

*Ruccaria*

ITALY'S FIRST DIVA

*Puccini*

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*Procaccini*

Giulio Cesare Procaccini  
Bologna 1574-1625 Milan

*Allegorical Portrait of Flaminia (Orsola Posmoni Cecchini) as Venus*  
ca. 1620-25

## ITALY'S FIRST DIVA

by Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell



Orsola Posmoni Cecchini – better known by her stage name, Flaminia – was one of the first women to find fame as an actress. The *prima donna* was a star of the *commedia dell'arte*, the largely improvised theatrical tradition that emerged in sixteenth-century Italy and persisted well into the eighteenth century. Incorporating pantomime, music, dance, and stock comic characters, the *commedia dell'arte* was likely born of the Venetian carnival tradition. It was performed by small, itinerant companies that developed fervent followings in cities and courts across Europe, though their movements were sometimes prompted by persecution from the church and civil authorities. The unscripted dialogue was often updated to reference current events or regional tastes. Shows primarily took place outside, in public arenas like fairs, marketplaces, and piazzas. But troupes were also invited into aristocratic homes and royal theatres. Remarkably, for the first time in history, women braved social and religious taboos to perform alongside men in the most popular form of entertainment of the period.

Actresses first appeared in the *commedia dell'arte* in the 1560s, replacing boy actors, and they were instantly popular with audiences. Many of these trailblazing women – including Orsola – were married to male actors and impresarios; according to some sources, Orsola was also the daughter of an actor-impresario, Flaminio Scala, whose stage name was Flavio. Orsola's husband Pier Maria Cecchini (who performed under the name Fritellino) was an actor, playwright, and head of the *Accessi*, a troupe that enjoyed the patronage of Vincenzo Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua. The name “*Accessi*” means “Inflamed”; like many *commedia dell'arte*

company names, it was derived from cavalier literature, and conveyed a sense of passion, adventure, and daring. At one time, the troupe had just five members, but its composition grew and changed over time. Other troupe members included Gerolamo Garavin and the brothers Drusiano and Tristano Martinelli. In 1615, Pier Cecchini noted that it had not yet been 50 years since women had appeared in costume on the stage, so their novelty value remained high throughout Orsola's career.

The plots of *commedia dell'arte* plays – such as they were – revolved around a pair of *innamorati*, or lovers, who faced a series of predetermined obstacles before being united in time for a happy ending. These lovers were the straight men in the topsy-turvy world of the *commedia dell'arte*. Always young and attractive, they wore fashionable and expensive costumes, which they might change several times during the performance. They had beautiful postures and graceful movements. They spoke in lofty rhetoric, with refined accents, in stark contrast to the other figures on stage. Though their passionate emotions might be over-the-top or melodramatic, they were also sincere, providing an idealised foil for the comic antics of the villains, harlequins, and devious servants who populated the world of the *commedia dell'arte* stage. Indeed, their determination to take themselves seriously was often a source of unintentional comedy; they could be self-centred to the point of being childish, as much in love with themselves as they were with each other. While the other characters usually wore masks, the *innamorati* did not; thus, Orsola's beauty was instantly recognisable on and off stage.

The stage name Flaminia had its roots in the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. Flaminia was one of several stock name used for the female lover in the plays.



François Bunel, *Actors of the Commedia dell'Arte*, late 1600s, oil on canvas, 118.5 x 170.7 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Béziers.

Orsola was not the only actress to be known by her most famous role; there was a “Roman Flaminia,” a “Barbara Flaminia,” and an Elena Balletti who also used Flaminia as her professional name. One of Pier Maria Cecchini's original comic plays was titled *La Flaminia Schiava* (*The Slave Flaminia*); written to show off his wife's talents, this production may have given Orsola her signature role and moniker. Alternatively, it may be a feminised version of Flaminio Scala's name.

Although records of the travels and repertoires of these itinerant troupes are sparse, the *Accessi* were certainly founded and enjoying the patronage of the Duke of Mantua by 1590, when the Duke is recorded as recommending them to the rectors of Brescia. Although that engagement never materialised, his endorsement would prove to be instrumental in finding them new patrons and venues. The troupe spent three months performing in Genoa in 1597; in 1599, they performed in Mantua during Carnival, before moving on to Bologna. In March of the following year, they were invited to perform for the French court by King Henri IV himself – an unprecedented honour, born of his high regard for troupe member Tristano Martinelli, called *Dominus Arlecchinorum* (“Master of the Harlequins”). On their way to France, the *Accessi* were delayed at the court of Turin by Charles Emmanuel, Duke of Savoy, who was evidently enamoured with their performances. They finally reached Lyon, where they performed at the celebrations of Henri IV’s marriage to Marie de’ Medici. They followed the court to Paris in January 1601, staying until October.

