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Book Section:

Shephard, T. orcid.org/0000-0003-4053-8916 (2023) 56. Ceiling with the Muses and Apollo. In: Borghetti, V. and Shephard, T., (eds.) *The Museum of Renaissance Music: A History in 100 Exhibits*. Epitome musical . Brepols , Turnhout , pp. 266-273. ISBN 9782503588568

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56. *Ceiling with the Muses and Apollo*

Tim Shephard

Alessandro Pampurino, Cremona, ca. 1500

Fresco on plaster, with gilt wood bosses, 427 (diameter) x 179 (depth) cm

Inscribed: CALLIOPE; APOLLO

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Photo ©XXXXXX

In 1497 Francesca Maria Sforza, prioress of the large but relatively poor Cremonese Augustinian convent of Santa Monica, enlisted the help of her half-brother Ludovico Sforza detto il Moro, the duke of Milan, in a plan to improve the fortunes of her community. Together they persuaded Pope Alexander VI to force the Cistercian nuns of San Giovanni della Pipia, known colloquially as the convent “della Colomba,” to merge with the nuns of Santa Monica, bringing with them the rich endowments of their eleventh-century monastery. On 25 September 1498 the Cistercian nuns entered their new home and became Augustinians; their former convent, now the property of Santa Monica, was assigned to a community of Benedictines (Merula 1627).

Unsurprisingly, some of the former nuns “della Colomba”—among whom were daughters, sisters, and aunts of the foremost families of Cremona—took a dim view of these developments. Forming a splinter group retaining the identity of their original community, they began litigation in Cremona and in Rome, and established a new cloister attached to the tiny church of San Marco, located on the opposite side of the city from Santa Monica. Although their legal action was ultimately unsuccessful, a small Cistercian community held fast to their new home up to the 1540s, when the antisocial behaviour of local youths forced the nuns to disperse to the houses of their respective families. Their cloister was quickly repurposed as a charitable hospice for poor women, many elements of its decoration remaining in situ up to the nineteenth century, when several paintings were detached and sold, among them this decorated ceiling (Merula 1627; Aglio 2005).

Pampurino’s Muses were probably commissioned by the sisters as they built and occupied their new convent towards the end of 1498. Most likely the nine decorated the community’s library, as they did in the Florentine Badia Fiesolana in frescoes completed around three decades earlier (Gombrich 1962). Apollo and the Muses, classical figures redolent of literature, learning, and the arts, are certainly an obvious choice for a space associated with reading and writing. They were also used in the decoration of study-rooms in contemporary secular palaces (Mottola-Molfino and Natali 1991)—for example, the Muses begun for Leonello d’Este’s villa of Belfiore and completed under his successor Borso, and those in the so-called *Tempietto delle Muse* in Federico da Montefeltro’s ducal palace in Urbino. Commenting on his choice of decorative scheme, Leonello’s tutor Guarino da Verona noted that the name “Muses” means “seekers” in Greek, “because they seek after all things or

because they are sought after by all men, desire for knowledge being innate in man” (Baxandall 1965, 186 and 202).

If the Muses were easy to justify in broad terms as occupants of a literary space, their meanings in such a context could be multiple and subtle. Guarino’s etymological comment was borrowed from Isidore’s *Etymologies*, an encyclopedic early medieval source that formed part of a whole battery of interpretations of the Muses cited repeatedly in commentaries on the works of Ovid and Virgil, and in mythographic guidebooks such as Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*. Unlike their relatives the seven Liberal Arts, whose conventionalised personifications graced many medieval manuscripts, the iconography of the Muses was to a substantial extent a new task in the visual arts of the fifteenth century (Anderson 1991). Fortunately for Pampurino, the challenge of harnessing the Muses’ rich mythography to a visual presentation had already been met, in a set of Ferrarese engravings from the 1460s known today, misleadingly, as the *Tarocchi di Mantegna* (Lippincott 1987, 1:58-67). Like several other artists of the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, faced with painting Apollo and the Muses, Pampurino adopted the *Tarocchi* as his model (figs. 56.1-2).

