

Working from home: the life and art of Giovanni Baratta

Review of:

Francesco Freddolini, *Giovanni Baratta 1670-1747. Scultura e industria del marmo tra la Toscana e le corti d'Europa*, LermArte documenti 10, Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 2013, 358 pp., 291 b&w ill., hbk, £172.40, ISBN 978-88-8265-925-7

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Figure 1 Giovanni Baratta, *Winter*; detail of the façade of the Palace of La Granja, 1735-40. Marble. Segovia, Palacio Real de La Granja de San Ildefonso.

Most sculptors born in the smaller towns of Italy travelled to larger cities to study, and remained there to earn their living. Many travelled throughout the peninsula (which was divided into many different states), throughout Europe, or even further afield. Some went to serve the local ruler, but others, mainly those who were having difficulty finding success in their native country, set off in the hope of finding more

favourable circumstances elsewhere. Not surprisingly, their works are to be searched for far from their homelands, and are often widely scattered.

Other seeking a more extensive clientele exported their works. While some materials, such as architectural decorations in stucco, had for obvious technical reasons to be made on the spot, others such as bronze were sturdy enough to withstand the risks of rough seas and man-handling, though there were always the risks of piracy and shipwreck. Florence had a tradition of exporting not only full-size bronze casts, including many after the antique, but particularly small bronzes, from the followers of Giambologna who reproduced his models,¹ to Baratta's friend Massimiliano Soldani, whose exports to London and Liechtenstein are well documented.² Marble presented more of a problem: packing was a sophisticated trade, and breakages could be minimized by leaving struts to support an outstretched arm or between fingers, which could be removed by local practitioners on arrival at the final destination. But, even so, disasters could happen, as notoriously with the relief of the *Madonna and Child* that Antonio Montauti sent to Lisbon in 1743 that had to be replaced by a bronze modelled by Giovanni Battista Maini and cast by Francesco Giardini.³

Giovanni Baratta, the subject of this monograph, is an exception. Though as a young man he served the Gran Principe Ferdinando de' Medici, and later worked extensively for the court of Savoy, he was not a court artist: he held no official position, and was free to accept commissions from any patron. From 1713, when he left Florence, he resided in the small city of Carrara, and, apart from some stuccoes made in Turin, he exported his marble statues from his home. There he had what was a virtually a factory, with numerous assistants (including his brothers and nephews), making decorative vases to ornament palace facades, columns with their bases and capitals, indeed whole altars, as well as artistic sculptures.

Carrara was the centre of the marble trade, with a tradition not only of excavating and selling the stone, but also producing and exporting the simple tiles and mortars made from it. Undoubtedly Giovanni learnt to carve marble there in the family workshop probably guided by his uncle Andrea Baratta (who had returned from Rome), but to learn more, and also to encounter better placed patrons, he needed the teaching that could be found in a city such as Florence, where he entered the workshop of Giovanni Battista Foggini. There he would certainly have assisted in making models, and he would also have made friends with the men of his own generation who were to become the leading sculptors of the next generation in Tuscany and beyond, such as Carlo Tantardini. Between 1691

¹Katharine Watson and Charles Avery, 'Medici and Stuart: a grand ducal gift of "Giovanni Bologna" bronzes for Henry Prince of Wales' *Burlington Magazine*, 115, 1973, 493-507

²Klaus Lankheit, *Florentinische Barockplastik*, Munich, Verlag F. Bruckmann, 1962, 128-134; Charles Avery, 'Soldani's mythological bronzes and his British clientele', *Sculpture Journal*, 14, 2005, 8-29.

³Jennifer Montagu, *Gold, silver and bronze: metal sculpture of the Roman baroque*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1996, 156-7.

and 1693 he was in Rome where, according to an old but almost certainly false tradition, he studied under Camillo Rusconi. Rather, as it would seem from his letters quoted here, he gained the protection of the sculptor Domenico Guidi, though the exact nature of their relationship is obscure, and it is uncertain whether he was actually working under Guidi, a sculptor from Torano which is not far from Carrara. It is however entirely reasonable to suppose that he would have assisted his elder brother Francesco, who was already established in Rome.

