

BEAUTY, SEDUCTION AND SHARING

EN

Art Collection
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão

08 JUN — 16 JUL
2023

This work is of particular interest both for its exceptional aesthetic quality and because it is a rare documentary example of a model for one of the great pictorial enterprises of King João V. Given the clear affinities with the final painting, this would appear to be the final version for the large altarpiece created for the main chapel of Évora Cathedral, in 1734, by Agostino Masucci (1690-1758).

There is less agreement among historiographers, however, with regard to the dating of both works, as well as the authorship of the altar painting.

The remodelling works on the cathedral's main chapel started in 1718, aiming to fulfil the request made in the last will and testament of Friar Luís da Silva, and continued until 1729. The paintings, however, were only commissioned in October 1731 and not in 1728, as has previously been posited. Two documents dated 1733 attest to the fact that Friar José Fonseca e Évora only commissioned them in Rome in October 1731, dispelling the notion that the canvases could have been dated any earlier. Although the chapter had planned to consecrate the main chapel in November 1732, it only happened much later, in May 1746, in a ceremony led by Archbishop Friar Miguel de Távora (despite the paintings being in Évora from 1735).

We also know that the first drawings for approval only arrived in late April 1732, a period when Masucci's *bozzetto*, now conserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, are thought to have been made, showing the entire composition. Even if they were immediately approved, without the criticism or correction notes to which other works for the presbytery were subject (such as the paintings of the *Birth of the Virgin* and the *Coronation of Our Lady by the Holy Trinity*), their acceptance



Agostino Masucci
(Rome, 1690-1758)

The Assumption of the Virgin
c. 1732-1734

Oil on canvas, 90 × 60 cm
Gaudium Magnum Foundation
Maria and João Cortez de Lobão Collection

would only have been made official at a later date, in July that year. This model for the painting of the main chapel can therefore only be situated in a time frame of 1732 to 1734.

With regard to its authorship, various hypotheses were put forward up until the late 19th century, some of which attributed it to Pompeo Batoni or Francesco Trevisani. In the early 20th century, Giuseppe Fiocco saw the touch of Anton Rafael Mengs in the work, a theory immediately supported by Luís Keil. This “uncontested authorship,” based on the presumption that the canvas on the main altar was allegedly signed by Mengs and dated 1775, led Keil to attribute all the other paintings in the chapel to him. More recently, other researchers have proposed the collaboration of Lorenzo Masucci, Agostino’s son.

A closer observation of the canvas on the Évora altarpiece allows us to confirm that it is indeed dated and signed by its painter, leaving no margin for doubt as to its authorship or date: “Aug. [ustino] Masucci Rom[anus]. F[ecit]. A[nno]. 1734.”

The theme of the *Assumption of Our Lady*, typical of the Catholic Counter Reformation, is quite common in baroque painting. It was very popular in the 17th century, and even among artists of the Bolognese and Roman schools, such as Aníbal Carracci and Guido Reni, who popularised it in Rome and who were copied by or influenced their direct followers.

In Carracci’s version, made in 1601 for the Cerasi chapel in the Church of Santa Maria del Popolo, in Rome, the figure of Saint Peter is given greatest emphasis among the apostles. But Reni’s interpretation, made in 1616 for the rather more modern Genoan church of Santi Ambrogio e Andrea, came to have a great impact on the generations

that followed. Despite maintaining the prominence given to Saint Peter, we find two distinct levels here, with the Virgin highlighted on the upper part, surrounded by angels, and the group of apostles on the lower part.

More importantly, it was the version produced by Carlo Maratta (1625-1713) for Urbino Cathedral, in around 1708, made into an engraving by Girolamo Frezza, which led to its spread and copying in the most diverse places.

In Masucci’s version, the affinities with the canvas made by his teacher Maratta are clear, especially in the figure of the virgin, depicting the traditional tomb in the valley of Jehoshaphat, surrounded by the apostles, and the prominence given to Saint John the Evangelist (instead of Saint Peter), holding the shroud covered in roses.

The interpretation of the theme in Évora Cathedral perfectly illustrates the development of Masucci’s work, as it matured into a classical style that was less open to rococo and *Barrochetto* influences. It would become characteristic of his painting during the decades that followed, closely linked to the classicism of the second half of the century driven by artists such as Batoni or Mengs.

Another aspect of particular importance in this work is the influence it exerted over other artists, even those in Rome. One of Masucci’s pupils, Stefano Pozzi, made a drawing from this painting, which was used for an altarpiece for the Church of Santa Maria Assunta, in the Quirinal Palace, in Rome, and Nicola Nasini made another, now part of the Chigi Saracini collection in Siena. Even more interesting, and a perfect reflection of how “Joanine” painting was a model for the artists of the time, is the copy made by Antonio Liozzi, in 1756, for the altar of the Church of San Francisco, in Penna San Giovanni (Ancona).

NUNO SALDANHA