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In my End is my Beginning

Painters in Milan after the Plague of 1630



Fig. 1: Giovanni Battista Crespi Cerano, Melchiorre Gherardini, Gerolamo Chignoli, *Madonna delle Grazie*, 1631, Oil on canvas, 210 x 315 cm, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milano.

As history runs its course, there are times when humanity witnesses the collapse of its own identity, sociopolitical system, and cultural order. Recent studies have made clear how history is, on closer inspection, punctuated by catastrophes and sudden changes in the forces in equilibrium, and how such changes, even when chaotic, need to be understood.¹ To phrase it in the words of Spinks and Zika:

"Disaster wreaks terrible havoc in the lives of individuals and communities. It destroys infrastructure, brings death, and produces violent emotions and trauma. But it also reinforces coping strategies and develops new pathways to recovery."²

When addressing the complexity of such periods, epochal events are frequently regarded solely as endpoints, thereby obscuring the potential for transforma-

tion or regeneration that they might offer. In this context, Button and Schuller argue that scholarly analyses often focus solely on the triggering event, neglecting the broader disaster continuum, which includes the preceding historical context and the long-term recovery process.³

This phenomenon is particularly evident in studies of 17th-century Milanese art. Historiography, especially since the Enlightenment, has largely portrayed Milan's period under Spanish rule (1554–1700) as one of decline.⁴ The pessimistic view is reinforced when considering the aftermath of the 1630 epidemic, an epoch-making event that profoundly influenced the city's history.⁵ This era is often seen as a time of profound crisis in the arts, devoid of significant initiatives, and marked by what has been interpreted as a lethargy in pictorial production throughout the city, which lasted for approximately twenty years. However, this

harsh judgment contrasts sharply with the accounts of Milan found in the *Guide*—scholarly narratives from the eighteenth century that are fundamental to the city’s artistic historiography—offering detailed and highly regarded descriptions of its treasures.⁶ In their efforts to create a portrait of the city, the *Guide* restore a flourishing image that had been overshadowed by subsequent centuries, thereby enhancing the significance of the artworks to celebrate the historical legacy of Milan. For instance, Carlo Torre’s *Il ritratto di Milano* (1714) and Serviliano Latuada’s *Descrizione di Milano* (1737) present a vision of the city rich with numerous artworks created between 1630 and 1650, dispersed throughout its many churches. Certainly, the Austrian Habsburg (1700–1796) and Napoleonic (1796–1814) dominations of the city obliterated a sizeable portion of the seventeenth-century artistic treasures—dispersing artworks and destroying churches⁷—a loss that may account for the obscurity surrounding many artists who worked during the twilight of the epidemic.

In 1630, the epidemic struck Milan for the second time in a short span, following the outbreak of 1576–1577. It resulted in the death of one-third of the population and had significant economic consequences.⁸ However, beyond the immediate devastation, the plague became a defining element of Lombard identity, leaving indelible marks on the city’s social and cultural fabric. From these traces Alessandro Manzoni drew inspiration for his classic novels *I Promessi Sposi* and *Storia della Colonna Infame*,⁹ where he poetically depicted the era. Indeed, Mina Gregori referenced Manzoni’s vision when, for the first time, she considered how the period of crisis had also impacted the figurative arts.¹⁰ In her article in the inaugural issue of *Paragone* journal, the scholar was the first to address this theme, effectively initiating a phase of recovery and renewed appreciation for 17th-century Lombard art, which had gone largely unrecognized for centuries. A well-defined interpretative paradigm was established for the first time, codifying the characteristics of 17th-century Lombardy. Two landmark exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues contributed to this renewed recognition in a significant way: Giovanni Testori’s *Mostra del Manierismo Piemontese e Lombardo del Seicento*¹¹ and the 1973 *Seicento Lombardo* exhibition held in Milan at the Palazzo Reale¹².

