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Caterina Angela Pierozzi
(active in Florence, c. 1670 – 1690)

The Annunciation Miniature

1677

tempera and gold leaf on vellum

14.6 x 19.4 cm.; 5 3/4 x 7 5/8 in.

signed and dated (lower centre):

CATERINA ANGELA PIEROZZI

FIORENTINA FACEVA 1677

Provenance

Private collection, United Kingdom.

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It is difficult to overstate the importance of the discovery of this exquisite miniature on vellum by Caterina Angela Pierozzi, particularly in the nascent field of study dedicated to 17th-century female Italian artists. Being the only known work by her hand, and signed and dated, the miniature will be the cornerstone of any future reconstruction of her *oeuvre* and is therefore of the utmost significance in our understanding of her highly successful artistic career – Pierozzi is one of only two female artists accepted as a member of the Accademia del Disegno during the 17th century. It is tantalising to think of the further attributions to Pierozzi which may now be possible through knowledge of this work, which will no doubt enter the literature discussing female baroque painters.

The miniature, which is in excellent condition, was likely a Medici commission, very possibly by the Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere, well-known for her patronage of female artists. Archival evidence confirms that the Grand Duchess was a collector of Pierozzi's work and, significantly, the Annunciation depicted at the centre of the miniature derives from a 14th-century fresco in the Basilica della Santissima Annunziata, venerated and protected by the Medici family. Tightly controlling the dissemination of this iconography, the Medici are documented as commissioning copies after the fresco, much like the present work.

All of this makes Pierozzi's miniature a truly rare, exciting and significant discovery, contributing as it does to our knowledge of the activity of female Italian artists in the 17th century, and relating to Medicean artistic concerns.

Vittoria delle Rovere's patronage of female artists

Before turning to Pierozzi's biography and the miniature's iconography, a brief discussion of the patronage of female artists beyond Pierozzi at the court of Vittoria della Rovere (fig. 1) is useful in providing context for the miniature.¹

Though the Medici family had a long tradition of supporting women artists, Vittoria della Rovere took this patronage to new levels, distinguishing herself as one of the foremost patrons of female artists in the 17th century, and 'consistently patronized more women artists

than any other member of the Medici family'.² The Grand Duchess briefly patronised the short-lived Bolognese artist Elisabetta Sirani and was an early supporter of the little-known pastellist Giovanna Fratellini, who became one of her ladies-in-waiting. More significantly, Vittoria was the first of the Medici to appoint a woman to serve as court artist, giving Camilla Guerrieri Nati a monthly salary for over a decade between 1662 and 1673. Subsequently, Guerrieri Nati received individual payments for commissions and, among the female artists patronized by Vittoria della Rovere, she 'can be credited with producing the largest quantity of pictures for the Grand Duchess.'³

The most important comparison for Pierozzi though, in terms of technique and subject matter, is Vittoria delle Rovere's patronage of the Marchigian painter Giovanna Garzoni, who specialised in botanical and zoological subjects, most often on vellum (fig. 2). She spent just under a decade at the Medici court, between 1642 and 1651, consolidating her already brilliant reputation as a still life specialist. By the time of her death in 1695, the Grand Duchess owned more than twenty works by the artist, housed mainly in her residence the Villa Poggio Imperiale, just south of Florence. As Eve Straussman-Pfanzner has noted, 'the artist's miniatures on vellum appealed on two levels. First, during the 17th century, the Medici family exhibited a marked interest in the genre of still life. In addition, the great precision with which Garzoni rendered her forms would have appealed to those members of the family invested in early modern science.'⁴ Pierozzi's miniature would have no doubt appealed to the Medici and their circle for these same reasons.

