

From the Street to the Studio

CONVENTION VERSUS CREATIVITY

In early 1618 the Neapolitan agent of Cosimo II de' Medici wrote to the grand duke's secretary concerning his negotiations with local artists. Cosimo del Sera had commissioned a picture of *Galatea* from the city's leading painter, Fabrizio Santafede (circa 1560–1624), but he remained unconvinced of Santafede's capabilities. The artist had visited him the previous day in order to show him a rough sketch of the composition and to discuss the subject, 'since they have not had much practice in these kinds of subjects here'.¹ Del Sera's comment on the Neapolitan unfamiliarity with mythologies is revealing in itself, and will be returned to presently. But Del Sera's reservations went deeper than this. He doubted that Santafede had the imagination and inventiveness necessary for paintings of this kind ('io non credo, che gl'habbia tanta bizzarria che basti').

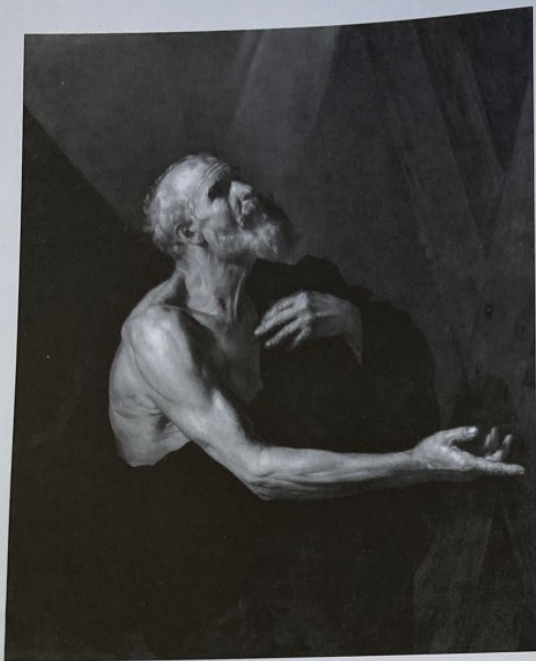
Del Sera had no such doubts when it came to a younger artist named Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652), who had arrived in Naples two years earlier. Ribera, he wrote, had painted for the viceroy three pictures of saints that were greatly esteemed and which demonstrated that he did not lack 'Bizzarria, e buone invenzioni' (originality and good invention). Del Sera lost no time in commissioning a painting from him. He was, in fact, so impressed with the artist's skill and inventiveness that he allowed him to choose the

subject himself ('metta il quadro in ordine, per farlo a suo capriccio').²

This brief exchange illustrates vividly the changing mood of taste and patronage that was just then beginning to impact on Neapolitan painting. Santafede's late Mannerist style, already challenged by recent developments in Neapolitan Caravaggism, would soon be eclipsed by the rapidly increasing popularity of Ribera's rich and complex tenebrism (fig. 3). Yet there was more at stake than a simple matter of style. The distinction between the two painters also involved differing working practices and a different conception of the role of artistic creativity.

The young Ribera had initially migrated to Italy from Játiva in Valencia some time prior to 1611. He arrived in Naples in 1616 after periods of residence in Parma and several years in Rome, the epicentre of the Caravaggesque art world.³ His background thus prepared him well to fulfil the expectations of the sophisticated Florentine connoisseur. Santafede's career, on the other hand, was based on his ability to cater to a markedly different set of expectations. His speciality was the devotional altarpiece, the *cona*, for which he is cited time and time again in documents (fig. 4).⁴ Patrons of these altarpieces sought very different qualities from those required of narrative mythological paintings. Displays of inventiveness and imagination were subordinate in these contexts to an emphasis on clarity and hieratic formal-

Facing page Massimo Stanzione, *Judith and Holofernes*, circa 1640 (detail of fig. 8)



3 Jusepe de Ribera, *St Andrew*, circa 1617–18. Oil on canvas, 136 × 112 cm. Quadreria dei Girolamini, Naples

ity. Compositions and iconographic schemes, such as that of *Our Lady of the Rosary*, were developed into formulas that were then carried over with only minor variations from one commission to another. For an artist with a large workshop, such as the Flemish painter resident in Naples Dirck Hendricksz (1542/3–1618), better known by the Italianized form of Teodoro d'Errico, this resulted in numerous duplicates of popular compositional types.⁵

