

THE YOUNG ASSAGIOLI AND A PORTRAIT OF A PAINTER MONK

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The more frequent visitors to the Institute of Psychosynthesis will recall, perhaps, that they have already seen the drawing presented here. More than one finding it disturbing for environments intended for rest, but also perceived as too private to display it in official rooms, had been hung in a disengaged space, near a window, without much curiosity about who the author was - he signed it with an elegant monogram - some curiosity, (but not enough to provoke a search) for the singular fact that among the rare paintings of the last house of Roberto Assagioli was the portrait of a monk ⁽¹⁾. Not a very suitable place, to be honest, to preserve it well. Works of art on paper, and in particular drawings, love the penumbra: the less light there is, the better and longer they live. But if for the survival of a drawing the ideal condition is darkness, not so for human stories, entrustable to the common memory only on condition that they will first be able to illuminate them so much that they can be re-composed, at least in part.

I am therefore grateful to Elisabetta Matteucci, curator of the monographic exhibition project on the Livorno painter “Oscar Ghiglia Classic & Modern” in progress from 6 July to 4 November at the Matteucci Center in Viareggio ⁽²⁾, for having reawakened my curiosity towards the artistic events folds of the story with an exploratory call on the origins of the work, documented but of unknown location: the drawing was thus recognized and brought back to Oscar Ghiglia (Livorno 1876 - Prato 1945) and the opportunity was taken to try to preserve its fortunately still discreet condition ⁽³⁾ and find it a more appropriate arrangement.

Here is the starting point: the *Catalog of the Exposition of the Society of Fine Arts in Florence in 1906* reports,

as owner of the *Portrait of Willibrordus Verkade*, Roberto Grego Assagioli, eighteen at the time, still fresh from moving to Florence to study medicine and surgery at the Institute of Higher Studies and yet already introduced into the most significant and lively groups in the local cultural context.

This year, 1906, was fundamental. In February, the third and last series of the anti-positivist and pragmatist “Leonardo” magazine began (an adventure that had begun in 1903, which ended abruptly in 1907), sensitive to the requests for renewal and the promoter of mystical-platonic aesthetics and a growing interest in religious life and thought, theosophy and spiritualism.

Assagioli collaborates variously, enthusiastically: as editorial secretary, helping to support it financially with paternal approval, signing reviews and contributions, but above all making him a spokesman for all his numerous contacts, in the frequent study trips in Italy and Europe. It is the year in which his relationship with Giovanni Papini (Florence 1881-1956) and Giuseppe Prezzolini (Perugia 1882 - Lugano 1982) becomes more intimate and confidential, before the subsequent fading and the clear divergence of their roads, on the eve of the first world conflict. Younger by a few years, Assagioli is eager to be liked by the two directors, for whom he nourishes sympathy and admiration; having overcome an initial insecurity he rapidly succeeds, generous and brilliant as he is, perfectly used to the life of the bourgeois and aristocratic salons, affable and courteous, open to every aspect of the thought that involves the culture of the inner life. The correspondence with both, at the time published in its entirety ⁽⁴⁾, amongst the useful information for rewriting the story of cultural relationships of the early Florentine and Italian twentieth century, it also contains some that directly link Assagioli both to the monk of the portrait and the portraitist.

For in-depth and critically updated news on the latter I refer to the catalog of the exhibition of Viareggio and a rich essay by Rossella Campana a few years ago in which is mentioned, among other, Assagioli ⁽⁵⁾, restricting me here to remember the Oscar Ghiglia too had an active part in “Leonardo”.

Hailed by critics as one of the most promising young Italian artists, he was making himself appreciated for his ability to “*reveal even to refined persons the hidden essence of things, especially in portraits*”. So did Papini write about him, who, among the ups and downs of a turbulent but authentic and enduring friendship, considered him a “Christian and psychologist painter” in whom a hard and difficult life had developed a sort of mystical intuition “*of brotherhood with the fragments of the universe*” ⁽⁶⁾.

Nearly everyone, knowing the serious economic conditions in which the large family of the painter then lived, worked hard as they could to help him. In January 1907 Assagioli wrote to Prezzolini, who had just pointed

out to him the critical situation: “A few days ago I met Cecchi⁽⁷⁾ who informed me of the sad conditions of Ghiglia. Reghini⁽⁸⁾ and I did as much and soon as we could, which is not much, but later we will do more. Meanwhile, I have made my studio⁽⁹⁾ available to Ghiglia to show his works to whoever he wants, and I’m almost sure I can make him sell something.”⁽¹⁰⁾

The delicacy and grace of his intervention evidently succeeded, at least in that juncture, in overcoming the resistance of the surly, sensitive and proud nature of the Livornese, and it is not excluded that Assagioli may have been an effective means for Ghiglia’s relations with the Florentine Jewish community in which he found numerous patrons and admirers.

