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Girolamo Muziano and Cesare Nebbia at Orvieto*

Rosamond E. Mack

The late sixteenth-century redecoration of the Cathedral of Orvieto witnessed both the beginning and the end of the teacher-pupil relationship between Girolamo Muziano and Cesare Nebbia. Working separately and at different times, they executed most of the altarpieces and frescoes for ten new stuccoed chapels built along the nave of the Cathedral. Unfortunately, only their altarpieces, now in the Cathedral Museum, survived a nineteenth-century restoration of the nave.¹ Muziano was a young artist when he began the project's paintings in 1555. He executed two altarpieces, the *Raising of Lazarus* and the *Way to Calvary*, and the fresco and stucco decorations in the fourth chapel on the left before leaving Orvieto in 1558.² Cesare Nebbia, who was born in Orvieto in 1536, presumably entered Muziano's shop during this period and accompanied him to Rome, where the two spent the early 1560's.³ Nebbia left Muziano's shop in mid-1566 to begin an independent career in Orvieto with commissions for the fresco decorations in the first chapel on the left in 1566, and for its altarpiece of the *Marriage at Cana* in 1569.⁴ During the 1570's Nebbia executed all of the fresco decorations in the five right chapels⁵

and some of their altarpieces. Others were painted by Muziano in Rome at the peak of his career.

Conflicting evidence for attributing two of the altarpieces from the right chapels, the *Crowning with Thorns* (Fig. 1) and the *Capture of Christ* (Fig. 2), has long been an obstacle in studying the mature works of Muziano and the early works of Nebbia. The traditional attributions derive from an eighteenth-century description of the Cathedral, in which both altarpieces are ascribed to Muziano.⁶ However, two published documents of commission dated February 16, 1575 in the Cathedral Archives specify that Muziano was to paint an *Ecce Homo* and Nebbia a *Capture of Christ*.⁷ Consequently, the *Capture of Christ* has frequently been attributed to Nebbia whereas the traditional attribution of the *Crowning with Thorns* to Muziano has never been questioned.⁸ Yet the styles of the two pictures argue for the reverse attributions. The *Capture of Christ*'s restrained forms, soft pictorial treatment, and melancholy mood resemble Muziano's *Christ Giving the Keys to St. Peter* in Santa Maria degli Angeli, Rome, ca. 1584;⁹ its composition and thematic interpretation are consistent with Muziano's other versions

*Much in this article appears in my dissertation on Girolamo Muziano for Harvard University, toward which Professor S. J. Freedberg provided invaluable guidance.

¹ Cf. L. Fumi, *Il Duomo di Orvieto e I Suoi Restauri*, Rome, 1891, which includes an 18th-century description of the decorations and a photograph of one of the chapels. The new information which I am presenting comes from the Orvieto Cathedral Archives, hereafter abbreviated O.C.A.

² The *Raising of Lazarus* was commissioned on November 17, 1555 and finished by June 11, 1556 (U. Procacci, "Una 'Vita' inedita del Muziano," *Arte Veneta*, VIII, 1954, 256, n. 26). Unpublished documents of payment dated October 2, 18 and December 18, 1556 indicate that Muziano had begun other paintings (O.C.A., *Camerlenghi*, 1556, XCI, fols. 135v, 138r, 14r). These must have been the altarpiece of the *Way to Calvary*, finished by April 30, 1557, and the decorations in the chapel where the *Lazarus* was eventually installed (cf. Procacci, "Vita," 25-57, Nos. 27-28). A document dated January 24, 1557 outlines conditions for these and projected chapel decorations (O.C.A., *Riformanze*, 1554-60, XIV, fol. 145r) rather than recording the commission for the *Way to Calvary* as stated by G. della Valle, *Storia del Duomo di Orvieto*, Rome, 1791, 327. Muziano left Orvieto after completing the one chapel, for which his last payment is dated August 22, 1558 (O.C.A., *Camerlenghi*, 1558, XCIII, fol. 119v).