The artistic production of the entire century was closely associated with the work of the so-called “Borromeo masters”, who were active during the period between the two major plague epidemics (1577–1630): Giovanni Battista Crespi, known as Cerano (1573–1632), Pier Francesco Mazzucchelli, known as Morazzone (1573–1626), Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1564–1625), and, to some extent, Daniele Crespi (1598–1630). This canon was precisely characterized and framed by the curators within the historical-religious context in which it developed, namely during the archbishoprics of Carlo Borromeo and his cousin Federico Borromeo.¹³ Naturally, Cerano was acknowledged as the primary figure of this Milanese artistic period due to his privileged relationship with Archbishop Federico Borromeo, who supported him through commissions and appointed him master of the painting class at the Accademia Ambrosiana.¹⁴

This critical assessment successfully defined the traits of *Seicento Lombardo* as a period with a remarkable capacity to convey powerful images in painting, marked by dark tones and dramatically depicting human experience in its rawest truth and suffering. Nonetheless, it is essential to remember that, struck by plague and fate, the leading figures of this artistic school perished alongside the fervent patron of that memorable era, Federico Borromeo, who passed away in 1631.¹⁵ As a result, the year 1630 and the outbreak of the plague were considered the ultimate chronological markers for describing the entire artistic period of the 17th century. Therefore, while the exhibitions and their critical approach laid the foundation for studies on the theme, they also significantly influenced the historiographical perspective, which, to this day, tends to overlook the period following the plague. The relationship between the arts in Milan and the plague epidemic has been explored concerning the 16th-century outbreak involving St. Charles Borromeo, rather than through an in-depth examination of the 1630 epidemic.¹⁶ Yet, the apocalyptic event, which marked an unbridgeable break with what had preceded it, represents a beginning for a new generation of artists who became protagonists of a new artistic season.

Indeed, Cardinal Federico Borromeo, who passed away on 21 September 1631, appeared to have already sensed the shift in the artistic landscape he had

briefly witnessed. In his final sermon, delivered at Milan Cathedral on Pentecost in 1631, he proclaimed:

"The arts are akin to the sciences, and the sciences resemble a ladder. If someone at the higher step of the ladder falls, those positioned lower, and considered inferior, must advance step by step, ascending gradually. Over time, they will eventually reach the same height that the first had attained."¹⁷

Borroneo's image is eloquent and effectively captures the dynamics of Milan's artistic context after 1630. The death of the great masters who had defined an artistic era in the city compelled those who survived the plague—having trained in the shadows of these masters—to step forward and continue their legacy. This generation of painters who emerged in Milan during the 1630s includes Melchiorre Gherardini (1603–1668),¹⁸ Gerolamo Chignoli (?–1670),¹⁹ Carlo Biffi (1605–1675),²⁰ and Ercole Procaccini the Younger (1605–1680).²¹ These artists, homogeneous in age and biography, were collectively shaped by the teachings of Cerano and the Accademia Ambrosiana. On July 11, 1621, Carlo Biffi and Ercole Procaccini the Younger were enrolled in the painting class taught by Cerano, alongside Melchiorre Gherardini, who, in 1626, joined the master's workshop, where Gerolamo Chignoli was already being trained.²² In the wake of the profound changes brought about by the plague epidemic, the careers of these artists testify to the resilience of the arts, which were not entirely dormant in the aftermath of the epidemic. Thus, the plague can be regarded as an icon of renewal and reconfiguration of collective existence. Painters operating in Milan after 1630 continued the legacy of the Borromean masters with a determined commitment to remain faithful to their tradition, maintaining an active artistic presence for two decades. Consequently, a revision of the existing paradigm is due: the epoch-making event of the plague will now serve as the starting point for the investigation.

To approach this topic systematically, it is important to note that the first historically documented point of contact between the survivors and the epidemic is their involvement in patrols, where artists were called to stand guard at the city gates. Caprara²³ identifies

this information in the State Archives of Milan, specifically within the dossier *Notificati gli abitanti nelle rispettive parrocchie della Città di Milano dagli Anziani innanzi al Tribunale di Sanità per destinar Guardie e soprintendenti delle Porte in tempo di contagio sospetto*,²⁴ which outlines the involvement of citizens in gate patrols during times of contagion. Careful observation reveals that artists participated in these duties for a decade. Gherardini was appointed to the parish of San Salvatore in May 1632, and in 1633, Gerolamo Chignoli was also enlisted, alongside Carlo Biffi.²⁵



Fig. 2: Melchiorre Gherardini, *Dal Orto il mio bel nome*, 1633–36, Etching, 123 x 152 mm, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. © Gallica.bnf.fr.