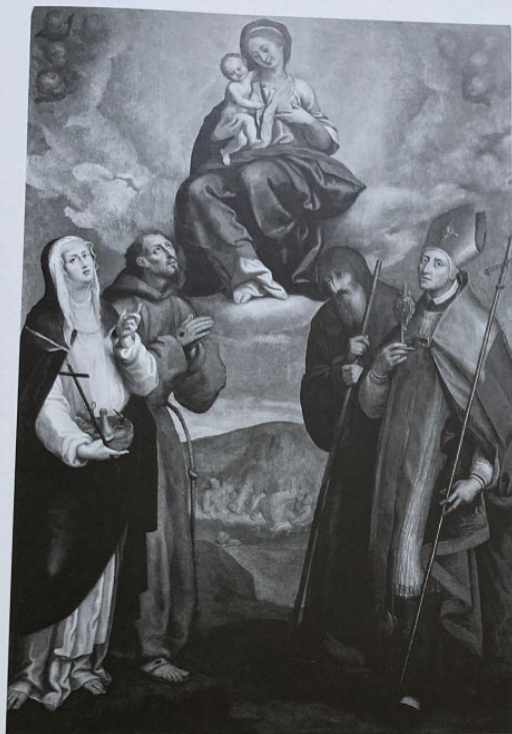
In a city that prided itself on its status as 'La Fedelissima' (the most faithful [city]), commissions for altarpieces were always a dominant feature of the local scene. They were particularly prominent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, appearing with monotonous regularity in the published bank payments and contracts. Private secular commissions, by contrast, appear only rarely. The reasons for this, as will be seen, is that Neapolitan patronage operated according to a different dynamic from other major Italian centres, such as Rome and Florence. The viceroys, although in the main eager to enrich their collections, took

these with them to Spain at the end of their term and were generally little interested in commissioning much art for Naples itself. There was thus no ruling household to set the standard for munificent patronage and no extended family to consolidate this, as was the case with the popes and their families. With no guiding programme of official patronage, it remained for individuals to commission works of art on their own.

This the Neapolitan aristocracy was slow to do, since it had moved en bloc to Naples only in the middle of the sixteenth century and had no significant local tradition of private patronage on which to draw.⁶ The late sixteenth-century collection of the poet Berardino Rôta (1508–1575), which contained paintings attributed to Raphael, Francesco Salviati, Vasari, Correggio and others and which was housed in a palace with a façade painted by Giovanni Bernardo Lama and with ceiling paintings by Polidoro da Caravaggio, was thus exceptional for its day.⁷ Those paintings that do appear in Neapolitan inventories of early seventeenth-century private collections tend to represent, instead, picture types that were relatively conservative by contemporary Roman standards. Portraits, devotional images and altarpieces were preferred over *istorie* and landscapes.⁸ In the 1620s at least, Naples accordingly still felt as if it were some distance behind contemporary developments in Rome. A visiting Spanish painter, Jusepe Martinez (1600–1682), when taken by Ribera on a tour of the local private collections in 1625, was probably not too far from the truth when he commented: 'since I had come from Rome, everything seemed small to me, as in this city people are more concerned with military matters and horsemanship than with the art of painting'.⁹

PAINTERS AND ARTISANS

The integrated altarpiece that so dominated painting commissions at the end of the sixteenth century provides a powerful visualization of the close and sustained relations that existed between painters and artisans during this period. The considerable collaborative effort that must have gone into creating these opulent aids to devotion is plainly evident in those altarpieces that still retain their original frames. Giovanni Balducci's *Annunciation*, for example, in the Chiesa dell'Annunziata in Piedimonte d'Alife (fig. 5), which dates from the 1590s, is made up of two paintings – a major panel and an upper portion that is often described in documents as a *cimasa*.¹⁰ Here painting forms



4 Fabrizio Santafede. *Our Lady of Grace with Sts Sophia, Francis of Assisi, Francesco di Paola and Januarius*, 1580s–1590s. Oil on panel, 228 × 150 cm. Museo Diocesano, Naples, on deposit from the Congrega di Santa Sofia



5 Giovanni Balducci, *Annunciation* altarpiece, late 1590s. Oil on panel, 453 × 340 cm. Chiesa dell'Annunziata, Piedimonte d'Alife

only one element of an elaborate decorative ensemble, as carved and gilded *putti*, herms and angels vie for the viewer's attention alongside a further two reliquaries of female saints that have been added to the tops of the columns. Documents of the period abound with like descriptions mentioning equally elaborate frames that were often to be executed by the carver following designs provided by either the artist or the patron.¹¹

