

BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

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Art Collection
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

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A painting in defence of religious images

St. John Damascene was born in Damascus in roughly 675 and died in Jerusalem in 749. He was a Doctor of the Greek Church and one of the great defenders of the veneration of religious images. He lived at a time and in a region where such a battle was hard fought, due to the aniconism imposed by the Umayyad Caliphate, where his own father worked as a senior court official, and the iconoclasm practised by the Byzantine emperors Leo III (717-741) and Constantine V (741-775). St. John Damascene preached and wrote abundantly in defence of the cult of the Virgin Mary and the veneration of religious images. His theory was based on two postulates: unlike the God of the Old Testament, Christ made himself visible to us and, by enabling people to get to know him, he negated any assumptions that had been made in relation to his representation; the image, just like the written word, is an appeal to the memory, it is what the ear is to the word and the image is to the sight, but, in both cases, it is at the intellectual level that people adhere to that memory. His writings, namely *Contra imaginum calumniatores orationes tres*, dating from about 730, are part of a series of texts that are always presented at critical moments of iconoclastic resurgence. His biographer John of Jerusalem added to these actions of the Saint from Damascus the description of a particularly elucidatory miracle. The iconoclastic emperor Leo III denounced John to the caliph, who ordered that the hand with which he wrote should be amputated. Miraculously, the Virgin Mary restored it to him and, to express his gratitude, St. John Damascene, offered a silver hand to an image of the Virgin, giving rise to the icon of *Panagia trikherusa*, the “Virgin of the Three Hands”, who is worshipped in the Greek Church.

A renewed interest was displayed in the figure of St. John Damascene at the beginning of the period of Counter-Reformation, in response to the Lutherans and Calvinists’ reservations about the worship of religious images, but there was nothing that pointed to a fresh resurgence of such interest in the mid-seventeenth century. However, in Cremona, *Il Genovesino* not



**Luigi Miradori, also known
as *Il Genovesino***
(Genoa c. 1605 – † Cremona 1656)

Martyrdom of St. John Damascene
c. 1645-1650
Oil on canvas, 209 × 140 cm
Fundação Gaudium Magnum

only produced this great painting of the *Martyrdom of St. John Damascene*, but also painted another canvas, of practically the same size, for the church of St. Clement (today the church of St. Mary Magdalene), signed and dated 1648, representing the Miracle of the Virgin Mary's restoration of the hand of St. John Damascene. Another Cremonese painter, Gabriele Zocchi, also painted the Martyrdom of St. John Damascene for the church of St. Vincent. The most recent historiography has linked this renewed interest in the figure of the saint to a response to the pillaging of churches during the attempted attack on Cremona by the French-Modenese troops, in 1644, which, although it was repulsed by the Spanish governor of Cremona, Don Álvaro de Quiñones, left the city's surroundings badly destroyed.

***Il Genovesino*: a painter who found his place**

The date of Luigi Miradori's birth is not certain, although it is known that he was born in Genoa probably in the middle of the first decade of the seventeenth century. He married Gerolama Benerosi in the city in 1627, and was still living there in 1630, when he contributed to the city's fortifications. But there are only two of his works linked to this early phase in his artistic career: the *Lute Player* (an instrument that he played with perfection), from the Palazzo Rosso, and a *St. Irene Tending to the Wounds of St. Sebastian*, from the Convento della Santissima Annunziata di Portoria. They both reveal a clear Caravaggism, which he had learned at second hand from other painters. At that time, the emulation of Caravaggio's style dominated the painting of Genovese artists through the influence of Simon Vouet, Gentileschi and Bernardo Strozzi. Through its Flemish community, Genoa was, at that time, a point of contact between the schools of Northern Europe and Italy, but the influence of Caravaggio's tenebrism was clearly visible in the work of most painters. In 1632, *Il Genovesino* was already living in Piacenza, but he also left few paintings here. All that remains of his work in this city is two paintings at the Galleria Nazionale di Parma (*Aaron Staying the Plague* and an *Adoration of the Magi*). He fathered two children there, and, in 1635, he married for a second time, with Maria Ferrarri, who, like him, was of Genovese descent. But, at the same time, he complained to Margherita de' Medici about the lack of commissions and asked her if he might leave the city. He must have headed immediately for Cremona, since, in January 1637, he baptised yet another daughter there. In a city where there was not a great deal of competition, he rapidly became the most distinguished and sought-after painter, benefiting from the patronage of the city's Spanish governor, Don Álvaro de Quiñones.

Not only did the latter give him protection, but he also opened for him the doors to his important art collection, which enabled him to rapidly learn models and solutions from Ribera and the Spanish masters that were represented in the governor's gallery. Curiously, many of the paintings that today are attributed to *Il Genovesino* were previously attributed to Spanish artists: the *Guardian Angel* at the Museum of Bucharest was attributed to Pereda and Zurbarán, the *Portrait of Gian Giacomo Trivulzio* to Mazo, the *Portrait of a Child* to Rizzi, the *Portrait of an Olivetan Monk* to Zurbarán, and the painting from the collection of Maria and João Cortez de Lobão was not only itself considered to be by Velazquez, but, in the nineteenth century, when it belonged to the Florentine collection of Luigi Borg de Balzan, it even had a false signature by the Spanish painter, on a "cartellino" attached to the painting and stating that he was the author.

The *Martyrdom of St. John Damascene* belongs to Miradori's most creative phase and shows the clear influence of Spanish painting, which was then beginning to make itself felt all over Lombardy. The self-portrait that can be seen in the group of figures on the left shows him to be roughly the same age as when he painted himself on the enormous canvas (477 × 764 cm) of the *Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes*, of the Palazzo Comunale di Cremona, signed and dated from 1647. The painting's spacious architectural setting is reminiscent of other works dating from the same period, such as the *Last Supper* from the same palace, the already-mentioned *Miracle of the Virgin* or the *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* from the church of Sant'Imerio di Cremona (1651), which display a remarkably similar use of colour, in their diluted bluish backgrounds and elongated perspectives. But what is most "Velazquez-like" about this painting is the group of figures in the foreground, in a complex composition that alternates the aloofness of aristocrats and military characters with more popular figures. And what is most Zurbaranesque is certainly the treatment that is given to the light, accompanying the perspective, and growing progressively brighter until we reach the end of the composition. The central theme of the painting is situated in the background, but, as we look at the scene, our gaze is captured both by its topographical centrality and by the incidence of the light, as well as by the framing of the architectural scenery that divides the grounds of the painting and is continued in the soft shading of the buildings in the background. The theatricality of the whole composition is evident, both in the figures in the foreground and in the ample and illusory framing of the architectures. *Il Genovesino* died in Cremona in 1656, the city that had welcomed him and given him every possibility of establishing himself as a great baroque painter in Lombardy.

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