



ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA SAN ROCCO DI MONTPELLIER
CENTRO STUDI ROCCHIANO

LOUISE MARSHALL

**« THE CULT OF SAINT ROCH IN LATE QUATTROCENTO TUSCANY:
PAINTINGS OF BARTOLOMEO DELLA GATTA IN AREZZO »**



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**« IL CULTO DI SAN ROCCO NELLA TOSCANA DEL TARDO QUATTROCENTO:
I DIPINTI DI BARTOLOMEO DELLA GATTA IN AREZZO »**

La prof.ssa Louise Marshall, dell'università di Sydney, è una delle più preziose collaboratrici del nostro «Centro Studi» per la sua competenza in materia artistica, con particolare riguardo al Rinascimento italiano ed al segmento più specifico dell'iconografia dei santi protettori dalle malattie, compreso, evidentemente, il nostro san Rocco.

Autrice di diversi saggi in lingua sia italiana che inglese, la prof.ssa Marshall è spesso presente nel nostro Paese, per approfondire le sue ricerche e per studiare sul campo i grandi capolavori dei nostri pittori; proprio per questa sua esperienza diretta, i suoi lavori sono apprezzati e ben conosciuti negli ambienti accademici internazionali.

Una prova evidente ci è fornita proprio dalla lettura del presente saggio, dedicato a due famose pitture di Bartolomeo della Gatta, artista per lungo tempo sottovalutato ed oggi ritenuto, al contrario, uno dei migliori interpreti della sua epoca. L'autrice, peraltro, si è soffermata non solo sugli aspetti propriamente artistici di queste due opere dedicate a san Rocco, ma anche sulle connessioni con il culto toscano del Santo e su alcuni aspetti sorprendenti delle scelte della Confraternita che commissionò il lavoro a Bartolomeo.

Ringraziamo i signori Giangiaco­mo Martines ed Anna Maria Ippolito per aver gentilmente concesso l'autorizzazione a riprodurre fotograficamente i due quadri di Bartolomeo della Gatta, conservati nel Museo di Arezzo.



LOUISE MARSHALL

**« LE CULTE DE SAINT ROCH À LA FIN DU XV SIÈCLE EN TOSCANE:
LES PEINTURES DE BARTOLOMEO DELLA GATTA EN AREZZO »**

Auteur de différents essais en langue italienne et anglaise, Louise Marshall, de l'université de Sydney, est une des collaboratrices les plus précieuses de notre «Centro Studi» pour sa compétence en matière artistique, avec une particulière attention à la Renaissance italienne et aux représentations des saints protecteurs des maladies. Cet essai nous parle de deux célèbres peintures de *Bartolomeo della Gatta* dédiées à saint Roch et des leur connexions avec le culte toscan du Saint.

Nous remercions M. Giangiacomo Martines et M.me Anna Maria Ippolito pour avoir gentiment accordé l'autorisation à reproduire photographiquement les deux tableaux de Bartolomeo della Gatta conservés dans le «Museo d'Arezzo».



LOUISE MARSHALL

**«THE CULT OF SAINT ROCH IN LATE *QUATTROCENTO* TUSCANY:
PAINTINGS OF BARTOLOMEO DELLA GATTA IN AREZZO »**

Author of numerous essays and articles both in Italian and English, professor Louise Marshall, from the University of Sydney, Australia, is one of the most precious members of our «Centro Studi» for her competence on artistic matters, particularly about the Italian Renaissance and the iconography of the Saints who protect against illness. This essay is focused on two famous paintings of Bartolomeo della Gatta dedicated to saint Roch, and on the connections with the cult of the Saint in Tuscany.

Our thanks to Giangiacomo Martines and Anna Maria Ippolito for kindly conceding authorization to reproduce the photographs of the two paintings of the «Museum of Arezzo» by Bartolomeo della Gatta.



