

THE PROBLEM OF ANTISOLIMENISMO IN NEAPOLITAN BAROQUE PAINTING

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In the neglected field of Neapolitan Baroque painting crude simplifications and critical misconceptions abound.¹ Nowhere is this more true than for the period from around 1690 to 1725, decades whose richness and diversity often is obscured by attempts to interpret every stylistic tendency in terms of the art of Francesco Solimena. According to the traditional view, now largely discredited, Solimena was the unique painter of consequence in Naples following the death of Luca Giordano, and consequently the nature of the "Neapolitan School" could be adequately characterized by his works alone.² Recent years have seen the publication of monographic studies of a number of Solimena's contemporaries, as well as several notable attempts to synthesize a more complete and accurate history of the period.³ Even to those Italian scholars whose work takes into consideration such re-evaluations of the period, however, Solimena still looms as the overwhelmingly dominant personality of the early Settecento in Naples. The distinct personal styles of such recently rediscovered painters as Giacomo del Pò, Domenico Antonio Vaccaro and Francesco Peresi still are considered primarily in relation to the art of Solimena, and contrary to the evidence of style and the testimony of contemporary records, most painters who cannot readily be classified as followers of Solimena are grouped into the vague and ill-conceived category of *antisolimeneschi*.

The tendency to view the painters of this period in terms of the polarity between *solimeneschi* and *antisolimeneschi* originated in the catalogue essay prepared by Costanza Lorenzetti for the major exhibition of Neapolitan Baroque and 19th century painting held in Naples in 1938.⁴ In her analysis of the mature style of Giacomo del Pò — who to this day remains the central figure among the so-called *antisolimeneschi* — Lorenzetti noted with interest "il suo evolversi al Settecento senza concordia di intenti col caposcuola napoletana."⁵ In thus recognizing that in Naples during the early 18th century there worked an important painter whose style was unrelated to that of Solimena, Lorenzetti had set forth the initial premise of a conceptual framework within which all future considerations of the period would lie. As her analysis gained general



1 Francesco Solimena, *Self-Portrait*. c. 1730. Naples, Museo Nazionale.

acceptance the acknowledgement of del Pò's stylistic distinctness from Solimena gradually evolved into the belief that his mature style reflected a conscious opposition to Solimena's art. There further developed the notion that far from being alone in his opposition to Solimena, del Pò was but the earliest representative of the organized forces of *antisolimenismo* in the opening years of the 18th century. As early as 1950, for example, in an exhibition catalogue jointly prepared by Ferdinando Bologna and Raffaello Causa, del Pò was seen as the first of many exponents of "la grande pittura settecentesca napoletana, antisolimenesca ed antidemuriana."⁶ More recently, in perhaps the most extreme expression of this view, Nicola Spinosa has adopted the phraseology of military historians to describe what he has termed the *fronda antisolimenesca*.⁷ Battle-lines of the early 18th century, whose historical existence has yet to be demonstrated, have been carefully drawn by modern scholars whose sympathies most often lie with the "opponents" of Francesco Solimena.

This historically inaccurate view of the early Settecento in Naples rests upon two fundamental misconceptions. First is the belief that already by 1705, the year of Luca Giordano's death, Solimena was perceived by his contemporaries as an overwhelmingly dominant *caposcuola*. Second is the opinion that the styles of the so-called *antisolimeneschi* were clearly antagonistic to that of Solimena and just as clearly related one to the next. The fallacy of this latter point can be demonstrated rapidly by an examination of some of the styles in question. The first point, which hinges upon our understanding of "perceptions" in the early 18th century, requires more lengthy consideration.

Paintings from Solimena's maturity, such as the imperious *Self-Portrait* (Naples, Museo Nazionale) of about 1730 (fig. 1), reveal a type of Late Baroque Classicism which is deeply rooted in Neapolitan traditions of the Seicento. The forms are tightly painted, and a strong chiaroscuro produces broad sculptural volumes which anchor the composition and render it stable. The emphatic frontality of the head, together with a carefully balanced system of countervailing diagonals, reduces what little movement is suggested by the undulant pockets of the drapery folds. Between this painting and a characteristic work by Giacomo del Pò, such as his *Apollo and Glory with Jupiter and Juno* (Salzburg, Residenzgalerie) of about 1723 (fig. 2), the contrast could not be greater. Del Pò's style, with its fluid, streaming brushwork and (at this late stage in the painter's career) its shimmering palette of pale blues and creamy golds, clearly is unrelated to that of Solimena. Whether such difference implies opposition, and hence *antisolimenismo*, is a question that cannot be answered through visual analysis alone.

