 Carlo Maratti and the Barberini family: two paintings for churches in Palestrina

by GIOVAN BATTISTA FIDANZA

IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, Palestrina, about 40 kilometres east of Rome, was the main town of an important principality, which in 1630 was acquired by the Barberini family from Francesco Colonna.1 It is not widely known that Carlo Maratti (1625–1713) painted two altarpieces for churches in Palestrina. One, which has not survived, was for the high altar of S. Rosalia, the other for the church of the Annunciation. The first of Maratti’s biographers to mention the S. Rosalia painting was G.P. Bellori (1613–96), who accurately describes its subject, S. Rosalia interceding for victims of the plague in Palestrina. He also states that the painting was commissioned by Prince Maffeo Barberini (1631–85), whose palace was attached to the church of S. Rosalia, to fulfil a vow made by the town council during an outbreak of plague in 1656, when the people prayed to S. Rosalia of Palermo, known for her protection from epidemics. Bellori adds that the painting had already been moved to Palazzo Barberini in Rome and replaced with a copy by Francesco Reale, whom Bellori describes as a pupil of Maratti. According to Bellori, this transfer was made for reasons of conservation, above all because the canvas was in direct contact with the rock on which the church was built.2 Regarding the date of the painting, Bellori writes only that it was executed after the epidemic.

Of Maratti’s other biographers, Francesco Saverio Baldinucci (1663–1738), writing around 1725–30, adds no useful information about the date of the altarpiece. He simply describes and praises the canvas, which he wrongly believed had been commissioned by Cardinal Antonio Barberini (1607–71).3 Lione Pascoli (1674–1744) believed that Maratti painted the altarpiece during the papacy of Alexander VII (reg.1655–67), while he was restoring an old painting in Palazzo Barberini and executing a series of paintings of the Apostles commissioned by the cardinal. The first of this series, St Peter, was the work of Andrea Sacchi, after whose death the commission was continued by Maratti.4 Anna Lo Bianco has demonstrated that Maratti painted the majority of these canvases — St Paul, St James the Great, St James the Less, St Bartholomew, St Matthew the Evangelist and St Simon — between 1666 and 1671,5 but a further two were painted later. According to Pascoli, Maratti executed eleven Apostles in all, but does not give a precise date for them.

Pascoli’s contention that the Palestrina altarpiece and the Apostles were carried out for the Barberini family at the same time could refer to the group painted in 1666–71.

6 L. Cecconi: Storia di Palestrina città del prisco Lazio, Ascoli 1756, p.375.
The dating of the S. Rosalia altarpiece (the church had only one altar) is resolved by documents in the Barberini archive. It was completed in October 1668, when Rugino Cappelloni, Maffeo Barberini’s accountant, paid Maratti 300 scudi for the painting (see Appendix 1 below). Pascoli’s reference to Alexander VII, who died in 1667, might therefore be connected to the date the altarpiece was commissioned. Unaware of this document, scholars have generally dated the painting to around 1660, thanks to a statement by a historian of Palestrina, Leonardo Cecconi, that the church of S. Rosalia was completed in that year. However, Cecconi states only that the first mass was celebrated in the church on 7th November 1660, without saying that its construction had been completed or, more importantly, that Maratti’s painting was already above the altar.

According to another historian of Palestrina, Pietrantonio Petrini, S. Rosalia was completed in 1677, but its construction was begun in 1657, confirmed by the earliest evidence of payments connected to the building work (a final account relating to unspecified undertakings), which shows that from 15th November 1657 to February 1660 just over 4,000 scudi had been spent on construction. Work on the church’s decoration was in progress some years before the altarpiece was commissioned. In 1666 Maffeo paid the considerable sum of 840 scudi, 35 baiocchi to the stonemason Giovanni Battista Borsella for work inside the church, which was overseen by its architect, Francesco Contini (1599–1669). Maffeo also paid 150 scudi to a certain Giuseppe Ceccolani for marble decoration for the high altar. This suggests that the structure that would house Maratti’s picture was then undergoing a complete remodelling, since the previous altar was made of wood and painted in chiaroscuro in 1659. Maratti’s canvas replaced an altarpiece by Leonardo De Sanctis, who was paid 9 scudi, 23 baiocchi for it by Maffeo on 31st October 1662. As well as being a mediocre painter, De Sanctis was an art dealer, who in 1631 counted Taddeo Barberini (1603–47) among his clients. The need to provide a painting of higher quality than that by De Sanctis