LOUISE MARSHALL

**« EL CULTO A SAN ROQUE A FINALES DEL SIGLO XV EN TOSCANA:
LAS PINTURAS DE BARTOLOMEO DELLA GATTA EN AREZZO »**

Autora de diferentes ensayos tanto en italiano como en inglés, Louise Marshall, de la universidad de Sydney, es una de las colaboradoras máspreciadas de nuestro «Centro Studi» por su competencia en materia artística, con una dedicación particular al Renacimiento italiano y a las representaciones de los santos protectores de enfermedades. Este ensayo nos habla de dos famosas pinturas de Bartolomeo della Gatta dedicadas a san Roque, así como de las conexiones con el culto toscano del Santo.

Agradecemos a los señores Giangiacomo Martines y Anna Maria Ippolito por haber tenido la amabilidad de concedernos la autorización para reproducir las fotos de los dos cuadros del «Museo d'Arezzo» de Bartolomeo de la Gatta.



LOUISE MARSHALL

« THE CULT OF SAINT ROCH IN LATE QUATTROCENTO TUSCANY: PAINTINGS OF BARTOLOMEO DELLA GATTA IN AREZZO »

In 1480, the *Fraternita di Santa Maria della Misericordia* in Arezzo commissioned an impressively large panel painting to hang in their audience hall from the local painter Bartolomeo della Gatta (fig. 1). Most unusually, however, the holy figure who first attracts the eye in this picture is not the confraternity's patron, the Virgin of Mercy, but St. Roch. This article seeks to explain the reasons behind the Arezzo confraternity's unusual decision to displace their own heavenly patron from centre stage in favour of another saint. As I will argue, such a decision is a telling indication of the rapid development of Roch's cult in Tuscany at this date. As the most recent developments in scholarship have demonstrated, Roch's cult as a plague saint was a late *Quattrocento* phenomenon, and the devastating plague epidemics which swept Italy in 1478-80 were a crucial trigger point¹. The timing of the Arezzo commission is thus hardly coincidental: at the same time as Francesco Diego was moved by the spectacle of Brescia wracked by plague to write his enormously popular and influential vita of the saint, so too other communities and institutions elsewhere in Italy were similarly eager to invoke the new plague saint. Analysis of the circumstances of the commission, and the particular features of the *Fraternita* painting, along with a series of other images of the saint painted by the same artist for Arezzo and the surrounding region, can shed light on the origins and genesis of Roch's cult, and the reasons for his appeal to Renaissance worshippers.

As a lengthy inscription along the base attests, the panel of St. Roch now in the *Arezzo Museum* was commissioned in 1479 (modern date 1480) by the eight rectors of the *Fraternita di Santa Maria della Misericordia*². An entry of February 1480 in an extant account book of the confraternity records payment to the local painter and *Camaldolese* monk Bartolomeo della Gatta, using his lay name Piero Dei³. To fully recognise the significance of this commission, we must first understand the history of the *Arezzo Fraternita della Misericordia*. Initially encountered in 1257 as a Dominican-sponsored Marian confraternity, the Fraternity was redefined in statutes of 1262 as an increasingly autonomous and lay-controlled organisation devoted above all to charity («institutam ad opera misericordie faciendam»)⁴. As specified in the statutes, the objects of this charity were the

¹ Readers of this site will be familiar with the dramatic changes in the recent historiography of St. Roch. See P. ASCAGNI, *Le più antiche fonti scritte su san Rocco di Montpellier. Un excursus comparativo e sistematico delle agiografie rocciane*, in *Vita Sancti Rochi* 1 (2006), 19-57; and P. BOLLE, *San Rocco. Dai racconti agiografici alle origini leggendarie e liturgiche*, *ibid.*, 58-106, both with references to earlier bibliography.

