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# VENICE AND THE VENETO DURING THE RENAISSANCE

## THE LEGACY OF BENJAMIN KOHL



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**Venice and the Veneto during the  
Renaissance: the Legacy of Benjamin Kohl**

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## The Carrara Among the Angels in Trecento Padua\*

by Meredith J. Gill

In the 1350s, the Paduan painter, Guariento di Arpo, completed an ambitious decorative scheme for the palatine chapel of the Reggia, the seat of Padua's ruling dynasty, the Carrara. The artist's cycle of paintings, comprising both wall frescoes and panels, constitutes an original, multi-media project for the medieval period, and it signals not only a milestone in Guariento's career, but also a decisive moment in the history of the Carrara family's cultural patronage. In this essay, I consider the reconstruction of this distinctive program, and connect it to Carrara identity and the family's claims as lords of Padua. In his inclusive, even-handed account of the cultural landscape of the late medieval Veneto, Benjamin G. Kohl allowed for artistic innovation as well as continuity; in this light, Guariento's commission offers another illuminating case-study in Carrara patronage in which refined taste and religious sensibility accompany the dynasty's resourceful and tenacious political worldview.

On the walls of the chapel, Guariento depicted two tiers of subjects drawn from Scripture in two rows of continuous narrative. Set into a frieze above the frescoes were (now illegible) inscriptions, while underneath them ran a series of painted Gothic arches, above a fictive marble socle zone. Along with these murals, the artist produced a sequence of over thirty panel paintings that describe a celestial vision: the Virgin and Child accompanied by Four Evangelists and surrounded by members of the hierarchies of angels (Figs. 2-8). He accomplished this with extraordinary coloristic effect. The cycle of panels was dismantled in the late eighteenth century, and the surviving frescoes of the west wall are now part of the renovated meeting rooms of the Paduan Academy, for which one wall of the chapel was demolished. Most of the panels, including twenty-nine representations of the orders of angels, are now in Padua's Musei Civici<sup>1</sup>.

\* This essay is drawn from my book, *Angels and the Order of Heaven in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, Cambridge, 2014.

<sup>1</sup> See Banzato, 1998a, 21-22; Banzato, 1998b, 57-58. The frescoes of the chapel (now the Accademia Galileiana di scienze, lettere ed arti) were restored by Leonetto Tintori. Other panels are now in the collections of the Pinacoteca, Arezzo, and the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University (*Armed Angel*

The program exemplifies Guariento's debt to fourteenth-century Venetian artists such as Paolo Veneziano, as well as to Byzantine models, evident most especially in the linear style of his panel of the *Virgin and Child*. Guariento's angels, on the other hand, reveal a newfound and expressive maturity evocative of the Gothic tenor of contemporary Venetian sculpture, and they are prophetic of the artist's celebrated (and now mainly lost) *Paradise* for the Palazzo Ducale in Venice of 1365-1368<sup>2</sup>. The biblical episodes convey, for their part, an acute psychological observation and an innovative, even theatrical presentation, aided by a characteristically lively architectural invention that distinguishes Guariento from Giotto, even as it recalls his more famous Trecento predecessor (Fig. 1).

Two themes are at least as important as Guariento's striking, even idiosyncratic formal language: first, the question of the reconstruction of the chapel's interior, and, second, the theological intellection governing the decoration as a whole. In 1765, before the panels were dismantled, they were described as located on the ceiling ("soffitto") with the Virgin at the center and the Evangelists at the four corners ("ai quattro angoli"). Later scholars have proposed two solutions for the relationship between the frescoes and panels, neither of which seem to have a precedent: first, that there was a grand polyptych against one wall (though this is contrary to the eighteenth-century evidence), and, second, that the panels comprised a ceiling design within an encompassing vaulted scheme. In this second arrangement, the Virgin would have been located as a kind of keystone at the center. In this hypothetical context, four trapezoidal panels were situated within sections of the vault defined by its ribs<sup>3</sup>.