³ Nebbia was only four years younger than Muziano, who was born in Brescia in 1532 (cf. Procacci, "Vita," 249). Documents establish that Nebbia was with Muziano in Rome in 1562 (Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 412, Doc. CLXXXIII) and in early 1566 (V. Pacifici, *Ippolito II d'Este Cardinale di Ferrara*, Tivoli, 1922, 390).

⁴ Nebbia must have been the associate who declined to accompany Muziano in the semi-retirement which Muziano sought after leaving the Este's patronage in the spring of 1566 (cf. Procacci, "Vita," 251, 259, n. 41). On June 24, 1566 Nebbia received the commission for frescoes in one of the Orvieto Cathedral chapels (O.C.A., *Riformanze*, 1560-71, XV, fol. 222v - erroneously dated by Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 415, Doc.

cxiv). This chapel can be identified as the first on the left from Nebbia's description of it, then completed, in a letter dated January 29, 1567 (cf. *ibid.*, 415, Doc. cxv). Nebbia received the commission for the *Marriage at Cana* on February 13, 1569 (O.C.A., *Riformanze*, 1560-71, XV, fol. 339v). The traditional attribution of this altarpiece to Taddeo Zuccaro has been corrected by J. A. Gere, *Taddeo Zuccaro, His Development Studied in His Drawings*, Chicago, 1966, 90.

⁵ Nebbia executed the frescoes in the fourth chapel on the right in 1572 (Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 381), the frescoes and the *Crucifixion* altarpiece in the fifth chapel in 1573-74 (*ibid.*, 381; cf. note 11), the frescoes in the third chapel in 1575 (Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 381; O.C.A., *Memoriali*, IV, fol. 165a and b), the frescoes in the second chapel in 1576 (*ibid.*, fol. 200a and b), and the frescoes in the first chapel in 1576-77 (Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 381; O.C.A., *Memoriali*, IV, fol. 164a and b).

⁶ Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 421-22. Both altarpieces have been attributed to Muziano by U. da Como, *Girolamo Muziano, 1528-1592, Note e Documenti*, Bergamo, 1930, 56, 206; P. Della Pergola, "Girolamo Muziano," *Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler*, ed. Thieme-Becker, Leipzig, xxv, 1931, 304; A. Venturi, *Storia dell'Arte Italiana*, Milan, ix, 7, 1934, 429, 440, 460; A. Molfino, *L'Oratorio del Gonfalone*, Banco di Santo Spirito, 1964, 24-25.

⁷ Della Valle, *Storia del Duomo*, 334-35, 342-43; Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 418, Doc. ccvii; L. Luzi, *Il Duomo di Orvieto*, Florence, 1866, 510-12, Docs. CLXIII-IV. Both Della Valle (p. 158) and Fumi (p. 381) attributed the *Capture of Christ* to Muziano in their texts while transcribing the document of commission to Nebbia in their appendixes.

⁸ Procacci, "Vita," 255, n. 22, 261, n. 61; P. Perali, *Orvieto*, Orvieto, 1919, 196; U. Gnoli, *Pittori e Miniatori nell'Umbria*, Spoleto, 1923, 202-04.

⁹ See Venturi, *Arte Italiana*, ix, 7, 457, fig. 256. An inscription in the chapel records its establishment, with a dedication to St. Peter, on October 6 of Pope Gregory XIII's thirteenth year, which would have been 1584. Muziano's altarpiece must have been commissioned about this time.



1 Nebbia, *Crowning with Thorns*. Orvieto, Cathedral Museum



2 Muziano, *Capture of Christ*. Orvieto, Cathedral Museum

of the subject.¹⁰ The more complex forms, decorative design, and sharper lighting in the *Crowning with Thorns* resemble those in Nebbia's altarpiece of the *Crucifixion* at Orvieto, documented 1573–74 (Fig. 3);¹¹ the strong influence of Taddeo and Federico Zuccaro's style equals that in Nebbia's almost identical composition of the *Crowning with Thorns* in the Oratory of the Gonfalone, Rome, 1573–75.¹²

Unpublished documents in the Orvieto Cathedral Archives confirm the stylistic evidence for attributing the *Crowning with Thorns* to Nebbia and the *Capture of Christ* to Muziano. The published documents for the commission

