Gothic German Influences on Two Lombard Paxes, ca. 1500

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Fig. 01: *Annunciation* pax (Buttazzoni collection); Lombard (probably Milan), ca. 1500 (frame and cast, relief prototype possibly earlier)

Fig. 02: *Lamentation* pax (Private collection; Koller auktion, 30 March 2009, Lot 337); Lombard (probably Milan), ca. 1500

This article will discuss two rare paxes which share the same type of frame. One features an *Annunciation* scene[1] (Fig. 01) and the other depicts a *Lamentation*[2] (Fig. 02). The reliefs are cast integral with their frames.[3] Integral casts like these suggest the likelihood of deriving from a finer original in which an individually cast relief would have been mounted into a separately prepared frame. The existence of an undocumented finer original may be indicated by the *Lamentation* pax. An independent cast of the *Lamentation* plaquette is known in the Berlin museum collections[4] and features a flanged border functionally suited for mounting into a pax frame (Fig. 03). In particular, the width of its margins would

nest seamlessly behind the triple-tiered border treatment surrounding the relief as observed on the *Lamentation* pax.

In the case of the *Annunciation* pax, the workshop responsible for it may have excised a relief, possibly the *Lamentation* scene, from the prepared wax model and replaced it instead with an example of the *Annunciation*. The recycling of pax frames and the interchange of relief subjects was a common practice in workshops from the late 15th century onward. The *Annunciation* was probably not originally suited for insertion into the present frame because the relief is truncated along

Fig. 03: *Lamentation* plaquette (Berlin State Museums); Lombard (probably Milan), ca. 1500

Fig. 04: *Annunciation* plaquette (Victoria & Albert Museum); Lombard (probably Milan), ca. 1475-1500

its right margin in order to fit properly in the frame's designated space reserved for a relief. This is evident by a wider independent plaquette of the *Annunciation* at the Victoria & Albert Museum (Fig. 04).[5]

The *Annunciation* pax is therefore a later version of the relief apparent by its minor loss in fidelity and the addition of afterwork altering its original character. Further evidence that the frame was borrowed from an example like the *Lamentation* pax is evident by the masking of the inscription which appears on the architrave of the *Lamentation* pax. While preparing the wax model of the *Annunciation* pax the artist cleverly made use of a small decorative stamp or model which they reproduced in five small wax sections. The

remnants of their individual margins, pieced together in succession like a toy train track, can be observed reproduced in the final bronze cast (Fig. 05). One last suggestion that the *Annunciation* pax descends from an earlier model is the upward curving ends observed along its base. This characteristic frequently occurs on aftercasts and tends to be exaggerated as casts become further removed from their prototype.[6] Only two other examples of the *Annunciation* pax are known, formerly in the Albert Figdor and Stefano Bardini collections.[7] The original design of the *Annunciation* relief may still predate the origination of the frame and an example was accessible to the workshop responsible for marrying the relief with the frame found on the *Lamentation* pax.

Fig. 05: Detail of *Annunciation* pax (Fig 01) showing a modification to the architrave.

ANNUNCIATION PAX

The *Annunciation* relief is staged beneath a gothic portico with the angel Gabriel kneeling before Mary with a raised arm. A book rests atop a pedestal beside Mary who folds her hands to her breast as the dove of the Holy Spirit descends upon rays emitting from the mouth of God the Father above. Ingrid Weber, in her catalog of Northern plaquettes, discusses the independent example at the Victoria & Albert museum[8] where she groups it with three additional reliefs depicting a *Nativity*, *Resurrection of Christ* and *Death of the Virgin*[9] collectively assigning them to an anonymous Swabian "Master I.V.A.," ca. 1480. Weber's attribution depends upon on the date and monogram featured on the *Resurrection of Christ* plaquette in Berlin.[10] Her assignment of these reliefs to Swabia is due to a series of independent early woodcuts believed traceable to that region. Collectively the four reliefs grouped by Weber superficially conform via their shared Gothic influences, yet the embellished details of each relief differ and suggest the involvement of several artists or workshops.

The *Annunciation* motif was widely reproduced throughout 15th century Europe and in a variety of mediums. Its impetus and widespread dissemination is partly due to the aforementioned circulation of

woodcuts, probably beginning in the 1430s, and also through European illuminations of the late Gothic era. For example, the Bodleian Library in Oxford have a quantity of casually conforming illuminated *Annunciation* depictions on manuscripts from England,[11] France,[12] Italy,[13] and the Netherlands[14] datable from 1375-1425.

Due to its wide distribution, a German origin for the *Annunciation* relief may not be firm and an Italian origin remains possible. For example, an illumination of the *Annunciation*,[15] ca. 1430, by the Milanese artist Michelino da Besozzo (1370-1456) confirms an early

Fig. 06: Illuminated *Annunciation* scene by Michelino da Besozzo, ca. 1430 (Morgan Library & Museum)

Fig. 07: German *Annunciation* woodcut, ca. 1450-70
(National Gallery of Art, Inv No 1943-3-452)

Fig. 08: Detailed views of *Annunciation* woodcut (Fig 07)
and pax (Fig 01)

arrival of the motif in Lombardy (Fig. 06). The figural poses of Besozzo's illumination generically correspond with the pax relief.