² TEMPORE SPECTABILIVM VIRORVM RECTORVM. GVIDI ANTONII DE CAMAIANIS/ SER BAPTISTE CATENACI DE CATENACIIS TOMASI RINALDI DE GOZARIIS. S[ER] PAVLI NICOLAI/ DE GALLIS. IOHANNIS VINCENTII DE IVDICIBVS. S[ER] BAPTISTE IOHANNIS COLE. S[ER] FINI BERARDINI/ DE AZZIS. ZACHARIES IOHANNIS BAPTISTE DE LAMBERTIS. MCCCCL XXVIII. On this painting, see Giorgio VASARI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi (Florence: Sansoni, 1878-85), 3: 215; and *Nel raggio di Piero. La pittura nell'Italia centrale nell'età di Piero della Francesca*, ed. L. Berti (Venice: Marsilio, 1992), 150-52, cat. 26, with colour plate and earlier bibliography.

³ "A dom Piero monacho in Santa Maria in Grado fiorini sei d'oro larghi per la sua fatica di depengniere la figura di Santo Rocho ne la tavola fatta per rettori de la Confraternita; Arezzo, Fraternita dei Laici, Libro del Camarlingo, anno 1479, f. 30 [28th February, 1480]. A photograph of the relevant page is published in U. PASQUI, *Di Bartolomeo della Gatta monaco camaldolese, miniatore, pittore e architetto* (Arezzo: Soci, 1926), pl. 3; the entry is transcribed in A. MARTINI, *The Early Work of Bartolomeo della Gatta*, in *Art Bulletin* 42 (1960), 134 n. 10.

⁴ The fraternity «Beate Marie Aretine» is first mentioned in a papal indulgence of 1257; the text of this and the 1262 statutes are published in G. MEERSSEMAN, *Ordo Fraternitatis. Confraternite e pieta dei laici nel medioevo*, 3 vols., Rome: Herder, 1977, vol. 2: 1011-12, 1015-29. The characterisation of the confraternity's activities in 1257 (daily prayer, monthly meetings to hear a sermon and confess sins, and celebration of the Virgin's feast-days) associate it with other Dominican-inspired Marian confraternities, on which see *ibid.*, 2: 921-1004. Meersseman described the institutional history of the Arezzo Fraternity as a precocious example of the "laicization" of mendicant-sponsored confraternities, along with a concomitant transformation of the group's aims and character: *ibid.*, 2: 971-72, 996-98. In addition to Meersseman, the following account draws upon Augusto ANTONIELLA's historical introduction to his edition of the

traditional categories of the 'deserving poor': widows, orphans, prisoners, religious, and *poveri vergognosi*, whose social class prevented them from begging openly. The activities of the confraternity were financed through regular contributions of individual members, and a weekly tour of the city and countryside by the rectors, soliciting donations. In addition to accruing spiritual merit through participation in charitable works, members were further assured of the hopeful fate of their soul after death through the provision for monthly and annual suffrages on behalf of the confraternity dead.

From the beginning, the *Fraternita* possessed a highly public and corporate character. By the end of the thirteenth century, confraternity membership was almost coincident with the population of Arezzo; extant incomplete membership lists run to approximately 1700 names. Amongst these can be found men and women from all levels of Aretine society as well as regions beyond, from feudal nobility and patricians to artisans, servants and labourers⁵. However the officials of the Fraternity, and in particular the post of rector, were always drawn from the wealthy mercantile elite. Such a provision was in fact specified in the statutes of 1262, which decreed that the rectors must be well-off men, to prevent the suspicion that, during their weekly begging tours, they sought alms on their own account. As Antoniella notes, in the office of the rectors the shameful practice of begging acquired a highly meritorious character when undertaken not as a direct need but as a good work on behalf of others. The rectors were chosen from each of the four quarters of the city; initially fixed at four, their number was increased in 1266 to eight⁶.

