

1453-1458 Florentine triumphs by Filippo di Marco

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Introduction

In the previous year, namely a half month ago, I concluded a note (1) with the following sentence: “I hope, however, that somebody else – following one or another of the paths here outlined – may obtain the wanted results.” The question itself was simple: after the discovery of imports of Florentine cards in the registers of Roman customs, can we confirm this trade with similar documents from the town of origin? I was convinced that such documents existed and could not escape my search, but after that I did not find any of them. My closing opinion was that some further years were needed before the question could obtain a satisfactory answer.

Now I have found with great amazement that my question has already been answered, and exactly... a half century ago! Let me describe this “new” progress, coming from so long ago.

Two German books

I have recently read with great interest a book written by a German author on the German people living in Florence in the early Renaissance, or, to be more precise, in the late middle ages. (2) This is a hardbound book of 412 pages.

Unfortunately for us, the main profession of German people living in Florence at the time was that of shoemaker. The Via Nazionale, which now leads directly to our railway central station, or Stazione di Santa Maria Novella, was once called Via dei Tedeschi, because many of them lived there and there had their factories or shops. As a result, we cannot be surprised if most pages of the book are devoted to these workers, their families, their trades, their social life among fellow countrymen, within the town and also in neighbouring places.

More interesting for us is Chapter 4: “A minority within the minority: the qualified professions.” Here we find merchants, people involved with manuscripts and the earliest printed books, and so on. In particular, section 2 is here dedicated to workers in a) metallurgy, and b) fine arts. Thus we have reached our field of interest too: unfortunately for us, “our” section VI.2.b. only covers five and a half pages on the whole. Obviously, among art objects of various kinds, the production of playing cards must be considered on its turn as a “minority within the minority”.

The advantage of this text is that it is based, as most information in the whole book, on the accurate and original study of this author on the primary sources kept in Archivio di Stato di Firenze. We can thus obtain a few names of German and Dutch workers involved in the production of printed figures (independent of their use, typically as religious images) such as Giovanni da Miessen dipintore, Guglielmus Guglielmi de Brabante pictor in cartis, Pietro di Rinaldo di Brabante tedescho fa charte dipinte, Rienere d’Adammo (?) maestro di charte, Rinaldo che vende le charte, and others. (p. 278-279)

In this sector, most interesting for us has been however to find the reference to another book written by a German author. “Werner Jacobsen, the art historian from Münster, has recently described the various professional specialisations in the painting arts for the Florentine Renaissance in a widespread research: to the modest house-painters were associated painters of tables, furniture, weapons, glass, playing-cards, textiles, and still some others.” (3)

It is thus time to pass from the first German author to the second one. Again, we are in front of a remarkable work, even heavier than the previous one, bigger format, a lot of illustrations, and also some original work on the primary sources.

It may be considered as a big advantage for us the fact that here we are interested only in artists involved in playing-cards production. The amount of information to examine becomes thus approachable: only two pages deal with our specific topic. We obtain here a lot of information, precisely of the kind that I personally have been involved in searching.

In the particular case of playing cards, however, what is the most relevant part is not the fruit of an original research of this author, but is mostly summarised from an old article that is quoted there. (4)

One old article with ancient documents

I could read the article quoted myself and use it for further study. You can probably imagine my surprise in finding that all the new information precisely derives from the account books kept in the Archivio Storico dell'Ospedale degl'Innocenti, which I had began to study a few weeks ago. (I might add that the only Cambini's *Quaderno* that I leafed through had been No. 266, whereas this new information derives from the Nos. 264, 265, 267, and 268. However, it is likely that even if I had instead examined one of these four volumes, my conclusion would have been the same.)

I will now continue the discussion with the help of the information that can be directly derived from the article mentioned above. The article is structured in a first part compiled by Hartt with discussion and comments and in a second part written by Corti with a selection of documents taken from the account books. In the following paragraph, I copy the part of the selection of documents inserted in the original article that is of interest for us. I have labelled A to G these quotations, but have kept in brackets the numbers that they have in the article.

A (3). Estranei 264, c. 226, left side

Bartolommeo di Paholo Seragli de' dare...

E adì 10 di marzo [1452/53] f. otto, per lui a Pipo di Marcho portò contanti, sono per uno paio di trionfi richi ebe da lui. f. 8.

B (5) Estranei 264, c. 241, left side

Bartolomeo di Pagholo Seragli de' dare...

E adì 21 di marzo f. uno largo, per lui a Filippo di Marcho dipintore, portò contanti, sono per parte di lavoro gli à fato. f.1 s.4.

C (6). Estranei 265, c. 27, left side

Bartolomeo di Pagholo Serragli de' dare...

E adì 31 di marzo [1453] f. 5 larghi, per lui a Filippo di Marcho dipintore, portò e' detto contanti, sono per resto di 2 paia di trio[n]fi fatogli, come dise Ghaspare da Ghiaceto. f. 5 s. 18 d. 4.

D (13). Estranei 267, c. 35, left side

1455

Bartolomeo di Pagholo Seragli de' dare...

E adì 29 di marzo f. quatro, portò e' detto, sono per pagare a Filippo di Marcho, per 3 paia di trionfi e 2 paia di charte. f. 4

E (15). Estranei 267, c. 98, left side

1455

Bartolomeo di Pagholo Seragli de' dare...

E adì 6 di settembre f. due, per lui a Pipo dipintore, portò Giovanni di Domenicho contanti, per trionfi. f. 2.

....