The second, far more tragic element illustrating how the circumstances created by the epidemic shaped the new generation is the abundance and violence of the deaths it caused, which created a significant void among the artists, as previously mentioned. It is essential to emphasize that this void extended beyond a professional level; it also signified a profound transformation within the artistic community, marked by the loss of family members, loved ones, masters, and fathers. In this context, it is particularly emblematic that three of the featured artists found themselves inheriting the family workshop. Carlo Biffi and Ercole Procaccini experienced the death of their fathers due to the plague, thereby inheriting their workshops, clients, and commissions. However, the most substantial void to fill was undoubtedly that left by Cerano. All the artists had spent a formative period either in his workshop (in the cases of Chignoli and Gherardini) or at the Accademia

Ambrosiana (in the cases of Biffi and Procaccini).²⁶ The artist was highly prominent in Milanese commissions, engaged in a diverse range of projects that would be inherited by Melchiorre Gherardini²⁷ upon his death. In fact, Gherardini not only had a professional relationship with Cerano but was also betrothed to his daughter, Camilla. The wedding, which was already planned, was expedited by the dramatic circumstances surrounding the tragic death of the painter; the marriage was celebrated only five days after the master's passing, thus formalizing the transfer of responsibility, facilitated by the young woman's dowry, which enabled Gherardini to complete the pending works.²⁸ Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite their tragic nature, these deaths marked a significant turning point in the lives of the surviving artists, coinciding with the beginning of their independent careers. With Cerano passing,²⁹ Gherardini assumed leadership of the most important and prolific painting workshop in Milan at the time.³⁰ Meanwhile, Gerolamo Chignoli, who was also part of Cerano's enterprise, embarked on establishing his own business.³¹ The survivors of the plague were called upon to fill the void left by their predecessors, carrying forward a legacy imbued with expectations. By analyzing several significant images produced during this period, including some that depict the plague itself, we can consider how a tragic rupture serves as a starting point for the careers of these artists. It also provides an opportunity to define their artistic identities in dialogue with their predecessors, thereby influencing their work to a considerable extent.

One final factor deserves consideration: the representation of the epidemic made by the artists themselves, which serves as a significant element in understanding the impact of the epidemics on the arts. Indeed, Milan is no exception in the 17th century, which offers a substantial collection of depictions of plague and pestilence that mirror the epidemic's spread throughout Europe. As Cohn suggests, the plague spurred artistic creativity, becoming a key theme in both representations of the disease and the narrative of liberation from it.³² Following the epidemic, Milan experienced a surge in images depicting the plague and saints believed to offer protection. Ex-voto paintings naturally dominated the commissions for surviving artists. Therefore, the analysis of some significant im-

ages produced during this period can illuminate the impact of the epidemics on the arts.

One image sums up these instances and becomes the perfect example for our discussion, both representing the moment of crisis and operating as an icon of redemption: the *Madonna delle Grazie* painted by Cerano, Melchiorre Gherardini and Gerolamo Chignoli for the homonymous Milanese church³³ (fig. 1).

The painting was the first significant image produced in Milan at the close of the epidemic, created between 1630 and 1632.³⁴ Commissioned by the friars of the Dominican Order of Santa Maria delle Grazie, it served as an ex-voto for the cessation of the plague, designed to adorn the lunette above the entrance to the chapel of Our Lady of Grace. Within this chapel, a perpetually burning lamp, according to the tradition gifted by the Madonna, symbolized the protection of Our Lady of Grace, anchoring the devotion of Milan's citizens. During the epidemic, the Dominican friars distributed oil from this lamp to the population, as it was believed that its devotional application as an ointment could prevent contagion and ensure the healing of the sick.³⁵ This practice, along with the lamp's perceived miraculous power, is memorialized in the lunette, which stands as a visual testament to the city's recovery from the plague.



Fig. 3: Valletto Francesco, Cesare Bassano, *Descrizione della esecuzione di giustizia fatta in Milano*, 1630 ca, Etching, 363 x 420 mm, Civica raccolta delle stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milan © Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Castello Sforzesco, Milano.



Fig. 4: Anonymous, *L'oglio pietoso*, 1630 ca, Etching, 243 x 190 mm, Civica raccolta delle stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milan © Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Castello Sforzesco, Milano.

