

Luca Giordano's Life and
Interpretation of Saint Paul the Hermit

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The Baroque in Southern Europe
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It was once said that Luca Giordano's images seemed to be "painted in one breath".¹ Giordano produced so many works, so quickly, that he was known by many as "Luca fa presto" ["Luca works fast" or "Luca the fast worker"].² This nickname could produce an image of a effortless, careless artist, who, in fact, had more important qualities such as Giordano's ability to absorb many diverse sources.³ These talents led him to be sought out by many leading institutions of his day, such as the Medici courts in Italy, and to be appointed to the Spanish court as official painter for Charles II.⁴ Giordano's knowledge and understanding of contemporary art and its history allowed him to produce compositions with a "sweet admixture of ancient and modern."⁵

Luca Giordano was born in Naples on October 18, 1634.⁶ His two biographers, Francesco Saverio Baldinucci and Bernardo De Dominici tell us that Giordano's first name was Agostino, only to be renamed Luca after his parents decided he would be trained as a painter.⁷ Giordano's skill as a painter is illustrated by an often told story from his youth. His father, Antonio was commissioned to paint angels in fresco in a local chapel, but since he was not a fresco painter himself, he went to get help from another artist while rejecting young Luca's offer.⁸ Upon Antonio's return, two angels had been applied, one as a sketch and the other painted in. Luca admitted to authoring this "inaspettata

novitá” [“unexpected novelty”] of which his father inquired about, then challenged him to finish the second angel as he watched.⁹ Upon its completion, Antonio “knelt down to thank God that he had been given a son of such talent.”¹⁰ Soon after, a viceroy of Naples introduced Giordano to his new master, Jusepe de Ribera.¹¹

The apprenticeship to Ribera is evident in Giordano’s style, and many of his early works can be confused with Ribera’s.¹² After the death of Ribera in 1652, Giordano traveled to Rome and visited northern Italy.¹³ De Dominici claims this is when Giordano came into contact with Pietro de Cortona, whose “bel colorito”¹⁴ [“beautiful use of color”] he would not forget. This technique is evident in Giordano’s altarpieces of the 1650’s in which, following Mattia Preti, he “brought Neapolitan painting out of its fifty-year involvement with dark tonalities and with Caravaggism”¹⁵ into the international mainstream of the late baroque. When Giordano was 18, he painted several altarpieces during his stay in Venice.¹⁶ During this visit, he was “deeply drawn”¹⁷ to painters such as Paolo Veronese and their cinquecento styles. Giordano’s interest in the work of Veronese is emphasized in Bellori’s *Lives*.

As an international celebrity, Luca Giordano’s unsigned *Life* was added to Giovan Pietro Bellori’s *Lives* in 1728.¹⁸ ¹⁹ It was not Bellori who wrote this *Life*,

but by the son of a painter that worked in Giordano's shop - Bernardo De Dominici.^{20 21} Seventeen years later, De Dominici completed a shorter, revised version of Giordano's *Life* for the third volume of his *Vite de' Pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani*. The first published life of Giordano was considered by some to be Bellori's work, but De Dominici claimed authorship "composed by me in youth and brought forth in 1728."²² Several historians have since discredited De Dominici's claim upon the *Life* of Giordano, only to be proven wrong. There was a little-known deluxe folio version of the 1728 edition of Bellori's *Lives* that contains a pair of sonnets exchanged by Antonio Roviglione and Bernardo De Dominici, "Per la Vita del Cavalier D. Luca Giordano," and another sonnet by Nicoló Lombardo that praises "Bernardo" for writing the *Life* of Giordano.²³ (Figure 1) This second edition of Bellori's *Lives* represents De Dominici's first attempt to put Naples on the modern cultural map of Europe.²⁴ The objective was to demonstrate the relations between Giordano's style and that of sixteenth century painters like Veronese.²⁵ Giordano was able to absorb the "art of the present and the past as an open field..."²⁶ and transformed them into new experiences.

Giordano's interest in Veronese can be seen in his 1683 painting of *Saint Paul the Hermit* (Figure 2). The life of Saint Paul the Hermit was written during

the 2nd century by Saint Jerome and was later popularized by Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*.²⁷ Saint Paul went to the Egyptian desert in 256 to flee the torment of Emperor Decius, and stayed a hermit in the desert until his death at age 113.²⁸ One night Saint Anthony Abbot had a vision of Saint Paul, "another hermit better than he"²⁹ and decided to find him. When Saint Anthony and Saint Paul first met, a raven brought them each a loaf of bread, when previously the raven would only bring Saint Paul a half loaf.³⁰ The next morning Saint Paul told Saint Anthony that he was going to die and wanted to be alone. Saint Paul asked Saint Anthony to bury him. Saint Paul then sends him to fetch a burial cloak from Bishop Athanasius. When Saint Anthony returned he watched Saint Paul ascend into heaven.

