

English version by Elizabeth Thomson

### Schifanoia. Month by Month: March-Aries.

The sky by Marco Bertozzi

The sky of March is under the guardianship of Pallas Athena (Minerva), goddess of wisdom, war, sciences and the arts. The guardian goddess is celebrating her triumph on a chariot drawn by unicorns and decorated with banners that flutter in the breeze. The shrewd daughter of Zeus and Metis is shown here as patron of justice; she is the wise, prudent ruler of the city, and (as Athena Ergane), protectress of the arts and female activities.

On the left side are “the children” and disciples of the goddess: doctors, artists, poets and lawyers all sons of the high intellectual Ferrarese society. Among them is Leon Battista Alberti (his portrait was recognised by Ranieri Varese). On the right, three weavers at their looms surrounded by a group of elegant ladies demonstrate the destiny of those born under the sign of Aries.

Athena is connected to weaving through the myth of Arachne. The three female figures in the forefront represent the three *Moirai* (Fates), who mark the eternal unfolding of fate.

It should be noted that in the lower register, Borso d'Este is portrayed whilst wisely administering justice. The internal architrave of the palace in which Borso is situated bears the unequivocal inscription *IUSTICIA*. The beneficial influence of Athena is reflected, therefore, in the superior virtues of the magnificent prince of Ferrara. The complex weaving of the painting will pay tribute to his just government, and his expected and awaited nomination by the pope to Duke of Ferrara.

### Middle register: the three decans accompanied by the zodiac sign of Aries

#### First decan (Aries I)

The first decan of Aries is a robust, dark-skinned man, with red eyes wearing torn white jacket and trousers. He is standing in a threatening attitude, and has around his waist a chord one end of which he is holding in his left hand. The image derives from the Indian sphere in Albumasar's treatise. Warburg was tenaciously determined to see in this figure the metamorphosis of the ancient Greek constellation of Perseus, here disarmed, and whose attributes are no longer recognisable, if not by his aggressive stance (Warburg [1912] 1966). More probably, the figure is associated with a constellation in the borderline

area between Pisces and Aries. Manilius (*Astr.* V, 645-655), writing his astrological poem in the first century DC, assigns a curious fate to those born under this configuration of the stars, which is to climb acrobatically upwards on a taut cable reaching towards the sky. The cable of this phantom acrobat refers to the long ribbon that connects the two fish of Pisces (Bertozzi 1999, 38-45; Bertozzi 2007).

### The second decan of Aries (Aries II)

A crouching woman with fair hair wears an elegant red dress with a fluttering garment on her shoulders. The figure replicates, only in part, the description in Albumasar's Indian sphere of a woman wearing red garments. She, has only one foot, and her image is like that of a horse (Bertozzi 1999, 46; Jaffé [1932] 1999, 115). Her regal aspect and her sumptuous clothing hint at the Greek queen Cassiopeia, connected (according to astral myth) to the constellations of Cepheus, Perseus, Andromache and Cetus (the sea monster).

### Third decan of Aries (Aries III)

A handsome young man with long, curly fair hair and elegantly dressed. In his right hand he holds an arrow, and in his right a hoop; long laces hang from both his wrists. This description is found in Albumasar's Indian sphere (Bertozzi, 1999, 46-47; Jaffé [1932] 1999, 115). His attributes – the arrow (corresponding to a whip), the hoop and the laces hanging from his wrists – hint at the Auriga constellation mentioned by Manilius (*Astr.* V, 67 ss.): The constellation of Eniocus (The Charioteer), that rises up to the fifteenth degree of Aries, will bestow upon those born under its influence the extraordinary powers of the Charioteer that made him worthy in the eyes of Jove to be taken up into the sky.

### The artists of march\* by Giovanni Sassu

The month of March opens the decoration of the eastern wall of the Hall, and is executed in fresco as is the northern wall. The difference in style between the northern and eastern wings struck Camillo Laderchi immediately in 1840; in the case of the former, the scholar recorded a strong relationship with the culture of Tuscany and Florence. On the basis of his interpretation of a passage in Vasari, he went so far as to link it with the name of Lorenzo Costa, whose biography by Vasari was mistakenly merged with that of Cossa.

\* Extract from *Cosmè Tura e Francesco del Cossa. L'arte al tempo di Borso d'Este*, cat. of the exhibition curated by M. Natale, Ferrara 2007, 434-435.

The name of the latter, however, was advanced for the first time in 1871 by Crowe and Cavalcaselle, although restricting his intervention only to the middle and upper portions of the months of the eastern wall. Shortly after, it was Fritz Harck (1884) who extended the presence of Cossa to the entire surface of the eastern wall, not failing to indicate, however, the participation of assistants.

In 1885 the publication by Giuseppe Campori and Adolfo Venturi of the letter written in March 1470 by Francesco del Cossa and addressed to Borso d'Este, proved the accuracy of Harck's observations: in the letter, in fact, Costa declared he was the author of "Those three fields towards the reception area", which is precisely the eastern wall. This discovery permanently defined later criticism, diverting attention to other aspects. In the courtesan section in the Month of March, for example, Adolfo Venturi (1931) took the figure of the knight holding the runaway horse at bay to be a counterpoint quotation of the San Giorgio of the organ doors of the Cathedral, painted by Cosmè Tura before the end of June 1469.

Of note, finally, is the suggestion of Roberto Longhi (1940 and 1956) to recognize in the party to the left under the arch the documented intervention by Baldassare d'Este (called to Schifanoia by Borso in 1471 to standardize his portraits in all the months of the cycle). This suggestion was shelved because of the change in date of one of Longhi's supporting documents (the Portrait of a Man of the Correr Museum, now seen as the work of Antonio da Crevalcore), but mainly because the intervention of Baldassarre, being probably applied dry, was removed by plastering and whitewashing.

Another technical note is key to analysing the works. The overlapping of the plaster and the traces of scaffolding holes makes it possible to determine that the work proceeded from left to right and from top to bottom, therefore from May to March. The month in question was therefore painted by Cossa last. This substantiates the notion that the portion with the Tura citation must have been performed when the work was almost finished. It follows that the total absence of echoes of the masterpiece in the Cathedral Museum in other areas allows us to assume that the rest of the wall was executed before June 1469, when Cosmè's painting was finished and was therefore visible.