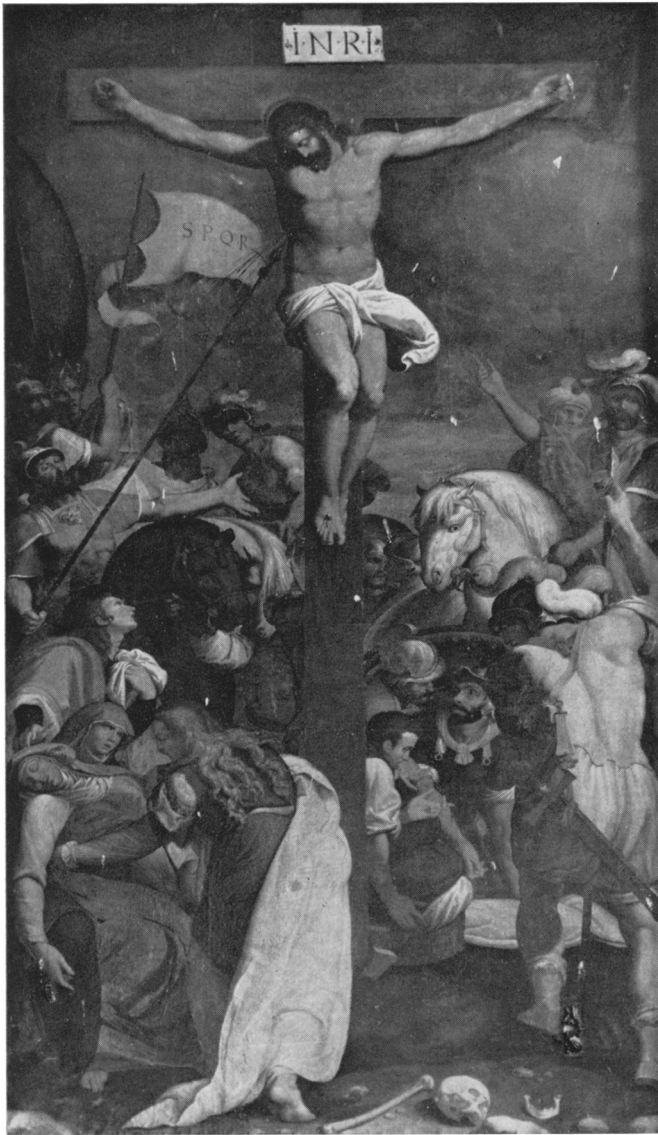
derive from the *Riformanze* – volumes which contain the minutes of the Cathedral's planning committee meetings. The actual execution of the committee's directives is recorded in other volumes: the *Memoriali* which contain summaries of commissions and lists of payments promised balanced against payments rendered, and the *Camerlenghi* which are the account books. The two summaries of the February 16 commissions in the *Memoriali* originally agreed with those contained in the *Riformanze*, but at some point the same recording hand altered the entries: the titles of the altarpieces were crossed out and corrected to stipulate a *Capture of Christ* by Muziano and an *Ecce Homo* by

¹⁰ See Muziano's drawing in the Louvre for Cort's engraving of the *Capture of Christ* dated 1568 (Louvre Inv. No. 5099; cf. J. C. J. Bierens de Haan, *L'Oeuvre Gravé de Cornelis Cort, Graveur Hollandais, 1533–1578*, Le Haye, 1948, fig. 23), a drawing in the collection of Janos Scholz, New York (cf. J. Bean and F. Stampfle, *Drawings from New York Collections I, The Italian Renaissance*, Greenwich, 1965, No. 123,) a drawing in the Uffizi (Inv. No. 7664s), and an unpublished copy in the Vatican Pinacoteca deposit (Inv. No. 632) of a painting by Muziano once in the Sacristy of Saint Peter's (cf. E. Pistoletti, *Il Vaticano Descritto ed Illustrato*, Rome, 1829, II, fig. XLIV).

