



Short Notice

A New Attribution of a *Bust of the Holy Virgin* to Enrico Merengo*

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A little known *Bust of the Holy Virgin* in the Rijksmuseum's collection is here added to the oeuvre of the sculptor Heinrich Meyring, born in Westphalia but better known by his Italian name Enrico Merengo (1638/39-1723).¹ His works owe a considerable debt to the compositional inventions and formal style of his teacher, Giusto Le Court (1627-1679)² (figs. 1-2).³ The Rijksmuseum's bust is a work in marble that has previously been attributed to two other artists at different times.⁴

Working in Venice in the second half of the seventeenth century, Merengo was trained in Giusto le Court's workshop. Since 1655, the year his presence in the Serenissima Repubblica di San Marco is first recorded, this Flemish sculptor – born in Ypres – had been the great pioneer of baroque sculpture in Venice and the exponent of François du Quesnoy's style there. Le Court had learned and mastered this style during his apprenticeships with Cornelis van Mildert and Artus Quellinus.⁵ There are evident echoes of Giusto le Court's training with these masters in his candle-bearing angels (figs. 3-4) at the entrance to the Cappella Labia in San Nicola da Tolentino in Venice, and in the extraordinary series of busts of the Olympian gods and sibyls in the Museo Nazionale di Villa Pisani in Stra that the sculptor created in the early sixties.⁶ Le Court's art gradually evolved

< Fig. 1
ENRICO MERENGO,
*Bust of the Holy
Virgin*, c. 1680.
Marble, h. 35 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-1968-19.

Fig. 2
Detail of fig. 1

into a sensitive style, in which the marble seemed to become a living, shimmering material, thanks in part to a growing tendency towards painterly chiaroscuro effects. While the high point of this stylistic development is without doubt represented by the complex plasticity of *The Virgin Grieving over Plague-Stricken Venice*,⁷ there are other works that also express





Fig. 3
GIUSTO LE COURT,
Candle-Bearing Angel,
detail, 1655.
Marble.
Venice, Church of
San Nicola Da of
Tolentino, Labia
chapel.
Photo: Giorgio Cini
Foundation, Institute
of Art History, digital
photo library.

Fig. 4
GIUSTO LE COURT,
Candle-Bearing Angel,
1655.
Marble.
Venice, Church of
San Nicola Da of
Tolentino, Labia
chapel.
Photo: Giorgio Cini
Foundation, Institute
of Art History, digital
photo library.

this more pronounced style phase. Examples include the remarkable ensemble of religious busts in the oratorio of the Ca' Nave in Cittadella,⁸ and those of Christ and the Virgin (figs. 5-6) in San Domenico at Chioggia.⁹ It was this last work by Le Court that Merengo chose as his model for the bust of the Virgin in the Rijksmuseum. This figure of the Madonna displays the same young woman's features – with 'bloom' in her cheeks, her soft lips closed and

Fig. 5
GIUSTO LE COURT,
Bust of Christ,
c. 1675-77.
Marble.
Chioggia, Church
of San Domenico.
Photo: Ruggero
Donaggio.

Fig. 6
GIUSTO LE COURT,
*Bust of the Holy
Virgin*, c. 1675-77.
Marble.
Chioggia, Church
of San Domenico.
Photo: Ruggero
Donaggio.





her eyes half open – as Le Court’s. They lend the Amsterdam sculpture a tender diffidence and pure, virginal simplicity that are part of this specific Marian iconography. To temper the extreme, almost ivory-like purity of the Virgin’s face, Merengo also used the same arrangement of her garment – with a similar full knot in the lower part of the work – as Le Court had introduced in his sculpture in Chioggia and in the version recently discovered by Guerriero in the Armstrong Browning Library (Waco, Baylor University) (fig. 7).¹⁰

Some comparisons with works that the German made in the years immediately after the death of his Flemish

teacher on 4 November 1679 are sufficient to establish Merengo’s authorship of the Amsterdam bust with certainty. It is important to note that Merengo had never worked anywhere but in Le Court’s workshop up to his master’s death, as emerges from a passage in a letter from Abbot Giovanni Parenti to the Duke of Modena, Francesco II d’Este, dated 1 September 1679. After providing his noble correspondent with information about sculptors ‘of some renown’ working in Venice, Parenti also mentioned the presence in the city of ‘a certain Enrico [Merengo], pupil of Giusto [Le Court], who is reputed to do good work’, but went on to add

Fig. 7
GIUSTO LE COURT,
Bust of the Holy
Virgin, c. 1678.
Marble.
Waco (Texas), Baylor
University, Armstrong
Browning Library.



Fig. 8

ENRICO MERENGO,
Annunciation,
c. 1679-80.
Marble.
Venice, Church
of Sant'Andrea
della Zirada.

