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ARTISTIC EXCHANGE BETWEEN BOLOGNA, PADUA, VENICE, AND THE BYZANTINE-BALKAN EAST: FRAGMENTS OF THE PASSION CYCLE IN THE CHURCH IN VEDRANA (BOLOGNA)

Rosa D'AMICO¹
National Art Gallery of Bologna, Italy

Sanja R. PAJIĆ²
University of Kragujevac
Faculty of Philology and Arts
Department of Fine and Applied Arts

¹ rosa.damico176@alice.it

² sanjapajics@yahoo.com

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Abstract. The church of the Santa Maria Annunziata in the village of Vedrana, near Bologna, is situated along the medieval road that connects Bologna with Ferrara, Padua, and Venice. Between 2008 and 2010, fragments of frescoes, dating from the second half of the 13th century, were uncovered in the church. In these frescoes, which originally adorned the upper parts of the central nave walls until the 18th-century reconstructions, decorative elements, busts of the apostles in the scene of the *Last Supper*, remnants of the figures of Christ and Judas, along with several soldiers in the *Betrayal of Judas* scene were identified. Early researchers noted that the frescoes exhibit a stronger influence from the Veneto region, particularly the Paduan culture, rather than the influences of the art of nearby Venice. However, these frescoes also display notable influences of Byzantine art from the region of the Balkan Peninsula, received directly or through Venice.

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The church in the village of Vedrana, located near Bologna, was first mentioned in historical sources in 1062 as Pieve di Santa Maria and later dedicated to Santa Maria Annunziata. The longstanding dispute between the ecclesiastical institutions of Ravenna and Ferrara was resolved in 1175 when Vedrana became part of the diocese of Bologna, a status it retains to this day. During the Middle Ages, the village developed alongside the church at the intersection of the ancient roads connecting Bologna with Ferrara, Padua, and Venice, in the present-day regions of Emilia-Romagna and Veneto (Caprara, 2010–2011, p. 203). Over the centuries, the building has undergone numerous transformations (Fig. 1). Of particular significance is the intervention which involved the installation of large windows on both sides of the central nave walls. Additionally, a new



Fig. 1. Church of Santa Maria Annunziata, Vedrana (Bologna) (<https://www.tourer.it/scheda?chiesa-di-santa-maria-annunziata-vedrana-budrio>)

barrel-shaped vault was constructed beneath the existing Romanesque wooden roof structure. The precise timeframe for these modifications is uncertain, but they certainly occurred before 1761 when they were first mentioned in the documents, whereas the oldest descriptions mentioning the performed works date back to 1781–1785 (Caprara, 2010–2011, pp. 203, 206, note 5). The current appearance of the building is the result of a reconstruction that took place between 1855 and 1880. During this period, a neo-medieval approach, which was widely embraced in cultural circles at the time, was adopted. The reconstruction aimed to preserve some of the original Romanesque elements in the interior and on the facades (Paolini, 2009, pp. 146–147, 267–268; Caprara, 2010–2011, p. 203, note 4).

During the maintenance works carried out between 2008 and 2010, fragments of paintings depicting figures and decorative elements were discovered on the original upper sections of the walls, in the narrow space between the old roof structure and the 18th-century vault (Caprara, 2010–2011, pp. 203–206). Parts of frescoes at a height of about one meter were uncovered, with their lower portions having suffered damage during the construction of the vault and the installation of windows. The best-preserved sections are the two scenes on the southern wall, spanning around 5 meters in length (Caprara, 2010–2011, pp. 203, 206, note 6, figs. 1–4). In the first scene, the upper part of the busts of male figures and heads with halos reappeared, depicted in a dialogue (Fig. 2). In close proximity, the heads of two figures engaged in a kissing gesture have been preserved. Their postures clearly represent a traditional artistic interpretation of the theme of the *Betrayal of Judas* (Caprara, 2010–2011, p. 204, figs. 1–2). The presence of figures dressed in military costume in the background, originally part of a larger group, confirms that the depicted scene represents the moment of Judas' betrayal of Christ, one of the most significant episodes in the cycle of



Fig. 2. The Last Supper, Paduan painter close to Maestro del Gaibana, Church of Santa Maria Annunziata, Vedrana, 13th century