The Fraternity's dominant role in the devotional life of late-medieval Arezzo was demonstrated by the strong level of communal support it enjoyed, in the form of special exemptions and privileges. The confraternity also flourished financially, building up a considerable patrimony by means of donations and bequests, which ultimately enabled it to dispense with individual monthly and annual dues⁷. As a result, the Fraternity came to acquire a kind of quasi-official status, operating almost as the institutionalised charitable organ of the city government. This was most clearly highlighted in a late-fourteenth century reform of the confraternity's statutes, which decreed that henceforth, all Aretine citizens were automatically considered to be members, without the necessity of making individual profession or contribution. Although some have seen this change in membership as depriving the Fraternity of its original collective and associative character, it is not clear why the new provisions should automatically have dissolved all sense of corporate involvement in the Fraternity's affairs and participation in the spiritual benefits of its charitable activities. Rather, with all citizens considered to be members, the Fraternity's rites of commemoration — which included a weekly suffrage for the dead in the chapel of the Fraternity hospital of *S. Lorentino*, participation of the rectors in funerals, and a funeral meal funded by the deceased's quarter — were now extended to cover almost every death in the city⁸. The semiofficial character of the confraternity is particularly evident in the commune's decision to entrust it with the task of maintaining the registers of the city's baptisms and deaths⁹. Not coincidentally, it was exactly at this period, during the course of the XIV century, that the confraternity moved its seat from the periphery to the centre, erecting a handsome palace on the main piazza of Arezzo as a tangible sign of its increasingly vital role in civic life (fig. 3)¹⁰.

Fraternity archives: *L'Archivio della Fraternita dei Laici di Arezzo. Introduzione storica e inventario*, ed. A. Antoniella, *Inventari e Cataloghi Toscani*, 17 (Florence: Giunta Regionale Toscana/La Nuova Italia, 1985), VII-LIII; and A. MORIANI, *Assistenza e beneficenza ad Arezzo nel XIV secolo: la Fraternita di Santa Maria della Misericordia*, in *La società del bisogno. Povertà e assistenza nella Toscana medievale*, ed. G. Pinto (Florence: Salimbeni, 1989), 19-36.

⁵ A. ANTONIELLA, XIII; A. MORIANI, 25-6. The Fraternity's large numbers, heterogenous social composition, and emphasis on collective charity and memorialization of the dead all have parallels in the thirteenth-century Fraternity of San Bartolomeo in nearby San Sepolcro, on which see J. R. BANKER, *Death in the Community. Memorialization and Confraternities in an Italian Commune in the Late Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), chs. 2 and 3, 38-109.

⁶ A. ANTONIELLA, XIII.

⁷ *Ibid.*, XIX-XX, XXII-III; A. MORIANI, 26-31.

⁸ As plausibly argued by ANTONIELLA, XVIII.

⁹ *Ibid.*, XV-XVIII; A. MORIANI, 22-24.

¹⁰ In the latter part of the thirteenth century the Fraternity generally met in the Pieve of Arezzo. In the early-fourteenth century offices were set up in the confraternity hospital of S. Lorentino: A. MORIANI, 22. The site on the main piazza was bought from the Commune in 1335, but construction did not begin till 1375. By 1377 the ground floor was

The panel of St. Roch was commissioned for this new palace, to hang in the audience hall (*Sala della Udienza*), where the rectors would give weekly audience to citizens¹¹. The painting's large size and gabled shape would have made it an impressive and highly visible addition to this major public room. It is thus surprising to discover that the principal figure in the picture is not the confraternity's patron, the *Madonna della Misericordia*, but the new plague saint Roch (fig. 1). Dressed in pilgrim's garb, the saint dominates the foreground. He is shown standing in Arezzo's central square, its surface strewn with large stones which perhaps are intended as a playful pun on his name¹², while also conveying a sense of decay and desolation to the urban scene. The carefully observed facade of the *Fraternita* palace is shown directly behind and to his right. Under the threat of plague, the *piazza* is almost deserted. Significantly, the only vestiges of human activity are centered on the confraternity palace. Two well-dressed men, who must be confraternity rectors, are silhouetted in the doorway. As they watch, two grave-diggers mount the palace steps, nonchalantly carrying the instruments of their trade. During an epidemic, the Fraternity paid for their most necessary services.