Once back in Florence from his brief sojourn in Rome, he re-entered the studio of Foggini, but soon began to make his own career. Foggini, as the sculptor of the Grand Duke Cosimo III, would have introduced him to the Medici court, where he gained the patronage of the Grand Prince Ferdinando, and the aristocratic members of his circle. Freddolini has found and explained the links between the sculptor's various Florentine patrons to this group, and even the Genoese Domenico Sauli. Similarly, his friendship with Filippo Juvarra is also explained by the architect's earlier contacts with other members of the Baratta family, and mutual links with the aristocracy of Lucca, while the presence in Turin of his fellow sculptor Carlo Tantardini may have provided entry to the patronage of the widow of Carlo Emanuele II, Giovanna Battista di Savoia Nemours, known as 'Madama Reale'. This examination of the webs connecting those who were to commission works from Giovanni Baratta is one of the more interesting aspects of this book, even if at times they seem a bit farfetched: would Eugene of Savoy's friendship with his allied general Marlborough have contributed to the sculptor's employment in Turin?

In Florence Baratta received from Cosimo III a workshop in the Uffizi, next to the rooms assigned to the older sculptor Massimiliano Soldani (1656-1740), and lodgings in the house of Pietro Guerrini, a man of considerable influence at the Medici court, especially in regard to art. Not surprisingly, Baratta undertook some relatively minor stucco work for Guerrini's villa, together with Giovanni Martino Portogalli, a stucco-worker with whom he was to collaborate on other occasions, most notably in the church of S. Frediano in Cestello, where documents show that it was Baratta who was responsible for the figures. Further decorative and figurative *stucchi* were made by the sculptor for a number of members of the Florentine aristocracy to decorate their palaces or to frame the grottoes in their gardens, including two rooms in the Palazzo Marucelli Fenzi which may have been designed by Sebastiano Ricci, who painted the ceilings.

But these years around the turn of the century also saw him produce one of his best-known works, the altar of *Tobias with the Archangel Raphael* in the church of Santo Spirito, a highly original composition set within a narrow but extremely tall space, in which the figures are dwarfed by an enormous palm tree and another tree that optically merges with the festoon above, yet the protagonists fill the ground below and succeed in holding the viewer's attention. He contributed the statue of *St Thomas* to the series of *Apostles* in SS. Michele e Gaetano, carved two splendid marble figures of *Wealth* and *Prudence* for the Palazzo Giugni (now in the Los Angeles County Museum), and figures for the grotto in the garden of the marchese

Raffaello Torrigiani; unfortunately the sources do not say what these were, and if the surviving statue of a terrified running youth is stylistically acceptable as the work of Baratta, it is harder to believe that it represents Actaeon.

Florence was an unmissable stop for anyone visiting Italy, and a long-standing destination for those on shopping tours for art, and particularly contemporary sculpture. The proximity of Baratta's studio to that of Soldani, whose small bronzes were ideal and easily transportable mementos of the city's artistic mastery, can only have drawn potential purchasers to that of Baratta. Frederik IV of Denmark visited both workshops 1709 and, according to Baratta's biographer Francesco Maria Niccolò Gabburri, 'bought all his works that were in his studio',⁴ in particular the large marble statues of *Flora*, *Orpheus*, and *Hercules Killing the Nemean Lion*. He tried, but failed, to induce Baratta to serve him in Denmark, but he did commission a number of columns, fireplaces and door-frames, and the author plausibly suggests that it was Frederik who advised Frederik I Hohenzollern, King of Prussia, whom he met shortly after his return from Italy, to commission some marble urns to decorate his palace from Baratta. It was Cosimo III, anxious to consolidate his friendship with the King of Denmark, who sent him a large marble statue of *Peace* by the sculptor who had gained his favour.

The English too were interested in acquiring such decorative sculpture, even if some attempts to do so bore no fruit. More important was the commission from John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough who had acquired through his agent in Florence bronze casts by Soldani after the antique for his new house, Blenheim Palace, and whom Baratta promptly took the opportunity of contacting. Marlborough, rich and powerful after his victories, commissioned two over life-size statues, one of *The Glory of Princes* offering a laurel wreath to the other representing the Duke himself in the figure of *Mars*. Unfortunately, before they were sent Marlborough had fallen foul of Queen Anne, and was no longer in a position to receive or pay for them, and they were eventually acquired by James Brydges, Duke of Chandos; the former is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, but the hero she was to crown is lost.

