

Francis W. Kent: THE CEDERNI ALTAR-PIECE BY NERI DI BICCI IN PARMA

In the Pinacoteca Nazionale of Parma there is a Quattrocento "Madonna and child with Saints" which has long been recognised, by Berenson and others, as by Neri di Bicci (Fig. 1).¹ In 1956, W. Cohn noted that this painting was identical with one described long before by Richa — and bearing the inscription "Hoc opus fecit fieri Bartolomeus Cederni de Cedernis" — in the Cederni chapel of San Romolo in Florence. Cohn was able to supply a brief biographical sketch of this obscure patron; and he speculated that the painting, "certamente un lavoro giovanile" of Neri di Bicci, was commissioned some time before 1453, the year in which that painter began his celebrated *Ricordanze*.² Recent researches into Cederni's career, which is extraordinarily richly documented for so comparatively modest a figure, confirm Cohn's hypothesis concerning the painting's early date. Although these new documents do not mention any painter by name, they do supply a firm context for this austere altar-piece, and interesting details about it. Its patron, too, the friend and employee of prominent Florentine patricians such as the Pandolfini and Boni, also turns out to be a more intriguing character than Cohn could have guessed.³

In commissioning the painting, Bartolommeo di Cederno Cederni was in fact fulfilling his father's bequest, repeated in Cederno's two testaments. In the first known to us, of 10 September 1437, Cederno, a reasonably prosperous wool merchant resident in the quarter of Santa Croce, asked to be buried in his ancestral tomb "iuxta cappellam et altare de Cedernis, sita in dicta ecclesia S. Romoli". At his expense, there should be executed in this chapel of San Bartolommeo by his heirs:

una tabula cum armis [?] dicte cappelle, in qua et pro ipsa expendant ad minus florenos triginta auri. Et similiter voluit et mandavit quod pingatur et hornetur de picturis et [sic] opportunis et aliis honorabilibus et condecensibus, in quibus et pro quibus picturis honorabiliter fiendis expendantur ad minus floreni triginta auri.⁴



1 Neri di Bicci, *Madonna and child with Saints*. Parma, Pinacoteca Nazionale.

In a second will of 22 January 1439, Cederno confirmed the bequest. Within ten years of his death, which occurred in that year, his heirs were to spend thirty florins “ut pingatur et pro pictura cappelle S. Bartolomei”, and thirty gold florins “pro una tabula picta altari et in altare dicte cappelle de Cedernis ... que tabula ornetur in optima forma ...”.⁵

Bartolommeo's guardians under his father's will, Carlo and Giannozzo Pandolfini, released some funds later in 1439 “pro consecutione legati facti dicte capelle S. Bartolomei cum oneribus in dicto legato contentis”, but these were apparently to pay for the elaborate masses to be celebrated there.⁶ Some years later, in 1447, the son admitted to the *catasto* officials that he had still to spend sixty florins at S. Romolo “in una tavola per detta chappella e inn altri achoncimi”.⁷ A draft tax-report of the same year, not in fact sent to the Comune, explained why the work was still to be done: “nonn ò fatto mio debito per la gra' graveza ò senpre auuta, e anche per due sirochie avuto a maritare — abiatemi per ischusato!”⁸ In fact Bartolommeo's excuses were genuine, for he was to receive considerable tax relief from the authorities in the December of 1447. This *sgnavo* he and his many influential friends had pursued with great purpose, perhaps to enable Bartolommeo to honour his father's bequest.⁹ Presumably in 1448 or early 1449, and therefore within the ten year limit imposed by Cederno's will, he discharged his responsibility to the family chapel. Certainly no later tax report mentions any testamentary obligation there other than to spend “hogni ano in perpetuo fiorini vi per fare la festa di San Francesco” and other masses.¹⁰ St. Francis of Assisi appears in the altar-piece at Parma, with Sts. John the Baptist, Bartholomew and Joseph, reflecting no doubt Cederno's explicit wishes: “dictus testator fuit et est devotus valde beati Francisci predicti”, as his first will stated.¹¹

During the 1440s Neri di Bicci had been coming into his own as an artist, increasingly a partner of his well-known father Bicci di Lorenzo, who was to die in 1452.¹² A handsome commission such as Bartolommeo Cederni's, thirty gold florins for an altar-piece to be painted “in optima forma”, was further evidence of his growing status. We may assume that Cederni was well satisfied, as his only other known act of artistic patronage — in 1461 — was again to commission Neri to paint “1° cholmo di bracc[i]a cinque incircha alto e llargho bracc[i]a tre incircha”, this time for the Benedictine monks of the Badia Fiorentina.¹³ There, in November 1482, Bartolommeo Cederni was to be buried, leaving to the friars most of his estate and, very unusually, the “ius patronatus” of his father's chapel in San Romolo. The Benedictines accepted the bequest and instituted there a chaplain to celebrate masses for the Cederni, including one on St. Francis' day as Cederno Cederni had required a half century before.¹⁴

NOTES

¹ A.O. *Quintavalle*, *La Regia Galleria di Parma*, Rome 1939, pp. 170-171. My thanks to Fiorella Superbi Gioffredi for her help with this note.

² W. *Cohn*, *Notizie storiche intorno ad alcune tavole fiorentine del '300 e '400*, *Rivista d'arte*, ser. 3, XXXI, 1956, pp. 69-70.

³ F.W. *Kent*, *Letters to an Obscure Florentine: Bartolommeo Cederni and his Friends*, forthcoming in: *Rinascimento*.

⁴ ASF, Not. Antecos., F303 (Ser Filippo di Cristofano, anni 1435-37), fol. 339r-v. All unpublished documents cited are from the Florentine State Archives. I am grateful to Gino Còrti for his archival advice.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Not. Antecos., L 191 (Ser Lodovico di Antonio del Rosso, anni 1428-49), fols. 17v-18r.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Not. Antecos. L 191 (anni 1436-50), fol. 128r-v, 16 november 1439.

⁷ ASF, *Catasto*, 660, fol. 444v.

⁸ ASF, *Conv. Soppr.*, 78, 314, fol. 197v.

⁹ See *Kent* (n. 3).

¹⁰ For example, ASF, *Catasto*, 800, fol. 605v (1458).

¹¹ Cited in note 4 above.

¹² C. *Frosinini*, *Il passaggio di gestione in una bottega pittorica fiorentina del primo Rinascimento: Lorenzo di Bicci e Bicci di Lorenzo*, in *Antichità Viva*, XXV, 1, 1986, pp. 5-15.

¹³ *Neri di Bicci*, *Le Ricordanze* (10 marzo 1453 - 24 aprile 1475), a cura di B. *Santi*, Pisa 1976, p. 167.

¹⁴ ASF, *Diplomatico*, Badia Fiorentina, 12 November 1482 (Cederni's testament). See too *ibid.*, document of 25 January 1483.