

**E. H. Gombrich, Bonaventura Berlinghieri's Palmettes, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 39, 1976, pp.234-6 [Trapp no.1976C.1]**

*For Hugo Buchthal*

The notion of the classical tradition comprises at least two distinct processes; that of survival and that of revival. It was the second of these, of course, that was first identified and became programmatic in the concept of the Renaissance. The very idea of rebirth, with its mystical overtones, implies also the idea of rejuvenation of something that had survived into old age and decay—the Middle Ages which had debased the heritage of antiquity. The art of Byzantium became the stock example from the time of Vasari onwards of a mechanical routine which could only be brought to life again by the vital touch of Latin Christendom. It was not before the nineteenth century, with its interest in evolution, that the continuity of western artistic tradition from classical antiquity onwards was stressed and it was in this connexion that Anton Springer coined the formula 'das Nachleben der Antike' [1] which Aby Warburg was to adopt as the theme of his library. More recent students of the classical tradition have increasingly found the distinction between survival and revival inadequate to do justice to the complexities of the processes involved. These complexities have been brilliantly analysed in Erwin Panofsky's *Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*. [2] Panofsky proposed something like a formula for the resolution of the problem. Briefly he saw the continuity in the Middle Ages as applying to form but not to content. Thanks to Hugo Buchthal we now know that even this formula cannot claim universal validity. [3] Moreover, by its very nature, it can offer no guidance in the field with which I am concerned at the moment, the study of ornament.

The only systematic work on the tradition of ornament, Alois Riegl's *Stilfragen* of 1893, strongly partakes of the evolutionist bias of the nineteenth century. It constitutes the most impressive demonstration in the whole field of the continuity of a tradition, the development of the palmette motif, extending from ancient Egyptian lotus ornament to the intricacies of the arabesque. Riegl's masterpiece has found no successor and indeed it may be no accident that no one has attempted to continue the story into the Middle Ages precisely because of the difficulties we here encounter in answering the question of 'survival or revival?'

These observations came to my mind on a recent visit to Pescia near Lucca where I had gone to see Bonaventura Berlinghieri's panel of St. Francis dated 1235 [4] (Pl. 20). The stage props of four of the narrative panels (Pls. 2 I a, d–g)— buildings and a curtain —are decorated with beautiful palmette scrolls which do not appear to have attracted the attention of students of Tuscan painting. I have found no exact parallels to these borders in contemporary Italian panel painting or illuminated manuscripts. [5] Indeed, what struck me first was their pronounced Greek physiognomy. Their general character recalls Greek vase paintings. Could this be a case of a deliberate revival?

Specialists in Byzantine art need scarcely be told that the matter cannot be so simple. It has recently been pointed out that the arrangement of Berlinghieri's panel derive from Byzantine icons [6] and the same dependence on Byzantine models is evident in his treatment of decorative zones. It so happens that the way his buildings are marked with horizontal friezes adorned with scrolls can be paralleled from two manuscripts closely associated with Hugo Buchthal's researches, the *Paris Psalter* (fol. 6v) and *Queen Melisende's Psalter* (fol. 1v) which is illustrated on the very first plate of his *Miniature Painting in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*. It is true that these particular friezes show much less complexity and a different distribution of figure and ground than Berlinghieri's example, but there are many other variations on the theme of the palmette scroll in Byzantine art which come much closer in

basic structure to Berlinghieri's border.[7] Characteristically it is in particular on the decoration of furniture, garments and buildings that we find these developments of the palmette scroll.[8] The closest parallel known to me comes from Yugoslavia. The sculptured archivolt framing the pictures of saints in the church of St. Pantaleon, Nerezi, built in 1164, show just such a palmette scroll turning and returning to fill the available space (Pl. 21b).[9] There can be no doubt that Berlinghieri derived his basic schema from examples of this kind. They resemble his borders much more closely in their structure than do the palmette scrolls known from Greek pottery. The Greek motif of the involuted palmette never occurs on borders but in the space-filling scroll work which sometimes luxuriates under the handles of Greek vases (Pl. 21c).[10] These beautiful products of a rich decorative imagination are generally organized in a free symmetrical arrangement around a central axis, and though the motifs echo each other over the whole field they are not repeat ornaments as Berlinghieri's are.

And yet it seems to me that Berlinghieri's treatment of the motif suggests an acquaintance with its original Greek version. The shape of his palmettes differs from the standard Byzantine form, their individual leaves are more rounded and more supple, in other words much closer to the Greek shape. The scroll from which they spring swings much more freely—again like the Greek scroll—and the freedom and elegance with which the space is filled, the relation between figure and ground, appears to justify the first impression of a Greek 'physiognomy'. Can this impression be reconciled with what we know of Berlinghieri's period and environment? I think it can.

It is true that the first artist whose name has become associated with the deliberate revival of the antique is Nicola Pisano whose pulpit in which he incorporated motifs from an ancient sarcophagus is dated twenty-five years after Berlinghieri's panel. We know of course that this was no sudden departure, but it may be that the link between Nicola and Apulia and hence with the revival at the court of Frederic II has somewhat diverted the attention of art historians from the local tradition which also helps to explain this assimilation of a classical model.[11] After all, for the stone masons of the Middle Ages the re-use of ancient columns and other *spolia* remained an acknowledged practice and with this practice went the occasional need of adapting or copying such fragments. In the phase of Tuscan architecture which Jacob Burckhardt christened the Proto-Renaissance this usage shaded over into the adoption of a classicizing style of decoration. It was in particular in Pisa and in Lucca that the craftsmen who carved ornamental details appear to have looked to ancient marbles for inspiration. It is a development that has proved difficult to analyse in any detail, because the rich acanthus scrolls we find around the portals of these cities" are not so much copies of classical patterns as testimonies to a renewed understanding of the laws of organic growth that has come from fresh contacts with antiquity.

