

English version by Elizabeth Thomson

### Month by month.

#### Reading the registers of the Hall of the Months in Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara

Month by month is a guide to reading the decorations in the registers of the iconographic cycle in the Hall of the Months in Palazzo Schifanoia. The complex theme conceived by Pellegrino Prisciani develops from scenes of everyday life at the court of Borso d'Este depicted in the lower register, rising upwards towards the heavens where the tutelary divinities of each Zodiac sign are represented in triumph. In the intervening spaces between these registers, obscure figures difficult to interpret appear: they are the decans.

Seven sections have survived, five have been lost to us (for the rediscovery of the wall decorations in Palazzo Schifanoia during the C19th and the technical reasons for the loss of the five sections, see the essays by Marco Bertozzi and Maurizio Bonora, in number 102 of "Engramma"). Descriptions and interpretations are given for the three registers of every surviving month (March, April, May, June, July, August and September): the band representing the divinities in triumph; the three decans of each sign; and the scenes of everyday life at the court of Borso d'Este and the artists described by Giovanni Sassu. For the five sections that have been reconstructed (October, November, December, January and February), description has been limited to the middle register, with notes by Maurizio Bonora on the detailed work of reconstruction and the literary sources used, together with descriptions submitted by Marco Bertozzi.

#### Introduction to reading the decans by Marco Bertozzi

The images of the decans occupy the middle register of each section and, three per sign, they accompany the Zodiacal constellations. Each decan, therefore, occupies an area of 10° and corresponds to a decade in each month. The division of the Zodiac into 36 decans (in Palazzo Schifanoia only 21 remain intact) is of ancient Egyptian origin: the stars indicating the rising sun followed each other in this function approximately every ten days (Neugebauer [1957] 1974, 106-120). Later, in Egypt, the morning stars were incorporated in the Zodiac and became representations of extra-Zodiacal constellations, or combinations of parts of the northern and southern constellations (paranattellonta in Greek) that rise and set with each degree or ecliptic field, accompanying them either north or south. However, the term decan, which, therefore, corresponds to 10 degrees of the Zodiac, must not be understood to be a simple computing unit: it is also a figure with a divine nature, in which the attributes and qualities of the stars and constellations passing through that defined sector of celestial space are reflected.

The so-called “Sphaera barbarica” of Teucer of Babylon written in Greek (in Egypt) during the C1 BC describes the stars and constellations (paranatel-lonta) that appear in each decan. Teucer’s sphaera wandered as far as India, returning to Bagdad where the astrologer Albumasar (C9 AC) revised it in his Introductorium in astronomiam, describing the figures corresponding to the decans in accordance with the Arabo-Persian, Indian and Greco-Ptolemaic traditions. Albumasar’s treatise was later translated into Latin (in the C12) by Herman of Carynthia and John Hispanus, and it circulated in the west during the middle ages via various compendia written by Leopold of Austria, Ludovico the Angle, Ibn Ezr, Pietro d’Abano and others (texts that include significant and useful variations to enable the decans of Schifanoia to be understood.

In addition, *Picatrix* too, (an Arabic treatise on astrological and talismanic astrology, written on Spanish soil and translated into Castilian in 1256 at the request of Alphonse the Wise, and subsequently circulating in the Latin version) is an important source for the decans of Schifanoia and for some parts of the sections in the upper register.

#### **Schifanoia: a problematic site?\*** by Giovanni Sassu

In Palazzo Schifanoia, there is a concentration of profound significances associated with the “politics of the image” that typify the years of Borso d’Este’s rule over Ferrara. The Hall of the Months should be read from the perspective of new and more expert research relating to his image, which as the then Marquess, he was busily elaborating in anticipation of being imminently appointed duke of Ferrara.

In this enterprise, Borso’s utilitarianism reaches a peak through his well-thought out use of art for political ends: his image is, in fact, reproduced three times in each scene through the use of preparatory cartoons that are replicated in succession by different artists.

Among the many artists employed at Schifanoia, the name of Francesco del Cossa (1436-78) soars above all others, although he was perhaps the artist less loved by Borso. At work’s end in March 1470, the artist had the courage to demand a fee worthy of the masterpiece he had produced. The marquess refused, and the artist left Ferrara, finding the fame and recognition he sought in Bologna.

---

\* Extracts from G. Sassu, *Verso Schifanoia, in Cosmè Tura e Francesco del Cossa. L’arte al tempo di Borso d’Este*, catalogue for the exhibition curated by M. Natale, Ferrara 2007, 415-425, and G. Sassu, *Guida a Palazzo Schifanoia*, Ferrara 2010, 10-11.

