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PAPAL GREED

THE THEFT OF THE PALA MONTELUCE AND ITS RETURN TO THE ITALIAN PENINSULA

LA CODICIA PAPAL

EL ROBO DE LA PALA MONTELUCE Y SU REGRESO A LA PENÍNSULA ITALIANA

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Abstract
This article examines the tortuous commission and subsequent loss of the famous *Coronation of the Virgin* by the Italian Master Raphael. It traces the naissance of the altarpiece (1503-25) as one of the key commissions by the Poor Clares of the convent of Santa Maria di Monteluce in Perugia, the looting of the piece by Napoleon's invading troops in 1797 and, finally the stubborn Pope's decision not to send the piece back to Perugia after the end of Napoleon's reign, keeping it for his own growing Pinacoteca Vaticana, where the piece still rests today.

Keywords
Raphael; Poor Clares; Napoleon; Altarpiece; Perugia

Resumen
Este artículo examina el tortuoso encargo de la famosa *Coronación de la Virgen,* del maestro italiano Rafael y su subsiguiente pérdida. Rastrea el nacimiento del retablo (1503-25) como un encargo clave realizado por las Clarisas del convento *Santa Maria di Monteluce* en Perugia. Además, hace la crónica del saqueo efectuado por las tropas invasoras de Napoleón y la negación papal de devolver la pieza a Perugia después del reinado de Napoleón, conservándola en la acrecentada *Pinacoteca Vaticana*, donde permanece en el presente.

Palabras clave
Raphael; clarisas; Napoleón; retablo; Perugia

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The recent wreckage of magnificent cultural heritage found in the oasis of the Syrian Desert known to us as the ancient spot Palmyra, reminds us that conflict and intense loss go hand in hand; the disappearance of long avenues of columns entices a feeling of dread over a senseless sort of bereavement. This brief article will show that this sense of loss over a much-loved piece of (art) history is universal. Albeit perpetrated by a different ideology and by another group of people, this paper will look at an equally painful yet lesser-known loss of a particular painting, that belonged to a specific group of people in Perugia, Italy. The painting examined is the *Coronation of the Virgin* by the Italian master Raphael and his students, Giovanni Francesco Penni and Giulio Romano [Figure 1]. The guilty parties, Napoleon and the Pope.

Figure 1. Raphael Giulio Romano y Gianfrancesco Penni, *The Coronation of the Virgin* (Pala Monteluce) (1503-1525). Oil on wood, 354 x 230 cm. Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome

By the early 20th century, the commune of Perugia had decided to suppress the Poor Clare convent of Santa Maria di Monteluce and move the remaining community of Franciscan nuns to another, smaller, building near their original convent, which they had inhabited since the early 13th century (S. Erminio, 2003). During an inventory check on July 16, 1908 the Sindaco di Perugia, in an effort to valuate Monteluce's situation, carefully noted down the riches of the convent before its closure in 1910. They found a *scultura in marmo*, doubtless the tabernacle produced in 1483 by the Florentine artist Francesco di Simone Ferrucci [Figure 2], they located *due affreschi*, representing crucifixions in the refectory and dormitory, and what they describe as a *tela a olio rappresentante l'incoronazione della Vergine*, a copy of the original by Raphael, Penni and Romano (Galassi, 2011) (Wright, 2013).

Figure 2. Francesco di Simone Ferrucci, *Tabernacle* (1483). Marble, 250 x 130 x 15 cm. Santa Maria di Monteluce, Perugia

On August 8, 1830, abbess Maria Taccini had welcomed this copy to the community of Monteluce by adding to the chronicle: *La sudetta copia fu di publica universale soddisfazione*, *Magra consolazione* (S. Erminio, 2004). The abbess, at first positive about the reception of the copy, clearly felt some bitterness at its arrival. Apart from having lost 'a Raphael', this begs the question, why?
Alberto Sartore calls the commission of the Monteluce altarpiece a *long and tortuous* story, which began with its commission on December 12, 1505, when a contract was signed between the nuns of Monteluce, in particular the formidable abbess Battista Alfani, and the artist, who was aided by the Perugian painter Berto di Giovanni —who acted as an intermediary in Raphael's absence from the Umbrian capital— (Sartore, 2011). Arguably, this is where the first struggle began. The duo received payment of some 30 ducats and was contracted to complete the painting within two years. Eleven years later, the nuns had still not received their high altarpiece which was to resemble a Ghirlandaio altarpiece featuring the figure of Saint Francis surrounded by the Apostles standing next to an empty yet flowering tomb. So, Berto was sent to Rome, where Raphael had been active at this point, to forge a new agreement. After this meeting Raphael, possibly for reasons of ease, altered the iconography of the promised piece to a twin image [Figure 3] he had painted for the Oddi family chapel in San Francesco al Prato in 1502 (O' Malley, 2005).