But it was not a happy engagement. One source alludes to “friction between Cecchini, Andreini, their wives, and admirers,” fuelled by the machinations of Martinelli, “a man spoiled by patrons and dreaded by his companions.” Here, “Andreini” undoubtedly refers to Francesco Andreini, an actor-playwright who had founded the *Gelosi* troupe with his wife, actress Isabella Andreini, called Florinda. The *Gelosi* (“the Jealous”) performed at the French court and elsewhere in Europe until Isabella’s death in 1604. It is easy to imagine what kind of conflicts arose between the rival impresarios and their respective leading ladies (in life and art) as they competed for audiences, proceeds, and

patrons; “swearing and dire threats were commonplace.” Pier Maria Cecchini, in particular, would gain a reputation as being difficult to work with, while Orsola was accused of “haughtiness.” Whatever tensions existed were not just personal but professional; Martinelli – the Harlequin of the company – was suspected of trying to undermine the *innamorati*’s traditional position as the stars of the *commedia dell’arte*.

After a stop in Rome, the *Accessi* were back in Turin by January 1602. Through the Duke of Mantua’s intervention, they performed in Milan in the summer of 1602, the peak theatrical season. But, once again, their residency was marred by controversy, seemingly centered around Orsola, whose presence and performances generated disagreements and strains within the company. An actor named Carol de Vecchi had recently taken over the role of a lower-class character called *Burattino* (meaning “Puppet” in English). In 1609, Pier Maria Cecchini would kill “Carletto” in the wake of a scandal involving Orsola, causing the troupe to be banished from Milan. (He had attacked and injured another actor in the troupe, Benedetto Ricci, days earlier; the two episodes were probably linked.) In his dedication to the *Lettere facete e morali*, published in 1622, Cecchini hinted at “honourable reasons” for the murders. Privately, however, he confessed in a letter to Gonzaga that his wife did not give him an hour of peace; she may have taken her stage persona as a romantic heroine to heart in her personal life. When a second female performer, Baldina, joined the *Accessi*, the rivalry between Orsola and Baldina threatened to destroy the troupe.

From 1606 to 1610, the *Accessi* joined forces with the *Fedeli* (“Faithful”), another *commedia dell’arte* company well connected at the Italian and French courts.





The partnership between these rival teams of thespians was, predictably, fraught with offstage drama. But Orsola emerged from the partnership as an undisputed star. A group of her fans even published a 72-page book of poetry praising her performances, *Varie rime in lode della Signora Orsola Cecchini della Compagnia degli Accessi detta Flaminia* (*Several verses in praise of Orsola Cecchini of the Accessi Troupe, also called Flaminia*).

It is from this source that we learn some of the more intriguing details of Orsola's career. She sometimes played male roles, which was not unusual for actresses in *commedia dell'arte* (male actors also played female roles). She once shot an arquebus – a type of long gun – during a show. Despite this masculine derring-do, she retained her feminine modesty; the verses praise the “extraordinary blush” that appeared on her “honest” and “chaste” face when she kissed her pretended husband on stage. (These reassurances were undoubtedly intended to deflect criticism at a time when women appearing onstage were regularly accused or suspected of immorality.) She made an impression as Angelica in *La Pazzia d'Orlando* (*The Pasture of Orlando*) and in Cesare Della Porta's tragedy *Delfa*. She was also a talented singer, as expected of *innamorati*.

The *Accessi* returned to France at King Henri IV's request in 1610. Later that year, the *Accessi* were allowed to return with the *Fedeli* to Milan, by special permission of the Spanish governor. There, they debuted *La Flaminia Schiava*, with Orsola in the title role. Although the play was so successful that it was published by Bordononi in the same year, another troupe, the *Martinelli*, were invited to perform at the court theatre, while the *Accessi* were relegated to a lesser venue.