The sparkling colour schemes of his frescoes, and the dazzling brightness of the figures that animate the eastern wall, the one with the months of March, April and May (in the latter Cossa was helped by an assistant), represent the most mature and happy marriage between the purity of forms of Florentine inspiration and the vagaries of colour and line typical of the art of Ferrara.

On the northern wall, on the other hand, the works of artists belonging to at least two workshops (three or more, according to some studies) alternate. The first, led by the so-called “Master of the Wide Open Eyes”, introduces once more in the months of June and July, but on a much greater scale, the achievements of ornate calligraphy of the miniature painters working for the d’Este family, with a style that has its frame of reference in Cosmé Tura (1433-ca 1495), master of the Ferrara workshop.

The workshop active in the months August and September appears to be more modern. Studies to-date justify assuming that Ercole de’ Roberti (1455 ca.-1496) is the surprising, furious and imaginative beyond measure author of September, able to paint disconcertingly expressive scenes like the Triumph of Vulcan, where furious smiths are portrayed intent on manufacturing weapons whilst two figures, identified with Mars and Venus, are covered with a sheet that looks like embossed metal.

In the representation of the Month of August, critics have recently suggested that they recognise the work of the master of Ercole de’ Roberti, Gherardo di Andrea Fiorini da Vicenza (doc. 1424-1485), mentioned in the archives as “de depintore di corte”, court painter, during the same period as Tura. Indeed, what appears merely sketched in in the month of August, in September has a more completed form: some expressions of the figures and certain dances, that are almost macabre and can be seen in the Triumph of Ceres in August, reappear, in a more dynamic form, in the Triumph of Vulcan.

One of the most critical problems concerning the cycle in via Scandiana regards the presence of one or more devisers. It is difficult not to assume that for an undertaking that seems to have functioned along the lines of a conveyor belt system there was a need to name the guide to the iconographic and/or stylistic program of the work.

As Aby Warburg has shown, and Cossa himself testifies when stating that he followed the instructions of “Pellegrino Prisciani and others”, the deviser of the iconographical scheme was without doubt Pellegrino Prisciano. On the artistic front, however, there is no substantial agreement that a real style “director” ever existed, or was called upon to hand out jobs or prepare the cartoons, (pounced rather than engraved), which is, on the other hand, well-documented.

And here began the myth of the dominant role of Cosmé Tura, fuelled first by the indications of Baruffaldi; in the nineteenth century with the discovery of the walls, the notion became fashionable again, in the twentieth century it was gradually re-assessed, and today, every now and then, it is revived. Some critics, especially those of the Longhi school, have appropriately reviewed the role of Tura, relying also on the fact that, during the dates of the execution of the works at Schifanoia, he was virtually “cut-off”, because he was undertaking the decoration of the new church of Belriguardo, work that kept him busy to such a degree that he completed it two years earlier than the estimated five. In addition, if on the one hand there is a total absence of any foundation attributable to Tura apart from a citation-tribute in the falconer in March, it would seem that the northern wall is to be set in the context of the development of the Ferrarese style that comes into being during the 1450’s as a direct result of the techniques of the Ferrarese miniaturists.

But is it so crucial to assume that there was a mind behind the work of Schifanoia? If one takes the trouble to view the Hall in its entirety, together with the narrative sequence, it will be seen that, at least in the upper and lower registers, rather than a strict control there seems to have been a sort of division of forms to represent. There appears to be a great awareness of the general distribution of significant essentials and the same consideration to iconographic details, whilst it would seem that the artists themselves were assigned the task of designing the figurative details including the appearance, posture, and perhaps even the number of the characters portrayed. The evidence for this is that looking at the registers it is difficult to discover a repetition of figurative ideas so as to suggest the use of preparatory cartoons, not even in the chariots of the Triumphs.

The impression, therefore, is that the artists worked following the general recommendations of Prisciani, perhaps delivered on paper, since, as shown by his manuscripts, the court astrologer had scrupulous familiarity with the art of drawing. Quite different is the situation for the lower levels, which are a sort of “borsiad” in images that represents the absolute pinnacle of the obsession for portraiture of the not yet Duke of Ferrara. It is here that there is an air of “direction”, where there is an almost serial, indeed oppressive, use of models designed and proposed by drawing board, and represented in combinations with slight variations; it is here, in short, that Borso appears to have centred most of his attention to detail.