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was the first to propose this date: A. Mezzetti: ‘Contributi a Carlo Maratti’, Rivista dell’Istituto Nazionale d’Archeologia e Storia dell’Arte 4 (1955), pp.265 and 323, which was accepted by Borea, op. cit. (note 2), p.589, and A.C. Gampp: ‘Santa Rosalia in Palestrina. Die Grabele des Barberini und das esthetische Konzept der “Magnificencia”’, Römisches Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana 29 (1994), p.357. A date of between 1657 and 1660 was proposed by L. Bortolotti: ‘Carlo Maratti (Maratta)’, Dizionario biografico degli italiani, Rome 2007, LXIX, p.445, which was accepted by A. Fralleoni: ‘Francesco Reali e la pala d’altare di Santa Rosalia’, in Iacono, op. cit. (note 1), pp.31–32. The only scholar to date the painting to the year of the plague was P. Collura: Santa Rosalia nella storia e nell’arte, Palermo 1977, p.81.


2 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (cited hereafter as BAV), Archivio Barberini, to unspecified undertakings), which shows that from 15th November 1657 to February 1660 just over 4,000 scudi had been spent on construction. Work on the church’s decoration was in progress some years before the altarpiece was commissioned. In 1666 Maffeo paid the considerable sum of 840 scudi, 35 baiocchi to the stonemason Giovanni Battista Borsella for work inside the church, which was overseen by its architect, Francesco Contini (1599–1669). Maffeo also paid 150 scudi to a certain Giuseppe Ceccolani for marble decoration for the high altar. This suggests that the structure that would house Maratti’s picture was then undergoing a complete remodelling, since the previous altar was made of wood and painted in chiaroscuro in 1659. Maratti’s canvas replaced an altarpiece by Leonardo De Sanctis, who was paid 9 scudi, 23 baiocchi for it by Maffeo on 31st October 1662. As well as being a mediocre painter, De Sanctis was an art dealer, who in 1631 counted Taddeo Barberini (1603–47) among his clients. The need to provide a painting of higher quality than that by De Sanctis


14. Ultraviolet photograph of Fig.13.
was probably due to the fact that on 12th September 1668 the high altar of S. Rosalia was declared a privileged altar by Pope Clement IX. This status was highly important, because it allowed a soul to be released from Purgatory at every mass celebrated at such an altar on certain feast days or times of year. It seems likely that Maratti was commissioned to provide a new altarpiece in anticipation of the altar’s changed status.

In addition, Maffeo Barberini’s financial records suggest a date for the copy of Maratti’s painting that was subsequently placed over the high altar (in situ), making it possible to deduce when the original was moved to Rome. As Bellori recounts, the copy is by a pupil and collaborator of Maratti, Francesco Pavia or Pavese, after his birthplace. A second-rate painter, he worked for the Barberini on various practical tasks associated with the decoration of their palaces and other properties and also painted copies of their paintings. Baldinucci leads us to understand that Maratti’s painting was moved to Rome during the papacy of Clement X (1670–76), a suggestion that is supported by new documentary evidence. On 22nd June 1675 Reale was paid 49 scudi by Maffeo for copying three pictures, including a S. Rosalia, which is almost certainly Maratti’s Palestrina painting (the others were a portrait of an unspecified king of Spain and a small painting whose subject is unknown).

Baldinucci states that the purported bad state of the altarpiece was only a pretext for moving it to Palazzo Barberini. In reality, he writes, a member of the family — whom he does not name — wanted to add this particularly beautiful picture to his collection in Rome. Baldinucci was probably right: Reale’s copy has also been in direct contact with the rock behind it, without presenting any particular conservation problems. The original painting was undoubtedly of high quality, even if today we can appreciate it only from a photograph taken in 1934 (Fig.12), since it was destroyed in a fire in the early 1970s in Palazzo Corsini, Florence, to which it had been moved in the 1930s for reasons of inheritance. Maratti brought his highly dramatic scene to life with intense and anatomically convincing renditions of the nude or semi-nude plague victims in the lower part of the canvas, who are contrasted with the idealised nudity of the cherubs and the angel in the upper part. The pathos of the scene is directly connected to a view of the town of Palestrina in the background.