His hands clasped in prayer, Roch directs his plea for clemency to the Virgin. A *cartello* tied to the end of his pilgrim staff is inscribed «ora pro populo» (pray for the people). This familiar liturgical plea articulates both the petition of the commissioning rectors to Roch and that of the saint himself to Mary. One may also speculate that the choice of this particular formula, rather than the more frequently encountered «ora pro nobis» (pray for us), was deliberate. By replacing the personalised plea (pray for us) with a more all-embracing directive (pray for the people), the *Fraternita* officials express the conviction that in their appeal they represent the populace of Arezzo as a whole. And it is here that the link to the confraternity becomes evident, since the Virgin to whom Roch appeals is explicitly depicted in the guise of the confraternity's patron. Supported by angels, she hovers in the air over the roof of the confraternity palace, her cloak held out in the traditional protective gesture of the Virgin of Mercy. It is as if the sculpted *Madonna della Misericordia* above the portal of the *Fraternita* palace, carved by Bernardo Rossellino in 1433 (fig. 4)¹³, had miraculously come to life to receive the petition of the saint.

Commissioned either during or immediately after two years of prolonged and devastating plague outbreaks, and probably paid for with money from the many charitable bequests received by the confraternity during epidemics, Bartolomeo della Gatta's *Fraternita* painting celebrates the vital role of the confraternity at a time of civic crisis¹⁴. The commissioning institution is visibly promoted as the source of both earthly and heavenly aid for their fellow citizens. In the deserted city, confraternity officials steadfastly remain at their posts to supervise the work of the grave-diggers, despite considerable personal risk. In addition, the commissioning of the image also testifies to the confraternity's efforts to enlist the necessary celestial aid for the beleaguered populace.

Given this agenda, the dominant place of St. Roch in this picture is extremely surprising and requires further explanation. Previously, the almost universal subject of the Fraternity's artistic commissions had been images of their own patron, the Madonna of Mercy¹⁵. Moreover, if the aim was to promote the confraternity's close ties with their heavenly patron in times of plague, then the most logical choice would surely have been the variant iconography of the plague *Madonna della Misericordia*. By the latter fifteenth century, this was a popular and reassuring image of heavenly defence against the disease, frequently used by confraternities, religious orders and communal governments alike to implore Mary's merciful protection on behalf of their members and

completed and in use; the upper floor was finished by Bernardo Rossellino in the 1430s. See A. ANTONIELLA, XVII-III; M. MERCANTI, *Il Palazzo di Fraternita in piazza Grande ad Arezzo* (Arezzo: V. Badioli, 1980); and A. MARKHAM SCHULZ, *The Sculpture of Bernardo Rossellino and his Workshop* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 18-19.

¹¹ *Nel raggio di Piero*, 150; A. ANTONIELLA, XVIII.

¹² As suggested by Megan HOLMES in a paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the «Renaissance Society of America» in 2006.

¹³ A. MARKHAM SCHULZ, 18-24.

¹⁴ For plague in Tuscany in 1479, see A. CORRADI, *Annali delle epidemie occorse in Italia dalle prime memorie fino al 1850*, ed. U. Stefanutti, 5 vols. (1865-94; rpt. Bologna: Forni, 1972), 4: 197-8. For bequests made to the *Fraternita* during times of plague, U. LEONI, *La storia di Arezzo dalle più remote epoche ai tempi presenti*, (Arezzo: G. Cristelli, 1897), 1: 253-4; A. MORIANI, 26-27.

¹⁵ For earlier *Fraternita* commissions of images of the *Madonna della Misericordia*, including a fresco by Pari Spinelli in the audience hall, the same room in which Bartolomeo's painting was hung, see *Nel raggio di Piero*, 52-4.

citizens. In such images, the Virgin's traditional gesture of mercy — the cloak held out over her devotees — becomes a literal shield against the deadly arrows of the plague, hurled down on sinners by an angry God¹⁶. The highly unusual decision of the Fraternity rectors to feature Roch so prominently in their painting can thus only be understood in the light of enormous local interest in the new plague saint, whose cult gained momentum at exactly this date, during the devastating series of epidemics which swept Italy from 1477 to 1479¹⁷.

