

Boardgames on frescoes: Milano

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This note follows another one (*Hoofdlijn 51*), devoted to a scene in the frescoes of Bracciano castle, representing two young ladies playing a boardgame and a third one as a bystander. Here we encounter another cycle of frescoes. The building here also is of remarkable architectural interest, the Biocca degli Arcimboldi, in the suburbs of Milan, which can be dated in the early part of the second half of the 15th century. Its location is about 8 km far from the Duomo, a distance once large enough to be considered as a country resort. An important battle was fought in 1522 just around this palace. In this century, it has been restored and described more than once. In particular, a full book has been published about it (Grassi) by Pirelli SPA, the owner of the building since 1918, with a remarkable part devoted to the frescoes.

They are painted on the walls of a large room and consist of a homogeneous series of scenes, devoted to leisure activities of the ladies. Four scenes are painted on the longer wall, two others on the shorter ones. A question has been asked by critics as for the actual aim of this cycle, maybe as permanent homage to a given lady or else as a sign of princely hospitality for visiting noble ladies.

The scenes are inserted within a common figurative decoration, being painted under a pavilion, above a rush matting, separated by columns. It must be stressed that the whole cycle was left in a very bad condition, and the figures were hardly visible. The main reason of this damage can be attributed to the technique itself, being tempera instead of real fresco painting.

In 1933, Mauro Pelliccioli, a specialist of restoration, was charged by Pirelli to recover the images under the control of Annoni, who had already cared for restorations in the building (Annoni). We have reproductions of the frescoes before and after the restoration, and thus we are well documented on the general appearance of these scenes in which several parts have been lost for ever. For a few scenes, one has tentatively to reconstruct their overall contents too, not to mention their details. Even for ‘our’ scene, which is not among the worst preserved

ones, we are lacking details which might directly provide a definite answer to our fundamental question: is this really draughts?

The dating of the paintings is not certain but it should be set either in about 1465 (Barletta), or in the end of the 1480s (Cogliati Arano), thus approximately from thirty to live years earlier than Bracciano frescoes. There is a further hint which induces us to an early dating of this witness, even earlier than the actual date of the painting. Annoni and other critics stress that the artistic style, the fashion of hairgear and clothing and the general atmosphere itself look like a scene of end 14th - begin 15th century. Thus, even if the picture can be dated in the second half of the 15th century, it intends to represent habits and games as used several decades before, when nobody would have dared to represent – instead of current subjects of religious kind – similar scenes. Scenes and figurative style of this kind can better be found among illuminations.

For us, the descriptions by art critics are not useful enough. Part of them consider the game as chess (Cogliati Arano), part as draughts. Even people considering it as draughts (Anoni, Barletta) do not realise that in this case we would be in front of a very early witness for the game, not only the earliest in Italy, but the earliest ever. The detailed study by Cogliati Arano has been based on the analysis of the photos taken before restoration – and she considers the game to be chess. I do not know whether her choice has been supported by some specific evidence, not mentioned in her text. My following discussion will thus be based on secondary aspects of the picture.

A first characteristics of the actual scene is its being extraordinarity crowded: at Bracciano we had, not surprisingly, two players – namely, the minimum required – and a bystander.

Later pictures representing boardgames are similarly outlined, with two or three persons on the whole. Here we definitely have six personages and it is not evident that only two are the players. A second characteristics of the picture is an extraordinary activity around the board. It is not uncommon that a player is painted while making a move, but this looks almost as a game of ping-pong in twos. This is very surprising for us. Nevertheless, the game cannot be considered an uncommon one: the table itself is apparently produced for the game, and it is difficult to think of a whole table produced for an uncommon game. For chess we know of many such tables, but the atmosphere appears here to be less suitable for chess than for some easier boardgame.

The board, where 5x17 squares are visible, is remarkably larger than usual chessboards. A reasonable assumption is that the artist intended to represent a double chessboard with 8x16 squares, as needed for rithmomachy; three lacking columns might be masked by the edge of the board, whereas the additional 17th row might be attributed to artistic licence. The game of rithmomachy, however, was not at all an easy boardgame – it was called the game of the philosophers and required a lot of arithmetics. On the other hand, to see here a 12x8 chessboard, as used for the courier game, is hardly possible.

What about the specific boardgame played in Bicocca fresco? On inspection, we would first suggest an unknown game among four independent players. Alternatively, the game may be two by two and the moves of the pair may be played subsequently or after consultation. Or else only two are the players, as expected: the environment is however so lively that some onlookers are not able quietly to observe the game; while two of them remain in the background, two others lively discuss with the players and show the correct moves.

The atmosphere is here typical of similar cycles of frescoes with ladies and gentlemen involved into play. Several such cycles of frescoes are known – Borromeo in Milan, Manta, Issogne, and so on, see Barletta – where playing cards, backgammon, ball and other games is represented as the main activity. Strictly speaking, however, the only similar cycle can be found in Bracciano castle. Let us compare Bracciano and Bicocca. The boardgame and the whole scene appear to be rather different. They do have however something in common: in both images, playing this boardgame is taken into account among the typical leisure activities of the ladies.

Thus, we cannot help thinking of a ‘jeu de dames’ or ‘ludus dominarum’ with the meaning of the game of the ladies. As yet, nothing is here established with certainty. The game represented may be a variant of chess, morris, or something else. The name of the game may mean other things, as the game of the ‘dams’, already suggested by Thomas Hyde and now supported on a firm basis by Arie van der Stoep. However, at first sight, the interpretations of the boardgames represented in both fresco cycles as draughts reinforce each other, and the most ingenious interpretation of the name ‘jeu de dames’ appears to be the most adequate for matching everything together.

Bibliographic references

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