The styles of other painters who are ranged among the *antisolimeneschi* at times display more significant parallels with Solimena's art than with that of del Pò. Important in this regard is Paolo De Matteis, whose initial training under Luca Giordano has obscured his profound sympathies with the classicizing milieu of Carlo Maratta and his followers in Rome. De Matteis' *Hercules at the Crossroads* (Leeds, Temple Newsome House), painted in 1711 on commission from Lord Shaftesbury (fig. 3), is hardly the sort of work one would expect from an artist who was programatically opposed to the style of Francesco Solimena. De Matteis eschews Solimena's pronounced chiaroscuro, but his composition and the high moral tone of his theme⁸ reveal a personality far more in tune with Solimena's conservatism than with the secular gracefulness of del Pò. A similar disparity between recent classifications and actual stylistic affinities can be found in the works of other painters said to be prominent in the anti-Solimenesque movement, most notably Domenico Antonio Vaccaro and Nicola Malinconico.⁹

Modern scholars no doubt are correct in asserting, despite their apparent distaste for his mature style, that Francesco Solimena was the most accomplished painter active in Naples in the early 18th century. The point at issue, however, does not concern the undeniably high quality of Solimena's *oeuvre*, but rather the extent to which he did in fact dominate his age. Only when it is seen that Solimena's preeminence in Naples during the early 18th century is largely a historical fabrication, and that prior to



2 Giacomo del Pò, *Apollo and Glory with Jupiter and Juno*. c. 1723. Salzburger Landessammlungen-Residenzgalerie.

about 1725 he was viewed as but one of several important painters in that city, can the art of his foremost Neapolitan contemporaries be considered on its own terms. At question is the extent to which, in the first quarter of the 18th century, Solimena was actually perceived as the Neapolitan *caposcuola*.

The first indication that Solimena was thought to hold a dominant position in his adopted city came only in 1733, with the publication of the second Neapolitan edition of P.A. Orlandi's *Abecedario pittorico*.¹⁰ The opening, unpaginated section of this work contains an encomiastic dedication to Solimena, written by Niccolo Parrino, together with a brief life of the artist and a collection of laudatory messages from several of his major patrons. This material clearly indicates Solimena's important stature, both within Naples and throughout Europe, in the same ambient which saw in Rome the ascendancy of Francesco Trevisani, Benedetto Luti and other heirs to the Late Baroque Classicism of Carlo Maratta. It must be noted, however, that by 1733 many prominent Neapolitan painters of the early Settecento were no longer living, while artists of the following generation, such as Francesco De Mura, had only just embarked upon their mature careers. For a brief period following the deaths of Giacomo del Pò, Nicola Malinconico and Paolo De Matteis, all during the 1720's,¹¹ Solimena was, incontestably, the dominant figure in Neapolitan painting.

Published sources dating from before the 1733 edition of Orlandi's *Abecedario* suggest that during the first three decades of the 18th century Solimena's stature was no greater than that of at least two other painters: Paolo De Matteis and Giacomo del Pò. Solimena's works, like theirs, were recorded in local guidebooks and were the subject of an occasional comment by a visiting traveller, but nowhere was the artist singled out for praise as the Neapolitan *caposcuola*. Moreover, the bibliography of early 18th century sources for the paintings of Solimena is no more ample than those for his two foremost contemporaries.

Although Solimena's dominant position in Neapolitan painting from the 1730's onward was first acknowledged in the 1733 edition of Orlandi's *Abecedario*, the overriding importance later accorded his art stems in large part from the historical framework for the period that was created by the biographer Bernardo De Dominici. In his *Vite* of the 17th and early 18th century artists of Naples, published in 1743,¹² De Dominici succeeded in setting back the moment of Solimena's emergence as the preeminent Neapolitan painter to 1705, the year of Luca Giordano's death. De Dominici viewed the history of Neapolitan painting from the mid 17th century until his own day as a continuum in which there reigned first Luca Giordano, and then Francesco Solimena. His assessment of Giordano's position was essentially correct, for Luca had been universally recognized since the 1670's as the foremost painter of Naples. In attributing a similar position to Solimena, however, De Dominici seems to have acted largely out of personal considerations. Although today he is remembered solely as the author of the *Vite* of Neapolitan artists, De Dominici was also a modestly talented painter, and may well have received his initial training in Solimena's large and well-organized studio.¹³ His desire to elevate his presumed teacher to the rank of a Luca Giordano, and to see Solimena as the direct and immediate successor to Giordano as the Neapolitan *caposcuola*, can thus be understood in terms of his own commitment as a painter to the type of Late Baroque Classicism which characterized Solimena's mature style.