The lunette is historically precise, providing a faithful portrait of the specific Milanese epidemics. The organization of the scene adheres to a pyramidal structure, with earthly figures positioned in the lower section and a divine apparition of Our Lady of Grace in the upper portion. The Virgin is shown walking on clouds, accompanied by two angels, one of whom presents an object. Traditionally, scholars have identified this object as a censer; however, it is, in fact, the lamp containing the miraculous oil, personally presented to the Dominican friars by the Virgin. Thus, the lunette fixes the image of a historical event deeply rooted in Milanese devotion and the circumstances of the epidemic. The friar gazes towards the bystanders as he distributes the ointment to the people, who are stretching out containers to be filled. In the lower part of the composition, Milanese humanity gathers, hoping for a miracle. The figures are arranged in diagonal lines, extending their arms to converge towards the lamp, directing attention to it. Even a man in the foreground, already in a state of agony, extends his arm toward

the lamp in a final gesture of seeking salvation. On the left side of the painting, a desperate mother cradles one of her two children while having abandoned the other, who is already dead.³⁶ A pestilential boil is already blooming on the woman's breast as she tries to bridge her other son towards the ointment.

The articulation of the scene, along with the originality of the design and iconographic motifs, all highlight the genius of Cerano. The somber and leaden tone of the composition, rendered in shades of brown, effectively captures the tragic nature of the depicted event, and aligns closely with the style of the master's later works. For instance, parallels can be drawn to similarly dramatic works such as the *Mass of Saint Gregory the Great* or the *Lamentation of Christ by Mary Magdalene*, whose tumid and tactile execution reveals the hand of the master. Notably, the use of light, starkly contrasted by a divine apparition, is organized through decisive diagonal lines, emphasizing the dramatic and almost swollen representation of the weary brown bodies. The painting was initially commissioned solely to Cerano. However, the artist was already in the terminal phase of his career, overwhelmed with commitments, and would die within a year during the pandemics, before finishing the lunette.³⁷

It is therefore not surprising that, upon close examination, the style confirms that the execution of the work can be attributed entirely to Gherardini and Chignoli. Both painters were still operating within Cerano's workshop and remained faithful to his artistic methods, although their execution was still somewhat rigid and in process of refinement when compared to the master's more mature and developed style.

Surely, the plague serves as both the subject of the image and its source, as the young painters captured on canvas the experiences of the apocalyptic times they lived in. This artwork is marked by the epidemic not only because it illustrates the catastrophic event but also because it displays Chignoli and Gherardini completing the work initiated by their master Cerano, thus encapsulating the transition between two generations of painters.

A second type of images must be taken into consideration. Indeed, after the outbreak of the plague, the art of engraving which had been dormant at the beginning of the century, emerged in Milan with renewed vi-

gor.³⁸ It is safe to say that the diffusion of printing in Milan reached unprecedented levels, due to its affordability in the complex economic landscape that followed the epidemic.³⁹ Artists like Carlo Biffi and Melchiorre Gherardini created drawings specifically for engraving, commissioned by discerning patrons.⁴⁰ This provided painters a more accessible and less demanding income opportunity compared to involvement in large frescoes cycles, the production of which had slowed during the plague years.



Fig. 5: Angelo Gallo, Giovanni Paolo Bianchi, *Madonna coi santi Rocco e Sebastiano*, 1630 ca. Etching, 342 x 243 mm, Civica raccolta delle stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milan © Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Castello Sforzesco, Milano.

Various images can be presented as examples, as the engraving production in Milan during these years encompasses a range of themes, from the representation of triumphal arches to the creation of maps and the realization of portraits.⁴¹ However, focusing on the depictions of the plague allows to examine how the epidemic was not only an opportunity for the development of technique but also the very subject of representation. A good example is Melchiorre Gherardini's engra-

ving *Dal Orto il mio bel nome*,⁴² of which several authors have highlighted the narrative effectiveness and the significance as a historical testimony⁴³ (fig. 2). The print shows a scene set along Corso di Porta Orientale leading to the city gate, characterized by a powerful perspective that features highly foreshortened buildings on the right side. In macabre detail, wagons laden with corpses traverse the street, making their way towards the Lazzaretto.