The key to Roch's popularity as a plague saint lay in the fact that he himself was believed to have contracted the plague and lived. In the *Fraternita* painting, as in other Renaissance images, his characteristic gesture is the demonstrative display of his plague bubo. Renaissance commentators invariably recognized the bubo as a sign of certain death¹⁸. Yet here is one who bears the dread sign and yet lives. For *Quattrocento* worshippers, in Arezzo as elsewhere, the sight of Roch, scarred by the plague and yet alive, must have been a powerful image of promised cure. In baring his morbidly marked flesh while remaining otherwise whole and healthy, Roch offers tangible proof that it was possible to survive the plague. Here was a saint who had triumphed over the disease in his own flesh.

The extremely appealing and efficacious reassurance that Roch offered late-fifteenth century men and women faced with a renewed onset of appallingly virulent plague epidemics, which is the immediate context within which to understand the Fraternity commission, is especially vividly documented in Arezzo. In fact, the town was to witness a remarkable proliferation of images of the new saint at exactly this time, all painted by the same artist, seemingly within a few years of each other, for a variety of interested patrons. In addition to the *Fraternita* commission, no less than three other large panel paintings of St. Roch by Bartolomeo della Gatta have survived, at least two of which were painted for locations in Arezzo itself. Two *predella* panels by the same artist depict events from Roch's life and may have been associated with one or more of these panels¹⁹. In addition, an impressive fresco on the nave wall of S. Domenico in nearby Cortona demonstrates that Roch's cult also spread to the surrounding region²⁰. Although only the *Fraternita* picture is securely dated, these other versions are stylistically close and are all usually dated within a few years of each other.

In the absence of documentation, it is impossible to tell if any of these pictures preceded the first published lives of the saint from 1478-80. In any event, confraternities in honour of the new saint are recorded as having been founded in both Arezzo and Cortona in the latter *Quattrocento*, and it is highly likely that such groups were at least in part responsible for promoting local interest in the new plague saint, organising public celebrations of his feast day and vociferously agitating city governments for visible tokens of communal recognition of their saint²¹.

Bartolomeo della Gatta's three other large-scale depictions of Roch all show the saint interceding to protect his devotees from the plague. Performed under the divine gaze, Roch's ritualistic presentation of his "wound" secures, indeed compels, heavenly favour on behalf of his worshippers. A panel now in the Horne Museum in Florence is possibly to be identified with a painting described by Vasari in the Servite church of *S. Pier Piccolo* in Arezzo²². The saint is represented displaying his bubo to a celestial figure — probably Christ, although the poor state of the painting makes it difficult to be certain — in the upper left corner. As in the *Fraternita* picture,

¹⁶ For the plague *Madonna della Misericordia*, see L. MARSHALL, *Manipulating the Sacred: Image and Plague in Renaissance Italy*, in *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994), 485-532; and idem, *Confraternity and Community: Mobilizing the Sacred in Times of Plague*, in *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in the Italian Renaissance. Ritual, Spectacle, Image*, ed. B. Wisch and D. Cole Ahl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2000, 20-45.

¹⁷ On the disastrous plague years 1477-79 throughout the peninsula, see A. CORRADI, 1: 313-26.

¹⁸ Anne CARMICHAEL, *Plague and the poor in fifteenth-century Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 79-80.

¹⁹ A. MARTINI, 137, fig. 10.

²⁰ *Nel raggio di Piero*, 144-6, cat. 24, with colour plate and earlier bibliography.