In recent years it has become fashionable to criticize De Dominici for the unreliability of his factual information and the fanciful nature of many of the anecdotes in his narrative.¹⁴ In actuality, however, when dealing with Neapolitan Baroque artists, and in particular with painters of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, De Dominici provided such a wealth of useful and accurate information that he must be considered among the finest regional biographers of the entire Baroque era. The question of factual accuracy, however, is only marginally related to the problem of De Dominici's inherent bias in favor of the style and working procedures of Francesco Solimena. Only on rare



3 Paolo De Matteis, *Hercules at the Crossroads*. 1711. Leeds, Temple Newsome House.

occasions did he actually falsify the nature of events so as to portray Solimena in a more favorable light.¹⁵ His bias operated instead in a more subtle and more pervasive fashion, as a filter through which to interpret the significance of all recent developments in Neapolitan painting.

De Dominici's *Vite*, then, must not be taken as an infallible guide to the state of painting in Naples prior to about 1725. Contemporary attitudes toward various painters of the late 17th and early 18th centuries can, however, be gauged through a study of the *Gazzetta di Napoli*, a series of weekly *avvisi* published in Naples throughout the period under consideration.¹⁶ Even a partial survey of this material, which rarely has been given proper attention by art historians, yields a number of interesting observations.¹⁷ Prior to 1692, the year of his departure for Spain, Luca Giordano was the painter most frequently cited in the *Gazzetta* — a confirmation, no doubt, of his preeminent stature in the artistic community of Naples. Following Giordano's departure, and indeed throughout the first quarter of the 18th century, one might expect to find abundant references to the works of Solimena, but this is not the case. Between 1692 and 1725, in the years for which *avvisi* have survived, there occur but three short references to Solimena.¹⁸ But while Solimena received remarkably little attention in these years, both Paolo De Matteis and Giacomo del Pò were cited with great frequency. There are references to the works of De Matteis for San Luigi di Palazzo, Santo Spirito di Palazzo, San Francesco Saverio (San Ferdinando), San Giovanni de' Fiorentini, the Pietà de' Turchini and the Certosa di San Martino.¹⁹ Similarly, del Pò is cited for his paintings in the Rosariello delle Pigne, San Domenico Maggiore and Santa Caterina a Formello, as well as for his scenographic designs for various theatrical productions and his contributions to the catafalques erected in Naples for the Emperor Joseph I and for Pope Innocent XII.²⁰ Other painters, many of whom today are but little known, likewise received surprisingly ample consideration. Nicola Russo, for example, is mentioned on four separate occasions between 1693 and 1697, and his paintings for Santo Spirito di Palazzo are described as "... acclamato universalmente da tutti i virtuosi, ed intendenti."²¹ In the accounts of the customary display of paintings along the via Toledo on the occasion of the Feast of Corpus Domini in 1709 and 1710, the works of Francesco Peresi alone are singled out for praise.²²

Inferences from a statistical survey of the *Gazzetta di Napoli* must be made with the understanding that this source is not a wholly accurate guide to the importance of a given artist, nor even the "noteworthiness" of his paintings. Only certain types of projects — namely, major works for the churches of Naples — are consistently reported in the *avvisi*. Rarely is there a reference to fresco decorations for a *palazzo nobile*, to easel paintings commissioned by private patrons, or to the shipment abroad of even a major work. Also, insofar as citations in the *Gazzetta* can be taken to indicate the relative significance of a project, or the popularity or prominence of a given painter, such evaluations represent the opinion of the particular author or editor of the entry and cannot necessarily be generalized as statements of attitudes which were widespread throughout the cultured population of Naples. Even within these limitations, however, the evidence of the *Gazzetta* strongly suggests that the artistic climate of the city between about 1690 and 1725 was far more open and varied than is generally believed. There is no evidence of Solimena's preeminence in these years.

