

“THE IMMENSITY OF THE UNIVERSE”
IN THE ART OF GIOVANNA GARZONI





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The Universe of Giovanna Garzoni.

Art, Mobility, and the Global Turn in the Geographical Imaginary

Sheila Barker

Early ambitions

With a scintillating curiosity, an indefatigable eye for observation, and the experiences of her extensive travels, Giovanna Garzoni instilled in her art a wondrous vision of a vast, complex, and interconnected universe. She began her life in Ascoli Piceno but spent her childhood in Venice amid sea-faring ships and their global cargoes¹. The idea of going abroad was implicit in her earliest professional aim: to gain entrée to the great courts of Europe. Bearing witness to this ambition is her notebook of juvenile calligraphic exercises from *circa* 1617–1620. It includes cleverly composed notes addressed to nobles in Siena, Verona, and Rome who were either potential patrons or cultural agents². Such connections likely led to her early visit to the Medici court³ and perhaps to her subsequent invitation to Naples by the Duke of Alcalà⁴.

It may be no coincidence that a penmanship exercise contained in the same notebook epitomizes the notion of mobility (cat. n. 1). In this very early work of Garzoni's, modelled after a Dutch calligrapher's prototype (cat. n. 2), a single line of ink unravels in rhythmic spirals and spasmodic leaps until it is transformed into the image of a galleon cutting through the waves at full mast. The Baroque age's supreme symbol of mobility, exploration, empire, commerce, and wealth, this paper galleon was also a prophetic emblem of Garzoni's future travels.

Garzoni's ambition to find patronage at a great court determined her adolescent curriculum. Like Venice's earlier female painters Irene di Spilimbergo (1540–1559) and Marietta Robusti (*circa* 1560–1590), she learned to paint in oils⁵. Tellingly, however, she also trained in skills pertinent to the service of a grand lady, including vocal music, string instruments, letter writing, and calligraphy⁶. The artist-biographer Carlo Ridolfi underscored the well-established link between these skills and courtly sociability when he noted how, as a young woman, Garzoni would "trattenersi con suoi amorevoli nel far piccioli ritratti di minio, col canto e con il suono" ("take pleasure with her dearest friends in making portrait miniatures, singing, and playing musical instruments")⁷. Garzoni's undated self-portrait—probably her earliest surviving miniature—advertises her courtly talents to potential patrons by showing her in the guise of a laurel-crowned muse with a viola da gamba (cat. n. 3). Not only touting her musical talents but also giving visible proof

of her artistry, this work invokes the formula of self-portraiture preferred by female painters, including the abovementioned Robusti as well as Sofonisba Anguissola (1532–1625), Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614), and Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–*circa* 1656), all of whom portrayed themselves with musical instruments⁸.

With her sights set on gaining a position in the household of Grand Duchess Maria Magdalena, Garzoni visited the Florentine court sometime between the years 1618 and 1621⁹. The young polymath from Ascoli Piceno entertained the grand duchess with vocal performances, instrumental pieces, calligraphic demonstrations, and a painted miniature of St Mary Magdalen—her first recorded work in this technique, now lost¹⁰. One of the witnesses to this dazzling display quipped that Garzoni had more talents than fingers¹¹.

During this first stay in Florence, it is almost certain that Garzoni encountered Gentileschi, who currently enjoyed a high profile at the Medici court. The two women artists would meet up again in Venice, Naples, and, according to new arguments, London¹². While in Florence, Garzoni surely also made the acquaintance of the similarly aged Arcangela Paladini (1599–1622), a painter, singer and needle-artist in the Grand Duchess's household¹³. These early encounters with female role models undoubtedly encouraged Garzoni to continue pursuing a career as a court artist¹⁴.

A universal artist

During her first visit to Florence and certainly during her second one in 1642–1651, Garzoni had the opportunity to admire the exquisite miniatures (see cat. nn. 14 and 15) of Jacopo Ligozzi (1547–1627), a Medici court artist once hailed as a "pictor universalissimo" because of his multiple artistic talents¹⁵. The status of "universal artist" could also be assigned to Garzoni. She worked in such varied media as large-scale oil painting, tempera-on-parchment miniatures, pen-and-ink drawings, *pietre dure* design¹⁶, textile appliqué (cat. n. 38)¹⁷, and painted fans¹⁸, whereas her range of genres embraced devotional imagery, portraiture, still-lives, miniature copies (which comprised some male and female nudes as well as landscapes), botanical illustrations, and even mythology¹⁹.

Garzoni's diverse artistic endeavors were not compartmentalized experiences; rather, her oeuvre exhibits rampant cross-fertilization between genres and across media.