Looking closely at the surviving parts of the cycle, it is possible to note the fundamental use of at least five or six “patrons”, used interchangeably by artists active in the months from February to September. Not all regard Duke Borso, but there is no doubt that they come into play when artists are asked to portray the Prince. In the months of February, March, June and, partially, September, the continuity of a figurative “aggregate” depicting Borso on horseback in profile

along with four or more riders leaps to the eye: this is a new kind of equestrian portrait which according to some scholars Borso may have developed along with his brother Baldassare d'Este, his official portraitist from 1470.

It must be remembered, finally, that the cycle was executed partly in fresco – the eastern wall portraying the months from March to September – and distemper (egg glue and oil on a preparation of chalk and glue) – the western and southern walls depicting respectively the months from October to December and January to February, together with the urban scenes – which led to the virtual disappearance of these portions.

### Bibliografia di riferimento / Bibliography

#### Astrologia / Astrology

*Lo Zodiaco del Principe: i decani di Schifanoia di Maurizio Bonora*, catalogo della mostra del 5 settembre – 30 novembre 1992, Ferrara, Palazzo Schifanoia, Ferrara 1992.

Bertozzi 1999

M. Bertozzi, *La tirannia degli astri: gli affreschi astrologici di Palazzo Schifanoia*, Livorno 1999.

Bertozzi 2002

M. Bertozzi, *Aby Warburg e le metamorfosi degli antichi dèi*, Modena 2002.

Bertozzi 2007

M. Bertozzi, *Enigmi figurati: Aby Warburg e l'astrologia internazionale di Palazzo Schifanoia a Ferrara*, in S. Settis (a cura di), *Il Palazzo Schifanoia a Ferrara*, Modena 2007, 143-150.

Bertozzi 2009

M. Bertozzi, *L'autunno di Schifanoia: il mito di Vulcano nel mese di settembre*, in Gianni Venturi, Francesca Cappelletti (a cura di), *Gli dèi a corte. Letteratura e immagini nella Ferrara estense*, atti del convegno di studi (Ferrara, Istituto di Studi Rinascimentali, 21-24 novembre 2006), Firenze 2009.

Boll 1903

F. Boll, *Sphaera: neue griechische Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Sternbilder*, Leipzig 1903.

Gundel 1936

W. Gundel, *Dekane und Dekansternbilder*, Hamburg 1936.

Jaffé [1932] 1999

E. Jaffé, *Testi per l'analisi delle figure dei decani*, in M. Bertozzi, *La tirannia degli astri. Gli affreschi astrologici di Palazzo Schifanoia*, Livorno 1999, 112-127.

Lippincott 1994

K. Lippincott, *Gli dèi-decani del Salone dei Mesi di Palazzo Schifanoia*, in M. Bertozzi (a cura di), *Alla corte degli Estensi. Filosofia, arte e cultura a Ferrara nei secoli XV e XVI*, Ferrara 1994, 181-197.

Neugebauer [1957] 1974

O. Neugebauer, *Le scienze esatte nell'antichità*, Milano, [1957] 1974, 106-120.

Warburg [1912] 1966

A. Warburg, *Arte italiana e astrologia internazionale nel Palazzo Schifanoia di Ferrara*, in *La rinascita del paganesimo antico*, Firenze [1912] 1966, 247-272.

## Fonti / Sources

Manilio, *Astr.*

Manilio, *Astronomica*.

Arato, *Fen.*

Arato, *Fenomeni*.

Boccaccio, *Gen. de.*

G. Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum*, a cura di V. Zaccaria, Milano, 1998.

Igino, *De astr.*

Igino, *De astronomia*.

Ovidio *Met.*

Ovidio, *Metamorfosi*.

Ovidio *Fasti*

Ovidio, *Fasti*.

Albumasar, *Intr.*

Albumasar, *Introductorium in astronomiam*.

Astr. *Plan.*

*Astrolabium Planum* (1488).

Enrico Cornelio Agrippa, *De Occ.*

Enrico Cornelio Agrippa, *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533).

Giordano Bruno, *Imag.*

Giordano Bruno, *Imagines facierum* (1582).

*Picatrix*

*Picatrix*, a cura di David Pengree, London 1986.

**Arte / Art**

## Bacchi 1987

A. Bacchi, *Sul Maestro dell'Agosto*, in V. Sgarbi (a cura di), *Per Schifanoia. Studi e contributi critici*, Ferrara 1987, 37-41.

