

Reviews

Valeria Rotili, Stefania Ventra,
Francesco Moschini (a cura di)

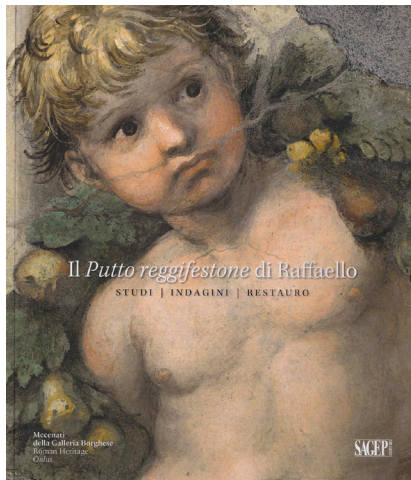
Il Putto reggifestone di Raffaello. Studi, indagini, restauro

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The goal of this short review is to bring to the attention of anyone interested in the material interpretation of artworks a recent publication illustrating the results of an undeniably important research that has re-assigned the paternity of a fragment of a fresco portraying a putto to the painter Raffaello Sanzio. Although the research has produced sensational results, its true appeal lies in its methodology, involving a group of scholars and the techniques and instruments they employed.

Several features of the study –three in particular– are undoubtedly worthy of note: 1. the multidisciplinary approach; 2. the rapidity of the research, from its ideation to the publication of the results; 3. a lack of any desire to influence the results one way or the other.

Although multidisciplinary projects have long been held in high regard in the field of research, they are not always satisfactorily pursued. In this case the project deserves to be examined more in detail because it is not only the foundation stone of the methodology, but also the element that allowed the scholars to achieve their key results in such an amazingly short space of time –a feature that that is anything but secondary. The rapid implementation of a project is very often deplored as a burden detrimental to real in-depth research; instead in this instance it is synonymous with synergy, exchange, and ability to

organize and collaborate. The study focused on precise issues, but clearly there was no way of knowing the ensuing results in advance. This is the third strong point of the research: the lack of any desire to influence the results. It is apparent in the lucid repositioning of the terms of the issues that prompted this new study of the artwork and in the simplicity with which the group exploited former studies so that they could examine them armed with new up-to-date theoretical and practical equipment and tools.

It's uncommon for a research project not to be influenced by the envisaged results, or maintain an open mind *vis-à-vis* the direction of the study in terms of gathering more knowledge and data. In this case the results could have been incredible (and they were), but they could also have confirmed the less attractive hypotheses, equally useful as regards the research, but much less appealing regarding dissemination. In short, the research involved providing a fresh start to an issue weighed down by extensive discussions and the involvement of 'excellent' scholars; the goal was to verify whether or not the re-interpretation of an artwork that used all the tools that current research should –and possibly, 'must'– trust, was able to solve the thorny issue of who designed the fragment of a wall painted fresco belonging to the Accademia di San Luca since the late 19th century,

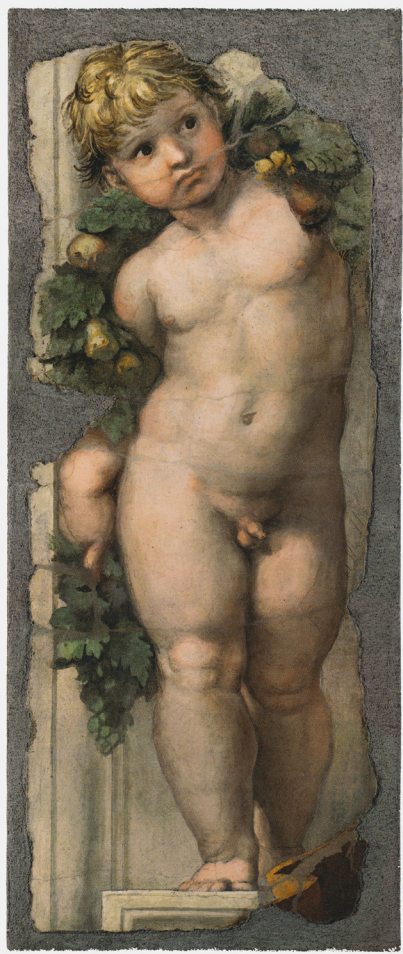


Fig. 1. Raffaello Sanzio, *Putto carrying a festoon*, 1513, fresco. Rome, Accademia Nazionale di San Luca.