The high significance that this subject held for Maffeo Barberini — and for his entire family — points to some interesting elements in the painting that also explain the relatively large sum (300 scudi) Maratti was paid for it. Since it must have been exactly the same size as Reale’s copy (264.7 by 183 cm.), it was quite large. More significantly, the composition included many figures, some of which — the nude bodies — were difficult to execute. A comparison with a painting by Maratti commissioned when Filippo Benizi was canonised (1671) underlines the high price paid for the S. Rosalia altarpiece: although the other painting was considerably larger (244 by 346 cm.), the artist received the same sum of 300 scudi. In the 1670s and 1680s the price of Maratti’s paintings was to increase in proportion to his fame.

In addition to the plague in Palestrina, S. Rosalia had another relevance for the Barberini family, as it was Urban VIII who in 1650 had added her name to the Roman martyrology. Maratti must thus have been strongly motivated to do his best, both in the painting’s preparatory stages and in its final execution. Revising the painting’s date to eight years later than has been generally accepted places it at a time when the artist was enjoying particular success. In 1668 Maratti’s master, Andrea Sacchi, had already been dead for seven years, and the other great painter active in Rome, Pietro da Cortona, was nearing the end of his career. In 1668 Maratti could have been
considered the most important painter in Rome, and in 1664–65 he held the office of President of the Accademia di S. Luca for the first time. Although Maffeo was not one of Maratti’s usual Barberini patrons, his financial records reveal a previously unknown commission: in 1664, four years before the S. Rosalia altarpiece, he paid Maratti 42 scudi for a circular painting of an unspecified subject.24

Maratti’s other altarpiece in Palestrina was an Annunciation for the high altar of the church of the Annunciation, which was demolished after the town’s bombardment on 22nd January 1944.25 In 1663 Maffeo assumed the patronage of the church, which gave him the right to nominate the parish priest.26 So, the church of the Annunciation became another sacred place in Palestrina under the direct control of the Barberinis. In addition to pastoral matters, the Barberini family was also interested in the decoration of the church, although not until some years after acquiring its patronage. The only documentary sources relating to the decoration are the reports of pastoral visitations. In the 1660 report it is stated, without giving details, that above the high altar – then the only altar – there was a painting of the Annunciation.27 The report of the 1669 visitation – the first following Maffeo Barberini’s assumption of the patronage – records that there was now a painted image of the Madonna enclosed in a carved frame.28 The high altar is not mentioned in the 1679 report, whereas in that of 1687 there is a reference to an ‘elegant and fine’ painting of the Annunciation over an elaborate stucco altar (see Appendix 2). This suggests that between 1679 and 1687 the high altar had been completely remodelled.

The ‘elegant and fine’ altarpiece was Maratti’s painting, which is accurately described, with some interesting details, in an inventory of the church from 1740,29 in which the high altarpiece is mentioned twice, in both cases with a reference to Maratti (see Appendix 3). The words of this inventory can be interpreted as follows: the writer uses a speculative wording (‘dicesi’) to ascribe the painting to Maratti, repeating it on both occasions. The first time he adds the adverb ‘quasi’ (not entirely), to indicate that the painter had delegated some parts of it to

22 See Collura, op. cit. (note 6), p.84.
28 ‘Altare sub invocatione Beatissimae Annunciationis, cuius imago in eius icona depicta conspicitur cum sua coronide peropportune incisa’. ASDP, Visita pastorale della Diocesi di Palestrina, 1669, fol.31r.
29 In the reports of the Pastoral Visitations of 1712, 1729 and 1735 (also in the archive of the diocese of Palestrina) the high altar is not described.
his workshop. The inventory states that the painting was paid for by Francesco Barberini the Younger (1662–1738) when he was an abbot, allowing it to be dated before 13th November 1690, when he was elected a cardinal.\(^\text{10}\) There is no reason to doubt the evidence of the inventory, drawn up only two years after the cardinal’s death.

