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Italian Maiolica: New Light on Nicola Pellipario

By *Bernard Rackham, C. G. Guildford*

(Fig. 28—32)

The first decades of the sixteenth century were one of those periods in the history of pottery — like the great age of Greek vases — when ceramic painting rose from an ancillary position almost to that of a fine art; some of the dishes and bowls of maiolica produced at that time in Italy were made hardly at all to serve a utilitarian end but primarily as a medium for displaying the pictorial powers of a ceramic painter. Success was dependent, it should be borne in mind, not merely on mastery in handling the brush and sound judgment in colour composition but not less on understanding of ceramic technique: the artist must know how glaze and pigments would behave under the final ordeal of the kiln. Some half-dozen maiolica-painters (not all of them known to us by name) stand out as supreme exponents of the art; among these one, Nicola Pellipario, was equalled perhaps but surely not surpassed.

This artist first became known to modern students of art from his signature, Nicola da Urbino, recorded in various forms on four pieces in museums and private collections; of these signed works two are dated, 1521 and 1528 respectively. Since their first publication nearly a century ago no fresh accessions have been made to the number of signed pieces, but many more than a hundred examples are known which are now generally accepted as from Nicola's hand. From documentary records it has been established that Nicola belonged to the Pellipario family, of Castel Durante, and it is reasonably assumed that he was born there. From one of the signed pieces named above we learn that in 1528 he was working in the botega of his son Guido, then at Urbino; Guido, who habitually called himself Durantino, is recorded in a document of 1520 as coming from Castel Durante.

Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks, of the British Museum, was the first to recognize, by comparison with the signed works of Nicola, that the famous service made for Isabella d'Este and decorated with her shield and imprese, for which a date about 1519 is generally accepted, was also from Nicola's hand. Later, it was observed by C. D. Fortnum that the set of dishes conveniently known as the Correr Service, from the fact that most of them are preserved in the Museo Civico founded by Theodore Correr at Venice,

were by the same painter as the Este service and, on stylistic grounds somewhat earlier in date; they had previously been assigned either to Faenza or to Cafaggiolo.¹ Finally, it fell to Otto von Falke, in 1917, to make clear that not only pieces with pictorial subjects but also a considerable number of dishes with portrait heads and of those with designs of a purely decorative character could be recognized as showing Nicola's authentic brushwork.

The very individual characteristics which become apparent from a careful scrutiny of Nicola Pellipario's signed works and of the famous services mentioned above have been set forth by none better than by Gaetano Ballardini in an article in Faenza² on a dish discovered by him in the Museo Artistico Industriale, Rome; suffice it to say here that the same personality can be felt directing the brush in the early services as in the signed works, in spite of changing influences to which it was subjected. The early works have invariably a lyrical quality even where, as is most often the case, the suggestion for the subject and, in varying degrees, for the arrangement and placing of the figures was taken from woodcut book illustrations; the treatment is always instinct with a lively and poetical imagination, and this is especially so where Nicola was his own composer, as in a plate with an idyllic hunting subject at Edinburgh³, from a service with an unidentified shield charged with a ladder and flag. Not the least remarkable proof of his power of composition is his faultless understanding of colour design and of the control of ceramic pigments, aspects of his work to which no colour reproduction is adequate to do justice.

In his later work Nicola seems to have yielded readily to the convenience of the early copper engravings now available as a framework for his illustrative compositions; but even here, as in his borrowings from simple woodcuts, his subjects are so transformed by his brush and by the calculated action of the furnace on his pigments that they become works of art *suo jure*; it may be said that they are never slavish copies of Raphael or other masters, but show his inventiveness in skilful adaptation to the circular area of his dishes.

The discovery of a new work of Pellipario when at the

height of his powers (Fig. 28) deserves a wider notice than the piece in question has yet received.⁴ It is a large dish (diam. 42,0 cm.) with the subject of the Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, now in the possession of Mr. John Scott-Taggart, of Chichester; it is reproduced here by his kind permission. The dish was acquired by its last previous owner many years ago from the Mame Collection, Tours.

The dish has no inscription on the back, and that is the case with all accepted works of Pellipario prior to 1528. The accompanying illustration makes a detailed description of the composition unnecessary. All familiar with the works of Raphael and his assistants in the Vatican will at once recognize that it is, with a few modifications, derived from the fresco, not attributed to the hand of Raphael himself, in the fourth bay of the Loggie, painted not later than 1519 (Fig. 29).