¹¹ Nebbia received the commission for the *Crucifixion* altarpiece and the decorations in its chapel on May 1, 1573 (Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 417,

Doc. ccv). He received payments for the altarpiece and the decorations throughout 1574 (O.C.A., *Camerlenghi*, 1574, CLX, fols. 104b, 112b, 116b, 128b) and two final payments for the altarpiece – described as “fatto l'anno passato” – in late 1575 (*ibid.*, 1575, CX, fols. 132b, 133b).

¹² The Zuccaro influence in Nebbia's Gonfalone frescoes has been noted by V. Moccagatta, “Ancora su Cesare Nebbia,” *Arte in Europa, Scritti di Storia dell'Arte in onore di Edoardo Arslan*, 1966, I, 612, and by S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy, 1500 to 1600 (The Pelican History of Art)*, Baltimore, 1970, 447. Nebbia's first altarpiece for the Cathedral of Orvieto, the *Marriage at Cana*, has traditionally been attributed to Taddeo Zuccaro (cf. Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 424).



3 Nebbia, *Crucifixion*. Orvieto, Cathedral Museum

¹³ "Addi 16 febraro . . . si contratto la tavola di presa Cristo Sg.r a Ms.r. Jeronimo mozzano pittore . . . p. prezzo d. scudi ducento vinti . . . ut dtto ms.r Jeronimo sia obbligato darej finita p. tutto il presenti anno la tavla d. Ecce Homo . . ." (O.C.A., *Memoriali*, IV, fol. 163a). "Addi 16 di fibraro 1575 si contratto a Msr. Cesare Nebbula pittore la tavola di ecce Homo da mettersi nell'ultima capella appresso la porta a man dritta alle ritrata [the first chapel on the right] et anco tutto il fresco che andra in detta capella . . . p. . . scudi ducento trenta . . ." (*ibid.*, fol. 164a).

¹⁴ On October 8, 1575 Nebbia was paid "a buon conto della tabla fa al presente . . . qual vien nominata Ecce Homo . . ." (O.C.A., *Camerlenghi*, 1575, CX, fol. 123b). Payments on December 31, 1575 and September 7, 1576 specify an *Ecce Homo* and the altarpiece for the third chapel on the right, where the *Crowning with Thorns* was eventually installed (*ibid.*, 1575, CX, fol. 139b; 1576, CXI, fol. 124a). Payments on February 26, March 10 and October 1, 1577 name a "Tavola della Incoronazione" (*ibid.*, 1577, CXII, fols. 117v, 120r, 136v).

¹⁵ Letters of 1578 and 1582 blame Muziano's delay on his many commissions from Pope Gregory XIII (Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 418–9, Doc. ccxi). Muziano's final payment on July 17, 1584 also included an altarpiece of the *Flagellation*: ". . . d. Hier.mu Mozzanij saluit et receipt pro omni et intregali residu mercedis duas tabulas . . . sine istorias passionis D. N. Jesu Xpi in Capture, ut Flagellationis ad Columna . . ." (O.C.A., *Riformanze*, 1560–78, XVI, fol. 303b).

¹⁶ ". . . Heronimus Mutianus bressanus pictor . . . [enters a contract to] pingere . . . Una Tabula bene ornata cul misterijs s.me Passianij D.N.J.

Nebbia.¹³ Payments to Nebbia recorded in the *Camerlenghi* between October 8, 1575 and October 1, 1577 designate this picture as an *Ecce Homo* or a *Crowning with Thorns*.¹⁴ It was nearly a decade before Muziano finished his altarpiece, and his final payment dated July 17, 1584 names a *Capture of Christ*.¹⁵ Either the Cathedral committee reversed the commissions between their issue in February and Nebbia's first payment in October of 1575, or there was an error in the first recording of the commissions.