An unusually detailed sense of the complex process of collaboration involved in these constructions can be gained from the circumstances of a failed commission of 1588. In June of that year the painter Decio Tramontano (documented 1573–99) found himself involved in litigation with the Benedictine monastery of Santi Severino e Sossio.¹² In April of the previous year he had been commissioned to

paint an altarpiece for which the monks were now tired of waiting. He had been given eight months to finish it, together with a down payment of 15 ducats and exemption from rent on his lodgings, which were owned by the abbey. Despite constant assurances that the altarpiece would soon be completed, he had never finished it and, to add insult to injury, had been seen in his workshop at work on other altarpieces. In his defence, Tramontano produced a physician to testify to a period of five months' illness and asked to be allowed to complete the commission now that his health had returned.

The proceedings include testimonies from four artisans involved in the commission who were quick to distance themselves from any potential blame for the delay. First to testify were the master gilders, Giannantonio Millone, Nardo

de Lanno and Cesare Villano. Tramontano had employed them to lay in the panel's gesso ground, but its size had caused them problems (with the frame fitted, it came to a massive 4.75 × 3.69 m). As such, it was too large to fit in Tramontano's workshop and had to be worked on further and dried out of doors. It had not dried properly because of the dampness of the winter weather ('li tempi non erano naturali per essere Inverno et et [sic] humido'), which resulted in their losing both time and money.

Next to testify was the master carpenter, Paolo Cimino.¹³ He had been commissioned, by the monastery rather than by Tramontano, to prepare the altarpiece and to carve its frame. He had prepared the panel, but was unable to complete the work because it had been left in a cellar before it had dried properly, and needed to be exposed to the sun for several months and turned continuously before it could be worked on further. Cimino is not specific about what his work entailed, but his procedures can be readily determined from other documents. His first task would have been to cut the panel to the required dimensions. He may have been given only a few days to complete this, since a week was the timeline set on another occasion for him to cut a panel and to send it on to the painter, who would have been expected to have it gessoed by gilders.¹⁴ Cimino would then have carved the surrounding frame while the painter was honouring his part of the contract. He would finally have had to return to the project in order to fit the frame to the painted panel in either the painter's workshop or his own.¹⁵ (It was at this stage that he appears to have experienced difficulties.)¹⁶

The case constitutes one of the very few instances in which the involvement of artisans in painting commissions is discussed, and these are the only Neapolitan documents known to the author in which Baroque artisans speak directly of their relations with painters. (None could write with confidence and Cimino could not sign his name.) They demonstrate that the production of Tramontano's altarpiece was a complicated, labour-intensive task involving three different specialists engaged in a complicated working quadrille that involved their intersecting on at least five stages of production. First, the carpenter prepared the panel that the gilders then gessoed. Next, the painter painted the altarpiece. Then the carpenter returned to fit the frame, and only then could the gilder return to gild its surfaces. When one worker failed to honour the contract, his co-workers on the commission were all directly affected.

In fact, in terms of division of labour and subcontracted payment, Tramontano's altarpiece constitutes one of the least-

involved types of painting commission then in existence in Naples. Religious institutions sometimes took it upon themselves to hire and supervise the carvers and gilders of altarpieces, as the monks of Santi Severino e Sossio seem wisely to have decided in the case of Tramontano's altarpiece.¹⁷ They just as often nevertheless delegated responsibility for the entire commission to the painter, including the frame.¹⁸ It was even more common for private patrons to expect the painter to oversee all stages of production. As the other payments to Cimino attest, this added considerably to the artists' workloads. Tramontano and his colleagues would thus have been responsible not only for preparing and painting the panel but also for having it carved, for designing the frame, and for employing competent carpenters and gilders to carry out the work.¹⁹

This added complication of time and expense must have cut considerably into all these artists' earnings. The cost of framing and gilding an altarpiece was, after all, not inconsiderable and could in fact exceed the prices outlaid for the paintings themselves. In 1588, for example, one of Santafede's patrons paid 68 ducats out of his own pocket for the frame of an altarpiece that he was just then working on before paying an additional 115 ducats for its gilding and ultramarine.²⁰ The documentation for Santafede's part of the commission is lost in this instance, but during this period it is unlikely to have exceeded his upper limit of 60 ducats. The frame for Santafede's altarpiece would probably have thus cost more than three times the painting itself. For fresco contracts and large-scale decorative ensembles, of course, the division of labour and mode of payment could be still more complicated, as will be seen, with the addition of stucco workers, assistant frescoists and specialists to fresco the landscape and *grotteschi*. With very few exceptions, in the context of public commissions, these costs were all incurred by the painter.²¹