Figure 3. Rafael, *The Coronation of the Virgin* (Pala Oddi) (1502-03). Óleo sobre lienzo transferido del panel, 267 x 163 cm. Pinacoteca Vaticana, Roma

Despite agreeing the piece would arrive in time for the Feast of the Assumption in August 1517, Raphael, again, failed to meet his deadline. On April 6, 1520 Raphael died without finishing the piece. The nuns, led by abbess Eufrosina degli Oddi, reacted to the news by re-entering the conversation with Raphael's disciples, Giulio Romano and Giovanni Francesco Penni and put pressure on the painters to finish the piece (Sartore, 2011). By June 2, 1523, the altarpiece was finally installed in the lay church of Santa Maria di Monteluce; Battista Alfani who had originally commissioned the piece in 1505, died on March 23, 1523 and thus never saw the completed image.

The painting, as mentioned before, did not resemble the Ghirlandaio at all, instead its iconography completely matched the Oddi piece which featured a coronation of the Virgin on the upper part of the depiction accompanied by musical angels and seraphs, while the lower part includes the depiction of the Apostles gazing upwards to where Christ crowns his Mother as Queen of Heaven as they stand next to a flowering empty tomb (Henry, 2004; McGrath, 2000). The iconographic choice for the painting, albeit with some adaptations, was an apt choice for Monteluce. The convent was dedicated to the Virgin and the Marian subject was therefore particularly suited to the Franciscan nuns who lived in perpetual enclosure and never left the confines of their imprisonment (Gardner, 1995). Monteluce had recently also been reformed and became part of the Franciscan Observant family, the Raphael could therefore be seen as showing the lay audiences in the church that this Reform had been a success. The painting equally represents the metaphor of a lost battle, for although it is clearly a finely executed image, it is inherently not a *true* Raphael, as only parts of it were finished by the master. Thus, the arrival of the painting and the struggle to get it in the first place already signified conflict, and perhaps for that reason Taccini thought a copy but a weak response. The reason why a copy was necessary in the first place, however, is at the core of the remainder of this paper and continues the *tortuous* history Sartore portrays about this painting.

The contested and, by now infamous, altarpiece continued to grace the walls of Monteluce's lay church until the late 18th century, when a foreign political attack threatened both the safety of Perugia and many of its cultural artefacts. By 1796, France, still reeling from the recent Revolution, put Napoleon Bonaparte, as Brigadier General, in charge of the Italian campaign. Bonaparte crossed the Alps, entered Milan, and forced Piemonte and Piacenza to submit to French rule. French troops would invade most of Italy in the following months, and apart from being able to celebrate grand military and political successes looted vast numbers of Italian heritage and triumphantly returned to Paris carrying them along (Wescher, 1988). Napoleon's plan, through intermediaries like the keen museum director Dominique-Vivant Denon, was to set up an exhibition, in the Musée Napoléon (later the Louvre) that showed off the exploits of French success in capturing the evolution of painting in Europe. Bonaparte, according to Wescher, had understood very well that by displaying his looted artefacts, not only colonies were being added to France's already vast dominions, but previously independent states, like Italy, were robbed of their patrimony, ideologies and beliefs (Wescher, 1988). By capturing that which was inherent to a country, Napoleon managed to symbolically deplete whole nations of their collective pride. Aided by a certain Gaspard Monge, in charge of listing commissions that were deemed desirable for transport, Napoleon composed a sort of aesthetical pyramid with at its summit works by Correggio and Raphael (Galassi, 2011). Raphael was deemed the absolute genius of the High Renaissance while Correggio, Titian, and Veronese followed closely behind. When the French diplomat Jacques-Pierre Tinet, followed by Antoine-Jean Gros, reached Perugia to compose a list of artefacts to be stolen and taken to Paris, their eye quickly fell on Raphael's work in the city. They decided to add Raphael's Oddi altarpiece and the Pala Monteluce to their growing list, and in order to trace the growth of Raphael's potential, also added the Resurrection of Christ, which belonged to San Francesco al Prato and was painted by the young artist's master, Perugino (Galassi, 2004). On February 17 and 18, 1797, Tinet, having taken over from Gros, inspects the churches, palaces and other spots of worth in Perugia and confirms he will be taking the previously listed paintings with him, and personally orders their transport. On February 21, 1797, the unthinkable happens when the Monteluce Raphael exits the church and travels first to Livorno, then to Marseille, to finally arrive in Paris, with the two other paintings, where it is put on display at the Musée Napoléon in November 1798 (Rossi, 1876).