and since then carefully and sometimes critically scrutinised (fig. 1). Instead another factor, that was anything but secondary, played a key role in the successful outcome of the study, i.e., the involvement of a very broad-minded sponsor who made it possible to exploit the incredible potential of innovative ideas, tools, and technologies [1].

The initial idea that sparked the implementation of the project emerged during an exhibition, more specifically during the preparation of the exhibition entitled *Raffael. The Accademia di San Luca and the myth of the Urbinate* [2] curated by Valeria Rotili, Stefania Ventra and Francesco Moschini. It was then that the three scholars came up with the idea for the research, so well documented in this book.

The work in question is the figure of a putto frescoed on plaster. As mentioned earlier, the long-standing *querelle* regarding the attribution of this artwork began when it became part of the collection of the institute in Rome thanks to Jean-Baptiste Wicar (1762-1834), a painter and above all a collector who had chosen and purchased it in Bologna, and then bequeathed it to the Accademia, convinced as he was that it had been painted by Rafael [3].

The fragment with the figure of a putto measures approximately 41.6 x 108 cm [4] and was obviously part of a much bigger composition. The putto is almost identical to another putto painted on a pilaster in the Church of St. Augustine in Rome; this latter putto is depicted in the top left-hand corner of the frescoed portrait of the prophet Isaiah located above the niche housing a sculpture by Jacopo Sansovino. The date when the fresco was painted in the Church of St. Augustine is pretty

precise –1513 ca.– and the fresco is indisputably attributed to Rafael.

So, we are dealing here with two putti: the *Putto carrying a festoon* in San Luca and the so-called *Putto of Isaiah*. These two putti triggered an impassioned but erratic debate between those who believed that the fragment in San Luca should be considered a copy (painted later and by someone else) of the one in St. Augustine, and those who attributed both putti to Rafael who is said to have painted an initial version of *Isaiah*, which he soon destroyed, leaving only the surviving fragment currently housed in the Accademia di San Luca. The research shows that the two figures seem to have identical details, are equal in size, and appear in the same pose, so much so that some scholars theorize that the same cartoon was used for both [Violini 2022]. This is not so obvious if one bears in mind that the *Putto carrying a festoon* is painted on a double-curved surface [see the geometric confirmation in Fasolo et al. 2022] (fig. 2) while the *Isaiah* is depicted on a flat surface.

The history of the *querelle* regarding its attribution began with Wicar's opinion of the artwork; it continued when the issue resurfaced in 1960 after two contributions (with contrasting positions) were published by Luigi Salerno and Pico Cellini in the same issue of *Bollettino d'Arte* [Salerno 1960; Cellini 1960]. This *querelle* alone would justify reading the book we are reviewing, because it illustrates the involvement and input by important collectors, art historians, conservators and restorers. This series of the more prevailing opinions is both fascinating and captivating; apart from Salerno and Cellini, other scholars involved are Adolfo Venturi, Vincenzo Golzio,

Italo Faldi, and still others [Venturi 1920; Golzio 1939; Faldi 1974; cfr. Ventra 2022].

The idea that prompted the research illustrated in this book was to once again consider the artwork as the key issue, because only by basing the research on a direct 'operational' comparison between the two is it possible to achieve new data and knowledge and, perhaps, say something definitive about its paternity.

The artwork has regrettably suffered the ravages of time and interventions that were not always successful. Apart from the issue of its attribution, it was important to give the work back its technical and expressive clarity and transparency. So the project not only studied documents and reports written over the centuries, it combined them with new material reviews and interpretations. The latter were possible thanks to advanced cleaning, restoration and conservation technologies as well as newly-acquired morphological, geometric and chromatic data regarding the deformed fresco.