Petrini (1795) was the first to record in print that this *Annunciation* was by Maratti, and that it had been paid for by the Barberini.\(^\text{11}\) The attribution was repeated in 1851 by Gaetano Moroni.\(^\text{12}\) Following these two brief references, the painting is not mentioned again in publications on Maratti – not even among his lost works – until 2013, when Roberta Iacono claimed that the picture was destroyed in the 1944 bombardment.\(^\text{13}\) However, it has survived (Fig.13), although not in a perfect state of conservation and – as an ultraviolet photograph shows – it has undergone some retouching (Fig.14), which, however, does not compromise the original image. Fortunately, the painting had been moved from the church to a place of safety before the bombardment, as was reported in an investigation carried out by the Commissione Centrale Italiana per l’Arte Sacra in 1945 (see Appendix 4). The canvas is now in the storeroom of the Cathedral of Palestrina: according to Monsignor Vito Cinti, dean of the cathedral’s chapter, who served in the cathedral from 1939, and as its parish priest from 1944, it was taken from the church to the seminary in Palestrina before the bombardment, and from there to the cathedral’s storeroom in 1982.\(^\text{14}\) The identification of the painting as Maratti’s lost *Annunciation* is confirmed by an engraving made after it, dated to 1700–10 (Fig.15). It is inscribed ‘Carol. Marrattus pinx.’ (bottom left) and ‘R. V. Auden Aed sculpt.’ (bottom right).\(^\text{15}\) Robert van Audenaerd (1663–1743) was a pupil of Maratti as well as one of his preferred engravers.

The style of the painting is clearly recognisable as Maratti’s. The presence of pentimenti on the left hand and the left eye of the Virgin, revealed by an X-radiograph (Figs.16–18), suggests that it is not a replica. It seems that Maratti experimented with two positions for the pupil of the eye, in the end choosing the higher one. The element of the Virgin’s face most characteristic of Maratti, apart from its plumpness, is the size of her eyes, to which, as the X-radiograph shows, the artist paid particular attention. It also reveals that Maratti used a cartoon, at least for the figure of the Virgin. He first tried to position the Virgin on the right of the canvas; her sketched figure is a perfect mirror-image of the one subsequently painted on the left.

The discovery that a cartoon was used, together with the presence of only a few pentimenti, suggests that Maratti had the help of one or more assistants, who completed certain sections over his underpainting without changing the design. This cartoon cannot be linked to any other known Annunciation by Maratti, none of which is the same size as the Palestrina canvas: the *Annunciation* of 1665 for S. Antonio Abate in Anagni, for example, measures 353 by 246 cm.; the *Annunciation* in the Quirinale Palace of 1673 measures 144 by 105 cm.\(^\text{16}\) These two paintings, although similar to the Palestrina canvas, show several differences.
20. *Annunciation*, by Carlo Maratti. After 1686. Oil on copper, 67.6 by 49.5 cm. (Royal Collection Trust, London; © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2017).
A small replica in oil on copper (67.6 by 49.5 cm.) of the Palestrina altarpiece is in the Royal Collection, and is currently on display at Hampton Court Palace, London (Fig.20). Attributed to Maratti, the painting shows a few stylistic differences from both the original and its engraving: in particular, the face of the Virgin appears slightly less plump.\(^a\) In addition, two drawings can be connected to the Palestrina painting because they show certain details that are not present in Maratti’s other two paintings of the subject, notably the position of the open book in the Virgin’s hand. One of these drawings, attributed to Sebastiano Conca (Musée du Louvre, Paris) copies the entire composition of the painting with few changes.\(^b\) The other, in the Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, is a copy of the figure of the Madonna, probably dating from the late seventeenth century (Fig.19).\(^c\)

A further document throws light on the creation of the Palestrina Annunciation. Among Francesco Barberini the Younger’s accounts for the years 1686 and 1687 is an undated list of payments made by Francesco Reale. Since the document is bound with payment details relating to 1686, it can be dated to that year. It records the purchase of a large canvas of 8 palmi (about 178 cm.) for a painting representing an Annunciation for Palestrina and for the necessary pigments. Of these, only the blue for the Virgin’s mantle is specified; given its relatively low cost, it must have been small (see Appendix 5). Since there is no evidence that Barberini commissioned another Annunciation, there is no doubt that this is Maratti’s painting, which measures slightly under 8 palmi in width.