THE ARTISTS' QUARTER AND FAMILY CONNECTIONS

The deep and widespread associations between painters and artisans during this period grew naturally out of the close-knit Neapolitan artistic communities of the day. The Neapolitan professions each had their own district. A high proportion of painters, sculptors, carvers and gilders all lived together in the area around the Palazzo Gravina, illustrated in the *veduta* of the 1620s or 1630s (see fig. 70). This neighbourhood, centred on the Piazza della Carità

and made up of lands traditionally held by the duca di Monteleone and the nearby monastery of Monteoliveto, was known as the *Quartiere della Carità*. It was a prime district of commerce – and thus also of art dealing – since it was situated between the seats of government, the court and the Spanish residents who represented the state. It also connected with the *Via Toledo*, a long, straight street created by vice-regal decree in the 1530s to facilitate expansion towards the port and still today one of the city's principal thoroughfares. Artists and artisans alike thronged here and in the adjoining *quartiere* of Spirito Santo.²² Prota Giurleo accordingly describes this district as a veritable beehive of artists. Almost all the best-known painters of Naples (and many more besides) lived in the area down through the generations.

From the opening decades of the seventeenth century the district was thus home to the leading painter Fabrizio Santafede, together with dozens more painters, both established and aspiring alike. These included such well-known specialists in the devotional *cona* industry as Teodoro d'Errico, Loise Rodriguez, Cornelis Smet and Wensel Cobergher, as well as slightly less prominent artists such as Tommaso de Rosa, Giovanni Antonio Ardito, Loys Croys, Jacob Isaacs. van Swanenburgh, Antonio Giusto, Matteo Cafaro, Domenico and Vito Greco, and Sebastiano Sellitto. From the next generation of early Neapolitan followers of Caravaggio, Carlo Sellitto is also encountered living here, together with Giovanni Battista Caracciolo, Giovanni Bernardino Azzolino and Filippo Vitale, as well as the sculptor Pietro Bernini. From the next generation of those painters active during the peak years of the 1630s and 1640s are also found the young Salvator Rosa, together with Juan Do, Bartolomeo Passante, Massimo Stanzione, Bernardo Cavallino, Agostino Beltrano, Diana de Rosa, Pacecco de Rosa, Giacomo Recco and Viviano Codazzi (the last of whom had moved to Naples from Rome).²³ Those painters, particularly foreigners, who were not able to find lodgings in the district formed a second colony outside the *Porta Reale* at the end of *Via Toledo*.²⁴

Living and working in such close daily proximity naturally encouraged these artists to seek to strengthen their pre-existing professional associations via the common practice of intermarriage. In this clannish and tightly interconnected world, in fact, one soon finds that any given artist was likely to be related in some way or other to many of his or her contemporaries. Tracing the threads of any one of these personal-professional webs will accordingly involve the researcher in unravelling a mass of interconnections

with other interlinked family histories. One instance should suffice to illustrate this common trend.

In 1597 the painter Tommaso de Rosa married Caterina de Mauro, sister of the painters Marcello and Cesare de Mauro. With this marriage Tommaso formalized his partnership within the De Mauro family business, and he worked alongside his brothers-in-law from that point onwards. In 1626 Tommaso's and Caterina's younger daughter, Grazia, in her turn married Ribera's pupil, Juan Do, with Ribera and Caracciolo serving as co-witnesses to the marriage. (Ten years earlier Ribera had himself married Caterina Azzolino, daughter of the painter Giovanni Bernardino Azzolino.) In this same year of 1626 Tommaso's and Caterina's eldest daughter, Diana (aka Annella), also married another young painter named Agostino Beltrano. Unusually for the time, both the bride and the groom were aspiring painters. Beltrano was cousin to Andrea Vaccaro, a follower of Caravaggio who went on to compete with Luca Giordano in a significant public commission during the early 1660s, and he himself would go on to work under Stanzione during the 1640s and 1650s. For her part, Diana also became an accomplished, if today frustratingly obscure painter, who also worked for a period in Stanzione's studio prior to her early death in 1643. Finally, Caterina's and Tommaso's only son, Francesco de Rosa, would also later become one of Stanzione's most able pupils under the better-known epithet of Pacecco de Rosa.