Biography

Though biographical information for Caterina Angela Pierozzi remains limited at present, elements of her career and her position within the Florentine art world can be reconstructed through contemporary documents. The principal source is a passage in *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua*, a biographical dictionary of Florentine artists compiled by Filippo Baldinucci, who worked at the Medici court, first as an intellectual, and then as keeper of the art collection. Published in six volumes, partly in 1681 and then posthumously in 1728, the biographies are the most important source for Florentine artists

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after Vasari. Pierozzi is mentioned by Baldinucci in the chapter on Ventura Salimbeni in the context of her uncle, the painter Fra Manetto Pierozzi:

‘Caterina Angela Pierozzi, niece of said Fra Manetto, who having learned from her uncle the art of miniature, with praise she practises in it, and we have from her hand in the chambers of the Serenissimo Palace a painting of circa 2 *braccia*, in which is represented the Blessed Virgin in the act of sitting, there are St. Joseph, and St. Ann, and the baby Jesus, and a little St. John, who, with beautiful grace, and extraordinary naturalness, pressed on his chest his little apron, in which he holds tightly wrapped two kittens, almost as if he wanted to defend them from a little dog, which with a beautiful gesture seems to want to cause them harm, and so realistic are the gestures of the young boy and of the little dog, that more could not be desired’.⁵

From this we learn that Pierozzi, who was married to the painter Michelangelo Corsi, came from an artistic milieu, and was presumably trained from an early age by her uncle. This chapter also establishes that her art was held in high repute, and was evidently deemed worthy of praise by Baldinucci - a noted connoisseur. It is not clear which palace is referenced by ‘*Palazzo Serenissimo*’, although it could be shorthand for the ‘*Palazzo del Serenissimo Gran Duca*’, which would of course be the Palazzo Pitti.

It is also known that a small picture on vellum by Pierozzi hung in the Medici Grand Ducal Villa Poggio Imperiale, as an inventory of 1692 lists a miniature on *cartapeccora* as adorning the wall of a small room just outside the ground floor apartment of Vittoria delle Rovere.⁶ The miniature depicts a portrait of a woman, who holds a small image of the Annunciation in her right hand, covered with crystal and adorned with a floral frame. Other than the portrait, this artwork must have been very close in nature to the present miniature. In the inventory, Pierozzi ‘is identified by both an inscription on the back of the image and her relationship to her husband Michele Corsi *disegnatore*, who received payments from the Grand Duchess on several occasions for designs for various miniatures and embroidery, including one of an Annunciation with a garland of flowers’.⁷ This Annunciation is referenced in an inventory of 1682,⁸ only five years after the execution of the present work and, although we do not as of

yet know anything of the artistic collaboration, if any, between Pierozzi and her husband, it is entirely possible that this miniature and the present work are one and the same.

The final certainty we have about Pierozzi's life is that she was elected to the *Accademia del Disegno* in 1684.⁹ This is a remarkable and highly important piece of information, since the only other female painter to be elected to the Academy over the course of the entire 17th century was Artemisia Gentileschi, in 1616. In fact, Gentileschi and Pierozzi were respectively the first and second female painters to be elected to the Academy ever. Critically, this indicates Pierozzi's acceptance and status as an artist amongst her male contemporaries.

The miniature's iconography: the *Nunziata* fresco and Medicean botanical interests

Pierozzi's miniature depicts the Annunciation, surrounded by a border of minutely rendered flowers, which include irises, tulips, hyacinths, peonies and lilies. She has inscribed her name, native city and the date (fig. 3), suggesting the work may have had special resonance for Pierozzi. The use of vellum and gold leaf, both expensive materials, indicates that this was an object to be prized and admired, and lends weight to the notion that the miniature was a commission of importance.

Painstakingly composed of minute yet discernible dots of tempera (fig. 4), Pierozzi is able to establish a sense of precision, space and volume, all in accordance with the standard miniature technique of the period, and reminiscent of both antecedents and contemporaries such as Jacopo Ligozzi and Giovanni Garzoni. The miniature is characterised by its extremely delicate details, as well as the smoothness and shimmering quality of its finish, all of which demonstrate Pierozzi's technical skill. Underpinning it all is a classic Florentine *disegno*, with the line and shading of the under-drawing showing through the flowers (fig. 5). Perhaps Pierozzi's graphic accomplishment goes some way in explaining her admittance to the *Accademia del Disegno*, which prized the foundational role of drawing in art above all else.