Francesco Barberini the Younger often asked Reale to buy pigments and canvases for paintings and curtains and to commission artisans to make frames and other decorative items. These activities are documented on at least four occasions in 1686 and 1687.\(^d\) On 16th November 1687 Reale was reimbursed for the cost of canvases and pigments for new paintings and for wool to line existing ones. He was also paid 50 baocchi as reimbursement for pigments and varnish bought for the restoration of a painting of St Roch. The document reveals that this last payment was the result of a request Reale had received from Maratti, who was working for Barberini.\(^e\) It is highly probable, therefore, that Reale also bought the canvas and pigments for Maratti for his Annunciation in Palestrina, and it is equally probable that Reale assisted him in its execution. This is further evidence for dating the painting to 1686. In January 1690 Barberini asked his porters to deliver some unspecified gifts to Maratti, confirming the friendship between the two men; the Annunciation in Palestrina may have helped to strengthen the relationship.\(^f\)

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Appendix

1. Payment by Prince Maffeo Barberini’s treasurer of 300 scudi to his accountant, Rugino Cappelloni, who had disbursed that amount to Carlo Maratti in October 1668 for having painted the altarpiece for the church of S. Rosalia in Palestrina. (BAY, Archivio Barberini, Compartitertoria, 170, Registro di mandati 1682–1673 (Principe Maffeo Barberini) p.440). Signori Tomasso Baccelli and compagni nostri Depositarii si compiaceranno pagare a Rugino Cappelloni nostro esattore scudi Trecento moneta quali gli facciamo pagare per suo rimborso altretanti da lui pagati a Carlo Maratta pitore nel mese di Ottobre passato per il prezzo d’un quadro di S. Rosolia [sic] fatto da esso per servizio della nostra chiesa in Palestrina che con ricevuta etc., il 14 November 1668. Scudi 300.


4. Extract from a 1945 inventory of postwar damage to the town of Palestrina, referring to the removal of Maratti’s altarpiece from the church of the Annunciation before the church was destroyed. (Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Fondo Commissione Centrale per l’arte Sacra, Archivio generale, no.5, Palestrina, [1945], fol.90). SS.ma Annunziata: Furono distrutti tre quadri: dell’Angelo Custode, di Santo Stefano, dei Santi Iudoro e Giorandino. È stato salvato quello dell’altare maggiore raffigurante la Vergine Annunziata opera del Maratto [sic], ma più volte ritoccato da mano profana. È stato salvato perché rimossa dal suo posto qualche tempo prima del bombardamento.

5. Expenses for Francesco Reale, paid on behalf of Monsignor Francesco Barberini the Younger, for the purchase of canvas and pigments for an ‘Annunciation’ for Palestrina. (BAY, Archivio Barberini, Giustificazioni I, 381, Giustificazioni diverse [di Mons. Francesco Barberini] dell’anni 1686–1687, fol.579). Denari spesi per servizio del Eminentissimo Signore Don Francesco Barberini Patrone da me Francesco Reale. Per una tella [sic] di palma otto che à servito per far una S.ma Annunziata qual servì per Palestrina sc. 1.40. Per azuro per il manto della Madona [sic] et altri colori sc. 3.50.

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\(^a\) Michael Levey considered the Annunciation in the Royal Collection to be a replica of another work in oil on copper (37 by 28 cm.) attributed to Maratti in the Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, but this is in fact a replica of the Annunciation in Palazzo Quin nale: see M. Levey. The Later Italian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty The Queen, 2nd ed. Cambridge 1931, p.109. On the Royal Collection Annunciation, see also D. Shave-Taylor, ed.: The First Georgians: Art and Monarchy 1714–1760.


\(^c\) BAY, Archivio Barberini, Giustificazioni I, 381, Giustificazioni diverse di mons. Francesco Barberini dell’anni 1686–1687, fol.579.

\(^d\) Ibid., fol.520v.

\(^e\) BAY, Archivio Barberini, Giustificazioni I, 386, Giustificazioni diverse dell’anni 1689 e 90 spettante monsig. ecc.mo[no] Francesco Barberini, fol.434v.

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