Fig. 3. The Betrayal of Judas, Paduan painter close to Maestro del Gaibana, Church of Santa Maria Annunziata, Vedrana, 13th century



Fig. 4. Traces of the decorative bands above the figures of Apostles of the Last Supper, Paduan painter close to Maestro del Gaibana, Church of Santa Maria Annunziata, 13th century, Vedrana

Christ's Passion (Fig. 3). This identification led researchers to conclude with considerable certainty that the nearby figures represent the preceding event – *The Last Supper*, which corresponds to the iconographic features of the preserved fragments (Caprara, 2010–2011, p. 204, figs. 3–4). The identification of these two themes suggests that the upper portion of the central nave once featured a cycle depicting various episodes of Christ's Passion. The scenes were arranged in a horizontal frieze, as evidenced by the traces of a frame adorned with stylised floral elements and strips of various colours. These elements, still visible above *The Last Supper*, would have framed the other

compositions as well (Fig. 4). Several fragments of these decorative bands and remnants of figures found on the remaining portion of the same wall and on the opposite wall further confirm the hypothesis that this cycle covered the entire upper zone of the nave. However, due to the limited available evidence, it is not possible to reconstruct the subject of the missing compositions (Caprara, 2010–2011, p. 206, note 6).⁴

Despite the lack of documentation, the technical, iconographic and stylistic characteristics of the preserved wall painting in Vedrana confirm that it was created in the decades around the mid-13th century. Further meticulous studies of the depicted scenes were conducted as part of the preparations for the potential restoration of the complex. The analysis revealed that the origin of the frescoes can be traced back to the art that developed in Padua between the sixth and ninth decades of the 13th century, closely connected to the artistic production in nearby Venice (Caprara, 2010–2011, pp. 203–206; Bossetto, 2015, pp. 97–99), despite the fact that there are few surviving wall paintings from this period in Padua. Fragments of a representation of the *Virgin and Child* (Fig. 5), discovered in a niche adjacent to the altar area in the Church of Santa Sofia in Padua, provide a strong resemblance to the wall paintings in Vedrana. Previously dated

⁴ After the rediscovery of the frescoes, accompanied by their publication, a restoration was proposed. However, administrative difficulties, compounded by the 2012 earthquake in Emilia, impeded the commencement of the necessary work. Although the earthquake did not cause significant damage to the church, it resulted in its long-term closure. The initial efforts to protect the frescoes and clean the surroundings were undertaken thanks to the church community of Vedrana.



Fig. 5. Madonna with Child, Paduan painter close to Maestro del Gaibana, Church of Santa Sofia, 13th century, Padua (www.medioevo.org/artemedievale/pages/veneto/SantaSofiaaPadova.html)



Fig. 6. The Descent from the Cross, Paduan painter close to Maestro del Gaibana, Church of San Benedetto Vecchio, 13th century, Padua

between the seventh and ninth decades of the 13th century (Cozzi, 1982, pp. 93–95; Cozzi, 1998, pp. 38–43; Nante, 2004, pp. 70–73), recent research now suggests that these fragments belong to the early years of the 1260s (Bossetto, 2015, p. 61). The evident similarity in the treatment of carnation, chromatic values and relationship between the figures strongly supports the hypothesis that both works were painted in close proximity to each other, likely by the same artist (Caprara, 2010–2011, pp. 204–205, fig. 5). However, it is plausible to assume that the Vedrana painting may be slightly later in date compared to the Madonna of Padua.

Similar features, albeit of somewhat lower quality, can be recognised in another Paduan fresco from the same period: *The Descent from the Cross* (Fig. 6), painted on the northern side of the western wall in the Church of San Benedetto Vecchio, also dating to the seventh decade of the 13th century (Nante, 2004, pp. 73–75; Bossetto, 2011, p. 72; Bossetto, 2015, pp. 60–61). Previous researchers proposed the thesis, later widely accepted, that these two works are closely associated with the style of the most prominent miniaturist of the period in Padua. Although this talented artist remained unidentified, he was named Maestro del Gaibana after his most famous work, the *Epistolary* (Ms. E 2), created in 1259 by the Ferrara calligrapher Giovanni da Gaibana for the Duomo of Padua, now kept in the Biblioteca Capitolare in the same city (Bettini, 1968, pp. 69–120; Mariani Canova, 2004, pp. 232–234; Nante, 2004, pp. 71–75; Mariani Canova, 2005, pp.