## Bacchi 1991

A. Bacchi, *Francesco del Cossa*, Soncino 1991.

## Bargellesi 1945

G. Bargellesi, *Palazzo Schifanoia: gli affreschi nel "Salone dei Mesi"*, in Ferrara, Bergamo 1945.

## Benati 1982

D. Benati, *Per il problema di "Vicino da Ferrara" (alias Baldassarre d'Este?)*, "Paragone", XXXIII, 393 (1982), 3-26.

## Buganza 2007

S. Buganza, *Intorno a Baldassarre d'Este e al suo soggiorno lombardo*, "Solchi", IX (2007), 3-69.

## Campori 1885

G. Campori, *I pittori degli Estensi nel secolo XV*, "Atti e memorie delle R.R. Deputazioni di storia patria per le provincie di Modena e Parma", 3a Serie III/I (1885), 525-604.

## Cavalca 2005

C. Cavalca, *Francesco del Cossa e Firenze: tre ricami e la pala con l'Annunciazione di Dresda*, "Nuovi studi", 11 (2004-2005 [2005]), 39-67.

## D'Ancona 1954

P. D'Ancona, *I mesi di Schifanoia in Ferrara, con una notizia critica sul recente restauro di Cesare Gnudi*, Milano 1954.

## Farinella 2007

V. Farinella, *I pittori, gli umanisti, il committente: problemi di ruolo a Schifanoia*, in S. Settis, W. Cupperi (a cura di), *Il Palazzo Schifanoia a Ferrara*, Modena 2007, 83-141.

## Harck 1886

F. Harck, *Die Fresken im Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara*, in "Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen", 5 (1884), 99-127, trad. it. *Gli affreschi del Palazzo di Schifanoia in Ferrara*, studio di F. Harck, traduzione di A. Venturi, Ferrara 1886.

Lippincott 1989

K. Lippincott, *Gli affreschi del Salone dei Mesi ed il problema dell'attribuzione*, in R. Varese (a cura di), *Atlante di Schifanoia*, Modena 1989, 111-39.

Manca 1992

J. Manca, *The Art of Ercole de'Roberti*, Cambridge (MA) 1992.

Manca 2002

J. Manca, *Cosmè Tura, The Life and Art of a Painter in Estense Ferrara*, Oxford 2000.

Padovani 1954

C. Padovani, *La critica d'arte e la pittura ferrarese*, Rovigo 1954.

Ortolani 1941

S. Ortolani, *Cosmè Tura, Francesco del Cossa, Ercole de'Roberti*, Milano 1941.

Rosenberg 1973

C. M. Rosenberg, *Notes on the Borsian Addition to the Palazzo Schifanoia*, "Musei Ferraresi", 3 (1973), 33-42.

Rosenberg 1974

C. M. Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara during the reign of Borso d'Este (1450-1471): a study in court patronage*, tesi di dottorato, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor 1974.

Ruhmer 1958

E. Ruhmer, *Tura, Paintings and Drawings*, London 1958.

Ruhmer 1959

E. Ruhmer, *Francesco del Cossa*, München 1959.

Sassu 2007

G. Sassu, *Verso Schifanoia in Cosmè Tura e Francesco del Cossa. L'arte al tempo di Borso d'Este*, catalogo della mostra a cura di M. Natale, Ferrara 2007, 415-455.

Sassu 2010

G. Sassu, *Guida a Palazzo Schifanoia*, Ferrara 2010, 10-11.

Settis 2007

S. Settis, W. Cupperi (a cura di), *Il Palazzo Schifanoia a Ferrara*, Modena 2007.

Syson 2001

L. Syson, *Tura and the "Minor Arts": The School of Ferrara*, in S. J. Campbell (a cura di), *Cosmè Tura. Painting and Design in Renaissance Ferrara*, catalogo della mostra, Milano 2002, 31-70.



Toffanello 2010

M. Toffanello, *Artisti a Ferrara nel Quattrocento. La corte, le botteghe, i cantieri*, Ferrara 2010.

Tuohy 1996

T. Tuohy, *Herculean Ferrara: Ercole d'Este, 1471-1505, and the invention of a Ducal Capital*, Cambridge 1996.

Varese 1980

R. Varese, *Il Palazzo di Schifanoia*, Ferrara 1980.

Varese 1989

R. Varese, *Metodo di lavoro: progetto a repliche*, in R. Varese (a cura di), *Atlante di Schifanoia*, Modena 1989, 173-187.

Venturi 1885

A. Venturi, *Gli affreschi di Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara*, "Atti e memorie della R. Deputazione di storia patria per le Provincie modenesi", serie III, 3 (1885), 384-385.

Venturi 1931

A. Venturi, *Pittura del Quattrocento in Emilia*, Firenze 1931.

Volpe 1988

C. Volpe, *Palazzo Schifanoia. Gli affreschi*, "Musei ferraresi. 1985/1987. Bollettino annuale", 15, (1988), 9-28.