The *Tarocchi* Muses and Apollo are indeed best seen as a visual encoding of the nine’s written mythography, cuing exactly the range of readings found in—for example—Boccaccio’s *Genealogy*. The order of the Muses in the set, a feature that varies greatly, derives from an etymological reading configuring them as an allegory of the acquisition of knowledge, found in Fulgentius’ *Mythologies*. Their attributes and activities broadly follow those found in a short poem on the Muses, now usually ascribed to Ausonius, which circulated in the period within Virgil’s oeuvre under the title “De musarum inventis,” with a list appended assigning to the nine specific arts:

Clio, singing of famous deeds, restores times past to life.
Euterpe’s breath fills the sweet-voiced flutes.
Thalia rejoices in the loose speech of comedy.
Melpomene cries aloud with the echoing voice of gloomy tragedy.
Terpsichore with her lyre stirs, swells, and governs the emotions.
Erato bearing the plectrum harmonises foot, song and voice in the dance.
Urania examines the motions of the heavens and stars.
Calliope commits heroic songs to writing.
Polymnia expresses all things with her hands and speaks by gesture.
The power of Apollo’s will enlivens the whole circle of these Muses:
Phoebus sits in their midst and in himself possesses all their gifts. (Ausonius 1921, 281)

Clio invented history; Melpomene tragedy; Thalia comedy; Euterpe the pipe;
Terpsichore the psaltery; Erato geometry; Calliope literature; Urania astrology;
Polyhymnia rhetoric. (Virgil 1469, 382)

Accordingly, Euterpe plays pipes; Terpsichore plays a “lyre” (really a contemporary equivalent—a cetra); Erato is a dancer, based on a dancing maenad commonly found on late-antique Bacchic sarcophagi; Urania is the Liberal Art Astrology; and Calliope has a trumpet, commonly used in ancient and contemporary verse as a symbol for heroic themes in poetry. However, the artist of the *Tarocchi* was also aware that the words “Muses” and “music” shared a common etymology, an oft-repeated insight derived from Isidore’s *Etymologies*. Thus, musical instruments are assigned even when pseudo-Virgil does not specifically mention one: Polyhymnia has a portative organ; Thalia plays a rebec; and Melpomene has a double pipe, probably modelled on the auloi-playing maenad found on several Bacchic sarcophagi.

The mysterious circles accompanying all of the Muses in the *Tarocchi* point to an interpretation found in Macrobius’ widely-read commentary on Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio*, and also in Martianus Capella’s *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, according to which the Muses’ singing gives voice to the heavenly spheres, a Muse assigned to each. This reading, which of course rests on the idea that all the Muses are musicians, was an adaptation of Plato, who had assigned the same role to the Sirens. Thalia, the only seated Muse and the only one in the *Tarocchi* to lack a circle, is surrounded by abundant foliage. Following Martianus, who gave specific designations for all the Muses, she is located on the immobile sphere of the Earth (Copernican heliocentrism is still some decades in the future). Apollo, meanwhile, addresses a starry sphere with a pedagogical pointer: he is, in Boccaccio’s paraphrase of Macrobius, “the moderator and conductor of the celestial melody” (Boccaccio 2011, 638).

The Cremonese Muses follow the mythography implied in the *Tarocchi* in almost every important respect, producing a range of possible readings: as an allegory of knowledge, as patronesses of the arts, as musicians, and as the harmonious choir of the heavens. However, Pampurino replaces the *Tarocchi* Muses’ landscape settings with elements of monumental architecture, an adaptation presumably designed to blend them with the fictive stonework of the vault. Thalia is given a colossal throne very similar to those in which Leonello d’Este’s painted Muses sit, suggesting that Pampurino was aware of more than one Ferrarese model for his subject.

From among all the several contemporary sets of Muses that were modelled on those in the *Tarocchi*, Pampurino’s is the only one to preserve the spheres, suggesting that the Macrobian interpretation of the Muses as purveyors of divine harmony had a particular importance to his patrons, the nuns della Colomba. By the second half of the fifteenth century their role in this respect had come to play a very particular part in poetics (Greenfield 1981), as explained for example in the university professor Cristoforo Landino’s commentaries on Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Dante’s *Commedia*, which quickly won a place among the standard reference works of Italian literary culture. Here the Muses’ identity with the harmonious spheres is combined with their traditional role as conveyers of divine inspiration to poets, turning poetry into an earthly echo of the divine order of the universe. Landino was well aware that this role had long been claimed for music, not poetry; but music, he explains, is of two kinds:

There are some who delight themselves with the harmony of the voice and of musical instruments, and these are vulgar and shallow musicians; there are others who are of more profound judgement, who with measured verses express the intimate sentiments of their mind, and these are those who, spurred on by the divine spirit, can write the most profound and meaningful verses. And this is called “poetry” by Plato, which does not only delight the ears with the sweetness of the voice, as does that vulgar music, but as I say describes high and mysterious and divine insights, and on celestial ambrosia pastures the mind (Landino 2001, 1:260).