Vincenzo Gonzaga died in 1612, and the relationship between the *Accessi* and the Gonzaga family disintegrated. The troupe moved on from the court of Mantua to Vicenza, Linz, and Vienna, where they performed for the Emperor Matthias. The following year, they returned to Paris via Lyon. However, they were called back to Milan in 1616, when Pedro Alvarez de Toledo was appointed the governor. This time, they were invited to perform at the royal palace. In 1620, Pier Maria Cecchini tried to revive his connection with the Gonzaga family, writing to Duke Ferdinando, Vincenzo's son and heir, that he was forming a new troupe. But it is unclear whether the relationship resumed before Ferdinando's own death in 1626.

The Great Plague of Milan closed the theaters from 1629 to 1631. But the *Accessi* weathered the storm and returned to the stage in 1632, when they performed a new comedy, Silvio Fiorillo's *La Lucilla costante, con le ridicolose disfide e prodezze di Polcinella*. Cecchini died in 1645, age 82.

In Giulio Cesare Procaccini's portrait, Flaminia is portrayed in the guise of Venus, accompanied by Cupid. The Roman goddess of love is an apt alter ego for the beautiful Italian diva, who specialized in romantic roles and clearly had an eventful off-stage love life, as well; Venus also made frequent appearances on the Italian stage, raising the intriguing possibility that Orsola may be dressed for a role. Though Orsola must have been between the ages of 37 and 40 in the portrait, she retains her seductive charm and much-admired blonde hair. Her arresting eyes, straightforward gaze, and unflappable demeanour suggest what a formidable presence she must have been on stage. Even today, this groundbreaking female artist commands her audience's attention.



*La Flaminia Schiava* written by Pier Maria Cecchini and published in Venice in 1612.



## SONNETO DELL'INFIAMMATO

*Questa Fiammella, anzi bell'Orsa apparsa  
Fra la greggia del ciel, fra l'aureo stuolo,  
Non è la guida de' Nocchier nel Polo,  
Se ben d'oro immortal la chioma ha sparsa.  
In due stelle d'amor ella è comparsa  
Et hor lampeggia et hor sen fugge a volo  
Per l'Italico suolo, ardendo solo,  
Che sola esser si vanta alm non arsa.  
Festila errante, Amor, non fissa luce,  
Perché fissa ogni luce in lei vedresti  
E seguir lei tiranna, anziché duce.  
Nel suo lume affogar l'alme faresti,  
Invece di guidarle, ove l'adduce,  
Perché tutte le Grazie in lei piovesti.*

A sonnet in praise of Flaminia  
written by her devoted supporters. *Varie rime in lode della Signora Orsola  
Cecchini della Compagnia degli Accessi detta Flaminia*  
(Bernardino Santoni, G.B. Alzato, 1608).



## PROCACCINI'S ALLEGORICAL PORTRAIT OF FLAMINIA

by Virginia Brilliant

Costumed *all'antica* in a loose white gown trimmed with gold and accompanied by a figure of Cupid, the sitter in this portrait has clearly been cast in the guise of Venus, the ancient goddess of love. A golden circlet studded with pearls and coral crowns her copper-coloured curls, and matches a set of pearl earrings. Despite the flattering idealism inherent in this allegorical conceit, the sitter is rendered with surprisingly realistic frankness and an informality highly unusual in portraiture of the period. Mature and handsome – rather than young and pretty – her hair curls and even frizzes at her temples and her cheeks are flushed in an especially naturalistic manner. Her pose is quite relaxed; shown a little more than half-length and seated, one elbow is raised to rest on a cushion, while with her opposite hand she caresses Cupid, who looks to her but points towards the viewer, creating an instant connection between the two.

This beautiful and compelling portrait is an important recent rediscovery and a significant addition to the known oeuvre of Giulio Cesare Procaccini. It emerged in 2019 on the Spanish antiques market, at which time it was attributed to the “School of Gandolfi.” Now recognised as the work of Procaccini, the painting will be included in the forthcoming monograph on the artist by work by Hugh Brigstocke and Odette D’Albo. The painting is in an excellent state of preservation, and during a treatment in 2019, an old canvas addition to the top of the canvas measuring about forty centimeters was removed, restoring the work to its correct proportions.