E adì 20 detto f. uno, per lui a Pipo dipintore, portò Giovanni di Domenicho contanti, per trionfi. f. 1.

...

E adì 27 detto f. dua larghi, per lui a Pipo di Marcho dipintore, portò Giovanni di Domenicho contanti. f.2 s.6 d.7.

E adì 10 d'otobre f. uno largho, per lui a Filippo di Marcho dipintore, portò contanti, per un paio di trionfi operati. f.2 s.6 d.7.

....

E adì 21 detto, L. trenta, per lui a Filippo di Marcho dipintore, portò contanti: sono per resto di trionfi auti da lui insino a questo dì. f. 7 s.- d.8.

F (17) Estranei 267, c. 206

Bartolomeo di Pagolo Seragli de' dare...

E adì 17 detto [April 1456] L. sedici piccioli, per lui a Filippo di Marcho dipintore, portò chontanti, e quali dise gli prestava per trionfi gli deve fare. f.3 s.20 d.6.

...

E adì 30 detto f. quatro larghi, per lui a Filippo di Marcho dipintore, portò contanti, dise per parte di trionfi gl'ane a fare. f.4 s.26 d.7.

...

E adì 15 detto [May] L. dieci, per lui a Filippo di Marcho dipintore, portò contanti, dise èrono per trionfi che da lui. f.2 s.9 d.8.

G (22). Estranei 268, c. 217, left side

1457

Bartolomeo di Pagholo Seragli de' dare...

E adì 17 detto [April 1, 1458] L. quatordecim s. X piccioli, per lui a Filippo di Marcho dipintore, portò contanti, sono per 2 paia di trionfi. f. 3 s.10 d.6.

First of all, we have to understand the function of Bartolomeo Serragli in this trade, and for this we can directly use the “explanation” provided in the article.

“The most striking patron to emerge from this group of documents is the little-known Bartolommeo di Paolo Serragli, who commissions in rapid succession from 1455 through 1457 (Documents 3-22) a fantastic amount of sculpture from Desiderio da Settignano, Andrea della Robbia, and Donatello himself, and paintings from Filippo di Marco and Filippo Lippi, all to the tune of about three hundred florins (including Donatello’s materials but not the final price for the statue), a handsome sum for a family that had just survived ten years of exclusion from public offices and seven years of exile imposed by Cosimo de’ Medici. ... Corti’s new discoveries provide the solution: Bartolommeo Serragli was an art dealer, one of the earliest of whom we have any such exhaustive record.”

This dealer was particularly active towards the South of Italy, down to Naples and its royal palace. Some comments can be added now. Interesting enough is that these particular cards were of various qualities and values. Together with rather cheap items, we find pricey ones: remarkable among them is the first pack encountered, in 1453. One could simply conclude that at this rather early time it was still a new and costly kind of production, but also the contrary opinion can easily be supported: the very fact that this pack was indicated as unusually rich may prove that more current ones existed already.

“Oddly enough, the only project to vie with the Donatello statue in expense in this entire series of entries is the so-far completely baffling set of “trionfi” for which Filippo di Marco is paid very nearly fifty florins at intervals from March 10, 1452/3 to April 1, 1458 (Documents 3, 5, 6, 13, 15, 17, 22). At this moment Filippo di Marco is a personality of the utmost obscurity. We know nothing of him beyond his matriculation in the Arte dei Medici e Speziali in 1447 (Thieme-Becker, *Allgemeines Lexicon...*, XI, 1915, p. 564.) and none of the triumphs can be identified with any certainty; for the moment I will not try. From the documents it is not even possible to count them, although one cannot help noting that they generally seem to turn up in pairs. [This author clearly did

not know the denotation of paio as a card pack. FP] There may have been as many as eight of these pairs, one pair is listed as “richi” (Document 3) and another as “operati” (Document 15). The phrases suggest scene-painting or designs for masques or parades rather than pictures, but in the absence of any evidence speculation had best stop at that point. Perhaps they were paintings after all, and if they can same day be identified among the various homeless Quattrocento panels representing such subjects, we will be the richer by one more minor master.”

Rather astounding may be the fact that just in one case can “simple” playing cards be found as manufactured and acquired. We had rather expected the contrary situation, in which ordinary cards were the rule and triumphs the exception. Apparently, triumphs were precisely the kind of playing cards most looked for, at the time, in this particular kind of trade.

Somewhat surprising is also the fact that all these different packs were produced by one and the same cardmaker, Filippo di Marco. We can imagine him as a kind of “Florentine Sagramoro”, but evident dissimilarities appear, to begin with the actual customers, not a Duke of the Este family, but just an art dealer, who could sell further these cards practically anywhere.

Conclusion

Of course, this new information is not enough to obtain a satisfactory view of the production of playing cards and triumphs in Florence in the middle of the 15th century. In particular, the packs we have just run into here can be considered as the tip of the iceberg, if taken as a selection representing the Florentine production. These were items commissioned for export, together with several other costly art objects. Incomparably much more, and cheaper, card packs were by then produced for local purchase and use by common people, triumphs included.

References

- (1) <http://trionfi.com/card-export-florence>
- (2) Lorenz Böniger, *Die deutsche Einwanderung nach Florenz im Spätmittelalter*. Brill, Leiden-Boston 2006.
- (3) Werner Jacobsen, *Die Maler von Florenz zu Beginn der Renaissance*, Dt. Kunstverl., München 2001.
- (4) Gino Corti, Frederick Hartt, “New Documents...”, *The Art Bulletin*, 44 (1962) 155-167.