²¹ On the Aretine confraternity of Roch, see A. TAFI, *Arezzo, guida storico-artistica* (Arezzo: Litostampa Sant'Agnes, 1978), 416; for the confraternity in Cortona, G.M. MONTI, *Le confraternite medievali dell'alta e media Italia* (Venezia: La Nuova Italiana, 1927), 1: 137.

²² The basis of this identification is the inclusion of a city view of Arezzo, a feature of the S. Pietro panel as described by Vasari: VASARI/Milanesi, vol. 3, 215. F. ROSSI, *Il Museo Horne*, Gallerie e Musei Minori di Firenze (Milano: Electa, 1967), 143, pl. 51.

a scroll twined around his staff articulates Roch's pleas for clemency: *Spare, oh Lord, spare thy people* («Parce Domini, parce populo tuo», Joel 2: 17). Behind his left shoulder hovers the skeletal figure of Death, armed with a scythe. A view of the city of Arezzo, now almost completely worn away, was once to be seen in the distance. Below, a near illegible inscription at the base seems to reiterate the words of the tablet that, according to Roch's biographers, was found under his head at his death, with the divine assurance of his intercessory powers²³.

Inscription and image thus work together: the divine origin of the text serves to validate Roch's cult, and God's solemn promise that he will always listen to Roch's pleas is vividly conveyed by the depicted *ostentatio vulnerum*. As long as the citizens of Arezzo honour the saint and invoke his aid, their city will be free from the menace of death by plague. Another panel by the *Camaldolese* monk, now in a private collection in Amsterdam, repeats many of the same elements (although not the city view)²⁴. Perhaps this panel was ordered as a copy of the one in S. Piero, for a church or chapel in the surrounding *contado*.

By virtue of its extraordinary bouquet of colours and incisive clarity of line, another panel in the *Arezzo Museum* (fig. 2) is usually identified as the picture originally in the Lippi family chapel in the Arezzo parish church, singled out by Vasari as the painter's masterpiece: "*il quale San Rocco e una bella e rara figura, e quasi la meglio che mai facesse*"²⁵. The way in which this picture, unique among all those painted by Bartolomeo, spells out a vivid drama of divine retribution and saintly salvation, offers us at once the most dramatic and clearest indication of the reasons behind the extraordinarily rapid rise of Roch's cult as a plague saint. Literally and figuratively, the painting presents a confrontation between heaven and earth: Christ's determination to exact punishment from a sinning humanity is met by Roch's insistent petition that his devotees be spared. Divine implacability dissolves in the face of saintly resistance. Christ countermands his own orders, sending a second pair of angels to intercept and break the plague arrows before they reach Arezzo.

Bartolomeo della Gatta's picture is a rare and highly revealing visualisation of the operation of saintly power. The depiction of Christ and his angels sending down the arrows of the plague is usually confined to representations of the plague *Madonna della Misericordia*. In Renaissance images, Roch's intercession was customarily envisaged in terms of a peaceful colloquy between the saint and a receptive divinity. By contrast, the Arezzo painting illuminates the moment of conflict, when Christ's originally punitive resolve is contested and transformed by the intervention of the saint. The startling juxtaposition of apparently contradictory actions on the part of Christ's angelic helpers — one pair hurling down the arrows, another intercepting and destroying them — is a brilliant pictorial representation of the conviction that a saint can force God to have «second thoughts». This unusual image offers a compelling pictorial formulation of the saints' «battle» with God, as enthusiastically described by a popular Dominican preacher such as Fra Giordano da Pisa in a sermon of 1304:

*Pugnano ancora con Dio, e fanno battaglia; ma questa e buona battaglia, che si muove di radice d'amore. Qual e questa battaglia? quando Iddio vorebbe talora fare vendetta de' peccatori e punirli, e i Santi pregano Iddio, e non lasciano, e tutti pugnano insieme a un tratto e una concordia per la misericordia a' peccatori; ma questa battaglia e buona, e vuole Iddio essere combattuto, e piacegli assai questa battaglia; sicche i Santi sono fortissimi*²⁶.