Born in Bologna in 1574, Procaccini moved with his family to Milan in 1587. He began his career as a sculptor but around 1600 turned his focus entirely to painting. By 1610, his reputation as one of the city’s leading painters was firmly

established, as is evidenced by his involvement in major civic artistic projects. Significantly, he collaborated on the cycle of paintings depicting the miracles of Carlo Borromeo in the Duomo, commissioned as part of the canonisation process for the Milanese archbishop. The dynamic modelling of the figures in these and other works clearly reflects the formation the artist received as a sculptor, although the sweetness of the facial features and expressions echoes the works of the Emilian painters Correggio and Parmigianino. Indeed, the originality of Procaccini’s style comes from his synthesis of Central Italian and Lombard elements with the pioneering innovations of the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens, who was active in Italy between 1600 and 1608, especially in Genoa. Indeed, it is significant that Procaccini’s most important patron was the Genoese nobleman Giovanni Carlo Doria (1576-1625), one of the most wealthy and cultured collectors of his time, and that Procaccini spent time in the city where he would have had access to many works by Rubens.<sup>1</sup>

This painting is a rare extant example of Procaccini’s portraiture. No surviving male portraits by the artist are known today, although documents including the inventory of the artist’s studio at his death in 1625 and the inventory of the collection of Giovanni Battista Visconti in Milan in 1701 attest to the fact that the artist did produce such works. As for female portraits, a single example is known, the portrait of a gentlewoman with a youth that appeared on the art market in 2010.<sup>2</sup> This work dates to the very last years of Procaccini’s career and is moreover unfinished (both the youth and the background are merely sketched in). Procaccini’s self-portraits, executed throughout the course of his career, are the main evidence for his skill as a portraitist. There is a small painting of

*Procaccini*

Giulio Cesare Procaccini  
Bologna 1574-1625 Milan

*Allegorical Portrait of Flaminia  
(Orsola Posmoni Cecchini) as Venus*  
ca. 1620-25

Oil on canvas  
97.5 x 73.2 cm  
Inscribed on the reverse of the  
canvas: "S<sup>r</sup> A.D"

PROVENANCE  
Giovanni Carlo Doria Collection, Genoa,  
(listed in the inventory of 1617-21)  
By descent to Agostino Doria  
Private collection, Spain



him as young man in the Koelliker collection, a self-portrait included in the *Transfiguration* in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, a portrait of himself as a warrior in the Museo Lechi in Montichiari, and a group of later self-portraits in the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, the Museo Cerralbo in Madrid, and the Brera, this last example dating to 1624, the year before the artist's death.

During the 2019 conservation treatment, an inscription was discovered on the reverse of the canvas. It reads "S<sup>r</sup>A-D" in large letters, which is an abbreviation of the name "S[igno]r A[gostino] D[oria]." This indicates that the painting was in the collection of Agostino Doria (d. 1640), the son of Giovanni Carlo Doria. The inventory of Giovanni Carlo's collection made between 1617 and 1621 lists but a single female portrait by Procaccini, recorded as "*la Flaminia comica*," and valued at 25 Genoese *lire*.

The "*comica*" mentioned in the inventory can, furthermore, be identified as the renowned actress Orsola Posmoni Cecchini (ca. 1580 - after 1633), whose stage name was Flaminia. She was active at the court of the Gonzaga at Mantua, as well as in numerous other Italian cities, including Milan, Naples, Florence, Rome, and Venice. Orsola's origins are not recorded. The earliest documentation for her life is a letter sent from her to the Duke of Mantua in 1602, and from which we learn that she was by that point in time married to the celebrated actor Pier Maria Cecchini. One work composed by her, the *Prologhi di Flaminia Cecchini, Comica Accesa, recitati al Serenissimo Signor Duca di Savoia* (1605) is known, as is a volume dedicated to her, entitled *Raccolta di varie rime in lode della sig. Orsola Cecchini nella Compagnia de gli Accesi detta Flamminia*, published in Milan in 1608. She starred in many comedies written by her husband, including *La Flaminia*

*schiaiva* (1610), *L'amico tradito* (1633), and "*della Pazzia di Flaminia*." Though neither the text nor the story of this last play survives, and its date is not clear, it seems to have been a long-standing favorite of the actress which she performed in Milan at the start of the century and again in Florence in 1623.