Comparison with the fresco reveals certain divergences: Melchizedek plunges his left hand into the contents of a basket, where in the fresco it appears to be outside the basket in a gesture of offering; the outstretched left hand of a figure behind Melchizedek has its little finger flexed, not extended. In the group on the right we find the stooping youth clothed and clasping an amphora by the neck instead of naked, with his hands on the handles of the vessel. The figure in the right foreground has no shield; one of the three heads behind (Fig. 31) is bearded instead of youthful. The wine-jar on the left has a handle ending in a scroll instead of a long spout; most significant of all, the contents of the baskets, of which there are three, are depicted as flat, in the form of the Sacramental Host. Turning to the background, we find trees inserted as coulisses in accordance with Nicola's frequent practice, and the distant landscape entirely different in character, with his favourite rows of rounded trees and buildings; though these are features undoubtedly suggested by German engravings, especially those of Dürer, we notice a fort with machicolated towers of the kind with which Nicola must have been familiar in many a rocca on his native hills. Parenthetically it may be observed that the English connoisseur, Henry Wallis⁵, plausibly but without any kind of proof, conjectured a familiarity with Venice and the wall-paintings of Giorgione which were then to be seen outside many Venetian palaces.

An important question here arises: how did Nicola become acquainted with the source of his composition? We know that in many of his pictorial works he made use of book illustrations or engravings as an aid in composing his picture — for instance, his best-known signed work, the dish in the Bargello, Florence, with the Martyrdom of St Cecilia (so entitled in the legend on the back of the dish) (Fig. 30) is a fairly close copy of Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving, after Raphael, of the Martyrdom of St Felicitas.

In the present case, the only known early engraving of the subject appears to be one by Giovanni Antonio da Brescia⁶, which, it will be noted, comprises the descriptive legend «*Tesoro presentato al Re salomon dali machabei Equeste depito i camera del s. papa*». This engraving served as the basis for two maiolica plates, one in the Dijon Museum, the other in the Louvre.⁷ The Dijon plate, which is inscribed In Castel Durante and dated 1524, can almost certainly be attributed to the hand of the painter known as «*Pseudopellipario*»; the Louvre plate, assignable to a Faenza workshop, follows the Brescia print more nearly except in the omission of some of the subsidiary figures; it includes, but in a cartouche at the base, the misleading title, so far as it describes the subject.⁸

Examination of a few details shows clearly that Pellipario did not use this print in painting his dish, and was indeed probably unaware of its existence. We find, for instance, that he has made it clearer even than did the painter of the fresco that the man on the extreme right has raised both hands, with palms pressed together, not a single hand as the engraver seems to have intended; in the print the basket in the middle appears without any wickerwork except round its rim; its contents are coins (as implied by *tesoro* in the title), whereas Pellipario seems to have been conscious of the symbolical intention of the subject as prefiguring the Mass by depicting the loaves as sacred wafers.⁹ On the other hand, unlike the engraver, Pellipario has, as has already been painted out, diverged from the fresco in the position of the stooping young man's hands on the neck, not the handle of a vase. Lastly, it will be noticed that Pellipario renders the subject in the same direction as the fresco: in the engraving it is reversed.

In dating the dish we are dependent on comparison with other pieces of which the date can be more or less accurately established. It has the band of triple reeding round the extreme edge of the rim on its under side which was the normal practice for dishes and plates at Urbino. In this respect it is in accord with the St Cecilia dish (dated 1528), to which also it approximates closely in brushwork and tonality and in the manner of drawing heads and limbs; it shows none of the occasional lapses in draughtsmanship which spoil some of Nicola's late works (unsigned, it is true) such as the plates of the Seven Planets series (after engravings dated 1533) and the Rape of Helen dish (after the Enea Vico print of 1542).¹⁰ It may therefore be dated with some confidence about 1530, perhaps not later than 1528.