An examination of the important commissions of this period likewise fails to support the contention that Solimena was an especially dominant force in Neapolitan painting in the first quarter of the 18th century. His production was limited primarily to altarpieces and large frescoes for the city's churches, and to easel paintings usually of modest size executed on commission from private collectors. In neither of these fields, however, was his contribution significantly greater than those of Giacomo del Pò, Paolo De Matteis or even Domenico Antonio Vaccaro. With regard to large-scale fresco decorations for Neapolitan palaces, Solimena's role was decidedly secondary. Whether by

inclination or by conscious choice, Solimena painted surprisingly few secular decorations. His four projects of this type, in the Palazzo Reale, the Palazzo Sanfelice, and his private residences in Naples and Barra, were executed only in the years after about 1730, following the deaths of Giacomo del Pò and Paolo De Matteis, the undisputed masters in this field.²³

The term *antisolimeneschi* has been applied to a number of painters in Naples in the early 18th century whose styles may have differed from that of Solimena. Difference, however, does not necessarily imply opposition, and as Solimena was not perceived by his contemporaries as *caposcuola* until at least 1725 there is little likelihood that in the opening decades of the century his classicizing, even "academic" style would have had so great a force as to spawn a reformatory *fronda antisolimenesca*. At the present stage in the development of Neapolitan Baroque studies the desire to simplify and categorize must be held in check. Only when the polar schema is abandoned and Solimena's role is seen in its proper perspective can a correct evaluation of the period and the individual styles of its painters be made.

FOOTNOTES

¹The content of this article, based in part upon research for my doctoral dissertation *The Paintings of Giacomo del Pò*, (University of Kansas, 1978), was presented in somewhat different form in a paper read at the national meeting of the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies, held in Chicago in April, 1978.

²This interpretation can still be found, however, in surveys of the period by British and American scholars, who have shown a tenacious resistance to recent developments in the study of Neapolitan Baroque painting. Rudolf Wittkower, for example, in his *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600 to 1750*, (Baltimore and Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 306, found room in the text only for Solimena, "... who headed the Neapolitan school unchallenged during the first half of the 18th Century," and relegated to a footnote his brief treatment of four other painters (including the Fleming Borremans) who were active in Naples during these years.

³Among the important general histories of Neapolitan painting in this period are F. Bologna, "Le Arti figurative," in F. Bologna, G. Doria and E. Pannain, *Settecento napoletano*, (Naples, 1962), pp. 51-96; O. Ferrari, "Le Arti figurative," in *Storia di Napoli*, VI, (Naples, 1970), pp. 1221-1336; and N. Spinosa, "La Pittura napoletana da Carlo a Ferdinando IV di Borbone," in *Storia di Napoli*, VIII, (Naples, 1971), pp. 453-547. Relevant studies of individual artists are cited in the notes below.

⁴C. Lorenzetti, "La Pittura napoletana del secolo XVIII," in *La Mostra della pittura napoletana dei secoli XVII, XVIII, XIX*, (Naples, 1938), pp. 145-203.

⁵Lorenzetti, "Pittura napoletana," p. 156.

⁶F. Bologna and R. Causa, *Sculture lignee nella Campagna*, (Naples, 1950), pp. 191-92.

⁷N. Spinosa, "Pittori napoletani del secondo Settecento: Jacopo Cestaro," *Napoli nobilissima*, 3rd series, IX, 1970, 74. In a recent private communication, Prof. Spinosa has indicated to me that he no longer holds this view.

⁸Due in part to the peculiar circumstances of the commission; see B. Croce, "Shaftesbury in Italia," in his *Uomini e cose della vecchia Italia*, (Bari, 1943), Vol. I, pp. 274-311.

⁹Both painters are placed among the so-called *antisolimeneschi* in R. Mormone, "Domenico Antonio Vaccaro architetto, IV: la chiesa di S. Michele a Piazza Dante," *Napoli nobilissima*, 3rd series, IV, (1964-65), 107. Though Vaccaro remains classified among the opponents of Solimena, an attempt to reassess the position of Malinconico was made in V. De Martini, "Un Episodio giordanesco a Bergamo," *Arte cristiana*, LXVI, (1978), 51-58.

