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Coincidentia oppositorum: the Malatesta Temple

Guide to reading Panel 25

edited by the Seminario Mnemosyne, coordinated by Monica Centanni and Katia Mazzucco; translated by Elizabeth Thomson

“We can therefore see the influence of both the Apollonian and Dionysian current. What role does the antique world play in the development of the vegen person? On the one side the tectonic aspect of Agostino di Duccio and Nietzsche, on the other the linear aspect of Burckhardt”.

In this manner, in his writings on Burckhardt and Nietzsche in 1927 (published in Italian in “aut aut” in 1984), Warburg helps us understand table 25 of Mnemosyne.

The panel begins — the entire first row of the montage — paying homage to the architecture of Leon Battista Alberti in his exemplary creation, the unfinished Tempio Malatestiano. The second row alludes to the other tonality of artistic expression that the Renaissance recalls from ancient times, above all the Hellenistic period: the interior decoration by Agostino di Duccio (between 1447 and 1457: the term *ante quem* is the beginning of his artistic commitment in San Bernardino in Perugia, present in fig. 14) and is the expression of the “Dionysian” spirit that was to be part of the rigorous composition of ‘classic’ architecture.

On the other hand, Alberti himself does not limit himself to the construction of the Apollonian recipient but intervenes not only with theoretical dictates in *Trattato sulla pittura* but probably also with extremely precise and detailed suggestions regarding the “Dionysian” tonality of the internal decorative style. According to Warburg:

Alberti was the architect of the whole church, whose construction he supervised in every detail; there is nothing to bar the assumption that he was the inspirer of these figures, with their agitated motion, which is entirely in keeping with his ideas. In the uppermost relief by Agostino di Duccio on the left façade of S. Bernardino in Perugia, F. Winter has pointed to an

antique source for the fluttering garments of one female figure, a Hora seen from the back. This source is the celebrated krater in Pisa [...]

The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity, p. 97

Furthermore (pp. 95-96):

The concern — equally conspicuous in the poem and in the painting — with capturing the transitory movements of hair and garments, corresponds to a tendency prevalent among Northern Italian artists from the first third of the fifteenth century onward, which finds its most telling expression in Alberti's *Libro della pittura*. Springer drew attention to this passage in the context of Botticelli's wind gods in the *Birth of Venus*; and Robert Vischer cites in his *Luca Signorelli*. It reads as follows: "Dilettano nei capelli, nei crini, ne' rami, frondi et veste vedere qualche movimento. Quanto certo a me piace nei capelli vedere quale io dissi sette movimenti: volgansi in uno giro quasi volendo anodarsi ed ondeggiare in aria simile alle fiamme, parte quasi come serpe si tessano fra li altri, parte crescano qua et parte in là [...]. A medesimo ancora le pieghe faccino; et nascono le pieghe come al troncho dell'albero i suo' rami. In queste adunque si seguano tutti i movimenti tale che parte niuna del panno sia senza vacuo movimento. Ma siano, quanto spesso ricordo i movimenti moderati et dolci, più tosto quali porgano gratia ad chi miri, che meraviglia di faticha alcuna [...]"

The 'discussion' on Apollinian and Dionysian (H) continues in the bas-relief by Francesco di Giorgio (fig. 22). Despite the difficulty of interpreting the subject (which critics have always claimed to recognise as the *Nozze di Piritoo* (*The Wedding of Piritoo*), or more generically a *Dionysian scene*) one can still recognise the composition of a Dionysian theme in an architectural Albertian-style setting. Or rather, the polarity Warburg himself proposes, that of an architectural setting, that is "Apollinian". The relationship between *incipit* (the Temple façade, fig. 1) and *explicit* (the detail of the angel, fig. 29) confirms the dualism indicated by Warburg between the two ways of experiencing the antique — the equilibrium and precision of Leon Battista Alberti's architecture and the "movement of the hair and garments intensified to the point of becoming mannerisms" of the sculptural style of Agostino di Duccio. The juxtaposition of the two last images confirms the insistence of the Dionysian towards the Apollinian, expressed here in a different posture: from the composure of *Music* (fig. 28) to the restlessness of the maenad (fig. 29) that is actually not a true maenad since the last detail is really a detail from fig. 19 picturing the image of the angel.