It may be well to take this opportunity of stressing the fact that, apart from the four signed pieces, attribution to Nicola Pellipario is a matter of opinion only, based on study of the style of painting. In a great many cases, of which Mr. Scott-Taggart's dish is one, the attribution may be accepted as being beyond doubt, but this cannot be said

of all claims that have been published. In particular, it is necessary to bear in mind that many pieces which show strong traces of Nicola's style may rather be attributed to his son, Guido Durantino, who may be assumed to have followed closely in his father's footsteps. But even here caution is necessary; the pieces in the well-known service, now scattered in many museums and collections, bearing the arms of Anne de Montmorency, Constable of France, and dated 1535, are inscribed «In bottega de M. Guido Durantino in Urbino». This is no certain proof that they were actually painted by Guido himself, although it is likely that this is the case. It can be said that they are by the same hand that painted many other pieces characterized by a more or less close similarity to the manner of Nicola Pellipario but showing certain weaknesses of drawing, for instance, stunted and ill-articulated figures and imperfections in the structure of buildings. The difficulty of clear discrimination is illustrated by the fact that a dish in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, with Gubbio lustre enrichment and the date 1526, was attributed by Fortnum¹¹ to Nicola, an attribution not acknowledged by Ballardini¹²; it is indeed difficult to accept the shortcomings observable in this piece as due to the same hand that painted the St Cecilia two years later. On the other hand, a dish at Cambridge in the Fitzwilliam Museum, bearing the lustred date 1524 is given by Ballardini to Nicola¹³, whereas the author, who discussed the whole matter in an article in the Burlington Magazine¹⁴, has been inclined to ascribe it to the painter of the Montmorency service. These considerations do not justify any hesitation in claiming Nicola as the author of the superb dish described above.

¹ Otto von Falke suggested that the Correr Service should be known as the «Ridolfi Service», for the reason that on a plate, now at Oxford, belonging to the service, the same subject (The Calumny of Apelles) is found as on a dish at Amsterdam on the rim of which are seen the arms of the Ridolfi family; the author has expressed, in a note to the English translation of E. Hanover's *Keramisk Haandbog* (Pottery and Porcelain, London, 1925, vol. I, p. 552, note 187) some hesitation in accepting this suggestion, owing to the improbability of a subject being repeated (though with modifications) on pieces in one and the same service.

² Vol. 18, 1930, p. 61.

³ B. Rackham, *Italian Maiolica*, London, 1952, fig. 70 A.

⁴ It was published by an anonymous writer in *Connaissance des Arts* (fig. 1, p. 32, July, 1952), as showing «le style et l'influence de Nicolo Pellipario», without recognition of the subject depicted or of the source of the composition.

⁵ «XVII Plates by Nicola Fontana da Urbino at the Correr Museum Venice». London, 1905, p. 24.

⁶ A. M. Hind, *Early Italian Engravings*, vol. VI, London, 1948, pl. 541. Mr. A. E. Popham has informed the author that he has been unable to find any other engraving from the fresco of so early a date, and he considers it «very unlikely that, if any engraving existed, all impressions should have disappeared».

⁷ Both are reproduced in *Kunstmuseets Aarskraft*, Copenhagen, 1950, Guy de Tervarent, «Enquête sur le sujet des Majoliques», figs. 33, 35; the Dijon plate is reproduced (front and back) in J. Chompret, *Répertoire de la Majolique Italienne*, Paris, 1949, vol. II, figs. 125, 126.

⁸ A. M. Hind (op. cit., vol. V, no. 21) speaks of «a supposed anachronism and connection with the Maccabees» suggesting «an almost incomprehensible medley of circumstances».

⁹ G. de Tervarent (loc. cit.), though at the time apparently unaware of the engraving, gives interesting illustrations of this aspect of the subject in connection with the two plates reproduced by him.

¹⁰ B. Rackham, *Catalogue of Italian Maiolica in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 1940, nos. 573, 575.

¹¹ A descriptive Catalogue of the Maiolica . . . in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1897, no. C. 431, p. 69.

¹² Corpus della Maiolica Italiana, Rome, 1933, vol. I, no. 191.

¹³ Op. cit., no. 138.

¹⁴ Vol. LXXVII, 1940, p. 182, «The maiolica-painter Guido Durantino».

The Jagd-Service Du Paquier

By J. F. Hayward, London

In his recent contribution to the *Mitteilungsblatt* entitled «Early Du Paquier Porcelain» (Nr. 43) Mr. Stanley Ungar of New York discusses at length the question of the correct dating and the authorship of the Du Paquier Jagd-Service, most of which is in the Oest. Museum, Vienna, though some pieces are in private possession. As some of his conclusions differ from those arrived at in my book on Du Paquier porcelain, I should be grateful if you could find space to publish the following reply.