If created in Italy, the *Annunciation* relief is still probably dependent on a model with German origins.[16] [17] [18] Early woodcut prints served as affordable and accessible source material for illuminators and goldsmiths of the period and one German woodcut from the third quarter of the fifteenth century (Fig. 07) appears to serve as a general prototype for the setting of the scene depicted on the relief. The scrolling banner is subdued on the small relief but the sculptor has made an effort to include the beginning of its Latin inscription with the letters AV, just prior to the termination of the banner as it passes behind the column. In the woodcut, these two letters appear just prior to the continuation of the inscription behind the scene's central column (Fig. 08) and suggests the maker of the *Annunciation* relief may have had the woodcut available as a reference point.[19]

Another possible source for Mary's pose, presenting her hands folded to her breast and a book upon a pedestal beside her, may have borrowed from an *Annunciation* at Santa Maria di Castello in Genoa, painted by the German artist Jos Amman in 1451 (Fig. 09). However, the stubby composure of the characters within the relief scene and the widely framed and square pax frame recalls the compacted figures observed through window-like vignettes in manuscript illuminations.

The pax, probably of Lombard origin, evokes influences characteristic of late 15th century Milanese illuminators who continued to rely on Gothic traditions into the early Renaissance. Comparisons with the work of Cristoforo de Predis (1440-86) may be evident in the

afterwork of the relief with the addition of bricks to the scene's architecture, an uncommon treatment for small plaquette reliefs (Fig. 10).[20] The vaulted arched ceiling, compressed figures and dense details recall his illuminations for the *Borromeo Book of Hours*.[21]

Further suggestive of a Milanese origin is the architectural French Rayonnant Gothic influence on the vault and gabled entryway as well as the Corinithian capitals shown in the plaquette relief. These French features are unique to Milan's cathedral and had an impact on its regional artists.

The frame of the present pax compares with others located in the Veneto or Lombard schools but particularly leans toward Lombardy and again in connection with Milanese illuminations. Its frame recalls the illuminated portico featured opposite the frontispiece to the *Commentarii Rerum Gestarum Francisci Sphortiae*, attributed to the circle of Giovan Pietro Birago, ca. 1493-94 (Fig. 11).[22] The flat and level top of the portico along with its Corinthian capitals set upon columns depicting vases with plant motifs emerging corresponds with the characteristics of the pax frame.

LAMENTATION PAX

The pax relief depicting a *Lamentation* scene shows the three Mary's attending the corpse of Christ.[23] Flanking the cross are instruments of the Passion and in the background are observed the kiss of Judas and the washing of Pilate's hands while above the horizontal beam of the cross are the moon and sun.

Like the *Annunciation* relief, the *Lamentation* corresponds with an early woodcut, in this case an

Fig. 09: Detail of *Annunciation* painting by Jos Amman, 1451, Santa Maria di Castello in Genoa

Fig. 10: Cristoforo de Predis, *Tribunal of the Scientists*, illumination from *De Sphaera*, ca. 1470 (Biblioteca Estense, Modena)

Fig. 11: Illuminated scene of the triumphant Francesco Sforza, circle of Giovan Pietro Birago, ca. 1493-94 (Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence)

Fig. 12: English *Pieta* woodcut, ca. 1500-10 (Bodelian Library, UK)

English print from the first decade of the 16th century (Fig. 12) which may have German antecedents from which the present relief derives. The central figure of Mary and the composure of Christ's body particularly relate to the print as does the incorporation of the Passion symbols.

An interesting characteristic of the *Lamentation* pax is its feature of the inscription: IN TE DOMINE SPERAVI (I put my trust in you, Lord)[24] along its architrave. The inscription again recalls the practice of illuminators whom integrated similar passages into the design of their compositions.

The Latin inscription on the *Lamentation* pax might further advise a Milanese origin as it was a verse given special attention in the Milanese church during the end of the 15th century. The widely celebrated composer, Josquin des Prez (d. 1521), under the employ of Cardinal Ascanio Sforza (1455-1505) in Milan composed his sacred *frottola*, *In te Domine speravi*, becoming a favorite in the Sforza court. The verse was also favored by Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98) who is believed to have possibly been alluded to in Prez's composition, as Prez favored the fiery preacher.

Fig. 13: *Pieta* applique, Veneto, ca. 1500 (Struble collection)

On account of the observations noted it is reasonable to suggest the two reliefs presented here are not German but rather Italian creations influenced by German models. The paxes themselves are rare and interesting works because they exemplify late Gothic influences permeating the early 16th century and likewise reveal the collaborative environment in which print makers, illuminators and goldsmiths cooperated in turn-of-the-century Lombardy.