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At centre we see the busts of the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin at the moment of the Annunciation. Both figures are particularly vivid with their vibrant greens, blues and reds. Pierozzi's skilful attention to detail is on display, particularly in the hair, whose strands are delineated individually, as well as the Virgin's ermine-lined cloak. The composition derives from the *affresco miraculoso*, known as the *Nunziata*, in the Basilica della Santissima Annunziata in Florence (fig. 6). Tradition has it that the execution of the fresco was entrusted to a certain Bartolomeo in 1252. Bartolomeo left the face of the Virgin until last, fervently praying that he would be bestowed with the ability to finish it and do justice to it. Falling asleep, he awoke to see that the face had been beautifully finished by an invisible hand. From then onwards the fresco quickly gained the reputation of being miraculous, venerated within Florence and beyond. Despite tradition, stylistic analysis suggests a date of around 1340, by an artist working in the tradition of Giotto.

By 1677, the date of Pierozzi's miniature, the Medici family had long been custodians of the miraculous fresco, severely restricting its access.¹⁰ Their deep involvement with the cult of the *Nunziata* began in the mid-15th century when Piero di Cosimo de' Medici commissioned the *tempietto* enclosing the image from Michelozzo Michelozzi. This involvement was ramped up during the Counter-Reformation period, when the Virgin's image was further sanctified and promoted by the Church. The Medici Grand Dukes sought to identify their own sacrality with that of the *Nunziata*, and in 1580 Ferdinand I engaged Alessandro Allori to restore the fresco, as well as to copy the image in order to gift it to Cardinal Borromeo.¹¹ From then on, and well into the 17th century, copies of the *Nunziata* were widely circulated and commissioned by the Medici family. Indeed, fourteen copies are documented by Alessandro Allori and around twenty by Cristofano Allori (fig. 7), who 'must have counted this activity as a distinct genre'.¹² Some of the copies were for the Medici themselves, such as, for example, the three small copies by Cristofano Allori which were sent to Marie de Medici in France at the beginning of the 17th century.¹³ Many others were given as gifts, with recipients including members of venerable Florentine families, and honoured associates outside of Florence, indicating that the Medici were concerned with sharing their privileged relation to the cult beyond the city.¹⁴

Given that the Medici restricted access to the *Nunziata*, appropriated its imagery for their own sacrality and promotion, and commissioned numerous copies after the fresco, it seems reasonable to posit that Pierozzi's miniature is very likely linked to Grand Ducal patronage, possibly that of Vittoria delle Rovere. Indeed, as already mentioned, the miniature accords very well with a description of a work by Michelangelo Corsi commissioned by the Grand Duchess, who was known for her piety. Medici patronage of the Basilica throughout Vittoria's life attests to the continued interest in the *Nunziata* and its iconography by the Grand Ducal family. This patronage includes the commissioning in 1671 of a series of paintings depicting miracles of the *Nunziata* by Cosimo Ulivelli,¹⁵ just seven years before the creation of Pierozzi's Annunciation.

The floral border surrounding the image of the Annunciation also ties in with Medicean interests, namely those of botany and horticulture. The flowers are beautifully rendered with botanical accuracy, and presumably Pierozzi had these floral specimens in front of her as she created the miniature. The exactitude of the flowers raises the possibility that Pierozzi practised botanical illustrations, like Garzoni and Ligozzi before her (fig. 8). This was an artistic domain much admired by the Medici, who were fascinated by the intersection of the natural sciences and art. Medici patronage of floral still life had reached its apogee by the mid-17th century, with artists such as Carlo Dolci, Bartolomeo Bimbi, Andrea Scacciati and, of course, Giovanna Garzoni, commissioned to make examples of this genre (fig. 9). Pierozzi's miniature fits in with Medicean botanical interests, further reinforcing the idea of a Grand Ducal commission with regards to the present work.