The figure of the angel-maenad (I), that stands out owing to its position at the end of the montage and the grouping of figures 15-19-20-21-29, makes us cautious in following another line of interpretation. All the images in the table — and in general the entire architectural and decorative project of the Temple convey a mechanism of overprinting of the antique on Christian places, subjects, figures.

In the table the confluent shifting between the two forms of interpretation from the classic horizon to that of the Christian and vice versa becomes clear — the Christian *interpretatio* and the Pagan *interpretatio*. The filter of the Christian *interpretatio* (C) makes the angel in figures 19 and 29 incarnate garments and the posture of the maenad. The façade of Chiesa di San Bernardino (fig. 14) takes on the lines of classic architectural composition. The woman who witnesses the miracle of San Bernardino in fig. 15 conveys the restlessness of a female figure from the sarcophagus of Medea. Warburg writes in his essay on Botticelli in 1893:

A number of other verifiable antique allusions are to be found in the work of Agostino di Duccio. Thus, Winter considers that the episodes from the life of Saint Bernardine, in Perugia, recall the composition on Roman sarcophagi. Jahn, in account of the Medea sarcophagi, illustrate a figure from the *Codex Pighianus* in Berlin in which Medea stands before the tree with the dragon; above her head is a garment billowing out spherically. The same motif, a rare one in this form, recurs in Perugia in the woman who stands on the shore, in front of Saint Bernardine and behind two woman with a child. It is quite likely that the sarcophagus was already standing in front of SS. Cosma e Damiano, and that it was drawn there.

For the same reasons of the Christian *interpretatio* the Magdalen at the foot of the Cross (fig. 21) assumes the gestual character of the maenad. Warburg writes in 1914:

[...] The sculptor Bertoldo di Giovanni [...] taught young artists making them familiar with the antique treasures of the Medici, that he was in charge of. Very few of his works remain but they show that he, a pupil of Donatello, (unlike others), gave his body and soul to the formula of antique pathos. The figure of the grieving Magdalen under the Cross pulls at locks of hair she has pulled out in a moment of orgiastic mourning is thus conveyed as a maenad brandishing the lacerated beast.

But apart from the Christian *interpretatio*, even more surprising and pervasive in the planning of the Temple, is the inversion of this filter to what could be defined Pagan *interpretatio* (B): forms, subjects, Christian

posture reread in the light of the re-emersion of figures and subjects from classicism.

“Pagan” is the architectural rewriting of Chiesa di San Francesco, converted to a commemorative ‘Temple’ of the client and of his court’s philosophy. “Pagan” are the images — Gods, sibyls, putti, Muse — called to be the counterpoint, also from a compositive point of view, in the frontal and symmetrical dialogue between the chapels of the two naves to virtue, prophets, angels, Arts.

Figures of the transition (D) between classicism and Christianity and of the announcement are the Sibyls, grouped together with the Prophets (fig. 9). This is an irregular series that can be seen on the two pillars of the Cappella delle Sibille (Chapel of the Sibyls) (or of the Madonna dell’Acqua) showing five Sibyls and one Prophet in each group. One normally finds them alternating in the numbers 12 and it is likely that the Sibyls multiply to reach the number of the twelve Prophets. Varrone and Lattanzio are usually declared responsible for the number of ten Sibyls — the number used in the decorations of the Cappella del Tempio. But rather than resorting to literature on the variation of the number of vegents, it would be more appropriate to underline how the unprecedented mixture of the ten Sibyls with two Prophets is able to reconstruct the canonic number of twelve in only one mixed group. Moreover, the two Prophets are Isiah and Michea, who prophesised the birth of the Virgin and the destiny of Bethlehem to become the divine crib. Twelve figures, Sibyls and Prophets together, from the *thesaurus* of classic literature and the Old Testament, announce the birth of the *Puer*.