But why, of 13 works exhibited by the painter to the promoter of 1906, Assagioli focused his attention on this portrait, so very intense and magnetic? And who was Willibrordus Verkade, here painted in pencil with a synthetic clarity of decidedly Nordic taste?

Papini has left a vivid recollection of him, in a chapter of *Passato remoto 1885-1914* entitled *The Benedictine Painter*, which recalls the first meeting with him in 1905, while he was immersed with Giovanni Vailati in reading a dialogue of Plato:

“And here, [...] suddenly, a new character opens the door and enters, never before seen. He was a tall, thin young man, with a bony face but illuminated by an unusual light, purer than the sun’s. He was all dressed in white, with the white cassock of the Benedictine monks. [...] He was a Dutchman and painter, he had converted and become a Benedictine and had studied in the monastery of Beuron, where they was trying to resurrect the true sacred painting of the Christian centuries. He was called Don Willibrordo Verkade and was a guest of the Franciscans of Fiesole, where he painted frescoes. But he did not tell us the reason for his sudden appearance and I, in the face of that ascetic and loving figure, did not have the idea to ask it him. [...] The eyes of Don Willibrordo sparkled, his words were sure and sonorous. All wrapped in his white chlamis, he seemed an redeeming archangel, rained from the sky to reform two reprobates who were about to fall into the abyss [...]”

*I saw the new friend several times, and he became friends with my friends. Oscar Ghiglia made him a beautiful green pencil drawing. Everyone loved him because we had never before met a monk of such generous intelligence, where poetry and holiness seemed to burn together with one fire. Don Willibrordo then returned to Germany and wrote a book, *The Torment of God*, which was a great success and where the visit made to me many years before was also told.”⁽¹¹⁾*

The monk in the portrait was therefore primarily a common acquaintance, whose name appears in the letters between Assagioli, Papini and Prezzolini. In August 1905, while Assagioli is on holiday in Switzerland in Engelberg, site of a resort and alpine excursions set up around a Benedictine monastery “worthy of the proud name of ‘monte degli angeli’”⁽¹²⁾ it was possible to him to visit the monastery minutely, on several occasions, welcomed with kindness and warmth by the monks, thanks to a letter of presentation by Don Willibrordo, remaining impressed by the collection of portraits of the abbots: “very important not artistically but psychologically” and full of “extraordinarily characteristic types.”⁽¹³⁾ The portrait, from a future psychiatrist and psychologist, is a genre that seems to appeal to him in a special way, even if it should be noted that only occasionally, at least in these youth letters, Assagioli refers to exhibitions, places and artwork. Even in those rare cases he is always limited to quick observations: summary brushstrokes of revealing impression, however, of how wide and rich his cultural formation and his aesthetic sensibility were. It is not his field of choice and he does not go into it. What interests him and ‘calls’ him is since then, the correspondence between beauty and interiority, between form and essence.

It is understandable, therefore, how he could deeply and consonantly both feel the artistic and human experience of Verkade, so bound and coherent, and the portrait made of him by Ghiglia with “feeling of the sacred and profound life” and with his peculiar ability “to relate with related spirits.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Father Willibrordus was born in Holland as Jan Verkade (1868-1946) from a family of wealthy entrepreneurs of the confectionery industry whose company still exists today. Leaving the twin brother with the management of the family business, he abandons his business studies and his country for the sake of art. In 1891, at only 23 years old, he was in Paris, at that time the undisputed capital of European art, where he met Paul Gauguin and became a member of the symbolist and theosophical group of the very young *Nabis* (Prophets), in particular linked to the theoretical core of the movement, namely Paul Sérusier and Maurice Denis. At the start of Gauguin from Paris, the following year, he moved with some of the group to Brittany. In the meantime his religious vocation has already manifested: he converted

to Catholicism and after a few months, in 1893, he came to Italy. He visits the Franciscan monastery of Fiesole and is deeply struck by both the monastic life and the art of the fourteenth century. His father tells him that he no longer wants to finance his travels and he replies that he has decided to become a sacred painter. He takes his vows in 1894 as a Benedictine monk and enters as novice in the monastery of Beuron, Germany, changing his name to Willibrordus. From that moment on, all his life takes place according to the Beuron painting school, founded in 1868 by Peter (Desiderius) Lenz. It feels as its mission to contribute to a new direction of art in which earthly and heavenly beauty, past and future, combine together, at the service of the Absolute. He travels all over Europe as a painter (in Italy he works in 1904 to decorate the crypt of the Abbey of Montecassino) and as ambassador of the Beuronese style which, at the time, arouses great attention, since it proposes to distil a synthesis between symbolism, art of ancient Egypt and Greece, normative use of the canons and proportions of the human figure and spiritualism.