Even less has been said about the choice of biblical narratives, let alone their remarkable relation to Guariento's carefully conceived definition of angelic nature. The chapel and any reconstruction of it invite consideration of two kinds of questions: the first has to do with the painted illusion of the celestial realms, with the observer's encounter with the angelic, and with the operations of color and light in the fictive heavens. These subjects bring to mind a challenge at the heart of artistic practice, namely the evocation of the otherworldly and invisible though persuasive naturalistic means<sup>4</sup>. The second,

[Prince] [wood, 83.8 x 52.1 cm.] [Bequest of Lucy Wallace Porter 1962.279]]. In the seventeenth century, the windows of the room were enlarged which damaged the frescoes. See also Banzato and Pellegrini, 71-72. In 1779, according to d'Arcais's entry in this volume, part of the palace complex, including the chapel, was ceded to the Academy, and at this time, one wall was demolished. In 1902, the panels entered the collection of the Museo Bottacin. Additional panels are in the Museo Civico Malaspina, Pavia, and the Castello del Catajo, Padua, while one of the *Cherubim* and an *Angel with a Shield and Lance* appeared for public sale in the 1980s. In the nineteenth century, other wood were recorded in private collections, possibly those same two panels.

<sup>2</sup> D'Arcais, 25-30; Banzato and Pellegrini, 14-15; 65-74; figs. 23-51.

<sup>3</sup> In her catalogue entry in Banzato and Pellegrini, 72-73, D'Arcais summarizes these proposals.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Shearman, 1987, 657-68; Shearman, 1992, chap. 4, "Domes," 149-91.

related – but more speculative – kind of question has to do with how apparently unlike artistic programs might be linked to one another; that is, how far can we go in positing congruities among works of art across time, even into the sixteenth century? From this perspective, Guariento, likely in consultation with his patrons and advisors, devised a scheme that presages some of the grand pictorial ensembles of the Renaissance.

Guariento's biblical episodes commenced at the upper level of the east wall, to the right of the altar. Visitors to the chapel likely entered through a doorway in this eastern wall, one that led to and from the palace's guest quarters. Only two fragments of fresco from the east wall survived the eighteenth-century renovations. These comprise the subjects of Adam and Eve before God (Gen. 1: 27), and Joseph interpreting the dreams of the Pharaoh (Gen. 41: 15-16), which probably belonged to the lower level. The frescoes opposite these, on the west wall, survive in better condition, beginning with the story of Noah (Gen. 9), Noah's benediction by God after the flood, and his subsequent drunkenness. At the center of the west wall (Fig. 1), we see Abraham's encounter with three angels (Gen. 18: 2). There follows the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19: 24) in a scene of devastation surveyed by two of Abraham's angels, after which we see the figure of Lot's wife – Lot having entertained the angels – transformed into a statue of salt (Gen. 19: 26). Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22: 9-14) succeeds this scene. After this, finally, we see Jacob in the company of Joseph, who is sold by his brothers into slavery (Gen. 37: 28). Below these events, on this wall and moving towards the altar at the north, the sequence begins with David's victory over Goliath, and the judgment of Solomon, followed by the abduction of Elijah (4 Kings 2: 11), who is sky-borne in a fiery chariot conveyed by angels. The chariot supplies an elevated reference perhaps to the Carrara wheel emblem. There follows the story of Daniel's three companions, Ananias, Misael, and Azarias, who refuse to worship an idol, despite Nebuchadnezzar's threat to throw them into a burning furnace; an angel must rescue them (Dan. 3: 17-49). Adjacent to this miracle, Judith decapitates Holofernes (Judith 13: 10)<sup>5</sup>.