Briefly Mr. Ungar's contentions are as follows:

A. that the decorator Jakob Helchis was influenced by Preussler rather than by Bottengruber and that he was engaged by Du Paquier in the early days of the factory, about or soon after 1720.

B. that the Jagd-Service was decorated by Helchis and that certain scratch-marks on the base of a Jagd-Service tureen in his collection constitute a dated signature by Jakob Helchis.

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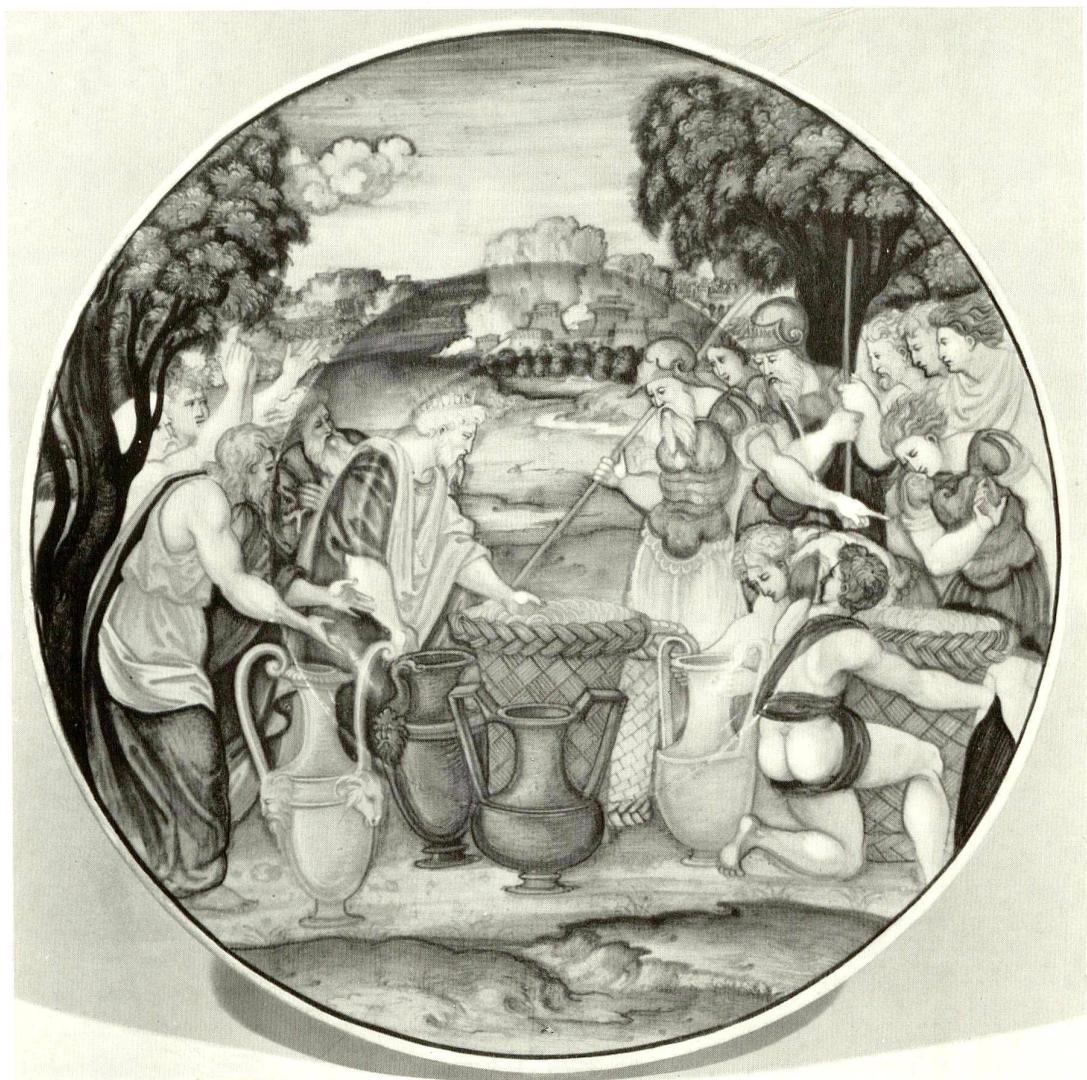


Fig. 28 Dish, Abraham and Melchizedek. Attributed to Nicola Pellipario, Urbino. Diam. 42,0 cm.
In the possession of Mr. John Scott-Taggart, Chichester.