In a Christian context, the motive force animating the heavenly spheres, and thus directing them in their harmony, had long been identified with God himself. It was therefore a short step to identify the nine sphere-singing Muses with the nine orders of angels, a Christian correction that had already been applied to Plato’s sphere-singing Sirens. In his *Book on the Nature of Love*, printed in 1525 but in drafting as Pampurino completed his work, Mario Equicola explains that:

Platonists do not hesitate to say that by Apollo is meant God, by the Muses the spirits of the celestial spheres, called by some intelligences: Calliope represents all the voices and that which they believed to be on the Primo Mobile, Urania the starry sky, Polyhymnia to be in Saturn, Terpsichore in Jupiter, Clio Mars, Melpomene the sun, Erato Venus, Euterpe Mercury, Thalia the moon. These “muses,” whose name the enemies of the Christian dare recklessly to affirm, are in fact none other than that which we call the nine orders of angels (Equicola 1525, fol. 60^v).

The angels, of course, made their music in constant celebration and praise of the Almighty God. As the nuns enjoyed the literary treasures and works of philosophy or theology stored in their library, they could feel comforted that even the most salacious verse, read with sensitivity and understanding, tantalised the mind of the reader with an echo of the harmony of the Christian heaven—a perspective strongly promoted by some of the literary personalities of the day, many of whom were also priests.

Equicola worked as secretary to the noblewoman Isabella d’Este, whose own study in Mantua was also adorned with a painting of Apollo and the Muses, completed shortly before Pampurino’s by Andrea Mantegna (*Parnassus*, Louvre, Paris). Isabella’s Muses cavort in a circle-dance beneath a fantastical arch of rock, atop which are the adulterous lovers Mars and Venus. Their salacious story was told in verse by Ovid and others, poets whose divine inspiration guaranteed a hidden imprint of heavenly truth, accessible to the reader capable of penetrating the veil of the poetic fiction. Isabella, an enthusiastic amateur musician who enjoyed singing contemporary love verse to the lute, was routinely compared to the Muses and even named a tenth muse. Although certainly a conventional complement for a woman of literary or artistic inclinations, Isabella’s muse-persona was also a strategy of literary self-fashioning, configuring her love songs as acts of divine revelation, and her broader literary interests as a commitment to sacred wisdom.

Pampurino's Muses offered an opportunity for the nuns similarly to project themselves into the resonant space of the spheres in their vault. At the apex of the ceiling is an oculus opening out onto a blue sky and a balcony where three figures are visible—probably inspired by a similar trompe l'oeil balcony painted by Mantegna for Isabella's husband Francesco Gonzaga. The three figures—an old man, a young woman, and a child—are quite distinctively disposed. The man stares down intently into the room below, whereas the woman's eyes are hooded, almost closed, and she cups a hand to her ear to listen attentively. The oculus with its circular stone framing is very similar in form to contemporary mirrors, usually small, round and encased in a frame of concentric circles (figs. 56.3-4). Looking up at the figures looking down, the viewer is prompted to mirror herself in them, and especially in the woman, attending carefully to the divine harmony resounding across the concave space of the vault (fig. 56.5), in the hope of catching an echo of divine truth and a revelation of celestial bliss to come. In its vertical dimension the room places the viewer in the position occupied by St Cecilia in Raphael's famous altarpiece commissioned by the Bolognese noblewoman Elena Duglioli dall'Olio (Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna), turning away from earthly matters to direct the senses toward the harmony of angels above.

The mirror formed a visual counterpart to the sonic echo of divine harmony that found expression in inspired verse, and appears in that sense at the feet of Pampurino's Apollo (fig. 56.6). Another university professor, Angelo Poliziano, explains in his *Nutricia* that in the inspired mind gleams a reflection attesting “to the mystic Muse of heaven ... For as the image of a star is reflected in a mirror, as limpid water poured into a glass gleams in the sun's rays, so the celestial modulations fashion and enflame the luminous and purified spirits of poets” (Poliziano 2004, 120-23). In her 1468 treatise *Mirror of Illumination*, Sister Illuminata Bembo reported that during the worship of her Bolognese Clarissan community, “many angelic spirits descended from heaven and came together with us to praise the divine mercy” (Bembo 2001, 29). For the sisters della Colomba, such a mirroring of the divine in the earthly was not restricted to their audible celebration of the liturgy, but extended into their study and learning, in a library space prepared expressly to prompt such an interpretation.

Additional references: Christian et al. 2014; Fabianski 1988; Guidobaldi 1992; Haar 1974; Schröter 1977; Shephard 2014; Shephard et al. 2019; Ștefănescu 2020.