For the artist monks of Beuron the laws of beauty are divine, mysteriously hidden in nature, and cannot be revealed except to colleagues equally convinced that the harmony of the universe is founded and regulated by numerical relationships.⁽¹⁵⁾

Prezzolini, for his part, visits Beuron in 1906 and 1908, - just as Verkade is planning to make frescoes at the convent of San Francesco in Fiesole, where he had been baptized - he publishes a very lucid essay on Beuronese art, defining it anything but primitive and, indeed, sophisticated and highly elaborated: “an art, I would dare to say, like those that are born at the end of a civilization, not those that are the first expression of a new”.⁽¹⁶⁾

The devastating drama of the war would soon irremediably lacerate that precious cultural fabric, complex and fascinating as delicate, made of dialogues, plots, exchanges and local and international relations: it would have done away with friends, thinning or interrupting relationships, generating profound creative crises.

Already known, having been examined elsewhere, is the progressive and irreversible cooling of the relations between Assagioli and Papini first and then with Prezzolini.⁽¹⁷⁾

Oscar Ghiglia in 1914 will retire with his family to Castiglioncello in voluntary exile, to escape the clamor of one more and more foreign interventionist Florence, and of those years he will leave a testimony in wonderful and moving pages of his correspondence. As for Verkade, in addition to never again having contact with the French colleagues Denis and Sérusier, with whom he had also shared so much, and who had repeatedly visited him at Beuron, he did not touch his brushes from 1915 up to 1924.

Bibliography e notes

- 1) At the current state of the cataloging of the Assagioli Archives, no document referable to the work has emerged.
- 2) E. Matteucci, *Così antico da sembrar novissimo*, in the exhibition catalog (*Oscar Ghiglia Classico & Moderno*, Viareggio-Torino, 2018-2019) pp. 15-33.
- 3) The design, still in its original framing, under glass, has undergone a simple cleaning and spreading intervention. The passepartout, blackened and partly compromised by humidity, has been replaced with an identical non-acid cardboard.
- 4) M. Del Guercio Scotti - A. Berti (edited by), *Roberto Assagioli-Giovanni Papini. Roberto Assagioli-Giuseppe Prezzolini. Correspondence. 1904-1974*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma.
- 5) R. Campana, Ojetti, Ghiglia, Andreotti. *Proposte d'arte e critica a Firenze nel primo Novecento*, in the exhibition catalog (*Da Fattori a Casorati. Capolavori della Collezione Ojetti*, edited by G. De Lorenzi, Viareggio-Tortona, 2010) pp. 47-63.
- 6) G. Papini, *Oscar Ghiglia (Parole e sangue)*, in *Scrittori e artisti*, Milano 1959, pp. 1283-1284.
- 7) Emilio Cecchi (1884-1966).
- 8) Arturo Reghini (1878-1946).
- 9) Almost certainly it must have been his own personal study at his home in Via degli Alfani 46.
- 10) M. Del Guercio Scotti - A. Berti, op.cit., p. 189.
- 11) G. Papini, *Passato remoto 1885-1914*, reprint by A. Casini Paszkowski, Florence 1994, pp. 193-195, reported in E. Matteucci, op. cit., pp. 18-19.
- 12) M. Del Guercio Scotti - A. Berti, op. cit., p. 13.
- 13) M. Del Guercio Scotti - A. Berti, op. cit. p. 152.
- 14) U. Ojetti, Ghiglia, 1920, p. 132 quoted in R. Campana, op. cit., p. 57.
- 15) R. Campana, op. cit., pp. 49-51; F. Mazzaferro, *Jan Verkade, Cennino Cennini e la ricerca dell'arte spirituale durante la Prima Guerra Mondiale*, in letteraturaartistica.blogspot.com/2014/04.
- 16) G. Prezzolini, *La teoria e l'arte di Beuron*, in “Vita d'Arte” 1908, reported in F. Mazzaferro, op.cit.
- 17) A. Berti, Roberto Assagioli. *Profilo biografico degli anni di formazione*, Florence 1987 and M. Del Guercio Scotti - A. Berti, op. cit.