¹⁰P.A. Orlandi, *Abecedario pittorico . . . coretto e notabilmente di nuove notizie accresciuto*, (Naples, 1733). The first Neapolitan edition had appeared two years earlier.

¹¹Dott.ssa Vega De Martini, of the Soprintendenza alle Gallerie di Napoli, has informed me of her discovery that Nicola Malinconico, traditionally thought to have died in 1721, continued to work as late as 1728.

- ¹²B. De Dominici, *Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti napoletani*, (Naples, 1742-43).
- ¹³None of De Dominici's paintings has been identified, and little can be said with certainty about his career as a painter. Nonetheless, his adulation of Solimena strongly suggests a pupil-teacher relationship.
- ¹⁴This has been the case since the biting condemnation of De Dominici in B. Croce, "Il Falsario," *Napoli nobilissima*, I, (1892), pp. 122-26 and 140-44.
- ¹⁵As with the commission for the spandrel paintings in the nave arcade of SS. Apostoli in Naples, for which see B. De Dominici, *Vite*, III, 498. The true nature of Solimena's intervention, after the Theatine priests had found del Pò's work unsatisfactory, can be gauged through documents published in F. Strazzullo, "Documenti per la storia della chiesa dei SS. Apostoli," *Archivio storico per le province napoletane*, XXXVI, (1956), p. 256.
- ¹⁶The early history of the *Gazzetta*, which has yet to be fully explored, is touched upon in N. Cortese, *Cultura e politica a Napoli dal Cinque al Settecento*, (Naples, 1965), pp. 161-84.
- ¹⁷The only surviving copies of the *Gazzetta* are preserved in the libraries of Naples. Key extracts will be made widely available in my "Notices on Painting from the *Gazzetta di Napoli*," *Antologia di Belli-Arti*, at press.
- ¹⁸*Gazzetta di Napoli*, 11 December 1696, 21 March 1713 and 2 June 1716.
- ¹⁹*Gazzetta di Napoli*, 7 April 1693, 9 December 1693, 13 July 1695, 25 June 1697, 19 January 1700, 16 November 1700, 6 May 1710, 2 August 1712, 4 April 1713, 18 August 1716 and 8 June 1717.
- ²⁰*Gazzetta di Napoli*, 19 May 1693, 8 June 1697, 5 October 1700, 12 May 1711, 8 March 1712, 25 December 1714, 31 August 1717, 2 December 1721, 27 January 1722 and 1 September 1722.
- ²¹*Gazzetta di Napoli*, 22 September 1693, 5 July 1693, 31 July 1696 and 30 April 1697.
- ²²*Gazzetta di Napoli*, 11 June 1709 and 1 July 1710.
- ²³For the frescoes by Solimena, all lost, see F. Bologna, *Francesco Solimena*, (Naples, 1957), pp. 284-87.

MID-FOURTEENTH CENTURY PAINTING IN SUCHOU: SOME LESSER MASTERS *

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Since the sixteenth century, historians of Chinese painting have viewed the later decades of the Yüan dynasty (1279-1368) as a period dominated by the Four Great Masters: Huang Kung-wang, Wu Chen, Ni Tsan and Wang Meng. Modern art-historical studies published in the West have maintained, and even strengthened, this critical concept by assuming a more-or-less independent development of the four distinctly individual styles of the Great Masters in the midst of a cluster of imitative and derivative styles of the "Lesser Masters" — a group whose membership varies but generally includes among others Chao Yüan, Ch'en Ju-yen, and Hsü Pen.¹ A number of recent publications have treated the period in terms of a broader period style or series of styles, often taking into account social and geographical considerations as well,² but the nature of the artistic contribution of the Lesser Masters remains obscure. Too often they are portrayed one-dimensionally, as pale reflections of their bright and talented contemporaries who were immortalized in the enduring notion of the Four Great Masters of the Yüan dynasty.³ An objective look at a selection of paintings by the Lesser Masters of Suchou active under the regime of Chang Shih-ch'eng (1356-1367) and in the decade immediately following the establishment of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) forces a re-evaluation of these long neglected painters.

Two of the Great Masters, Huang Kung-wang and Wu Chen, died in 1354 — two years before Chang Shih-ch'eng took over the city of Suchou. The other two, Ni Tsan and Wang Meng, were active in and around Suchou well into the 1370's. Located in the

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