The conflict that led to the loss of much of Italy's patrimony must have been feared throughout the peninsula, but was perhaps most lamented by the nuns of Monteluce, a rather forgotten group hidden behind high walls. The scribe, abbess Teresa Fedele Graziani, wrote much about the invasion

of French soldiers just outside of her convent, which was located beyond the sturdy Etruscan walls that encircle Perugia itself. On February 14 she detailed the arrival of over 900 French soldiers on their way to Rome and Foligno. On February 17, 1797, however, she had just one reason to write; on this terrible day, felt throughout the city, with much regret the French commissioner had come to make arrangements to take away the *famosa tavola a sia quadro di Maria Vergine Assunta in cielo, opera del celebre Rafaello d'Urbino*. She added that the painting had been valued at 15.000 scudi (S. Erminio, 2003). Tinet valued it as *inestimable*. So if we follow the hypothesis that the arrival of the Raphael at Monteluce was the metaphorical crowning of the achievements the Poor Clares of Monteluce had managed through their own Reform and the subsequent Reform of other Clarisse houses by Perugian nuns, then the loss of the painting, through a political conflict, meant that the theft touched upon the ideology shared by the religious community itself and, by extension, the urban fabric that protectively surrounded them. Graziani therefore aptly described the sentiment felt by her community while a spoiled Tinet descended upon their convent and sent their masterpiece to Paris; a post revolution city.

The large Napoleonic Empire that ruled much of the European continent famously fell in 1815, when Bonaparte was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo. Before the fall, valuable artefacts had continued to be stolen during other looting campaigns, the most successful one being Denon's as late as 1813; another 48 paintings had left Perugia by November of 1813, only to arrive in Paris when the allies were already advancing on Napoleon's armies (Galassi, 2004). After France's demise, the Italians wanted to secure they could retrieve what was rightfully theirs. Pope Pius VII sent Antonio Canova, at that time considered the best Neo-Classical sculptor on the Italian peninsula and perhaps on the European continent, to Paris in the guise of a diplomat to start negotiations that would enable the return of the looted pieces. Canova's initial probing was difficult as the French were stuck in a harsh and unsettling political situation in which the country was being ruled by the allies, yet after some more demands Canova made headway and managed to recover about half of the works in question, despite the fierce opposition of Museum director Denon who felt possessive of the spoils (Johns, 1998). There was, however, one catch, the returned works, or at least, most of them, were to be retained in Rome to be housed in the growing Vatican Collection. The French, who felt they could add conditions to the return of works that had been stolen in the first place, demanded the works should stay in Rome to serve as a testament of Italian art and to be studied by eager students who would flock the Italian capital (Johns, 1998).

Although some of the works went back to their rightful, private owners, the fate that befell the famous Coronation of the Virgin by Raphael and his assistants, was a Roman one. The altarpiece must have been returned to Italy between 1815 and 1817. It immediately went to Rome while Perugia was left out of the equation. The Pope's official motivation for keeping many of the returned artefacts, and specifically those that originally belonged to religious institutions, was that religious houses would be unable to carry the financial burden (!) connected to the return of the objects (Galassi, 2004). It is unclear what this burden represented and what the actual costs in retrieving a stolen good would have been. However, the nuns of Monteluce, after the initial struggle to get the piece and the loss of the painting in 1797, opposed and wanted their item back, and this is where the final struggle over the Coronation starts.

In 1824, as noted in the Chronicle, abbess Maria Placida Baldelli pleads with her confessor, with the support of her entire community, for the return of the Raphael to the lay church of their convent in Perugia, and demands that the authorities look into the return as, after all, it was only right that the painting should return, as the community had paid for it with their own funds (S. Erminio, 2003). In 1830, a freshly elected abbess Maria Gesuarda Taccini, whom we have encountered at the beginning of this paper, re-opens the discussion of the piece, as it had still not been returned to them. She therefore opted, together with her entire community, for restitution. After contacting the papal intermediaries, interested in securing and building the Vatican Collection, the nuns are offered three thousand scudi for the painting, but they refuse. The community insists on the return of the painting, but in the next papal communication are only offered one thousand scudi for the painting, and a copy of the original produced by the painter Giovanni Silvagni. The nuns, probably out of fear to lose any offer, accept the final offer (S. Erminio, 200). On the morning of August 8, 1831, as Taccini notes, the copy of Raphael's Coronation of the Virgin arrives, as promised by the government. She details the painting is hung above the high altar at around eleven in the morning thanks to the

kind assistance of a certain Giuseppe Caratolli. It was, apparently, universally admired by the public (S. Erminio, 2003). The painting is never mentioned again.

Today the original Coronation of the Virgin graces room X in the Pinacoteca in the Vatican Collections. The Oddi altarpiece can be found in room VIII, because the two paintings with such an interlinked history have been strangely separated. The guidebook to this ever growing and remarkable collection does it mention the struggle that the Perugian nuns delivered to get it to their church in the first place, nor does not speak of looting, perhaps to avoid giving French visitors an uneasy feeling, and it certainly does not say anything about the letters written to Rome by women who were courageous enough to attempt to battle a paternalistic society. When one visits what is left of the once magnificent convent and church of Santa Maria di Monteluce in Perugia, it is easy to get fully informed about what happened to the Coronation now in Rome. It is blatantly clear that the copy now hanging in lieu of the original is an intruder; the elegant touch of 16th century masters has completely disappeared. The only consolation is, that Palmyra is definite, a willing Pope, however, might still be able to alter Monteluce's fortune.

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