No portraits of the actress survive, and contemporary poetry celebrating her talents only notes that she was blonde and very attractive. Of her personality, more is known. She was apparently an enormously charming woman of strong character, though her detractors, for example the actor Giovanni Battista Andreini, writing in 1609, note that she was often reckless in her conduct. Indeed, in Turin in that year, she incited a great scandal with rumors of a relationship with her fellow actor Jacopo Antonio Fidenzi, and she was moreover implicated in the murder of the comic Carlo De Vecchi at the hands of her her husband at the close of the theatre season. Her brilliant career began to decline in the late 1620s, and though the date of her death is not known, the last documented mention of her is in a letter written by her husband in 1633. Because she specialised in playing the part of the lover, it is quite appropriate that she should be cast as Venus in her portrait by Procaccini.

It is not clear why Procaccini painted the actress's portrait. It may have been commissioned directly by Giovanni Carlo Doria; alternatively, because the Procaccini family had close ties to leading figures in the Milanese theater, the commission may have come from within this circle, perhaps a member of her family, a lover, or, most likely, an admirer. The painting entered the Doria collection sometime before or between 1617 and 1621, when the actress was between the ages of approximately thirty-seven and forty, which correlates well



Fig. 1.  
Peter Paul Rubens,  
*Marchesa Brigida  
Spinola Doria*, 1606,  
oil on canvas,  
152.5 x 99 cm,  
National Gallery of  
Art, Washington.

with the sitter's mature appearance and suggests *terminus ante quem* for the work. Also important to dating the painting in the very last years of the 1610s is the clear stylistic influence of Rubens's portraits of Genoese noblewomen upon the depiction of Orsola Cecchini. Procaccini would have had the opportunity to study paintings like Rubens's *Marchesa Brigida Spinola Doria* (1606, National Gallery of Art, Washington, fig. 1) first-hand and in depth when he was in Genoa in 1618, living in the Doria household and completing his *Last Supper* in the *Santissima Annunziata al Vastato*. Rubens's russet-haired beauty with flushed cheeks costumed in sumptuous white silks and set against a dramatic swath of red background drapery was clearly an important model for Procaccini's portrait, although the latter painting brings to the pictorial equation a naturalism and informality which are without parallel in Rubens but are instead resolutely Lombard in sensibility.

Portraits of actors and actresses are unusual but not unknown at this date. The present work is thus a rare example of a type which includes works like the *Portrait of an Actor* by Domenico Fetti (1621-22, State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, fig. 2) and a group of troupe portraits of Italian *commedia dell'arte* actors likely executed by French or Flemish painters in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth centuries. Moreover, although they were enormously popular in the eighteenth century, allegorical portraits in which the sitter is costumed as a figure from mythology, history, or the bible are few in the early seventeenth century in Italy, although Procaccini's self-portrait as a warrior, mentioned above, offers some evidence of the artist's interest in "fancy dress" portraiture. Since in the case of the present work he was depicting an actress,







Fig. 2.  
Domenico Fetti,  
*Portrait of an Actor*,  
1621–22,  
oil on canvas,  
105.5 x 81 cm,  
The State  
Hermitage Museum,  
St. Petersburg.  
Photograph © The  
State Hermitage  
Museum. Photo by  
Vladimir Terebenin.

Fig. 3.  
Anthony van Dyck,  
*Double Portrait  
of George Villiers,  
Marquess and later 1st  
Duke of Buckingham  
and his wife,  
Katherine Manners,  
as Venus and Adonis*,  
1620s, oil on canvas,  
222.9 x 163 cm,  
private collection.



he had perhaps both more freedom and reason to envisage her in a “role,” rather than as herself, or may have been asked to do so by his patron in commemoration of a favorite performance. It might be noted that Antony van Dyck, one of the earliest pioneers of the allegorical portrait, spent a great deal of time in Genoa in the 1620s, and it is intriguing to speculate that Procaccini’s portrait anticipates, even in some small way informed, his own work in this genre (fig. 3).

<sup>1</sup> For Procaccini and Doria, see Hugh Brigstocke, *Procaccini in America*, Hall and Knight, New York, 2002, exh. cat.; Viviana Farina, *Giovan Carlo Doria: promotore delle arti a Genova nel primo Seicento*, Florence, 2002; and Viviana Farina in Piero, Boccardo, ed., *L’Età di Rubens. Dimore, committenti e collezionisti genovesi*, Palazzo Ducale, Galleria di Palazzo Rosso, and at Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Spinola, Genoa, 2004, exh. cat., pp. 185–95.

<sup>2</sup> Vienna, Dorotheum, 21 April 2010, lot 44.



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