Thus, it can be said that this flourishing production, while influenced by crisis factors, also introduced a significant novelty: for the first time, it was not foreign artists practicing graphic art, but a local generation of artists dedicated to engraving alongside their painting activities. In fact, other printed works portraying events related to the epidemic can be recalled, such as the one featuring some figures kneeling in prayer as carts filled with corpses traverse the streets, while individuals suspected of spreading the disease (*untori*)⁴⁴ face brutal executions⁴⁵ (fig. 3). Another example is the print that encapsulates, as a sample, all the events of the epidemic⁴⁶ (fig. 4). Once again, we recognize, in a perspectival view of the city, the carts laden with corpses being removed, the execution of the plague spreaders, and the figures in prayer who gather in the background near the miraculous image of the Madonna delle Grazie, above which a lamp burns. On the other hand, some prints take on a more ex-voto character, such as the depiction of the *Pietà* with Saints Roch and Sebastian, who are venerated as protectors against the epidemic⁴⁷ (fig. 5).

Two more commissions linked to the experience of the plague are notable in the realm of pictorial production: both Chignoli and Gherardini created an ex-voto painting. Gherardini produced an image of *Santa Felicità* for the community of Turbigo, near Milan, in 1631⁴⁸ (fig. 6). This painting depicts the saint upon whom the community relied for deliverance from the disease, as indicated by the cartouche stating "ob liberatione a peste" and it is signed by the painter as "gerardinus 1631".

Chignoli, on the other hand, is credited with a monumental altarpiece representing the Madonna flanked by Saints Roch and Sebastian, an ex-voto characterized by the presence of the Madonna positioned between the patrons of the disease.⁴⁹

Shortly after these initial works, both painters began to establish themselves in the Milanese artistic scene, alongside Ercole Procaccini and Carlo Biffi. The careers of this group flourished with the creation of numerous altarpieces and several frescoes in Milanese churches.⁵⁰ In the span of two decades, these artists had firmly established themselves as prominent figures. The workshop of Ercole Procaccini the Younger⁵¹ emerged as a new focal point for the training of young Milanese painters, with Chignoli and Gherardini being sought after for extensive fresco cycles in Milan and for significant projects beyond the city borders.⁵²



Fig. 6: Melchiorre Gherardini, *Santa Felicità*, 1631, Oil on canvas, 132 x 93,5 cm. Santa Maria Assunta, Turbigo. © Laboratorio San Gregorio - Archivio parrocchiale di Turbigo.

As the mid-century approached, however, new, and more distinctly Baroque influences began to emerge in the city, and new figures asserted themselves on the artistic scene.⁵³ Over time, the arts in Milan flourished across a variety of forms and languages, and the generation of artists who had survived the plague gradually set aside its earlier style.⁵⁴

While the post-plague artists sought to navigate and adapt to the emerging artistic trends, they occasionally struggled to fully embrace them. Milan was once again on the verge of transitioning into a new era, this time not through tragic or abrupt changes, but through a gradual evolution that led to new artistic possibilities.

Nevertheless, it is essential today to reconsider the two decades of Milanese art following the plague of 1630 and to focus on the recognition of the figures of its protagonists: a generation of artists who, precisely because of the apocalyptic event that heralded the end of times, witnessed the beginning of their own history. The epidemics provided an opportunity for new commissions and marked a critical juncture in the artists' careers, allowing them to flourish and gradually assume control of Milan's artistic landscape for two decades.

Endnotes

Acknowledgment is given to Eleonora Aiello, Thomas Balfe, Mauro Pavesi and Rita Yates for their valuable contributions and support during the preparation of this paper.