Many professionals were involved and the synergy they generated succeeded in providing diverse contributions, but they all focus on the same idea: to base the study on the work itself.

The work group included: art historians and curators (Rotili and Ventra, plus another participant, Silvia Ginzburg who wrote an important contribution outlining, amongst other things, the genesis of the putto's figure and pose [Ginzburg 2022]; restorers (read the splendid interpretation of the artwork by Paolo Violini [Violini 2022] and the interesting technical contribution by Claudio Falcucci [Falcucci 2022]; architectural historians (with the important input by Francesco Moschini, National Academic of San

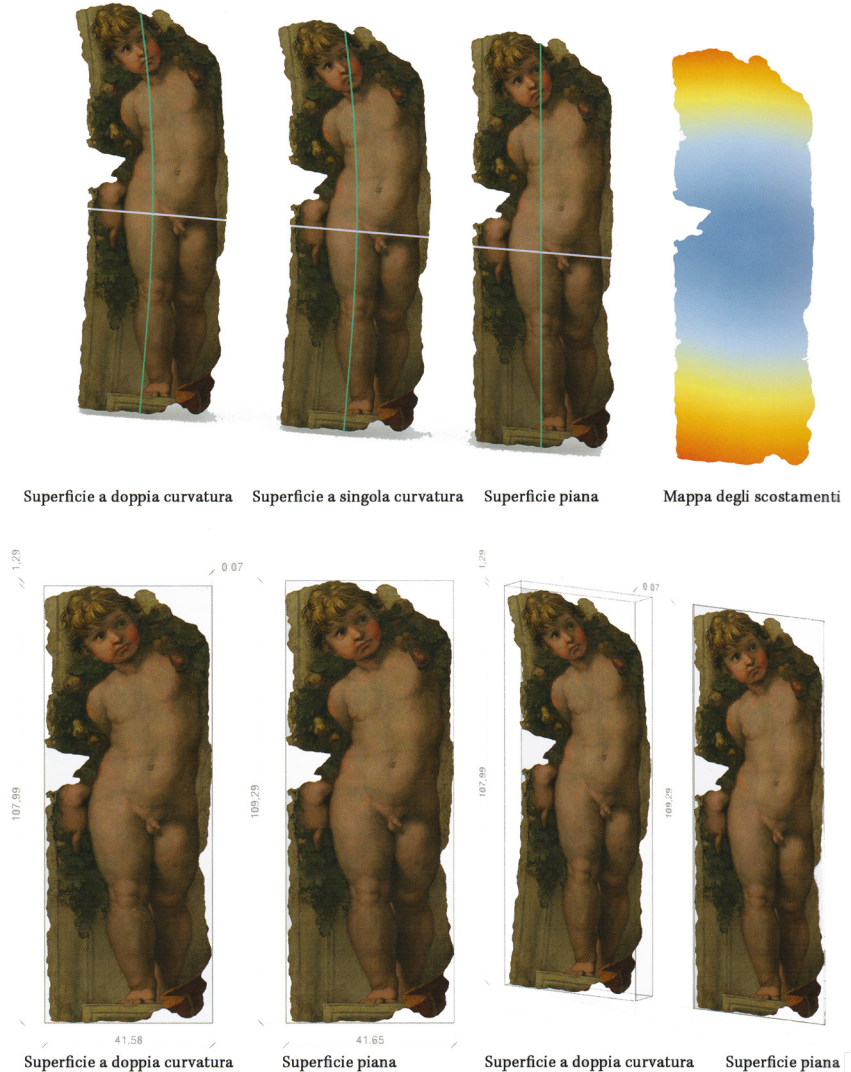


Fig. 2. Raffaello Sanzio, Putto carrying a festoon, 1513, fresco. Rome, Accademia Nazionale di San Luca. Phases of the plane development of the double-curved surface [Fasolo et al 2022, fig. 17, p. 116].