In many of these scenes, Guariento emphasizes angelic witness and angelic intervention (with Abraham, Isaac, Elijah, and Ananias), and he also selects incidents in which heroic individual action (Abraham, Joseph, David, and Judith) will ensure the salvation of a chosen people. The painter's inclusion of the Book of Daniel is intriguing in this way since archangels play key roles as intermediaries, counselors, and saviors. Daniel's Book (7-12) privileges visionary encounters in which angelic communication plays an important part. The Archangel Gabriel must explain Daniel's second vision of the figures of animals to him; in the third vision, he appears again as Daniel beseeches God for the fulfillment of his promises of mercy to Jeremiah. Gabriel explains how the seventy years of desolation should be interpreted. Daniel's fourth vision

<sup>5</sup> Hueck, 67-69.

ends with a statement as to how the Archangel Michael, guardian angel of Israel, will save the people. The outcome of the Azarias narrative in Daniel also depended on a divine messenger's salvific intervention, thereby reinforcing the larger symbolic meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's story as a prefiguration of the universal kingdom of a Messiah.

The Carrara lords might have claimed that their rule of the Paduan territories was permitted by divine agency and divine right. For them, Guariento's themes were robustly affirming, particularly in light of the visit to the city of the future emperor, King Charles IV of Bohemia, in November, 1354. He lodged at the Carrara palace, known as the *Reggia*, as a guest of his loyal imperial vicars, and it is reasonable to suppose that he was a fitting beholder of these scenes<sup>6</sup>. The family's princely aspirations are reflected, too, in the tapestry-like articulation of the wall surface and in the elaborate settings of medieval townscapes, architectural ornament, and refinements of armor and costume.

Guariento's heavenly assembly of angels in the panels, by contrast with the frescoes, is a pictorial homily on their nine orders as formulated in the *Celestial Hierarchy* of the fifth-to-sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius. In descending order, the artist enumerates the Cherubim, Thrones, Dominations (or Dominions), Virtues, Powers, Princes (or Principalities), Archangels, and Angels. Oddly absent is the highest order of all, the Seraphim, though it is possible that they framed the damaged panel of the Virgin and Child. We begin with the lower Angels (Figs. 2-3) whose attributes are the small bodies of souls; the Archangels hold balances, weighing souls; the Princes hold shields and lances (Fig. 4), while the Powers walk chained demons. The Virtues grasp lilies (Fig. 5), and act in aid of humankind with miracles. The Thrones sit on marble seats, with scepters and orbs (Fig. 6), and ten seated Dominations have orbs and batons within rainbow mandorlas (Fig. 7).

Twenty-two of the panels are rectangular, while five have slanted sides or triangular shapes. Unfortunately, the panels have been cut down so that these variations may have no relation to their original context. The panels of angels of the same order are generally of the same height; the triangular panels are taller than these, and those showing groups of angels are the largest of all. Whereas all of the full-bodied angels are set against blue backgrounds, the paintings of the Virgin and Child and the Evangelists have gold backgrounds, as do two smaller images of the Cherubim. As befitting their association with Divine Wisdom, the Cherubim hold discs on which are inscribed "PLENITUDO

<sup>6</sup> Hueck, 63-75. Charles IV made Giacomo II da Carrara imperial vicar in 1348: "More than simply a token of Charles' friendship or symbol of prestige, the imperial vicariate brought legitimation of Carrara rule over Padua, broader authority in the affairs of northeast Italy, and the possibility of greater independence from Venice". Kohl, 1989, 93. On this same visit to Italy, Charles named Francesco da Carrara knight and vassal of the empire; he, in turn, knighted a number of his close Paduan allies. Charles received the Iron Crown in Milan in January, and the imperial crown in Rome in the following year. *Ibid.*, 97.

SIENCIE” (“fullness of knowledge”), after Pseudo-Dionysius. These two images, and perhaps others of their kind, may have framed the Virgin, flanking images of their superiors, the Seraphim. Perhaps most revealing is the fact that all of these figures are clearly not to be read in any way *da sotto in su*. Rather, judging from the directions of their bodies and the gentle, rhythmic inclinations of their heads, they are to be read from one side to another, left to right or right to left. They invite, then, to be read as if they had been set as a series of panels along the walls, above the frescoes and just below the ceiling proper.