We are grateful to Dr. Eve Straussman-Planzer and Dr. Sheila Barker for sharing their thoughts and research on Caterina Angela Pierozzi. Further, Dr. Barker has discovered a birth record for Pierozzi, as well as payment records to her from the Grand Prince Ferdinand, which she intends to publish in an article, alongside the present work.

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Figure 1. Justus Sustermans, *Portrait of Vittoria delle Rovere*, oil on canvas, c. 1640.
Villa Medicea di Poggio a Caino

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Figure 2. Giovanna Garzoni, *Still Life with a plate of artichokes*, miniature on vellum.
Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti, Florence



Figure 3. Caterina Angela Pierozzi, detail of *The Annunciation Miniature*

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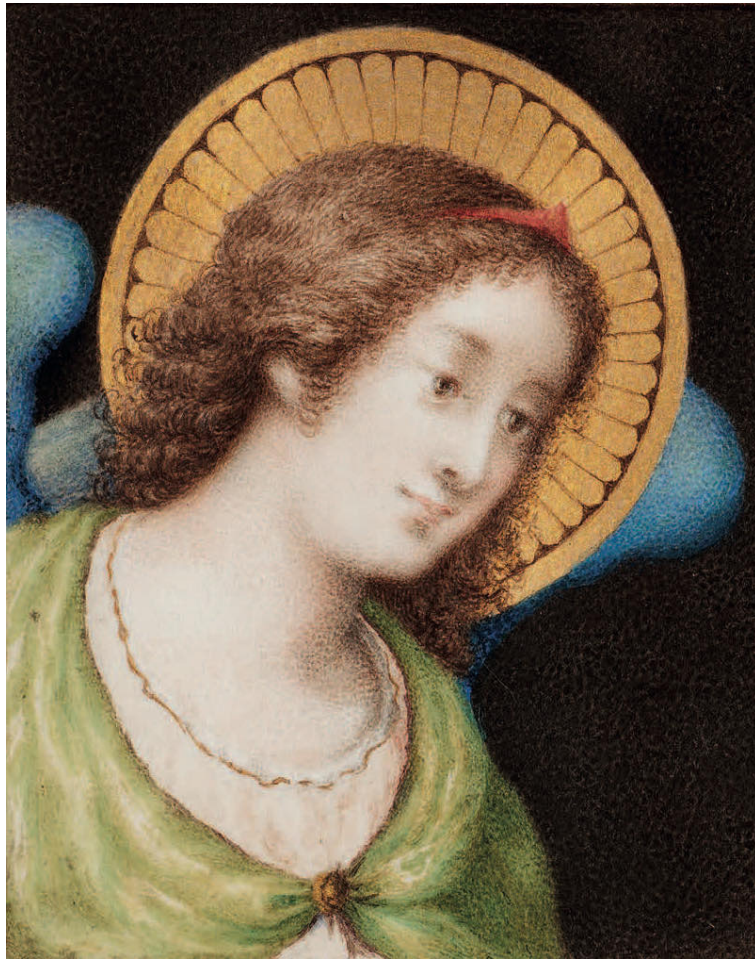


Figure 4. Caterina Angela Pierozzi, detail of *The Annunciation Miniature*



Figure 5. Caterina Angela Pierozzi, detail of *The Annunciation Miniature*

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Figure 6. Italian School, c. 1340, *The Annunciation (Nunziata)*, fresco.
Santissima Annunziata, Florence



Figure 7. Cristofano Allori, *The Annunciation*, oil on copper, 34.5 x 45.5 cm.
The Hermitage, Saint Petersburg

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Figure 8. Jacopo Ligozzi, *Mourning Iris and Spanish Iris*, gouache on paper.
Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence

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Figure 9. Giovanna Garzoni, *Still Life of Flowers*, tempera on vellum.
Villa Poggio a Caino, Florence

Footnotes

¹ For the most complete discussion of Vittoria delle Rovere's female artistic patronage, see E. Straussman-Pflanzer, *Court Culture in 17th-Century Florence: The Art Patronage of Medici Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere (1622-1694)*, doctoral dissertation, New York University, 2010, pp. 252-354.