Luca and its General Secretary from 2011 to 2020); experts in the fields of survey, documentation, and geometric analysis of architecture and cultural heritage (Leonardo Baglioni, Matteo Flavio Mancini, and Sofia Menconero who were members of the group coordinated by Marco Fasolo).

The members' contribution –that perhaps focuses more in detail on the specific interests of the journal *diségno* and the Unione Italiana per il Disegno (UID), the scientific association that decided to launch the journal– is part of the interesting essay entitled *Geometric studies on the Putto carrying a festoon: surveys and analyses* [Fasolo et al. 2022]. The essay is itself an exemplary, well-performed and superbly shared research, proving that a well-planned, integrated and absolutely non-invasive survey, combined with a careful analysis of the morphology and color data, should currently be considered (along with the options provided by a skilled use of restitu-

tion and interpretation models [5]) as a powerful tool to analyze, preserve and enhance cultural heritage. The contribution focuses on how a careful interpretation of the morphology of the study object can reveal, or at least, provide scientific data supporting certain aspects and hypotheses formulated based on tools used in other investigative fields; it also indicates how to examine cultural heritage using non-contact technologies by creating copies that can be used to make comparisons based on surface size, superimpositions, juxtapositions, and the matching of vulnerable or physically distant works.

In concluding this review it is possible to state the following: research sometimes opens doors that were previously shut. This is what happened here thanks to the 'fortunate' result of this study that has enriched the catalogue of the works of an artist with an undisputed personality and undeniable international renown.

This will undoubtedly benefit the whole country and add an important page to the book of the history of art. But what is particularly unusual and interesting, especially for those involved in research, is that the scientific communication –not only of the results, but also the methodological, technical and instrumental process that was adopted– is also 'enthralled': this book represents one of those rare cases when readers will perceive the enjoyment and enthusiasm that appears to have gripped the very different professionals and experts working in so many fields.

All we need to understand now is whether, by chance, part of this success should also be attributed to Rafael, because we should not ignore the fact that it is the *Putto carrying a festoon*, rather than the *Putto of Isai-ah*, –in my very questionable opinion– that once again moves us today.

Laura Carlevaris

Notes

[1] The study, restoration of the art work, and the publication were sponsored by the Associazione Mecenate della Galleria Borghese - Roman Heritage Onlus that promotes culture and art by supporting the Galleria Borghese and the Monuments, Excavations and Historical Gardens of Rome. It was founded in 2013 to promote, protect and enhance historical and artistic assets of the Galleria Borghese: since 2017 the Association has broadened its objectives to include the city of Rome, performing and supporting 'study activities, scientific and documentary research of crucial cultural importance' involving 'recovery and restoration projects with a commitment to make private entities aware of their responsibilities and involve them in a

modern logic of cooperation with the public': <<https://www.mecenatigalleriaborghese.it/>> (accessed 24 October 2022).

[2] The exhibition was held in Rome from 22nd October 2020 to the 5th March 2021 at the Museo Accademia Nazionale di San Luca in Palazzo Carpegna. The year 2020 marked the 50th anniversary of the death of Rafael who was born in Urbino in 1483 and died in Rome on the 6th April, 1520.

[3] In the book Valeri Rotili [Rotili 2022] extensively discusses the figure of Jean-Baptiste Wicar, his clever intuition, and his crucial role in the story of the fragment of the fresco in San Luca.

[4] The fragment has a double curvature that creates depth on the surface: the measurements cited here are those of the theoretical envelope box, with a depth of roughly 8.2 cm. As regards the morphology and geometric characteristics of the artwork, see: Ginzburg 2022, pp. 36, 37; Fasolo et al. 2022.

[5] Today many contributions support the idea of a Model of reality which can generate and be expressed by a wide range of different models, from graphic models to the models behind digital representations, maquettes and holographic models,....: see, for example, Migliari 2004; Migliari 2012.

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