Fig. 7. Christ's entry into Jerusalem, Maestro del Gaibana, the *Epistolarly* (Ms. E 2), 1259, Biblioteca Capitolare, Padua

159–160; Bossetto, 2011, pp. 69–77; Bossetto, 2015) (Fig. 7). This miniature, documented towards the end of the sixth decade of the 13th century, but likely present in the city even before that, is believed to have directly influenced the formation of Paduan artistic workshops (Muraro, 1960, pp. 61–62; Bettini, 1968, p. 100).

Researchers have clearly emphasised the elements present in the miniatures of this precious manuscript, which reveal a thorough knowledge of Venetian illuminations (Bettini, 1968, pp. 100, 104; Bossetto, 2011, p. 70; Bossetto, 2015, pp. 51, 54), as well as some iconographic solutions found in the mosaics of the most relevant artistic worksite of the lagoon, the Church of San Marco (Bossetto, 2011, p. 69; Bossetto, 2015, p. 51). On the other hand, the strong Byzantine influences, evident in the miniatures and on both Paduan frescoes, have been attributed to the artistic connections centered around Venice and its interactions with overseas regions, more precisely with

Constantinople, the Balkans and the Crusader territories in the East (Bossetto, 2011, pp. 69–77; Bossetto, 2015, pp. 54–55, 57–68). In fact, during the middle of the 13th century, Venetian workshops likely became acquainted not only with Byzantine monumental painting but also with manuscripts created during this period (Bossetto, 2011, p. 76). One such manuscript is *Codex Ms.118* from the National Library in Athens, which was undoubtedly illuminated before the fall of the Latin Empire in 1261 (Weitzmann, 1944, pp. 196–210; Bossetto, 2011, p. 76). The influences of the artistic production of Constantinople, which can be observed in the *Epistolarly* and in works created under its influence, are not the result of direct connections with contemporary trends in the workshops of the capital of the empire, but rather they reflect the knowledge of a style nurtured in the Veneto studios and based on the reinterpretation of Byzantine models (Bossetto, 2011, p. 75).

Within the context of Eastern influences, scholars have suggested concrete connections between the Paduan experiences of Maestro del Gaibana and



Fig. 8. The Descent from the Cross, Byzantine painter, Church of the Ascension of Christ, Mileševa Monastery, ca. 1222–1228

Byzantine painting in the Balkans, particularly Serbian art from the first half of the 13th century (Bossetto, 2011, pp. 69–73; Bossetto, 2015, pp. 54–55, 57–68). From an iconographic point of view, it should be emphasized that the aforementioned fresco of the *Descent from the Cross* in Padua represents a version of the scene closely related to the Byzantine prototype. This connection is best exemplified by the fresco depicting the same theme in the under-dome area of the church of the Mileševa Monastery (Bossetto, 2011, p. 72; Bossetto, 2015, pp. 60–61; Дамико & Пајић, 2023, in print) (Fig. 8): it is one of the Balkan wall paintings whose influences, whether direct or mediated, can be recognised in Venetian works during the formation of the new Italian painting of the 13th century. On the other hand, when it comes to stylistic and artistic features, scholars have identified similarities between the Paduan manuscript and the Mileševa wall paintings, painted around 1222–1228 for the Serbian King Vladislav by a talented painter from one of the major centres of the Byzantine Empire, likely Thessaloniki (Bossetto, 2011, p. 70; Bossetto, 2015, pp. 57–68). The solemn and almost classical interpretation of certain figures in the *Epistolary* holds parallels with other examples of art in Serbia, painted by Byzantine artists, such as the fresco ensemble created around 1260–1265 in the Church of the Holy Apostles in the Patriarchate of Peć. For instance, the representation of St. Paul (c.8v), with his head turned upwards, closely resembles the eastern models that inspired the depictions of the apostles in the drum of the dome in Peć (Bossetto, 2011, pp. 72–73) (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. The Ascension of Christ, detail, Byzantine painter, Church of the Holy Apostles, ca. 1265, Patriarchate of Peć (https://www.rastko.rs/kosovo/pecarsija/hramovi/img/036_a.jpg)