Fig. 9
Detail of fig. 8.



almost hypertrophy in the forms – in great softness in the modelling of the surfaces and the subtle pursuit of a *sfumato* effect, almost like that achieved by the delicate, restrained touch of a watercolourist. These style characteristics lead to a dating of the bust in the Rijksmuseum in the sixteen-eighties, before Merengo's hand developed the austerity and economy in the rendition of forms that are so typical of his better-known works. Merengo's bust of the Virgin in the Rijksmuseum was an apt tribute to his great teacher – as Guerriero shrewdly observed – and a testimony to the enduring reputation of Le Court's inventions, both for private commissions and on the art market of the period.¹⁴

that 'one does not know whether he will still be able to make such perfect works, once he is no longer in the proximity of his teacher'.¹¹ Merengo's earliest documented autograph works, such as the Angel for the altar van San Giuliano in the Basilica of Santa Giustina in Padua, therefore also date from 1680 onwards.¹²

Returning to the bust of the Virgin in the Rijksmuseum, she appears to be closest, stylistically, to the *Madonna* by Merengo carved in the *Annunciation* relief at the back of the high altar in the Church of Sant'Andrea della Zirada in Venice. Le Court designed and executed this altar in 1679, the year he died (figs. 8-9).¹³ The similarities in the features of the Virgins in Venice and Amsterdam are so striking that there can be no doubt about the attribution of the latter to Merengo. The Amsterdam Virgin differs from the work in Sant'Andrea della Zirada – where one can detect a certain distension and

NOTES

- * My sincere thanks go to Frits Scholten for his immense help and infinite patience.
- 1 For Enrico Merengo see R. Breuing, *Enrico Meyring 1628-1723. Ein Bildhauer aus Westfalen in Venedig*, Rheine 1997; M. Klemenčić, 'Enrico Merengo (Heinrich Meyring)', in A. Bacchi (ed.), *La scultura a Venezia da Sansovino a Canova*, Milan 2000, pp. 760-62; S. Wolff, 'Nuovi contributi su Heinrich Meyring', *Saggi e Memorie di Storia dell'Arte* 24 (2000), pp. 117-57; P. Rossi, 'Enrico Merengo. L'attività veneziana', *Arte Veneta* 63 (2006), pp. 27-47; S. Wolff, *Heinrich Meyring. Bildhauer in Venedig*, Freiburg in Breisgau 2006 (diss. University of Freiburg, digitally available at www.freidok.uni-freiburg.de, permalink: urn:nbn:de:bsz:25-opus-57035).
 - 2 For an updated profile of the artist see S. Guerriero, under 'Corte, Josse de (Le Court, Giusto)', in *The Encyclopedia of Sculpture*, vol. 1, New York/London 2003, pp. 373-75. Further, among others, P. Rossi, 'La scultura a Venezia nel Seicento', in G. Romanelli (ed.), *Venezia. L'arte dei secoli*, Udine 1997, p. 500; S. Guerriero, "Di tua virtù che infonde spirto ai sassi". Per la prima attività veneziana di Giusto Le Court', *Arte Veneta* 55 (1999), pp. 49-71; M. de Vincenti, 'Bozzetti e modelli del "Bernini Adriatico" Giusto Le Court e del suo "miglior allievo" Enrico Merengo', *Arte Veneta* 62 (2005), pp. 55-81; A. Bacchi, "Le cose più belle e principali nelle chiese di Venezia sono opere sue." Giusto Le Court a Santa Maria della Salute (e altrove)', *Nuovi Studi* 12 (2006), pp. 145-58; S. Guerriero and M. Clemente, *Giusto Le Court. Due opere ritrivate*, Figline Valdarno 2015.
 - 3 J. Leeuwenberg, *Beeldhouwkunst in het Rijksmuseum*, coll. cat. Amsterdam 1973, pp. 370-71, no. 623. This attribution was published earlier in S. Guerriero, 'La Vergine con il Bambino di Giusto Le Court alla Salute. La sua fortuna e un busto inedito', in Guerriero and Clemente 2015 (note 2), pp. 7-41, esp. pp. 34-37 and fig. 25.
 - 4 In Leeuwenberg 1973 (note 3) the marble was attributed to Giuseppe Mazzuoli; in an forthcoming entry for the digital collection catalogue of the Rijksmuseum's sculpture collection, Frits Scholten recently re-attributed it to Giuseppe Maria Mazza of Bologna (with thanks to Frits Scholten for this information).
 - 5 See Guerriero 1999 (note 2). For Quellinus see F. Scholten, *Artus Quellinus: Sculptor of Amsterdam*, Amsterdam 2010.
 - 6 Guerriero 1999 (note 2).
 - 7 See Guerriero 2015 (note 3), pp. 7-41.
 - 8 See A. Mariuz and G. Pavanello, 'La chiesetta di Bernardo Nave a Cittadella', *Arte Veneta* 50 (1997), pp. 77-79 and S. Guerriero, 'Le alterne fortune dei marmi. Busti, teste di carattere e altre "sculture moderne" nelle collezioni veneziane tra Sei e Settecento', in G. Pavanello (ed.), *La scultura veneta del Seicento e del Settecento. Nuovi studi*, Venice 2002, pp. 97-98.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
 - 10 Cf. Guerriero 2015 (note 3), p. 28.
 - 11 'di qualche grido' and 'Vi sarebbe pur anche un tal Enrico giovane del Giusto, il quale dicono operi bene, ma non si sa poi quando fosse lontano dal maestro se li lavorieri riuscissero così perfetti'. The letter was published by L. Righi Guerzoni, 'La scultura a Modena nel Seicento. Collezionismo e commissioni ducali', in A. Spagiari and G. Trenti (eds.), *Lo Stato di Modena. Una capitale, una dinastia, una civiltà nella storia d'Europa*, Modena 2001, p. 339.
 - 12 See Wolff 2000 (note 1), pp. 125-26, with bibliography.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 128-29.
 - 14 See Guerriero 2015 (note 3).