²³ The inscription is now virtually illegible. Pasqui's transcription (18-19), from an eighteenth-century source, is probably the most accurate: SVM ROCCHVS QVI FVNDO PIAS PRECESQVE FECVNDAS PRO ILLIS QVOS FLAMMA NECIS PESTIFERAE LEDIT (*I am Roch, who offers devout and abundant prayers for those whom the flame of pestilential death harms*).

²⁴ A MARTINI, 137, fig. 8.

²⁵ VASARI/Milanesi, 3: 215; *Nel raggio di Piero*, 147-8, cat. 25, with colour plate and bibliography

²⁶ Giordano da Pisa (also known as Giordano da Rivalto, 1260-1311), *Prediche del beato fra Giordano da Rivalto recitate in Firenze dal MCCCIII al MCCCVI*, ed. D. Moreni (Firenze: Il Magheri, 1831), 2: 85, predica XLV. Delivered in the Florentine Cathedral on Sunday, October 4, 1304. Giordano was an extremely popular preacher, drawing huge crowds, and an immense number of his sermons (over 700) were recorded for posterity by various members of his audience. For an excellent discussion of the character of his sermons, see C. DELCORNIO, *La predicazione nell'eta comunale* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1974), 38-41. Richard Trexler invokes Giordano's comments in his stimulating analysis of Florentine perceptions of the operations of saintly power: R. TREXLER, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), 61ff and esp. 66-7.

Awareness of the existence of these other Aretine images of Roch help us to see more clearly the distinctively different iconography of the picture commissioned by the Fraternity of the Misericordia for their audience hall (fig. 1). Where all the other versions show Roch interceding directly with Christ (fig. 2), in the *Fraternita* painting Roch appeals to the Virgin Mary. It is she, rather than Christ, who is here represented as the ultimate authority. Without recourse to God, she has the power to avert the plague, if properly appealed to by the appropriate saintly intermediary. Of course, if Mary is shown exercising such powers, it is only because Christ wishes her to, as theologians were careful to explain. Yet the absence of any representation of the deity certainly cedes power to the mother, the queen of mercy to Christ's king of justice, the supreme and apparently autonomous heavenly authority to whom the new plague saint must inevitably bow his head. In this way, the Fraternity painting both testifies to the extraordinary recent upsurge of devotion in Arezzo to a new saintly intercessor against the plague, but also effectively captures that devotion and channels into a means of glorifying their own heavenly patron. Seen within its local context, the confraternity painting can be recognised as a particularly canny propagandistic effort on the part of the commissioning rectors. In the old phrase, if you can't beat them, join them — and get them to work for you rather than against you. In this richly envisioned painting, invocation of Roch's specialised powers as a protector against the plague is closely tied to the commemoration of the charitable work of the *Fraternita* and the exaltation of its patron, the Virgin of Mercy. In this way, Roch's undoubted charisma is enlisted and appropriated to aggrandise the role of the confraternity's own patron, the *Madonna della Misericordia*, as the ultimate source of safety for the entire city.

LOUISE MARSHALL

Louise Marshall was born in 1958 in Melbourne (Australia) and lives at Darlinghurst (Sydney). Teacher of the «History of Art and Cinema» Department at the University of Sydney, expert of iconography of the plague in the Italian art of the Renaissance – particularly about the cult of Mary and of the saints Roch, Sebastian and Nicholas of Tolentino – she is author of many essays and articles, both in English and in Italian.

Louise Marshall è nata a Melbourne, in Australia, nel 1958 e risiede a Darlinghurst (Sydney). Docente del Dipartimento di Storia dell'Arte e del Cinema all'università di Sydney, si occupa soprattutto dell'iconografia della peste nell'arte rinascimentale italiana, con particolare riguardo al culto di Maria e dei santi protettori Rocco, Sebastiano e Nicola da Tolentino; ha scritto diversi saggi ed articoli, sia in inglese che in italiano.

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