As earlier noted, one additional example of the *Lamentation* relief is known by an independent plaquette in Berlin. Weber cataloged it as German, second half of the 15th century following after Ernst Bange who first cataloged it in 1923 for the Staatliche Museen Berlin.[25] However, an Italian origin is again possible. A *Pieta* applique[26] of similar style (Fig. 13), intended for and used on Italian paxes, may be taken into consideration as it was wrongly ascribed by Bange as German due to its relationship with images of the *Vesperbild*. However, the relief is now accepted as Italian due to its regular incorporation with a pax frame of Venetian origin[27] and due also to David Bonzato's discussion of the *Vesperbild's* influence on North Eastern Italian art in his entry on an example at the Museo Civico Padova.[28] [29]

Endnotes

1 From the Buttazonni collection, formerly with the Cicognani collection.

2 From a private collection: Koller auction, 30 March 2009, Lot 337

3 A separately cast handle is attached to the reverse of the *Annunciation* pax. The present author has not seen the reverse of the *Lamentation* pax and it is therefore unknown if it retains its handle. The handle featured on the *Annunciation* pax is a common foliated type used widely on paxes of the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

4 E. Bange: *Die Bildwerke in Bronze und in anderen Metallen; Arbeiten in Perlamutter und Wachs geschnittene Steine*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin, 1923; No. 1931, p. 69

5 Inv. 4498-1858

6 The contortion of the bronze along these extremities of the base could have to do with the cooling of the bronze which shrinks when cooled. The thinness of the metal along these extremities may result in some warping. Contrarily, it could also be the result of how the cast was poured, and this extremity may have been susceptible to flaws, exacerbated by successive aftercasts as examples are copied.

7 The Figdor example is reproduced in Bange 1923 (see E. Bange, *op. cit.* [note 4]; No. 2851, pp. 71-72)

8 I. Weber: *Deutsche, Niederlandische und Franzosische Renaissanceplaketten, 1500-1650.* Bruckmann Munchen, Germany, 1975; No. 4.1, p. 48

9 I. Weber, *op. cit.* (note 8); Nos. 4.2-4.4, pp. 48-49

10 I. Weber, *op. cit.* (note 8); No. 4.3, pp. 48-49

11 MS. Lat. liturg. e. 41; fol. 007r

12 MS. Douce 144; fol. 028r

13 MS. Douce 62; fol. 028r (a French attribution is also possible)

14 MS. Canon. Liturg. 92; fol. 026r and MS. Canon. Liturg. 17; fol. 025v

15 MS M.944 fol. 16v, Morgan Library & Museum

16 There remains also the possibility the relief could be the work of a German artist active in Italy. Mark Evans notes there were 13 goldsmiths from Germany and the Netherlands active in Venice between 1437 and 1508 (see M. Evans: 'Albrecht Durer and his legacy.' *Dürer and Italy Revisited: the German Connection*, The Trustees of the British Museum, 2004; p. 1)

17 Antonella Huber, in cataloging the present pax while in the collection of Vladimir Cicognani, suggested the pax was 15th century, school of Niccolo Fiorentino. Her assessment was chiefly due to the unique blend of Italian and Northern styles, noting how Niccolo was active in Florence but also visited Flanders, active in the Burgundian court as an engraver of seals (see A. Huber: *Un mondo tra le mani: bronzi e placchette della Collezione Cicognani*, Bononia University Press, 2012; No. 23, pp. 15, 49)

18 Bange attributed the relief as German, last half of the 15th century though acknowledged the frame's Italian character (see note 7 for reference).

19 Evans notes the presence of three German printers active in Milan from the 1470s: Valdarfer, Pachel and Scinzenzeler, any of whom could have been reasonable sources for further introducing German woodcut models to Milanese goldsmiths (see M. Evans: *Apollo Magazine, March 2011*, 'German prints and Milanese miniatures: Influences on—and from—Giovan Pietro Birago'; p. 3)

20 Ms Lat. 209 fol.8v; Tribunal of the Scientists, from *De Sphaera*, ca.1470

21 Illuminators influenced Milanese goldsmith circles as observed by late 15th century *baisse-talle* compositions and scenes of enamel work not dissimilar from how early French enamelers borrowed from their illuminating peers.

22 Fol 1v - Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence

23 Weber and Bange describe the relief as showing John, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and Christ, however, the characters flanking the central Virgin appear to be female figures from the present author's judgment.

24 A reference to the Biblical Psalm 30.

25 I. Weber, *op. cit.* (note 8); No. 12, pp. 50-51 and E. Bange, *op. cit.* (note 7); No. 1931 , p. 69

26 From the Struble collection.

27 Francesco Rossi convincingly argues for a Venetian origin, first suggested also by Emile Molinier (for Rossi see: F. Rossi: *La Collezione Mario Scaglia – Placchette, Vols. I-III.*, Lubrina Editore, Bergamo, 2011; No. XIV.7; for Molinier see E. Molinier: *Les Bronzes de la Renaissance: Les Plaquettes. 2 Vols.*, Paris, France, 1886; No. 435)

28 D. Bonzato: *Bronzi e Placchette dei Musei Civici di Padova*, Editoriale Programma, Padova, 1989; No. 6; pp. 39-40

29 For example, Pietro Perugino's (1448-1523) *Pietà con San Girolamo e Santa Maria Maddalena* recalls the influence of the *Vesperbild* in his painting made ca. 1473.