An examination of the painting suggests that Giordano depicted Saint Paul at a particular moment in that narrative of his life. Giordano's painting shows the hermit moments before giving his soul to the angels floating above. The raven has a full loaf of bread, seen only after the meeting with Saint Anthony. Giordano's interpretation of Saint Paul is that of an old man with grey hair, a slender muscular build, and the looks of a hard life. It has been suggested that Giordano composes Saint Paul in the eremitical tradition: a great figure "seated, knees bent (creating a 'zig-zag' rhythm), penitential, stick-cross in hand, and the wilderness

setting replete with the tree continuing the diagonal thrust of the composition.”³¹

Scenes of Saint Paul and Anthony’s meeting are common, but images of Paul alone are extremely rare. Ribera etched *Saint Jerome with the Angel of Judgement* (Figure 3) two decades before he accepted Giordano’s apprenticeship.³² Due to lack of visual material for Saint Paul, and the abundance of ideas associated with Jerome, it “is not improbable that these two saints, both of whom represent penitence and asceticism, and were both recipients of heavenly visions... should be linked together.”³³

The iconography of Saint Paul is standard, “if though interchangeable with that of St. Anthony and St. Jerome, both, as well, hermits.”³⁴ Giordano’s former master, Ribera places Saint Jerome with a broken tree trunk thrusting upwards towards the heavenly vision - so does Giordano in his Saint Paul. Both figures are in a natural setting, resting on a rock. Ribera’s Saint has been startled by the angel’s trumpet, raising his arms in surprise.³⁵ Giordano renders Saint Paul a few moments later, ready to accept the divine message.³⁶ Giordano’s contribution to this subject’s iconography is the addition of a halo over the head of Saint Paul.

A Veronese altarpiece, *The Virgin and Child Appearing to Saints Anthony Abbot and Paul the Hermit* (Figure 4) has been suggested as the stylistic antecedent to Giordano’s Saint Paul.³⁷ Completed in 1562, it could have easily

been seen by Giordano during a visit to Venice.³⁸ Veronese and Giordano's Saint Paul altarpiece are similar; both show his arm is outspread, looking toward a heavenly vision, and both perspectives indicate the painting was to be viewed from below.

Giordano was one of the most accomplished painters of his generation.³⁹ His knowledge and understanding of art history contributed to his fame. De Dominici, Giordano's first biographer, put him in the canon of moderns while showing his styles link to the past. His ability to assimilate art of the past and present can be seen in his painting, *Saint Paul the Hermit*.

Notes

1. Luca Giordano, Luca Giordano, 1634-1705 (Napoli: Electa Napoli, 2001), 17.
2. Sue Reed, Richard Welsh, Italian Etchers of the Renaissance and Baroque (Boston: MFA Publications, 1997), 286.
3. Giordano, 17.
4. Giordano, 13.
5. Giordano, 13.
6. Judith Colton, A Taste for Angels: Neapolitan Painting in North America, 1650-1750 (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1987), 113.
7. Colton, 114.
8. Colton, 114.
9. Colton, 114.
10. Colton, 114.
11. Colton, 114.
12. Reed and Welsh, 286.
13. Colton, 115.
14. Colton, 117.
15. Colton, 117.

16. Colton, 115.

17. Colton, 115.

18. Giordano, 17.

19. Janis Bell, Thomas Willette, Art History in the Age of Bellori : Scholarship and Cultural Politics in Seventeenth-Century Rome (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 282.

20. Bell and Willette, 282.

21. Bell and Willette, 286.

22. Bell and Willette, 282.

23. Bell and Willette, 282.

24. Bell and Willette, 289.

25. Bell and Willette, 290.

26. Colton, 118.

27. Jacobus de Voragine, "The Golden Legend, vol. 2" The Life of S. Paul the First Hermit, 21 January 2004, <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/voragine/goldleg2.all.html#xxiv>> (29 April 2004).

28. Voragine.

29. Voragine.

30. Voragine.

31. Richard Townsend, "Luca Giordano's St. Paul the Hermit and the

Eremitical Tradition” (Virginia Commonwealth University, 1984), 9.