1. See Belmonte/Scirocco 2019.
2. Spinks/Zika 2016, p. 4.
3. Button/Schuller 2016, p. 3.
4. See Signorotto 2000.
5. The year 1630 was the peak of the plague outbreak. The epidemics began to spread in 1629 with effects that persisted until 1632. See Ferro 1973.
6. See Carrara/Visioli 2020.
7. The dispersal of Milanese heritage is primarily the result of the suppression of religious orders during the Austrian Habsburg era, alongside the repercussions of the similar phenomena occurring during the Napoleonic period. See: Ferro 1999; Castiglioni 1958; Valsecchi 1959; Rota 1959, p. 42–43.
8. See Sella 1982.
9. See Manzoni ed. 2021; ed. 2023.
10. Gregori 1950, p. 7–20.
11. Testori 1955.
12. Dell'Acqua 1973.
13. The plague of 1576–1577 is commonly referred to as the plague of St. Charles (Carlo Borromeo) due to the significant personal involvement of the archbishop during this crisis. The legacy of St. Charles in terms of religious and artistic policies was, to a certain extent, continued by Federico Borromeo, a complex and multifaceted figure extensively analyzed in various studies. See Jones 1993; Giuliani 2007. Additionally, the concept of a distinct Borromean Lombardy—a phase in Milanese history closely associated with the endeavors of these two cousins—has also been a focus of scholarly investigation. See Pissavino/Signorotto 1995.
14. Instituted by Borromeo himself, the academy was designed to train the next generation of artists in Milan. See Bora 1992; Jones 1993.
15. See Frangi 1999. This text is the first to address the issue of the post-plague period and its aftermath, significantly highlighting the generational aspect of this phenomenon. A thorough understanding of 17th-century Lombardy remains grounded in knowledge of the "Borromean masters", facilitated by existing monographic works on the key figures of Morazzone, Cerano, and Procaccini. See Gregori 1962; Rosci 2000; Rosci 2005; H. Brigstocke/D'Albo 2020.
16. See Ferro 1973a; Ferro 1973b; Jones 2005; Pavesi 2023a; Pavesi 2023b.
17. Borromeo 1632, 568–569. The translation provided has been completed by the author. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and clarity, there may be slight variations or interpretations that reflect the author's understanding of the original text.
18. For Gherardini's life see Bona Castellotti 1978; Coppa 1989a; Spiriti 2000; Cavalieri 2005 and particularly about the year of birth Ferrari forthcoming.