In 1610 Tommaso de Rosa died prematurely, aged forty. His widow waited two years before remarrying, aged thirty, this time to the early Neapolitan Caravaggesque painter Filippo Vitale, who was five or so years her junior. Vitale was then attached to the workshop of Carlo Sellitto just down the road, and this association must have been one of the principal attractions of the marriage, at least in terms of its potential to provide further stability and consolidation for both Caterina de Rosa herself as well as to the De Mauro-De Rosa family's fortunes more generally. Tommaso de Rosa seems to have been a reasonably successful painter, notwithstanding the fact that his one known work today has been characterized as 'prosaic ... unconvincing' and representative of 'an artist of not exceptional talent working in the late Mannerist tradition which extended well into the seventeenth century in Naples'.²⁵ While Caterina presumably would not have seen things this way, Vitale was nevertheless certainly well placed in terms of his future prospects, since Sellitto was then the leading painter of the new Caravaggesque style (fig. 6), a field that he led until his own early death in 1614; this

was followed soon thereafter by Ribera's eclipsing of the Neapolitan Caravaggesque field following his arrival in the city in 1616. Vitale would likewise go on to become one of the leading Caravaggesque painters in the years following Sellitto's death (fig. 7), until he too was progressively edged out of the field of principal painters of the city following the ascendancy of Ribera and Stanzione from the 1620s.

With this marriage Vitale also became stepfather to Caterina's children, among them Diana and Francesco de Rosa (then aged eleven and six, respectively), who thus now had two artist father figures to follow in their vocations. The marriage produced further offspring and further matrimonial alliances in turn. In 1639 Caterina's and Filippo's only

6 Carlo Sellitto, *St Cecilia*, 1613. Oil on canvas, 245 × 184 cm. Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples



daughter, Orsola, married Aniello Falcone, who was just then instigating one of the earliest private life drawing academies in Naples. Twelve years later Aniello Falcone's sister, Candida, married Onofrio de Leone, himself a painter and also brother to one of Falcone's most gifted pupils, Andrea de Leone. Finally, in 1661, Grazia de Rosa's and Juan Do's eldest daughter Anna married the sculptor Michele Perrone. Towards the end of the seventeenth century the daughters of Anna Perrone (née Do) in turn married the painters Paolo de Matteis and Giovanni Battista Lama. Thus an intertwined network of business and family connections had been sustained over a period of four generations.²⁶

The decision to send children into apprenticeships was also undertaken with equally tightly drawn family considerations in mind. Prior to their marriage in 1626, both Diana de Rosa and Agostino Beltrano had been employed simultaneously by another painter named Gaspare de Popolo. Beltrano, then aged fourteen, had undertaken a straightforward apprenticeship in which De Popolo had agreed to teach him the essentials of painting in return for his labour. Diana de Rosa, on the other hand, was then aged eighteen and so had already received some form of training in her stepfather's workshop. She accordingly entered into a more advanced, junior assistant's contract with De Popolo, who agreed to pay her 50 ducats per year as a result.²⁷ This contract must have been predetermined on Diana de Rosa's part a long time earlier, since Gaspare de Popolo was none other than her uncle. In 1602 he had begun his career by serving, in his turn, as apprentice to Diana's father, Tommaso de Rosa. By 1610, aged nineteen, he had progressed in the family's confidence to the point of marrying Tommaso's sister-in-law (Diana's aunt, in other words), Isabella de Mauro, shortly before Tommaso's death later in the year.²⁸

This complex web of long-standing familial and professional relations extended further to encompass the next stage of the careers of the children of Caterina de Mauro and Tommaso de Rosa/Filippo Vitale, together with that of their new family member, Agostino Beltrano. At some stage from the late 1630s to the early 1640s both Diana and Pacecco de Rosa, together with Agostino Beltrano, all made the decision to become junior assistants in the workshop of Massimo Stanzione.²⁹ Caterina and Filippo Vitale can only have approved of the prospect of their son-in-law and two children now progressing from their first relatively modest master's workshop to that of one of the two leading painters of the day. This move must have appeared particularly propitious given that Stanzione was just then receiving considerable acclaim for his development of a more refined and