The figure of the prophet, an exemplary image of the mechanism of reinterpretation and of the passage from classicism to Christianity plays an important role in the semantic paths of the table. In the verticle sequence on the right-hand side of the panel (starting from the reliefs of the Sibyls and the Prophets in figures 9a and 9b) grouped together are the examples of the ideal antique sculptural style of Agostino di Duccio, Bertoldo di Giovanni, Francesco di Giorgio. Thus, the Dionysian character of the angel of San Sigismondo (fig. 29) and of the Maenad at the feet of the Cross (fig. 21) are joined by the excitement of the Sibyls “one moment melancholy and pensive and absorbed, at others vibrant and filled with divine *furoi*” (Muscolino). Maenad, but Apollonian, the Sibyl marks an ulterior shifting, not only between pagan and Christian, but also between the two poles — or the two faces of the “two-faced herm” — of antiquity.

However, Sibyls and Prophets are not the only linking figures to harmonize the path of the pagan (classic and old-testamentary) antiquity to Christianity within the sanctuary, up to the articulation of the rebirth of the antique of which the Temple is the first and most perfect representation.

Other figures are the Muses that were rehabilitated after a long period of mediaeval latency during which, according to Boethius, they were imagined as “sirens and whores”. Here they reappear for the first time in the Renaissance, together with the allegoric Arts (to be considered as a late antique allegory of the Muses themselves). Still “sirens”, but certainly not “whores” according to the platonic vision of Timaeus, they rest on the semispheres as the God Apollo (fig. 10) and sing cosmic glory. Warburg writes in 1895 in his essay on theatral customs carried out by Buontalenti in 1589 (p. 358; p.393 n. 42):

The idea of representing the musical harmony of the universe in mythological terms was current in the Quattrocento in a different form. Here the musical soul of the cosmos was personified as Apollo, and he was surrounded by eight Muses as rulers of the spheres. Seven Muses correspond to the planets, and Urania to the eighth sphere; Thalia, in accordance with myth, remained earthbound. The ninth and tenth spheres, which the Middle Ages had added to the system, were personified as “Primum Mobile” and “Prima Causa”. [...] Similar concepts are expressed in the reliefs by Agostino di Duccio in Rimini.

The Arts that do not stand on the semisphere are present in the two pillars of the Cappella delle Muse e delle Arti (Chapel of the Muses and the Arts) in a group of seven figures plus two. The image of Apollo and of the *Ars Aedificatoria* is added to the arts of *trivium* and *quadrivium*. The classic divinity (fig. 10) is represented according to the current iconography “as the musical soul of the universe”, with the lyre, bow and arrow and laurels, holding laurel from which the three Graces ‘flower’. The umpteenth happy confusion, one of the Charities is called Talia, “abundance”, but Talia is also the “festive”, Muse of comedy. Interpreted also as Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, the other figure carved on the pillars should be traced back to the image of a new mechanic art, Architecture, seeing that precisely between 1447 and 1452 Alberti wrote *De architectura* and, according to Warburg, he was actively involved in the planning of the iconographic programme inside the Temple.

Many of the reliefs that can be seen on the panel therefore relate to the dialogue between antiquity and contemporaneity, to relationships, shifting

of meaning, catasterisation (E) of the strong figures along the way: Mercury (fig. 12) is the image of eloquence; Urania (fig. 17) is Astronomy, the divinities are planetary figures; in the figure of the zodiac sign of Gemini (fig. 26) one is reminded only of Castor and Pollux.

In the dense web of the table's semantic paths it seems impossible to isolate works that were exclusively presented for their formal importance — an aspect far from Warburg's mind and opposed by the definition of *Pathosformel* itself. An almost total identity can indeed be traced amongst the figures that mark the path between Apollinian and Dionysian (H) and the images that are 'cut out' within them, portray the garments and postures that characterise the two lines of the antique "springing from the same branch". In the general uniformity of the personal sculptural style of Agostino di Duccio — for example the portrayal of movement by means of garments and hair, and the analogy of certain figures such as Apollo (10) and Music (28) or Euterpe (18) and the zodiac sign of Libra (25) — the contrast of more composed figures and others that portray movement and restlessness (e.g. figs. 17, 18 and 28, 29) takes on particular significance.

As in table 39 which includes many works commissioned by Lorenzo de' Medici although there is no portrait of the patron, in this table Sigismondo's name is also recalled by means of the works he created and the culture of his court.