Even while he was living in Florence, Baratta returned frequently to his family workshop in Carrara, and it was no doubt there that most of the decorative marble work was made. In 1713 he decided to settle there permanently. In 1712 Pietro Guerrini's brother married, involving changes in the family household arrangements, Grand Prince Ferdinando died, and in 1713 Giovanni Baratta himself married Laura Monzoni, from a family of quarry-owners in Carrara. This family link, strengthened when thirteen years later his brother Francesco junior married Maria Celeste Monzoni, gave the Baratta family a direct connection to the marble quarries, though how far they actually relied on the Monzoni is not clear from the evidence that Freddolini produces. Giovanni also had an interest in the shipping trade, which should have allowed them to control their work from the excavation of

⁴ K. Lankheit, *Florentinische Barockplastik*, 223

the block to the completion of the finished statue, including its transportation and installation, and by this means also to control its price.

It was in 1713 that Baratta began his long-standing connection with Turin when he began collaborating with Tantardini on the stuccoes of the Palazzo Madama. He also made decorative statues for the façade of the palace, and also for the façade of Sta Cristina, financed by Madama Reale. This church was designed by Filippo Juvarra, the court architect of her son Vittorio Amadeo II, and Baratta's fruitful friendship with Juvarra was to last till the architect's death in 1736, when the building of the palace at La Granja in Spain was still incomplete, and the sculptor's extensive work for it was never fully paid for.

This palace façade is typical of many aspects of Baratta's work. It included not only the statues of the *Four Seasons*, (fig. 1) medallions representing *Mars* and *Minerva*, elaborate trophies and coats-of-arms, but also the capitals and bases of the columns and pilasters. While these, and no doubt the trophies surmounting the balustrade, would have been made in the workshop, the *Seasons* are among the sculptor's more impressive works. The whole stands as one amongst many examples of the way the family workshop established in Carrara at the Baluardo could undertake major commissions, combining the work of sculptors of various levels of competence, and also the stone-cutters. Elsewhere, it was normal for stone-cutters to remain separate from the sculptors,⁵ which is not to say that one does not often find the same men working together on various projects. It also shows the close relationship Baratta had by then established with Juvarra, in that he not only suggested subjects for the two relief medallions, but also disagreed with the height of a statue on the drawing that the architect sent him; since the drawing is lost we have no way of knowing whether Juvarra accepted his criticism, but clearly there was no likelihood that he would have taken offence, and turned to another sculptor.

Baratta was also a competent architect, at least to the extent of designing an altar or the decoration of the walls of a chapel or an apse, as in the Santuario della Madonna delle Grazie at Montenero near Leghorn. If in the context of artists who worked abroad it is the sculptures in Britain, Denmark, Spain or Turin that have a particular relevance, there were many churches nearer to home to which he contributed in Tuscany and Liguria. But here too it seems that he almost invariably worked in the same manner, carving the marbles in Carrara and sending them to their destination, with at most a workshop assistant to set them up, and only occasionally leaving Carrara to do this himself. Very rarely did he carve a statue on the spot, as in case of the relief of the *Assumption of the Virgin* for the façade of Sta Maria di Carignano in Genoa, a group that had been left incomplete by Claude David, but where little if any trace of the earlier sculptor's work remains. Even here, where Baratta had submitted his own new design for the doorway, and indeed for

⁵ This practice will be well known to any historian of sculpture, but it could still come as a nasty shock to a seventeenth century patron who did not realize that there would be two separate workmen's accounts to pay (see Jennifer Montagu, *Roman baroque sculpture: the industry of art*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1989, 38-41).

the systematisation of the whole façade (window surrounds, niches, steps etc.), the rest of the work was done in Carrara.

The same method was used for the many commissions he received in Tuscany and Liguria. In particular in Leghorn, which was controlled by the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, he and his assistants acquired a virtual hegemony over the production of marble decorations. Among his more important works there were a number of sculptures executed over several years for various chapels in S. Ferdinando, including the altar of *The Angles Liberating Slaves*, to which Portogallo contributed the parts in stucco, though all the marble structure was made in the Baratta workshop, and the somewhat later statues of the sainted kings, *Ferdinand* and *Edward the Confessor*.

He was also to carve statues of the four Church Fathers, *Sts Augustine, Ambrose, Athanasius* and *John Chrysostom* (as well as other work) for the church of St Uberto designed by Juvarra at the Venaria Reale in Turin, and five statues for the multitude of adorning the church of Mafra in Portugal. Even if two of these were executed by his cousin Giovanni Giacomo, they must have been conceived by Giovanni. If almost every known sculptor in Rome, Florence and Genoa was involved in this massive commission for Mafra, for one artist to make even as many as three was exceptional, though José Maria Fonseca Évora, in charge of the project, ensured that his favourite sculptor Carlo Monaldi carved six, and Giovanni Batista Maini, who was to become the favourite sculptor of the Portuguese court, carved four.