This cycle of angels has no precedent in terms both of its scale and in terms of its relationship with a mural scheme, which begins, thematically, and according to Early Christian tradition, to the right of the altar. In Padua, however, there was an early Trecento precedent for the ranks of angels. This was in the Cappella Angelorum of Padua’s Augustinian church of the Eremitani. Here, an unknown Venetian painter executed a now-destroyed diagram of the orders of angels alongside the *Last Judgment*. These angels also followed the nine hierarchies of Pseudo-Dionysius<sup>7</sup>. At the Eremitani, as at the Reggia, Cherubim carried the Pseudo-Dionysian text on roundels on their chests; the Thrones were also seated on rainbows within mandorlas. The Virtues performed three kinds of miracles, including curing the infirm and exorcising demons. These angels stood before abbreviated natural forms – a plant, animals, and the ocean – each of which resonated with the sequence of Creation. Their type recalls the angels at hand during the days of Creation in the thirteenth-century mosaic cycle in the Creation cupola of the atrium of San Marco in Venice<sup>8</sup>. Even more apt is a comparison with the dramatic mid-Trecento orders of nimbed angels in the cupola known as the Dome of the Angels of the Baptistery of San Marco<sup>9</sup>. Intended as a mortuary chapel for Doge Andrea Dandolo (1343-1354), the iconography of the angels here recalls the

<sup>7</sup> Christe and Bonvin, 67-99. The authors note the different versions of the orders among Pseudo-Dionysius, Gregory the Great’s *Moralia*, and his *Homily 34*. The Eremitani cycle corresponds to Pseudo-Dionysius and *Homily 34*, although the *Homily* omitted the Dominions. The third through seventh orders vary among these sources.

<sup>8</sup> This is the hypothesis of Fogolari, 81-89. See Demus, Plates 40; 41; 44a. These show the six-winged Cherubim at the base of the cupola. Cf. also the subject of *Joseph Thrown into the Pit and Brethren Feasting* of the first Joseph cupola of the atrium of San Marco (Plate 52) with Guariento’s fresco of Joseph.

<sup>9</sup> At San Marco, and reading clockwise, a Cherub with ten wings holds a disk, inscribed “SIENCIE PLENITUDO;” a crowned Throne, seated on a globe, holds a liliated scepter and scroll (inscribed “TRONIS”); a Domination, who wears armor, transfixes a devil with his spear while holding scales containing a soul; he is inscribed “DOMINACIONES;” an Angel (inscribed “ANGELI”) and an Archangel (inscribed “ARKANGELO”) hold bound souls above a cave containing others; a Virtue, inscribed “VIRTUTES,” bears a scepter as he leans over a skeleton by a flaming rock and a spring; a Power (inscribed “POTESTATES”) binds a devil in chains; a Principality (on whose scroll is written “PRI[N]CIPATU[S]”) is dressed in armor and bears a sword. He is seated on a stool decorated with animal heads. Nearer the Cross on the altar below, a Seraph holds a scepter and



ninth-century mass still in use for the souls of the dead, in which God asks Michael to liberate the souls of the deceased. The Powers at the Eremitani wore priestly vestments such as dalmaticas and stoles, while the Princes, in armor, were lavishly armed (as they are in Venice). In the chapel at the Reggia, in the only other surviving panel of a group of angels, the Princes on their ribbon clouds are similarly equipped (Fig. 8)<sup>10</sup>.

In addition to the mosaics at San Marco, Guariento had, too, another magnificent precursor in the mid-thirteenth-century mosaics of the Baptistery of Florence. Though he was well-traveled, however, we have no firm evidence that he went to Tuscany. In the Baptistery, and flanking Christ (whose book reads “CREAVI DEU[S] ANGELOS”), are the orders of angels in pairs. They are also identified quite unusually by inscriptions ringing the days of Creation. As to the question of who might have had a role in collaborating with Guariento as a courtly advisor, Petrarch’s name inevitably emerges. In the late 1360s, and with his last patron, Francesco il Vecchio da Carrara, Petrarch likely contributed in an advisory capacity to the decoration of the palace’s famous Sala Virorum Illustrium. Perhaps he also had some part in the earlier scheme in the chapel and in its typological design<sup>11</sup>.