About this time the committee revised an earlier commission to Muziano. On September 26, 1574 Muziano had received a commission for an altarpiece of the *Resurrection* to be finished within two years for 220 scudi, of which only twenty scudi would be paid in advance; he had also agreed to accept the same terms for subsequent altarpieces.¹⁶ A month later Muziano had received his advance, and at the end of the year the committee had ratified the commission and resolved to consider their option on another altarpiece during the next year.¹⁷ When the second commission of February 16, 1575 was recorded in the *Memoriali*, a note on the account for the first altarpiece described it as the *Flagellation of Christ at the Column* rather than a *Resurrection*.¹⁸ The best explanation for this change is that in early 1575 the Cathedral committee decided to complete the decoration of the right chapels to form a Passion series: a *Capture of Christ*, a *Flagellation*, and a *Crowning with Thorns* for the uncompleted first three chapels joined Muziano's earlier *Way to Calvary* – transferred from the left side of the nave – and Nebbia's *Crucifixion* in the completed fourth and fifth chapels.¹⁹ Muziano delivered the *Flagellation* (Fig. 4) together with the *Capture of Christ* in mid-1584.²⁰ His ideas for the short-lived *Resurrection* project survive in four compositional drawings now in the Uffizi.²¹

The stylistic differences between Muziano's and Nebbia's altarpieces signal the latter's artistic independence. Although the drawing and some motifs in Nebbia's *Crucifixion*

Xpi. sine illius resurrectionis . . . inte.no duous Annoris . . . [for] scuta ducento eiusdes mones completo du opere . . . [with an advance payment of] scuta viginti soluit et ad se traxit . . . [and if the Cathedral committee decides that] D. Hier.m fies alia tabulam alicui ex alijs Cappellis eiusdem ecclis. qd. ipe D. Hier.m teneatur et obligans sit, pro ut ut promisit allam facere p. eodem et precio et cum eisdem pactis et Inventionibus scp.tis . . ." (*ibid.*, 1572–85, XVI, fol. 71r).

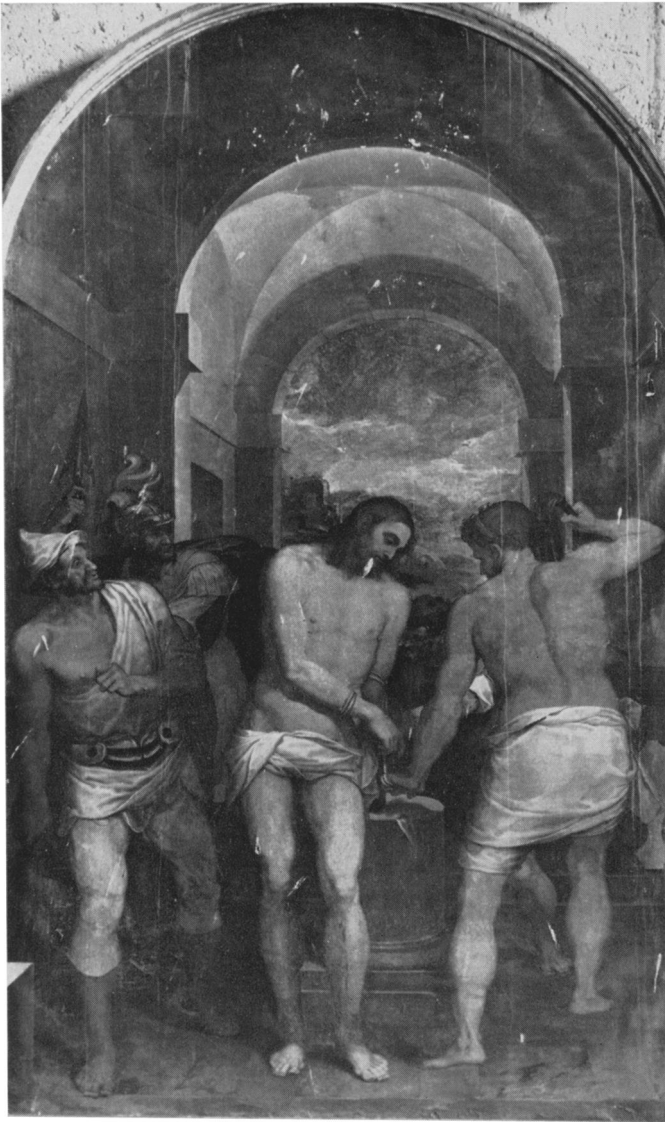
¹⁷ On October 27, 1574 Muziano was paid twenty scudi "a buon conto della pictura di una tavla che se obligato a fare alla R. fabrica" (O.C.A., *Camerlenghi*, 1574, CIX, fol. 117b). On December 29, 1574 the Cathedral committee decided that ". . . p. auta di questo pnte Numero si intenda Ratificato l'Instr.to fatto con m. Girolamo Mozzani pittore sopra la pictura della tavola, Ut che il successore s.r Camerlingo che sara con li sig.ni soprastanti, se ci sara modo, possaro locare la secunda Cappella a M. Girolamo predetto co li conventioni modi pacti facti il pnto Sig.r Camerlingo" (O.C.A., *Riformanze*, 1572–85, XVI, fol. 82r).