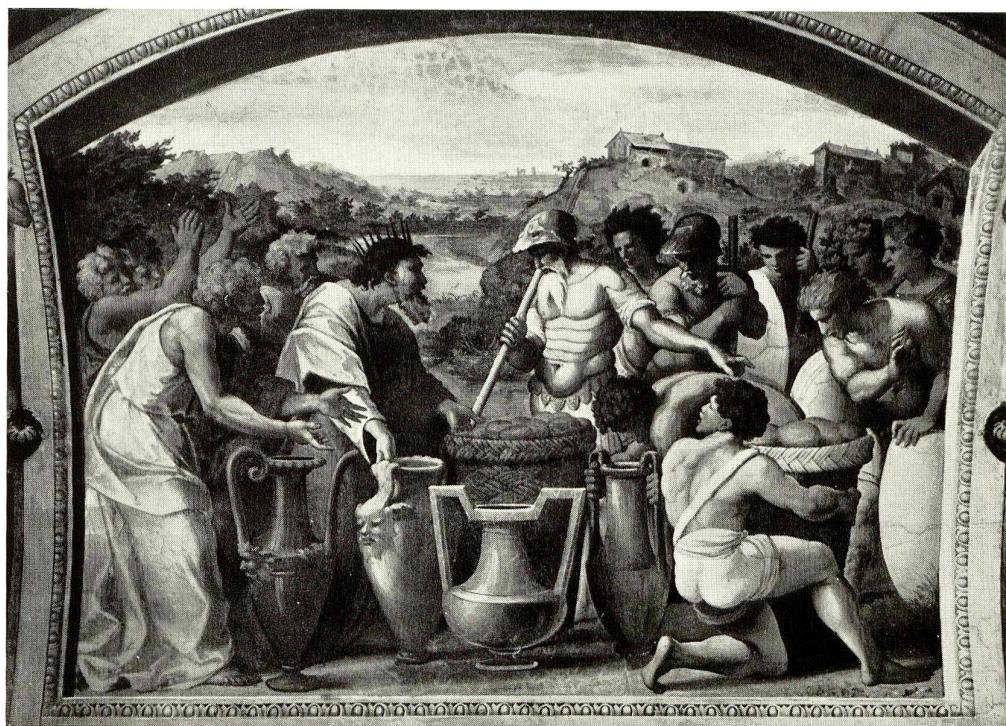


Fig. 29 Fresco, *Abraham and Melchizedek*. School of Raphael. Loggia of the Vatican, Rome.

Photo: Anderson, Rome

Dieses Mitteilungsblatt Nr. 45 schenken Ihnen unsere Überseemitglieder in den Vereinigten Staaten. Vorstand und Redaktion verdanken diese noble Geste recht herzlich. Ganz besonderen Dank verdient Herr Ralph Wark in Hendersonville, der durch seine rege Initiative den Druck dieses Heftes ermöglichte.

Vorstand und Redaktion wünschen allen unseren Mitgliedern frohe Festtage und ein gutes neues Jahr.

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Tafel VIII



Fig. 30 Dish, *The Martyrdom of St Cecilia*. By Nicola Pellipario. Signed «NICHOLA» (in monogramm) and inscribed «I historia de Sancta Cecilia la quale e fata in botega de guido da castello durante In urbino 1528». Diam. 50.0 cm. Museo Nazionale, Florence.

Photo: Alinari, Firenze.

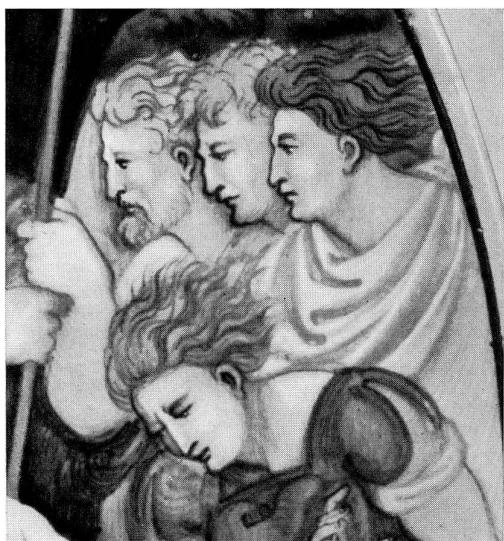


Fig. 31 Detail of fig. 28



Fig. 32 Engraving after the fresco in the Vatican
By Giovanni Antonio da Brescia.