19. Girolamo Chignoli was probably born in the first decade of the XVII century. See Milantoni 1980; Valsecchi 1961b; Coppa 1995a; Coppa 2003; Cavalieri 2005.
20. See Bossaglia 1968.
21. See D'Albo 2016.
22. See Rosci 2000, p. 295–296; Caprara 2001, p. 329.
23. Caprara 2001, p. 327–354.
24. The title of the dossier can be translated: “the inhabitants of the parishes of the City of Milan are notified by the Elders before the Tribunal of public Health to assign Guards and overseers for the Gates during times of suspected contagion”.
25. The dossier (Archivio di Stato di Milano, Atti di governo, Sanità parte antica, c. 286 bis) identified by Caprara has facilitated the discovery of several new documents pertaining to the lives of the artists under consideration. For the sake of brevity, only the key dates are provided here. Furthermore, it is interesting to note a parallel in Rome: during the plague of 1630, which did not directly affect the city, arrangements were made for the walls surrounding Rome to be guarded by two artisans assisting a nobleman, similar to the situation in Milan. See Nussdorfer 1992; Caprara 2001.
26. Studies have often overlooked the training of this generation of artists within the Accademia Ambrosiana and, more broadly, under the tutelage of Cerano. In the later years of the master’s career, Chignoli and Gherardini assisted him with the numerous commissions that he could no longer manage alone. See Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan, P. 239 SUP, Regole dell’Accademia del disegno nella Biblioteca Ambrosiana, handwritten dossier transcribed in Nicodemi, 1957, p. 653–696. See also Bora 1992; Rovetta 2005.
27. The terminal designs for the reliefs of the overdoor of the Duomo are particularly noteworthy (Stoppa, entries in Il Cerano, 1573–1632, p. 198–202), as well as those in which Gherardini himself participated: Cerano, *La Battaglia di Muret*, oil on canvas, 500 x 650 cm, Cremona (Rosci 2000, p. 269–272); Cerano and Melchiorre Gherardini, *Madonna col Bambino, San Pietro e San Bruno*, oil on canvas, 104 x 174 cm, Pavia, Pinacoteca Civica Malaspina (Rosci, 2000, p. 272–273); and the lunette *Madonna delle Grazie*, which we will discuss shortly (see related note). Also remarkable is the commission for the *Sposalizio della Vergine* in San Giuseppe, requested to Cerano in 1629 by Scipione Toso, which was never completed and whose execution must therefore be attributed entirely to Gherardini.
28. See Rossetti 2024 and the previous note.
29. Cerano died on the 23 of October 1632 for asthma and dropsy (older term for edema, a condition involving fluid retention and swelling). The documents related to the death are preserved at the State Archives of Milan, ancient population section (Fondo popolazione, parte antica), folder 120. See Pevsner 1928, p. 48; Rosci 2000, p. 296.
30. See Rosci 1964; Rosci 2005.
31. See Valsecchi 1961b.
32. Cohn 2010, p. 110–117.
33. Cerano, Melchiorre Gherardini and Gerolamo Chignoli, *La Madonna libera Milano dalla peste*, 1632 ca, oil on framed canvas, 210 x 315 cm, Milan, Santa Maria delle Grazie, entrance to Madonna of the Rosary Chapel. Rosci 2000, p. 174.
34. Bora 1983, p. 175–178.
35. Ferrari 2019, p. 315, note 41; Bellagente 2004, p. 31–33.
36. Boeckl 1993, p. 45–68.
37. See note 29.
38. See Alberici 1973; Bora 1995; Bianchi 2012.
39. For Gherardini’s oeuvre, we have access to a comprehensive catalogue compiled in Bartsch’s annotated edition. In contrast, our knowledge of Biffi’s work remains limited, relying primarily on Bossaglia’s brief biographical entry for the time being. See Viganò 1987; Bossaglia 1968.
40. See Bianchi 2012.
41. Curiously, records indicate that votive prints were utilized for thaumaturgical purposes—specifically, as contact objects to ward off the plague—in 17th-century Naples. It is plausible that similar practices may have occurred in Milan; however, further research is required to substantiate this possibility. See Boeckl 1993, p. 60.
42. Melchiorre Gherardini, *Scenes of the 1630 plague in San Babila, From the Garden, my beautiful name*, 1631 ca, etching, 137 x 168 mm, Brescia, Museo di Santa Giulia, inv. ST 3475. Viganò 1987, p. 174–175. The print is part of Gherardini’s second series of etchings, showcasing the artist’s mastery of the graphic medium and serving as a remarkable example of post-plague artistic production. See Nicodemi 1922. The title of the print refers to the play on words between *Orto* (garden) and *oriente* (east), alluding to the direction of what is now Porta Venezia. The verses also imply a bitter reference to the *ocaso*: the sunset of life at the Lazzaretto, which takes place in the east, the direction where the sun rises. See Pavese 2023b, p. 150.
43. See Nicodemi 1922.
44. The term refers to individuals believed to spread contagion through malicious means, often the use of ointments or other substances. The term, rooted in Italian folklore and paranoia, reflects the fear and social scapegoating during epidemics, when certain people were accused of intentionally spreading illness to harm the population and were often prosecuted or even executed without legitimate cause. See Clini 2021.
45. Francesco Valletto (designer) and Cesare Bassano (engraver), 1630 ca, engraving, mm 365 x 420, Milan, Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, inv. A.S. m. 3-69; A.S. m. 51-16.
46. Anonymous, *L’oglio pietoso*, 1630 ca, engraving, mm 243 x 190, Milano, Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, inv. A.S. p. 9–32.
47. Angelo Gallo (designer) and Giovanni Paolo Bianchi (engraver), 1630 ca, engraving, mm 342 x 243, Milan, Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, inv. Tri. M. 3-43.
48. Melchiorre Gherardini, *Santa Felicità*, 1631, oil on canvas, 132 x 93,5 cm, Turbigo, Santa Maria Assunta. See Coppa 1995b.
49. About saints protecting from the plague including Roch and Sebastian, Boeckl 1993, p. 45–68.
50. While a detailed exploration of the artists’ production cannot be conducted with the attention and precision it requires, a brief mention will now be made regarding the stylistic evolution of their work and their most notable masterpieces painted for Milan. For an overview see Frangi 1999. This topic is currently under investigation for my doctoral thesis, to which I will refer upon its completion. Chignoli contributed to the fresco decoration of the choir of Santa Maria della Pace, realised canvases for the Church of Santa Maria del Paradiso, and collaborated with Ercole Procaccini the Younger on the now-destroyed frescoes in the Ducal Palace, the seat of the Milanese government. See Valsecchi 1962, p. 267–275 and Torre 1714, p. 341–342. Procaccini was also active in painting at the Church of San Vittore, while Melchiorre Gherardini worked in San Giuseppe, San Vito al Pasquirolo and San Paolo Converso. All these artworks were completed before the mid-century and reflect a vibrant revival of the artistic life in the city. See Pesenti 1968; Frangi 1997; Ferro 2003; Paleari 2023. Indeed, despite the challenges posed by the epidemic, artistic production continued unabated, as evidenced by the ongoing decoration of the Duomo, which serves as a significant reference point for artistic development in Milan. See Valsecchi 1961a; Valsecchi 1961b.
51. Ercole operated an art academy devoted to the teaching of drawing and the representation of the human body (Accademia di nudo), first documented in 1667 by the Bolognese art historian Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616–1693); see Arfelli 1961.
52. Melchiorre Gherardini completed in 1643 the altarpiece *Martirio di San Giorgio* (oil on canvas, 283x183 cm, church of San Giorgio, Montagna, signed “MELCHIOR GERAR/PINGEBAT”). The painting is a key reference in the artist’s body of work due to the presence of the signature and the date of execution. Both Gherardini and Chignoli also worked at Sacro Monte in Varallo. See Coppa 1995, p. 284–285; Gentile 2019, p. 242–244.
53. This critical issue has been extensively explored in academic studies, particularly through monographic works focused on the most representative figures in the field: Francesco Cairo (1607–1665), Carlo Francesco Nuvolone (1608–1662), Johann Christoph Storer (1611–1671). See Frangi 1998; Ferro 2003; Appuhn-Radtke, 2000.
54. The reflections of this transformation are evident, for example, in the late works of Ercole Procaccini the younger and Melchiorre Gherardini, which shift towards a gradual lightening of their palettes, increasing the use of hazy tones and softly undefined shapes. In Milan, they collaborated again in 1653 on the now-lost frescoes of the Portinari Chapel in the Church of Sant’Eustorgio and on the decoration of Palazzo Durini, dating to the close years. In the surviving frescoes of Palazzo Durini the artists reveal a newfound fluidity in their brushstrokes, as well as an unprecedented brilliance and lightness in their color palette, enriched by airy yellows, greens, pinks, and reds. See Bora 1989; Geddo 2001.