¹⁸ "e p. il prizzo d. la tavola d. la flagellazione di Nro Signore alla colona . . . [scudi] 220." (O.C.A., *Memoriali*, IV, fol. 163a).

¹⁹ Cf. notes 5, 11. In 1560 Muziano's altarpiece of the *Way to Calvary* had been installed in one of the left chapels (Fumi, *Duomo di Orvieto*, 412, Doc. CLXXIX).

²⁰ Cf. note 15.

²¹ The *Resurrection* drawings in the Uffizi are all executed in red chalk on white paper: Inv. Nos. 7621s (207 × 137mm), 7622s (205 × 132mm), 7623s (207 × 139mm), and 7649s (207 × 140mm). There is no record of another picture of this subject by Muziano.



4 Muziano, *Flagellation*. Orvieto, Cathedral Museum

and *Crowning with Thorns* reflect his training with Muziano,²² the compositions and surfaces indicate different sensibilities. The dense, complex patterns of shapes and movements give Nebbia's compositions a primarily decorative value. Sharp contrasts of highlight and shadow, strident *cangianti* coloring, and crisp descriptive detail ornament Nebbia's surfaces. The narrative content in these pictures derives principally from an emphatic realism in the figures and incidents. Whereas Nebbia's altarpieces richly illustrate their various actions and emotions, Muziano's convey their religious meaning and a melancholy mood. His austere forms and restrained movements suggest an immensely grave content, and his severe compositions accent those forms and movements that communicate the events' significance. For example, Muziano's *Flagellation* departs from the traditional Renaissance emphasis on the subject's violence in order to convey its lesson of solemn martyrdom.²³ A composition that devitalizes action and mutes emotion presents a heroically framed Christ whose self-contained form remains both physically and aesthetically aloof from the sharp, heavy patterns of his torturers. A golden gray tonality, soft pastel colors, glowing surfaces, and gently vibrant atmospheric effects imbue this stark scheme with a sentimental appeal which invites the spectator to contemplate its exalted content and absorb its brooding mood. Some of Nebbia's later works, such as the small paintings in the Chapel of the Nativity, Madonna dei Monti, Rome, show that he grew to appreciate the suggestive values of Muziano's compositional and pictorial style. But Nebbia's earliest surviving independent works demonstrate an initial reaction against his master's severity, and his own inclination toward the more decorative and descriptive style of the mainstream of late sixteenth-century Roman Mannerism.

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²² For example, the main group in Nebbia's *Crowning with Thorns* derives from Muziano's design of the same subject engraved by Cort in 1567 (cf. Bierens de Haan, *Cornelis Cort*, 93-94, No. 81).

²³ Muziano's earlier compositions of the subject, a drawing in the Uffizi (Inv. No. 7665s, 204 × 138mm, red chalk on white paper) and a copy in the Vatican Pinacoteca deposit (Inv. No. 536) of a painting once in the Sacristy of Saint Peter's (cf. Pistolesi, *Il Vaticano*, II, fig. XLIV) illustrate a gradual departure from his models, the *Flagellations* by Sebastiano del Piombo in San Pietro in Montorio, Rome, and by Taddeo Zuccaro in Santa Maria della Consolazione, Rome, toward the Orvieto altarpiece.