Later, in Venice, Guariento chose to depict angels again with great specificity in his glorious and largely lost *Paradise* in the Doge’s Palace (1365-1368). Here, too, the passage of the human soul was key. When Tintoretto came to paint his great canvas of c. 1588, a masterpiece that supplanted Guariento’s fire-damaged Venetian fresco, his angels guided the souls of the Blessed with a certain measure of emphasis and panache. He also portrayed representatives of the Nine Orders with their attributes, such as scales, orbs, and lilies. They did not, though, physically carry their charges, as did Guariento’s angels; rather, they guide, lead, and coax. This was the artist’s response, perhaps, to the mid-sixteenth-century climate of speculation on the matter of the soul’s justification.

It is tempting to see an Augustinian impulse behind each Trecento chapel’s decoration, particularly given the Augustinian presence in Padua. The city was, after all, a vibrant intellectual center in the later medieval period. The Augustinian, Giles of Rome (Egidio Romano), who was the author of several later thirteenth-century works on the measure, cognition, and composition of angels, had been in Padua in 1281 when he attended the meeting of the Augustinian General Chapter<sup>12</sup>. Among Giles’ studies was his treatment in at

scroll inscribed “SERAPHIN,” as he sits on a cushioned bench. Nine half-figured angels with torches encircle the blue sphere housing Christ in the center of the dome. He is flanked by two red and gold seraphim with six wings (following Isaiah 6: 1-2).

<sup>10</sup> At the Eremitani, the Archangels held balances for the weighing of souls, and they stood above the lowest order, the Angels, who waited to escort those judged to Heavenly Jerusalem. Cozzi, 30.

<sup>11</sup> See now Richards.

<sup>12</sup> From 1285 until 1291, Giles of Rome held the first chair of the Augustinian order at the University of Paris. Suarez-Nani, 77-178; 209-47.

least two treatises of the distinction between essence and existence as these categories had been defined by Thomas Aquinas. This distinction had far-reaching consequences for the intellectual framework of medieval angelology<sup>13</sup>. The Colonna family, who counted Giles among them, had also long been a sponsor of angelic schema in works of art. In the fifteenth century, at the family enclave outside Rome, at Riofreddo, in the vault of a small oratory, an artist who was likely the felicitously-named Arcangelo di Cola da Camerino frescoed a colorful diagram of the winged and whirling circles of heaven. This commission joined a better-known altarpiece for Rome's basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in which Masolino encircled the Virgin at her Assumption with a wreath of angels, each angelic order carefully identified by color and attribute<sup>14</sup>.

Guariento's accomplishment in Padua brings an added dimension to the character of Carrara patronage. While members of the family were enlightened patrons of the arts and promoted the city's local saints, they are not generally identified by historians and art historians as theologically learned or artistically adventurous. Yet the erudition and visual spectacle of the chapel's decoration presuppose patrons who were astute and discriminating, patrons who knew how to impress international visitors and local neighbors alike. In adumbrating other programs, namely those at the Eremitani and at Venice's great basilica, Guariento associated the Carrara with their influential neighbors: with their own town's powerful mendicant presence, and with the Venetian republic's long line of Doges. Within the walls of their residence, the Carrara claimed the protection of the angels in this life and the next, linking their right of rule to that of the Bible's kings and heroes who had been rescued in desperate and dangerous circumstances by God's elite emissaries. In this, the artist also raises questions for the modern scholar about center and periphery, questions that continue to inform our understanding of the history of the Veneto in the medieval period.

In this light, Benjamin G. Kohl's scholarship on Paduan artistic life is groundbreaking, for he frequently argued on behalf of the inimitable creative solutions of the city's artists<sup>15</sup>. Taking Ben's lead, we must think again about the tensions in late medieval Padua between signorial government and Carrara wealth. This tension and its impact on daily life in the city, so effectively encapsulated by him,

<sup>13</sup> Giles of Rome, *Theorems on Existence and Essence* (*Theoremata de esse et essentia*); Giles of Rome (Egidius Romanus), Ms., *Quaestiones disputatae de esse et essentia; Quaestiones de mensura angelorum* (France, 1325-1375), Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Cod. Vat. Lat. 847.

