

Boardgames on frescoes: Bracciano

Franco Pratesi

The starting point for this study has been a list of early pictures on the subject of Italian draughts, sent to me by Jean Simonata on behalf of Arie van der Stoep. On this list was an item which I had not noticed, at least in this context – the fresco of Bracciano castle (see figure). This work is worth discussing, particularly owing to its early age; in fact, this is not a further contribution from mid 17th century (as those by the Bamboccianti) but it directly comes from the end of the 15th century. In contrast to later works, here we have the typical atmosphere of a court -and a style of the gothic kind, internationally followed at the beginning of the same 15th century. Let us begin with the castle, using some information from a recent guide-book (Martino). The Bracciano castle represents a good example of fusion between military and civil architecture. It was built by Napoleone Orsini from 1470 onwards; the west wing was completed by his son Virginio Gentile. It has an irregular pentagonal plan with round towers and massive walls and is placed in a dominating location above the town. The room with the figure of interest here is described in the same source in the following way:

The Pisanello room has a cycle of frescoes of female figures (1497) attributed to an artist trained in the workshop of Pisanello. It is designed to exalt the role of women, and indirectly of Bartolomea, the energetic sister of Prince Virginio. The paintings represent mythological figures (Diana, Proserpine, the muses) and queens. The iconography shows links with late gothic court art.

Thus, this picture is different from the common figures of draughts interest; the scene actually belongs to a cycle of almost twenty ones and the fact of being part of a rather homogeneous series may be useful for its understanding. The scenes of the cycle show a twofold character: on the one hand, they represent typical occupations of ladies, especially during their leisure time; on the other hand, the personages are not rep-

resented as real people of the court but as queens or similar female personages of the classical tradition (as confirmed by the names written below the figures).

We have much information on the cycle, to begin with the first description by Borsari, when these frescoes were hardly visible. A significant restoration was carried out by Ojetti at the beginning of the 20th century. In the catalogue of the 1981 exhibition, the cycle is described in detail, also from a technical point of view. We are even informed on the specific techniques and chemicals used by original painters and by later restores. For instance, the marked dark contour line along the profile of the personages can be completely attributed to Ojetti. The specific fresco of draughts interest is not among those which have been completely repainted after the repairs needed for replacing the roof in its original location, and the only significant additions (apart from peripheral zones) are the contour lines mentioned.

Critics debate the name of the artist, probably the same of the Hercules cycle in another room, a follower of Pisanello or a fellow of Antonazzo. The very name of the artist is not very relevant to us, but the date of the work is so; fortunately, the experts agree in centring it in 1497, with the uncertainty of just a couple of years. Thus, all of the main parts have been preserved from the end of the 15th century – this witness would thus be about a century earlier than any explicit information we have for Italian draughts from literary texts.

Let us focus attention on the specific scene of greatest interest to us. Even this scene is not a single item – there are actually two scenes, separated by a slender column, within a loggia or an interior. On the right, two damsels are playing with balls; on the left, two others are playing a board game while a third is looking from the background. The scene on the right is useful to assure us that these damsels are enjoying their leisure time; just for a pastime can one behave like that. The same is true for the left part, even if a somewhat greater concentration is required. Here we have reached the final point to be discussed, the most difficult one, whether the board game is really draughts! For instance, a reproduction of this scene can be found in Chicco-Porreca *Dizionario*, among other specimens of the chess iconography.

The board is chequered with white and black squares, as usual; actually the visible squares would correspond to a 8x6 board but the two missing rows may be covered by the damsel sitting on the right. It can be noted that the board is located with the first row having a black

square on the player's right – as is now the acknowledged rule for draughts, different from chess where this square should be white. But, considering the date, this cannot be assumed as a proof for draughts.

In order to have a certain witness of draughts being played, we look for the details and especially for men on the board. Everybody expect some men to be present here, be they chessmen or simpler draughtsmen. They cannot be detected in recent reproductions (Martino), even if some traces can be noted in earlier ones. Probably, these traces were not enough for exactly reconstructing the previously existing men and restorers have repainted the plain chessboard, without them. Now, with the chessmen or the draughtsmen, we have lost all the internal evidence and we are left with such external hints as deriving from the environment and so on.

An indication on the actual form of the pieces may be deduced from the particular way in which the hands of the players are represented: we might thus conclude that draughtsmen can better be fitted to the hands of the players than chessmen; but this is hardly an evidence. If the light atmosphere of the scene and the evident lack of a deep concentration are taken into account, draughts is better supported than chess. Another hint for draughts derives from the fact that chess is usually represented as played by men or between a lady and a gentleman. An independent indication in favour of draughts would derive from the name itself of this game, if we verbatim understand 'jeu de dames' as 'game of the ladies', namely the board game most typically played by them. However, Arie van der Stoep strongly rebuts this possible explanation, and he has studied all the questions implied for many years.

In conclusion this evidence remains rather puzzling as a draughts reference, particularly because some probability remains that it instead represents a game of chess. A useful confirmation would be found by setting this scene in correspondence to others of similar date and subject. I have recently seen that another example is known, which has several features in common with that above described. I will provide information and comments on it in one of the next issues. Here, I would only anticipate their essential character: not isolated works, but parts of a whole cycle illustrating leisure activities of ladies. Passing from one to two cycles of such fresco scenes, where draughts seems to be present, may provide a stronger support to the interpretation.

Bibliographic references

- L. Borsari, *Il castello di Bracciano*. Roma 1895.
A. Chicco, G. Porreca, *Dizionario enciclopedico degli scacchi*. Milano 1971.
A. Cavallero et al., *Bracciano e gli Orsini nel '400*. Catalogo. Roma 1981.
L. Martino, *Bracciano – le guide al gran tour*. Milano 1989.