While Baratta's later statues are all perfectly respectable sculptures, they lack the originality and elegance of those produced in his Florentine youth; they do not stand out, or rest in the memory. Indeed, the altar group in S. Ferdinando is distinctly awkward. It is in his decorative sculpture that Baratta excels, in the personifications on the volutes of the portal of Sta Cristina or the side altars of St Uberto, or supporting the tabernacle of the high altar, even if these owe much to the drawings provided by Juvarra, and the decorative sculpture of the façade of La Granja is masterly. Such as remains of his purely ornamental sculpture, on door surrounds and so forth, is of the highest quality. But this has done little for his posthumous reputation: in a world where 'art' is all too often taken to mean painting, who notices the sculpted figures perched atop the altar-pieces? And doorways are things to be passed through, not looked at.

In his own lifetime he was undoubtedly successful financially, but his election in 1731 as 'Accademico di Merito' of the Accademia di S. Luca in Rome was a recognition quite widely given, and when in the same year Alderano I Cybo, Duke of Massa and Prince of Carrara, bestowed on him the title of Count Palatine this was the reward of a local boy made good (for 'the reputation earned in Italy and elsewhere and also from princes')⁶ from someone who had done nothing to assist him at the outset of his career, and is not known to have commissioned anything

⁶ '...riputazione guadagnatasi in Italia e fuori e anche presso i principi'.

from him in later years. If such a title is exceptional among Italian artists, and was undoubtedly appreciated in that it enabled the sculptor to treat his aristocratic patrons on terms of equality, the only works possibly made for Alderano, allegories of *The Church* and *Lombardy* now in Berlin are here, no doubt rightly, classed as largely workshop productions. Baratta owned an extensive library, and set up a school where the students were to acquire something of a liberal education as well as learning the art of sculpture; his hopes that this would survive his death were to be frustrated, and eventually it was incorporated into the Accademia di Belle Arti of Carrara.

Baratta's work is uneven in quality, and this cannot always be explained away by the collaboration of his workshop. However, it is perhaps unfair to expect the author of a monograph to criticize his hero, even in the few cases when the dispassionate reader may feel that he merits it. But it is the manner in which he used this shop, the vertical integration from the quarry to the finished statue, as well as the unusual horizontal inclusion of stone-cutters into a single outfit (virtually a factory) with the many sculptors, including the younger members of his family as well as Giovanni himself, that makes him a particularly interesting case study.

The book under review is a traditional monograph, written by a scholar who has devoted much of his life to the Baratta family.⁷ It was a large family, several members of which were given the same names, and many of them, over several generations were sculptors; the author provides a helpful family tree on p. 24. A biography of the sculptor is followed by a full catalogue of his works, and each section includes numerous documents, many found by the author.⁸ There is an index of names, but not of places, (a problem if one searches for something in the catalogue arranged chronologically, where sculptural works can take many years to complete), and an extensive bibliography.

The only serious criticisms one can make concern the publisher. One must be grateful these days to any publisher who is prepared to produce a series of books dealing with artists who are not household names, and even more so if they are sculptors, but, as always with Bretschneider, the price is extortionate. This volume is the culmination of many years of work on the artist, and if one has to say that it contains few surprises for those who have read Freddolini's earlier books and articles, this is a summation to which scholars will turn first; it is regrettable that few of them will be able to afford a copy. In return for such an outlay they would find only black and white photos, often of works in which the use of different coloured marbles is fundamental. Some of those illustrating the catalogue are small in size, even if they depict a whole altar, and the quite generous number of full-page

⁷ In particular, F. Freddolini, *Giovanni Baratta e lo studio al Baluardo: scultura, mercato del marmo e ascesa sociale tra Sei e Settecento* (Studi e fonti per la storia della scultura, 3), Pisa, Edizioni Plus, 2010, provides much peripheral material that is relevant to this later book.

⁸ A minor correction to p. 282: the letter suggesting that Soldani might produce a marble statue for Mafra was published by Armindo Ayres de Carvalho, *D. João V e arte de seu tempo*, II, Lisbon, edição do autor, 1962, 405.

photographs and of details in both the catalogue and the main text are, inevitably, of the more important and totally secure sculptures; if one has any doubts on the attributions of any of the others, one must try to hunt for larger illustrations elsewhere before forming even a preliminary judgement.

That said, this book provides a full account of a sculptor who, at his best, produced some masterpieces of baroque art, and whose method of working is an interesting exception to that of his contemporaries.

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