Fig. 1 – Giovanna Garzoni, *Raised Fruit Bowl Containing Peaches on the Ground near Three Sorbs and a Fig*, c. 1650, tempera on parchment. Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, inv. 1890 n. 4780

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Giovanna Garzoni (Ascoli Piceno 1600 – Rome 1670)

Portrait of Zaga Christ

1635

watercolor and bodycolor on parchment mounted on card, later silver frame, height 5.7 cm

signed and dated on reverse: "ገዳርጌ ገዳርጌ ገዳርጌ / Giovanna Garzoni F. / Torino 1635"

London, Philip Mould & Company

Signed by Garzoni on the reverse in both Ethiopic (Ge'ez) (whose phonetic transliteration "Žowānā Gārsonē Fē[č]i]" was kindly provided by Ted Erho) and Latin scripts, this portrait miniature represents Zaga Christ (also written Saga Krestos, 1608–1638), a self-proclaimed Ethiopian prince who converted to Roman Catholicism in Jerusalem and traveled throughout Europe as a pretender to the throne of King Yaqob I of Ethiopia (*circa* 1590–1606). The painter and sitter crossed paths during the bitter winter of 1634–1635, when Christ transferred to Turin under the protection of the Duke of Savoy Vittorio Amedeo I (1587–1637) in order to recuperate from a grave illness (Crawford 1950, pp. 293–295; Aroles 2013, p. 60). Garzoni had been at the court of Turin in the role of "miniatrix di Madama Reale" since 1632, remaining in this position until 1637 (Di Vesme 1932, pp. 799–800).

The portrait miniature —perhaps commissioned by the Duke of Savoy or the sitter himself— is executed with exacting precision using a pointillist technique. In line with the English tradition of portrait miniatures (Meloni Trkulja 1983a, p. 78), the background is painted with ultramarine blue, just as in Garzoni's *Portrait of a Gentleman* (The Hague, Stichting Historische Verzamelingen van het Huis Oranje-Nassau, cf. Fig. 5 in Cosgrove's essay), which she executed in Venice in 1625. Christ is shown wearing a red jacket with gold braid ornaments that matches the description of the jacket he received as an official gift upon his arrival in the Spanish kingdom in Italy in 1632 (Aroles 2013, p. 56). On top of his red jacket rests a delicate collar of linen and needle lace that appears to have been made with the Venetian techniques of *reticella* and *punto in aria*; the Duke of Savoy himself wears a similar lace collar on top of his armor in a portrait also by Garzoni from this period (see cat. n. 6).

Codified by Paolo Giovio in 1575, the tradition of positive depictions of Ethiopians in early modern Europe derives from a shared identity as Christians (Schreuder 2008, pp. 21–31; Lowe 2012, pp. 109–112). Garzoni deviated from the standard iconography for that nation in order to make this highly individualized portrait. Tender and delicate, the naturalistic portrayal focuses on the noble qualities of the inner man, including his suffering (Aroles 2013, p. 60), rather than on outward symbols of the kingship he claimed. The specificity of the depiction along with the Ethiopic signature on the reverse testify to a close rapport between the artist and the sitter, whom Garzoni presents through curious and sensitive eyes. As discovered by Philip Mould & Company, the numbers 3619 and 505 on the reverse correspond with the lot number and sale price of a portrait of Zaga Christ sold in France in 1752, thus providing information about the portrait miniature's earlier provenance.

Hilda Groen

Bibliography: Helle & Glomy 1752, n. 505; Gault de Saint-Germain 1835, p. 123; Aroles 2013, p. 56; *European Silver* 1989, n. 209; Casale 1991, p. 55; Bottacin 2004a, p. 77.



Giovanna Garzoni (Ascoli 1600 – Rome 1670)

Lapdog with Biscotti and a Chinese Cup

circa 1648

tempera on parchment, 27,5 x 39,5 cm

signed in the lower right corner: "Giovanna Garzoni F."

Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Galleria Palatina, inv. 1890 n. 4770

The inscription of "Giovanna Garzoni F." in the lower right corner of the tablecloth distinguishes this miniature from the others by Garzoni in the Medici collections, which are rarely signed. Garzoni painted this miniature mid-career, around 1648, for Grand Duchess of Tuscany Vittoria della Rovere, who was frequently represented with her dogs. Their kennels were inventoried in almost every room in her Villa del Poggio Imperiale, where this painting once hung (S. Meloni Trkulja, in *Al servizio del Granduca* 1980, p. 35). It is likely that Vittoria received the lapdog pictured here from England, since her husband Ferdinando II ordered two dogs for breeding in 1635 (ASFi, MdP 1803, ins. 18, no fol., MAP doc. ID 14531). Lapdogs of this type, valued for their rare white color (ASFi, MdP 4759, fol. 958, MAP doc. ID 18999), were part of a Medici family tradition. Given as diplomatic gifts, Medici dogs were acquired from courts in France, Spain, and England in exchange for valuable items such as tapestries and jewels: for instance, Grand Duke Cosimo II reciprocated a gift of dogs from the King of Spain with a Florentine tapestry worth three thousand *scudi* (ASFi, MdP 4943, fol. 442, MAP doc. ID 13780). Sometimes the jewels came with the dogs, as when Queen of France Marie de' Medici sent French dogs with collars worth 50 *scudi* to Grand Duke Ferdinando I in 1606 (ASFi, MdP 4028, fol. 135, MAP doc. ID 24227).