In addition to the recognizable connections with Balkan and Serbian art, certain features of the Paduan *Epistolary* and the associated frescoes reveal similarities to the world of Crusader art, as suggested by some scholars. These “hybrid” works combine Byzantine tradition with a stylistic language associated with “mixed” experiences prevalent in the territories of the Eastern Mediterranean under the rule of the Latin Crusaders, particularly the Venetians and the French (Bossetto, 2015, pp. 62–68, with references). The famous Fortress of Saint John of Acre, which became the capital of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem after the fall of Jerusalem in 1244, played a significant role in this context, with Venice having a special influence (Bossetto, 2015, pp. 63, 66). It was a hub for miniature workshops where artists from different backgrounds worked together, leading to the fusion of various artistic traditions (Folda, 2005, pp. 3–26; Bossetto, 2015, p. 63). This environment is be-

lieved to be the origin of the famous illuminated manuscript associated with Saint John of Acre, the so-called *Arsenal Bible* (Paris, Bibliotheque de l’Arsenal, MS 5211) (Buchthal, 1986, pp. 54–68) (Fig. 10). It was illuminated between 1250 and 1254, at a time when King Louis IX of France, better known as Saint Louis, participated in the Crusades and resided in the regions controlled by the Latins (Folda, 2005, p. 21). The Old Testament text of the *Arsenal Bible* is illuminated with numerous miniatures created under the strong influence of the Byzantine East, combined with a less refined style inclined towards narration, which refers to the world of Gothic art. It is worth noting that certain pages of this important manuscript, presumably commissioned by the king himself (Buchthal, 1986, p. 67), show connections with the above-mentioned fresco of the *Virgin and Child* from the Church of Saint Sophia in Padua, which is in close proximity to the *Epistolary* manuscript (Furlan, 2004, pp. 15–32).

This viewpoint has been embraced by recent scholars, although not without some divergence (Bossetto, 2011, pp. 74–75). In fact, the artistic characteristics of the Paduan *Virgin and Child* exhibit both the refined forms of Byzantine art from



Fig. 10. Scenes from Genesis, Frontispiece, Master of Acre, *Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal* (MS. 5211), 1250–1255, Paris (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acre_Bible#/media/File:Biblioth%C3%A8que_de_l' Arsenal, 5211_-_Genesis_frontispiece.jpg)

the region of the Balkan Peninsula and the sometimes overly expressive style of Crusader art, whose features can be noticed in the “French” *Arsenal Bible*. The rediscovered frescoes in Vedrana likewise evoke similar suggestions that made their way to Bologna through the Veneto-Paduan culture under the dominant influence of Maestro del Gaibana. Certain features of the Vedrana cycle, such as the highlighted eyes of the apostles in the *Last Supper* scene, indicate possible influences from Crusader art, reinterpreted in the light of the same sources that shaped Paduan painting. These influences were probably widely accepted in Bologna, despite the absence of preserved works. This is understandable, considering the city’s significant role in the context of the Crusader culture during the 13th century. Historical records confirm the participation of many crusaders from Bologna in the Fifth Crusade, fought in Egypt between 1217 and 1219 (Giacomelli, 1983, p. 105). It is believed that upon their return, they played an important role in the establishment of the cult center on the so-called “holy mountain” of Montovolo in the Bolognese Apennines, whose

bore a resemblance to Mount Sinai and featured the then restored churches of Saint Mary and Saint Catherine. At the same time, the cult of relics of Eastern origin grew in the city itself, especially nurtured in the Santo Stefano complex – also known as Sette Chiese, modelled after the most important monuments of Jerusalem (Cardini, 1987, pp. 19–50).

The emergence of Vedrana frescoes significantly contributed to the study of monumental painting that developed in Bologna during the 13th century (Benati, 2000, pp. 87–107). In the churches and monasteries of the city, characterised by a blend of different cultures, encouraged by the renowned University and the presence of new religious orders, primarily the Franciscans and Dominicans, painted cycles were created. However, only fragmentary traces remain to attest

