). This thought probably originated from the artist's readings on the issue of *Philosophia naturalis*, a subject well documented in Giovan Battista Paggi books. It is similarly interesting to determine how the sources for its review and the blend of pagan myth and biblical-Christian tradition have common roots in the same group of books. Lauro Magnani well identifies the Roman libertine circles close to Nicolas Poussin, Nicolò Soderini, Athanasius Kircher and Cardinal Barberini as literary and philosophical vehicles of this religious syncretism, but, again, it is likely that these arguments were born directly from Giovanni Benedetto's first readings in the house of Paggi. **(fig. 19)** In fact, the pagan god Demogorgon, which appears almost everywhere in the paintings of Castiglione, crowning ancient steles, bas-reliefs and inscriptions in both allegories of mythological-philosophical approach (think of the *Tribute to Demogorgon* of Ottawa **(fig. 20)**, the *Bacchanal* of Puerto Rico **(fig. 21)** or the *Circe* of the Order of Malta **(fig. 22)** and the Palazzo Spinola Gallery **(fig. 23)**), and both in paintings that seem apparently linked to the biblical tradition, like the *Journey of Abraham* **(fig. 24)** of the Strada Nuova Museums in Genova, it appears for the first time in the so-called *La Esposizione di*

Geber philosopho by messer Giovanni Braccesco. The book is a Platonic dialogue where Braccesco presents natural philosophy proposed in the thought and writings of the great Arab father of chymia (Geber) through a dialogue with a partner named Demogorgon. The choice of the character is anything but random: ultimate symbol of the unity of primeval nature, Demogorgon is an almost neglected deity, virtually absent from the pantheon and the best known cosmogony, but present only in the *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* by Petrarch and in the *Imagini delli Dei de gl'Antichi* by Vincenzo Cartari: both text are present in Paggi's library. It is precisely for this reason that Demogorgon is the ideal medium through which to convey the idea of knowledge that can be gained only by returning to the roots of human experience, the survey of those secrets of nature so present in literary and philosophical production contemporary to Grechetto.

Giovanni Benedetto therefore seems a veritable demiurge through which the creative process takes place, a personification of the ancestral god, Demogorgon, able to encompass all the features of the four elements and the natural world and often represented in the the tradition of the hermetic - alchemical research as the philosopher in search of the very principle of nature in the so-called *coniunctio oppositorum*. In this perspective could be read the figure of Diogenes (**fig. 25**), expedient to represent the personality of the artist and the philosopher able to go beyond the mere human reality, towards the much more deep secrets of nature, symbolically represented by the apparent chaos of objects represented by Castiglione and the supposed insanity of the oil lamp lit in broad daylight. (**fig. 26**) A light that is no longer the instrument useful to the man to see the world of sense, often mean and degraded, as the intellectual light that is used to understand the ultimate reality of things, and that is true guidance of the spirit. (**End - 27**)