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Figures

Fig. 1: Giovanni Battista Crespi Cerano, Melchiorre Gherardini, Gerolamo Chignoli, *Madonna delle Grazie*, 1631, Oil on canvas, 210 x 315 cm, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milano.

Fig. 2: Melchiorre Gherardini, *Dal Orto il mio bel nome*, 1633-36, Etching, 123 x 152 mm, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. © Gallica.bnf.fr.

Fig. 3: Valletto Francesco, Cesare Bassano, *Descrizione della esecuzione di giustizia fatta in Milano*, 1630 ca, Etching, 363 x 420 mm, Civica raccolta delle stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milan. © Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Castello Sforzesco, Milano.

Fig. 4: Anonymous, *L'oglio pietoso*, 1630 ca, Etching, 243 x 190 mm, Civica raccolta delle stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milan. © Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Castello Sforzesco, Milano.

Fig. 5: Angelo Gallo, Giovanni Paolo Bianchi, *Madonna coi santi Rocco e Sebastiano*, 1630 ca. Etching, 342 x 243 mm, Civica raccolta delle stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milan. © Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Castello Sforzesco, Milano.

Fig. 6: Melchiorre Gherardini, *Santa Felicità*, 1631, Oil on canvas, 132 x 93,5 cm, Santa Maria Assunta, Turbigo. © Laboratorio San Gregorio - Archivio parrocchiale di Turbigo.

Abstract

The article examines the impact of the 1630 plague epidemic in Milan, an event that profoundly shaped the city's history and was poetically depicted by Alessandro Manzoni. While much research has focused on the social and historical consequences, less attention has been given to the rise of a new generation of artists during this time. These artists, trained under Giovanni Battista Crespi il Cerano (1573-1632) and the Accademia Ambrosiana, experienced the epidemic firsthand. They guarded the city gates and witnessed the deaths of their mentors, friends, and fellow students while continuing to create paintings and engravings. These surviving artists like Melchiorre Gherardini, Gerolamo Chignoli, Carlo Biffi, and Ercole Procaccini the Younger carried forward the legacy of the Borromean masters while staying true to their tradition and their work influenced Milanese art for the next two decades.

By analyzing key artworks from this period, this study explores the connection between painters and the plague – both as witnesses and as creators of representations of the crisis – challenging the traditional view of the epidemic as merely destructive, instead presenting it as a catalyst for artistic renewal and transformation in Milan's art history.

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Title

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