high artistic achievements of these paintings. Noteworthy among the preserved works are the frescoes in the Church of San Vittore (Дамико & Пајић, 2020, pp. 47–74, with bibliography), then the scene depicting the *Massacre of the Innocents*, the sole remaining episode of the once extensive cycle that until 1803 adorned the dome of the Church of Santo Sepolcro in Santo Stefano complex (D'Amico, 2013, pp. 329–344), as well as other frescoes from the same period in this complex, particularly the fragment of the figure of Saint Peter in the Church of the Trinity (Дамико & Пајић, 2019, pp. 203–226, with bibliography). There are also frescoes in the niches on the outer northern wall of the Church of San Giacomo Maggiore (Дамико & Пајић, 2018, pp. 127–144, with bibliography). These fragments of monumental Bolognese painting display artistic and iconographic features that, despite their significant mutual differences, reflect the presence of Eastern influences, along with elements of Romanesque origin. Apart from the artistic traces preserved in Bologna itself, it should be highlighted that in the wider context of the present provinces of Emilia and Romagna, important examples of monumental painting, which exhibit strong Byzantine influences, but likewise possible Balkan origins, were transmitted through the circulation of models, drawings and ideas. Notable examples include the frescoes in the dome of the Baptistery in Parma (Пајић & Дамико, 2013, pp. 279–294, with bibliography) and the frescoes that were once located in the apse of the Church of San Bartolomeo in Ferrara, now exhibited in the Pinacoteca Nazionale in the same city (D'Amico, 2016, pp. 9–22). An important difference is that these mentioned works do not demonstrate any connections with contemporary painting from the Veneto region and Venice, unlike the frescoes from Vedrana, where such influences are evident. In fact, among the few remaining 13th-century frescoes in Bologna, only one, the representation of the *Virgin with Child and Saints* in one of the aforementioned external arcossoliums of the Church of San Giacomo Maggiore, has been recognised by the scholars as having limited Venetian influences (Giorgi, 2000, pp. 288–289), combined with strong indications of Tuscan origin. In this regard, the preserved paintings from Vedrana open new possibilities for researchers studying 13th-century art.

It is also important to note that the presence of artists closely associated with the workshops from Padua was not an unusual phenomenon in the wider territory of Vedrana, located along the busy road that, as mentioned, connected Bologna with Padua and Venice (Caprara, 2010–2011, p. 203). The connections between these cities were centuries old, with evidence of the famous Paduan monastery of Santa Guistina possessing an estate in this area as early as 828 (Servetti Donati, 1993, p. 489). Furthermore, the previously established historical connections between Ferrara and Padua were particularly strong in the mid-13th century: due to political troubles that befell Padua in 1254, the bishop of the city sought refuge in Ferrara, accompanied by the most respected representatives of the Church (Bossetto, 2015, pp. 33, 99).

The significant presence of fragments from the cycle in the Bologna area suggests that the influence of the Gaibanese style may have spread to territories south of the river Po, where such artistic connections have not been identified so far. Such connections probably persisted after 1265, when it is believed that the workshop of Maestro del Gaibana moved beyond the Alps to Austria and Bohemia, where manuscripts that exhibit distinct resemblances to the style of this miniaturist were produced (Bossetto, 2015, pp. 103–135, with bibliography; for manuscripts from Northern Europe, see also Corrie, 1987, pp. 111–123).

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Роза ДАМИКО

Национална галерија уметности у Болоњи, Италија

Сања Р. ПАЈИЋ

Универзитет у Крагујевцу

Филолошко-уметнички факултет

Одсек за примењену и ликовну уметност

Уметничка размена између Болоње, Падове, Венеције
и византијско-балканског Истока: фрагменти циклуса
Страдања Христовог у цркви у Ведрани (Болоња)

Резиме

Црква Благовештења у селу Ведрана, у близини Болоње, налази се уз средњовековни пут који повезује Болоњу са Фераром, Падовом и Венецијом. Између 2008. и 2010. године у цркви су откривени фрагменти фресака из друге половине XIII века. На овим фрескама, које су првобитно красиле горње делове зидова главног брода до реконструкција у XVIII веку, идентификовани су декоративни елементи, бисте апостола у сцени Тајне вечере, остаци фигура Христа и Јуде, као и неколико војника у сцени Издаја Јуде. Рани истраживачи приметили су да фреске показују утицај уметности неговане у регији Венета, посебно падованске културе, пре него утицаје уметности из оближње Венеције. Међутим, ове фреске показују и значајне византијско-балканске утицаје, примљене директно или преко Венеције.

Кључне речи: Ведрана; сликарство XIII века; Болоња; Падова; Венеција; византијска уметност; српска уметност; италијанска уметност.



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