32. Townsend, “Luca Giordano’s St. Paul,” 2.

33. Richard Townsend, “Luca Giordano and the Eremitical Tradition” (Virginia Commonwealth University, 1985), 3.

34. Townsend, “Luca Giordano’s St. Paul,” 5.

35. Townsend, “Luca Giordano’s St. Paul,” 2.

36. Townsend, “Luca Giordano’s St. Paul,” 3.

37. Townsend, “Luca Giordano’s St. Paul,” 6.

38. Townsend, “Luca Giordano’s St. Paul,” 6.

39. Giordano, 17.

Bibliography

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Appendix

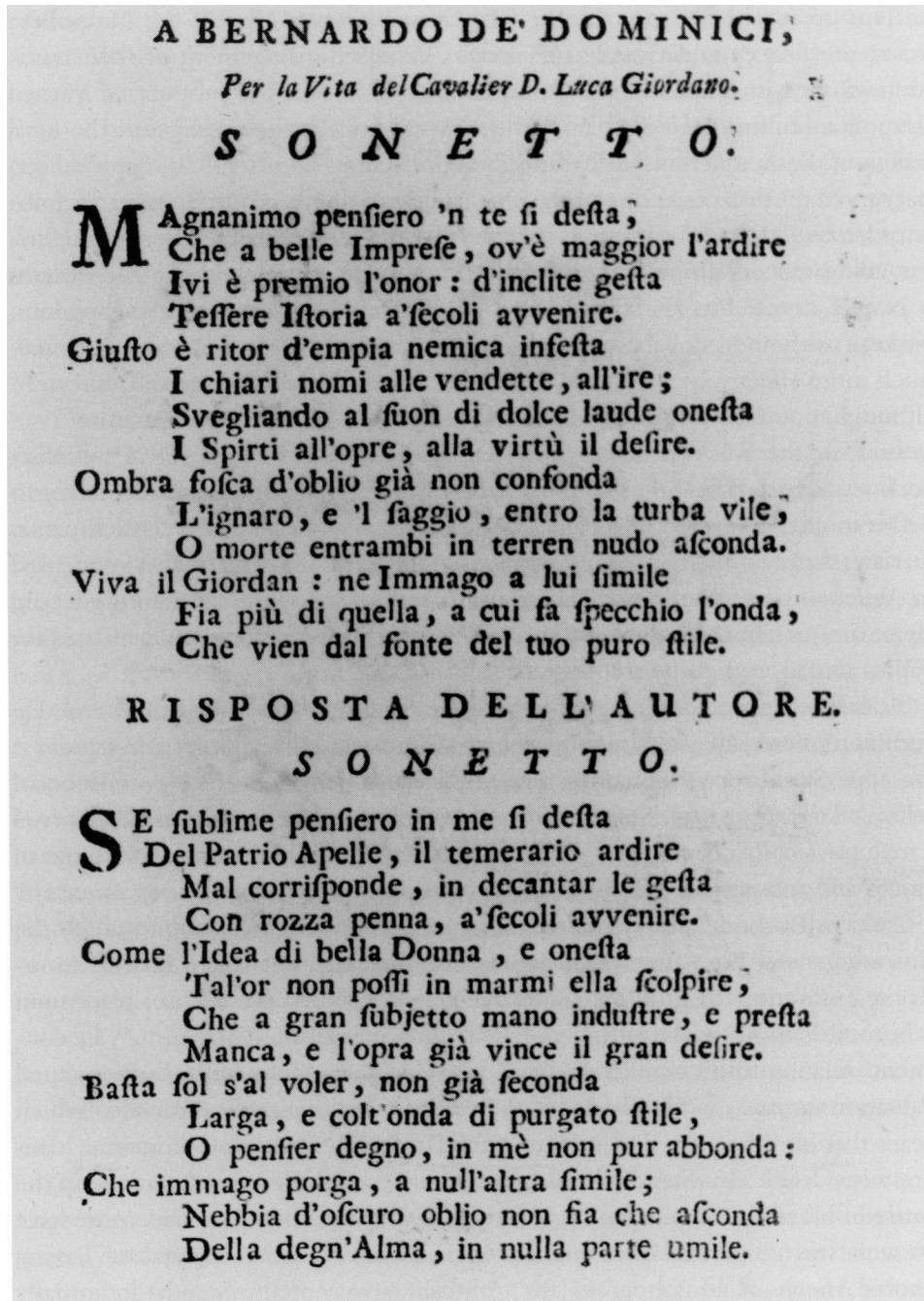


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4