<sup>14</sup> See Roberts, 295-97.

<sup>15</sup> With characteristic straightforwardness, he set out the challenges facing the art historian at the beginning of his essay, Kohl, 2004, 176. He quoted Dorothy Whitelock's *The Audience of Beowulf* (1951): "The effect of any work of art depends not only on the author's power and skill, but also on what is already present in the minds of its hearers, or readers, or – in the case of the visual arts – its beholders". Ben brought to light the work of under-recognized artists, such as Giusto de' Menabuoi, as well as his Paduan patrons, chiefly Fina Buzzaccarini, consort of Francesco il Vecchio

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attain pictorial resolution in the Carrara household's place of worship, and in the salvific acts of the angels in Guariento's biblical subjects, as also in his angels' kindly almsgiving and decisive intervention in the afterlife.

da Carrara. See Kohl, 1989; and Kohl, 2001. He offered further glimpses of his integrated understanding of the relations between art and its social matrix in Kohl, 1998, especially in chaps. 5 and 6 ("Signorial Government and Carrara Wealth"; "Creating Carrara Affinity").



Fig. 1. Guariento di Arpo, Abraham's Meeting with Three Angels and the Sacrifice of Isaac (fresco, west wall, former chapel, Carrara Palace, Padua), by permission of Comune di Padova, Assessorato alla Cultura.



Fig. 2. Guariento di Arpo, Angel with a Soul (panel, 82 x 58 cm, Musei Civici, Padua), by permission of Comune di Padova, Assessorato alla Cultura.



Fig. 3. Guariento di Arpo, Angel Weighing Souls and Combatting a Demon (panel, 80 x 57 cm, Musei Civici, Padua), by permission of Comune di Padova, Assessorato alla Cultura.



Fig. 4. Guariento di Arpo, Armed Angel with Shield and Lance (Prince) (panel, 90 x 58 cm, Musei Civici, Padua), by permission of Comune di Padova, Assessorato alla Cultura.



Fig. 5. Guariento di Arpo, Angel with a Lily and Two Kneeling Figures (Virtue) (panel, 80 x 57 cm, Musei Civici, Padua), by permission of Comune di Padova, Assessorato alla Cultura.



Fig. 6. Guariento di Arpo, Angel Enthroned with Scepter and Orb (Throne) (panel, 90 x 57 cm, Musei Civici, Padua), by permission of Comune di Padova, Assessorato alla Cultura.





Fig. 7. Guariento di Arpo, Group of Ten Seated Angels with Lilies and Orbs (Dominations) (panel, 119 x 107 cm, Musei Civici, Padua), by permission of Comune di Padova, Assessorato alla Cultura.



Fig. 8. Guariento di Arpo, Group of Armed Angels (panel, 110 x 107 cm, Musei Civici, Padua), by permission of Comune di Padova, Assessorato alla Cultura.

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### Abstract

In the 1350s, the Paduan painter, Guariento di Arpo, completed an ambitious decorative scheme for the palatine chapel of the Reggia, the seat of Padua's ruling dynasty, the Carrara. On the chapel's walls, the artist depicted two tiers of subjects in fresco drawn from Scripture. Along with these, in a sequence of over thirty panel paintings, he portrayed a celestial vision: the Virgin and Child accompanied by Four Evangelists, surrounded by the hierarchies of angels – all with extraordinary coloristic effect. The program is a milestone in the artist's career, expressing not only his debt to fourteenth-century Venetian works and Byzantine models, but also a newfound maturity prophetic of the artist's celebrated (mainly lost) *Paradise* for Venice's Palazzo Ducale

## The Carrara Among the Angels in Trecento Padua

(1365-1368). In this essay, I reconstruct this distinctive program, and connect it to Carrara identity and the family's ambitions for Padua.

### *Keywords*

Middle Ages; 14<sup>th</sup> century; Padua; art; paintings; iconography; patronage; Guariento di Arpo; Carrara family

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