² E. Straussman-Pflanzer, p. 255.

³ E. Straussman-Pflanzer, pp. 309-310.

⁴ E. Straussman-Pflanzer, p. 283.

⁵ F. Baldinucci, *Notizie de' professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua*, vol. V, 1702, p. 129-130:

'Caterina Angela Pierozzi, nipote di esso Fra Manetto, la quale avevdo dal Zio appesa l'Arte del miniare, con lode in quella s'esercita, e s'ha di sua mano nelle Camere del Palazzo Serenissimo, un Quadro di braccia 2. in circa, nel quale è rappresentata la B. Vergine in atto d sedere, v'è S. Giuseppe, e S. Anna, e l'Signore Bambino, ed un S. Giovannino, il quale con bellissima grazia, e straordinaria naturalezza s strigne al seno ul suo Grembiolino, nel quale tiene strettamente rinvolti due Gattini, quali voglia quegli difendere da un Cagnolino, il quale con bel gesto, par, che voglia sar loro sanno, e tanto il moto del Fanciullo, che del Cagnuolo appariscon si veri, che più non può desderarsi'.

⁶ Referenced in E. Straussman-Pflanzer, p. 359, footnote 724: *'N.o 311 Vn Quadretto ottangolo in cartapecora, miniatovj Vn ritratto d'vna femmina, che con la mano destra tiene vna Nunziatina con Adornamento dj Cornicette à onde con Spartimentj miniatovj diversj orj, con Cristallj Sopra, alto con d:o Adornam:o 2/3 lar:o Z 11, Scrittovj p dj dietro, fatto dalla Caterin Angiola Pierozzi, Moglie dj Michelin Corsj ricam:re; E d:o Quadro, con altrj appresso tuttj trovatij indispostj da d:o a 48 n.o 1.'*

⁷ E. Straussman-Pflanzer, *op. cit.*, p. 341.

⁸ Referenced in E. Straussman-Pflanzer, *op. cit.*, p. 341, footnote 725: *'i0i/ Vittoria p[er] grazia di dio, Gran Duchessa di Toscana [symbol]/ Sen:r Borromei Tes:re Nro Dil:mo/ Pagate à Michele Corsi disegnatore ducati sessanta per valuta d'una miniatura, che rappresenta la Santissima Annunziata, e d'una ghirlanda di ori pur miniata, le quali hà venduto p[er] Nostro servizio; e segnatene la somma in debito dove à Voi parrà meglio poiche vi sarà fatta buona in virtù di questo Nostro Mandato. Dato [symbol] in Firenze. 2. Gennaio. 1682 .ab Inc:ne/ Vittoria GDsa.'*

⁹ L. Zangheri (ed.), *Gli accademici del disegno elenco alfabetico*, Florence 2000, p. 256.

¹⁰ B.I.M. Iarocci, *The Santissima Annunziata of Florence, Medici Portraits, and the Counter Reformation in Italy*, doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 2015, p. 181.

¹¹ F. Bocchi, *Della Imagine Miracolosa della SS. Nunziata di Firenze*, Florence: T. Barrachi, 1852, pp. 67-68.

¹² B.I.M. Iarocci, p. 50.

¹³ M. L. Chappell, *Cristofano Allori 1577-1621*, Florence 1984, pp. 18, 84 and 114.

¹⁴ For a full list of recipients of the *Nunziata* image, see B.I.M. Iarocci, pp. 51-53.

¹⁵ B.I.M. Iarocci, p. 130.