Jacopo Ligozzi painter of fine *naturalia* and macabre skulls

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Jacopo Ligozzi, son of Giovanni Ermanno, and brother of Francesco - both of them were artists - was born in Verona in 1549 (his birthday is not sure). He lived a long life during which he had a variety of experiences, finally dying in Florence in 1627. He had a prominent role as an artist at the court of the Grand Duke Francesco I, who summoned him to produce naturalistic depictions, probably according to the recommendation of Ulisse Aldrovandi, the scientist and naturalist from Bologna. Indeed, Francesco I was noted for his desire to conduct scientific experiments, and he built the “Casino di San Marco” and the “Studiolo di Palazzo Vecchio” for this purpose. The naturalistic culture of Ligozzi was inspired by acquaintances, in the years prior to his arrival in Florence, with important collectors of natural specimens: Francesco Calzolari, who worked in Verona, and the surgeon Leone Tartaglini from Tuscany, who had moved to Venice and had an herbarium, a book of rare beauty about fish, and was devoted to procuring specimens for the Wunderkammer. Ligozzi also had the opportunity to see and copy prints of botany and zoology drawings by Durer. Ulysses Aldrovandi saw the first works of Ligozzi and admired their fidelity of reproduction. These lively and detailed depictions brought Aldrovandi to define Ligozzi as the new Apelles, and to compare him to Titian, Raphael and Michelangelo.

When Ligozzi arrived at the Medici Court, he, together with his entire family, was immediately accommodated in the “Casino di San Marco”. He proved to be a very fine painter, capable of using such thin brushes for his works that they acquired details fine enough to seem like miniatures. He produced marvelous paintings of medicinal plants and animals caught in action using delicate and variegated colors, and finding a wonderful synthesis between artistic interpretation and scientific rigor. His work was so appreciated that he was soon called upon to decorate some Medici’s palaces such as the “Tribuna degli Uffizi” and the *Grotto of Thetis* at the “Villa di Pratolino”, but also to draw coats of arms, jewelry, *capriccio* goblets, costumes, decorations for bedrooms, clothing, and he addresses for the ladies of the court, and to study apparatus for weddings and funerals of the Medici’s Court.

It was because of his versatility that Ligozzi was defined as a “Universal Painter” by his contemporary, the historian Filippo Baldinucci. It is said that his panels seduce and capture the eye of observers today as they did in the past, when found before a cat drawn in such a realistic manner as to instinctively elicit a caress.

Ligozzi’s ability to depict nature in its many forms made him a forerunner, and in a way the inventor of the still life. It is believed that Caravaggio himself was inspired for his famous fruit baskets by Ligozzi’s work. Ligozzi’s wonderful drawings also served for the design of original table tops which gave way to the beginning of the typically Florentine art of mosaics made not with glass, tesserae, but with marble fragments of different colors, creating a painting made with precious stones.

Jacopo Ligozzi’s luck changed after the death of Francesco I and Bianca Cappello and the ascent to the throne of his brother Ferdinand I, who until then had been a Cardinal. Ferdinand I immediately dismantled his brother’s laboratories and moved Ligozzi and his family to another house in “Via Larga”, ensuring that he was working in a workshop set up in a corridor of the Uffizi. After some time, Ligozzi was dismissed by the Court following an accusation to the Grand Duke by a valet, and only in the last years of his life he returned to play the role of court painter, a position made available due to the death of Giorgio Vasari.

Ligozzi was very devout and strictly observant; he read sacred meditations, and one son and two daughters took religious vows. He attended various religious confraternities such as that of Saint Paul I, whose members met every Saturday night, staying in a room shared with two wooden skeletons which served as a *memento mori*. He came to sign his works with his initials joined by a line through which a Cross was drawn. In the years between the 1500s and 1600s, Ligozzi devoted himself to sacred depictions made unusual and original by his profound piety. They fully reflect the disquiet brought about by the Counter-Reformation. His work specifically addresses the theme of the transience of life and the terrible consequences of death. Ligozzi does not miss a chance to frighten and disgust the viewer, and reaches the maximum of horror in two paintings of young people, perhaps couples: the young people seem serene and happy, but they must know that death can take them, they must be ready for God’s judgment and consider the consequences of death. The paintings are full of allegorical significance: a book of debtors and creditors alludes to the divine judgment, recalling that all earthly goods and pleasures exemplified by various objects and animals are in vain; the hourglass reminds us that death can come without warning.

The warning of the painter is tremendously depicted in the background of the paintings: the face in the process of becoming a skull is frightening, horrifying. The painter, mindful of his naturalistic studies, seems to take pleasure at showing in great detail the decomposition process rather than the fi-
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Figure 1 a, b - a) Female portrait (recto). b) Macabre still life (verso). Oil on Table - Bodnant (private collection).

In the painting one can almost smell the stench of rotting meat, the decomposition of the flesh which, a few decades later, will be a passionate field of study for Francesco Redi. Florence once again allowed artists to be in close contact with scientists who studied the anatomy of the human body. It is certain that Ligozzi frequented botanists involved in the care of the “Giardino dei Semplici” (Garden of Simples, one of the first botanical gardens in the world), which was directly in front of his studio. In addition, he most certainly had the opportunity to study human corpses in those years, as a letter from Giorgio Vasari in Arezzo addressed to the Florentine physician Rontini, in addition to informing us that he has performed drawings of medicinal herbs, asks him to provide him with a book of bones, given that he did not have the convenience of having cadavers as he did in Florence (“la comodità di haver de morti come costi in Firenze”).

nal stage of consolidation and death visible in the bones or skull which were pictured by other artists (Figure 1 a, b). In the painting one can almost smell the stench of rotting meat, the decomposition of the flesh which, a few decades later, will be a passionate field of study for Francesco Redi. Florence once again allowed artists to be in close contact with scientists who studied the anatomy of the human body. It is certain that Ligozzi frequented botanists involved in the care of the “Giardino dei Semplici” (Garden of Simples, one of the first botanical gardens in the world), which was directly in front of his studio. In addition, he most certainly had the opportunity to study human corpses in those years, as a letter from Giorgio Vasari in Arezzo addressed to the Florentine physician Rontini, in addition to informing us that he has performed drawings of medicinal herbs, asks him to provide him with a book of bones, given that he did not have the convenience of having cadavers as he did in Florence (“la comodità di haver de morti come costi in Firenze”).