Sigismondo Malatesta (A) commissioned Leon Battista Alberti, Matteo de' Pasti and other important intellectuals of that cultural circle with the first liminal work between Humanism and the Renaissance. A threshold opera, the beginning of the 'conversion' of the building to Temple in 1447, however, the date Sigismondo wanted engraved (and to which we are referring) is 1450, Jubilee year, and also the year in which the union between Sigismondo and Isotta was officially marked. It was carried out with *spolia*, antique marbles from Ravenna, Greece and Dalmatia that were chosen owing to their *vetustas* and their symbolic value. The Temple, however, remained *opus infectum* due to Sigismondo's political and economic decline. In 1461 he was brought to trial in Rome for heresy and successively sentenced and burnt in effigy. One of the accusations against Sigismondo in the famous passages of Enea Silvio Piccolomini's *Commentarii* should be remembered:

Aedificavit tamen nobile templum Arimini in honorem divi Francisci;
verum ita gentilibus operibus implevit ut non tam Christianorum quam
Infidelium daemones templum esse videretur.

In 1464 Sigismondo was allowed to return to the Pope's service and went back to Rimini but the only fragment he could add to his monument was the tomb of Gemistus Plethon, the philosopher who prophesised the return of antique paganism in the new mystery-platonic religion. Gemistus's tomb was added on the external right-hand side of the Temple (fig. 2) next to the tombs of the other court scholars Basinio Basini, Giusto de' Conti and Roberto Valturio.

Even if the figure of Sigismondo Malatesta is not physically present in either the form of portrait or effigy, it still hovers over the entire table and is represented in the reliefs on the tombs of his ancestors (figs. 5, 6, 7) and is remembered by the votiv relief of Saint Sigismund (fig. 19: now in Milan but originally in the funeral chapel of Malatesta) and is hidden by astrological images of the works in the lower area of the panel. The sign of Cancer in fig. 24, a sign of water (but fig. 23 also represents the influence of the moon on water) is the visually most prominent zodiac sign in the Cappella dei Pianeti (Chapel of the Planets): it is the very constellation under which Sigismondo was born on 13th June 1417 and the zodiac sign is holding a map of his city of birth in his nippers. In the same sequence a detail with the sign of Gemini (fig. 26) can be seen: it is the zodiac sign that governs the date 13th June, the date of birth (in 1866) of Aby Warburg after the Gregorian calendar.

Table 25 belongs to a thematically compact group of montages (tables 20-27) that is dedicated to the tradition of the demonic-astrological culture. The understanding of these tables allows one to follow the main steps, within the European tradition, of the pilgrimage of antique divinities by means of Latin manuscripts — from Arabic tradition (see tables 20, 21), calendars, games and works of art. The 'journey' includes some of the most important places of Mediaeval and proto-humanistic culture, from the Court of Alfonso the Wise of Castile (tables 22, 22.1) to the "Salone dei Mesi" of Padua (tables 23, 23.2, 23.4) and reaches a climax with two exemplary works of the Renaissance landing places of this tradition: Tempio Malatestiano di Rimini (table 25) and the cycle of frescos in Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara (tables 27, 27.2, 27.3).

In panel 24 one can see images from Children of the Planets taken from manuscripts and German xylographic books. In these illustrations — place and means of survival — the antique divinities portray their planetary traditions (24.13), for example the figures of catasterisation of the reliefs by Agostino di Duccio. The images in table 24 also allow a contrast with the restitution of the dynamism of the expression and accessory elements of classic figures made in Rimini through this reinterpretation — on the crest between tradition and *interpretatio*: indeed, in this case, the antique subjects are associated with static figures “alla francese” from the franco-germanic tradition (24.31).

Table 26, however, appears to be an introduction to the works from Ferrara in table 27. While table 25 ends — at the bottom — with a sequence of zodiac signs and planetary figures connected to the date of birth and other biographic aspects of Sigismondo Malatesta, the montage in the following table includes the so-called *Tabula Bianchini* (26.8), a prophetic ancient Egyptian instrument that divided the zodiac into groups of 10° angles of “decanes”, and was used to determine propitious or less propitious days until the modern age.



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