This dog, often identified as a pug, bears resemblance to the specimens in Tiberio Titi's *Portrait of a Lapdog* (private collection; Casale 1991, p. 118) and in the 1618 portrait of Vittoria's grandmother Christine of Lorraine with her dog (formerly attributed to Francesco Bianchi Buonavita, S. Meloni Trkulja, in *Natura viva* 1985, p. 104 n. 30). At age three, upon her betrothal to her Medici cousin, Vittoria had been painted with a dog of a similar breed (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Inv. 1890 n. 239); before this, her father Federico Ubaldo della Rovere had been painted with one at his engagement at age five (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Inv. 1890 n. 2473). While lapdogs are sometimes depicted with young boys, they are rarely seen with adult men, who are paired instead with hunting dogs. From antiquity, lapdogs have been associated with the feminine, and their fashioning reflected their owners' nobility (Sand 2016, p. 165).

Demand for dog portraits increased in the seventeenth century, particularly among the ducal families of Mantua, Ferrara, and Florence (Bowron 2006, pp. 6, 14). Typical examples showcase wealth through elaborate jeweled collars, such as those seen in Justus Suttermans's portrait of two spaniels sporting ceremonial collars with the Medici coat of arms, also believed to have been created for Vittoria della Rovere (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Inv. 1890 n. 4937) or Lavinia Fontana's portrait of Isabella Ruini and her lapdog wearing an opulent earring (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Galleria Palatina, OdA 536). By contrast, the pug portrayed by Garzoni wears a simple leather collar with metal bells, creating a more naturalistic and domestic tableau. Garzoni's portrait emphasizes the dog's inner qualities, particularly its sweet nature: the biscuits and teacup depicted near the wide-eyed pug not only provide a scale by which to appreciate her diminutive size, but also reveal how disciplined she is. The dog can be trusted to sit quietly without disturbing the precious porcelain cup, and to patiently ignore the sugary treats next to it. While the flies gather on the abandoned sweets, the obedient pet directs her full attention to the viewer. Garzoni's characteristic attention to optical detail is noticeable here particularly in the precise rendering of the dog's hair and the realistic appearance of the flies (Chastel 1984, p. 34; Casale 1991, p. 118). Also depicted in great detail, the porcelain cup is noteworthy for its bluish-grey pastel overglaze that decorates the white slipware. This is very distinct from the vivid blue-and-white Kraak porcelain wares that were popular for export, these being the types usually depicted by Garzoni. However, it is quite similar to the cup in *The Old Man of Artimino* (cat. n. 27). The cup's narrow bell profile, slip decoration, even straight rim, low foot ring, and delicately fashioned vignettes of insects, rocks, and flowering plants suggest that it was a Dehua cup (see cat. n. 25) made in the 1640s during the transitional period from the Ming to Qing dynasties; thus it would have been a very recent addition to the Medici sideboards when Garzoni painted it, and, moreover, it was probably used at the Medici court for drinking hot chocolate (F. Morena, in *Il Cioccolato* 2008).

If the dog is a pug, as some scholars have suggested, then it, too, had Chinese origins like the porcelain cup. Pugs originated in China. In the late Cinquecento and early Seicento they were imported by Dutch traders, who named the breed 'Mopshond', and they became a favored breed in European courts. Vittoria della Rovere would have had at least a vague notion of the appearance of Chinese pugs since there were two Chinese porcelain sculptures of *shizi* dogs wearing collars with metal bells (cat. nn. 67–68) among the precious objects in the Grand Duchess's Stanza dell'Aurora.

Dana Hogan

Bibliography: Sutherland Harris, Noehlin 1979, p. 133 n. 15; S. Meloni Trkulja, in *Al servizio del Granduca* 1980, p. 35; Meloni Trkulja 1983a, pp. 88–89, 96; Spike 1983, p. 70; Chastel 1984, pp. 140–141; S. Meloni Trkulja, *Natura viva* 1985, p. 104, n. 30; Carapelli 1986, pp. 106–107 n. 22; Meloni Trkulja 1986, p. 98; Fumagalli 1989, p. 568; Casale 1991, pp. 118–119; G. Casale, in *Gli incanti dell'iride* 1996, pp. 54–55, n. 14; Giusti Galardi 2001, pp. 24–25; M. Sframeli, in *Fragili tesori* 2018, pp. 196–197, cat. n. 29.





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