A mason of early thirteenth-century Lucca would hardly have been surprised to see a painter deriving similar inspiration from a painted fragment of an ancient vase. True, it is generally said that Greek vases did not attract attention before the eighteenth century," but there is no reason to doubt that Bonaventura Berlinghieri could easily have come across Greek potsherds just as we know that Aretine ware was dug up and greatly admired in the same century.[14]

It is this appreciation of the specific qualities of Greek ornament which is expressed in Berlinghieri's borders rather than any desire to copy a particular motif. His motifs, as we have seen, remain rooted in the tradition he had absorbed from Byzantium, but he no longer applies this tradition uncritically.

Clearly the distinction between survival and revival is too crude to do justice to this change in attitude. All artistic practice is rooted in traditions and all tradition presupposes survival of formulae and

stereotypes." But it is one thing to accept these traditions without demur and to modify them only incidentally as habits of speech are modified in the drift of language, it is quite another thing to take over a tradition while wishing to develop or reform it. It was such a conscious reform of Latin style that marked the humanist movement of the Renaissance.[16]

It is obviously much harder to document such a reform in the visual arts as a matter of conscious intention. What we can document is the need which artists must have felt to modify the tradition if fresh demands were to be met. Bonaventura Berlinghieri's Pescia altar happens to be a case in point. The saint he was to glorify with the means of Byzantine icon painting was St. Francis who died a mere nine years before the date of the panel's completion. There was no fixed tradition for the rendering of his figure and his legend. The very idea of an altar painting was something of a novelty in Tuscany.[17] To do justice to such an exacting task the master certainly had to make use of all the formulae and devices he could take over from the Byzantine tradition, but he would also be prompted to experiment and to study alternative solutions. The unobtrusive scrolls on his panels may be a reminder of this opening of new horizons which Vasari called the 'Rebirth' of art.

1 *Bilder aus der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, Bonn 1867.

2 Stockholm 1960.

3 *Historia Troiana, Studies in the History of medieval secular Illustration* (Studies of the Warburg Institute, 32), London 1971.

4 E. B. Garrison, 'A new History of Bonaventura di Berlinghiero's St. Francis Dossal in Pescia' in his *Studies in the History of medieval Italian Painting*, i, 2, 1953, pp. 69ff.

5 Garrison, *op. cit.*, iii, Florence 1957-58, offers no precedent. There are later echoes on the Bardi S. Francis panel at S. Croce, Florence, and on the footstool of Coppo di Marcovaldo's Madonna in S. M. Maggiore, Florence.

6 O. Demus, *Byzantine Art and the West*, New York 1970, p. 212.

7 M. Alison Frantz, 'Byzantine illuminated Ornament', *Art Bulletin*, xvi, 1934, pp. 43-76. Zagorka Janc, *Ornaments in Serbian and Macedonian Frescoes*, Exhibition, Museum of Applied Art, Belgrade Sept.—Oct. 1961.

8 K. Weitzmann, *Studies in Classical and Byzantine Manuscript Illumination*, Chicago 1971, fig. 151.

9 Gabriel Millet, *L'Ancien Art Serbe*, Paris 1919, fig. 152, the author comments (p. 146) on 'la composition classique de ces palmettes et ces acanthes'; for illustration of another canopy see Oto Bihalji-Merin, *Byzantine Frescoes and Icons in Yugoslavia*, London 1960, pl. 16.

10 Paul Jacobsthal, *Ornamente griechischer Kasen*, Berlin 1927.

11 H. Wentzel, 'Antiken Imitation des 12. and 13. Jahrhunderts in Italien', *Zeitschrift für Kunstwissenschaft*, ix, 1955, especially pp. 67-70.

12 For illustration see especially *Catalogo delle cose d'Arte e di Antichità d'Italia*, Serie i, Fasc. ii, Pisa, a cura di R. Papini, Rome 1912, and C. Enlart, *L'Art Roman en Italie*, Ser. ii, Paris 1924.

13 R. M. Cook, *Greek Painted Pottery*, London 1960, chap. xv. An interesting additional reference in Vasari's life of Battista Franco (ed. Milanesi, vi, 58,) was pointed out to me by Professor Otto Kurz to whose help and encouragement I am much indebted.

14 Panofsky, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

16 See my *Art and Illusion*, New York and London 1960.

16 See my article 'From the Revival of Letters to the Reform of the Arts: Niccolò Niccoli and Filippo Brunelleschi' in D. Fraser *et al.* (editors), *Essays in the History of Art presented to Rudolf Wittkower*, London 1967.

17 Hellmut Hager, *Die Anfänge des italienischen Altarbildes, Veröffentlichungen der Bibliotheca Hertziana*, Munich 1962.



Bonaventura Berlinghieri, St. Francis, Pisa, St. Francis cycle (A. 134)



b - Palazzo arch. Nervi, church of St. Fantasia (A. 132)



c - Apollon studi, c. 1320-80, London, British Museum, Vas. F. 201 (A. 133)



d, e, g - Piero Johnson, Details from Pl. 21 (A. 134)