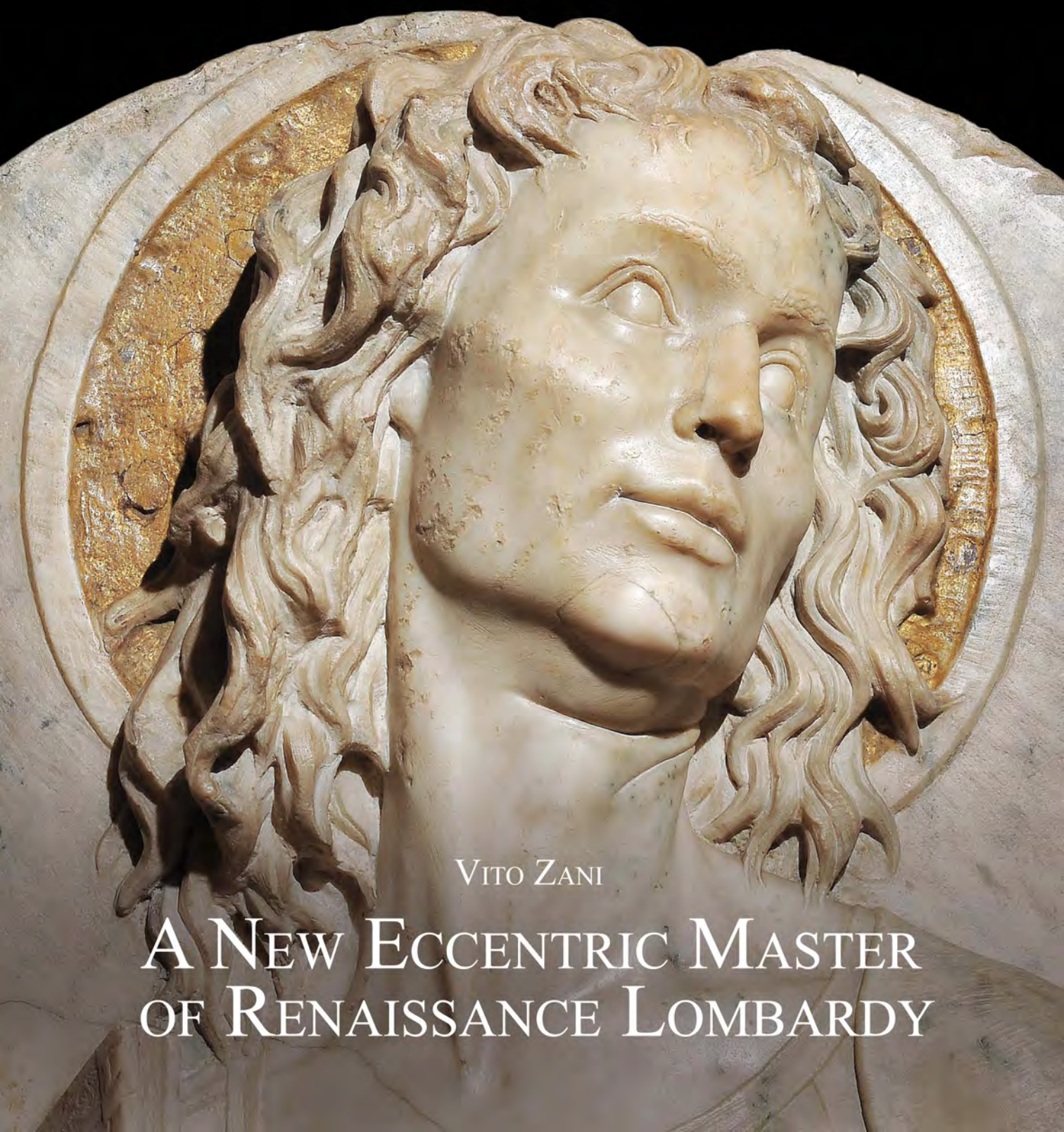




LONGARI arte MILANO

Early Italian and European Works of Art



VITO ZANI

A NEW ECCENTRIC MASTER  
OF RENAISSANCE LOMBARDY



**MASTER OF THE ALTAR FRONTAL**

**OF THE CERTOSA DI PAVIA**

(Alberto Maffioli da Carrara?)

*Saint John the Evangelist*

1495-1497

Medallion in Pomo marble (Sondrio)

cm 56 × 52





## A PARENTHESIS OF TUSCAN SCULPTURE IN NORTHERN ITALY AT THE TIME OF LUDOVICO IL MORO

Like a flower that has blushed unseen, for the first time this rather surprising relief has entered the public gaze, emerging from a private Italian collection where it has been kept since at least the first half of the twentieth century.

It has numerous common characteristics with eight medallions of the *Apostles* in the wall cornice of the presbytery of the church of San Maurizio at Ponte in Valtellina (Sondrio) (Fig. 1). These latter are all parts of a series that had a troubled beginning, and which may never have been completed, with some of the elements absent even from the outset. This seems to be the case of the *Saint John the Evangelist* presented here, with the still intact eyeballs lacking the finish found in the other *Apostles*, whose pupil recesses are filled with black stucco (still present in some of them), the same used in the space within the haloes of the figures.

The series of the *Apostles* was sculpted for the church's new presbytery, the building of which had been approved by the Council of the community of Ponte in 1495. In September of that year the work was entrusted to Giovanni Antonio Amadeo and Giacomo del Maino, who between March and April 1497 abandoned the work when it was far from finished, or possibly even only just begun. In June 1498 the commissioners of the work drew up a contract for its resumption and completion by Tommaso Rodari who put his younger brother Jacopo in charge of the site and the sculpting of the figures. The work was completed in 1500 as testified by a stone memorial plaque still in the presbytery.

Unfortunately the certainty of these particular details does not help us identify who in fact carved the sculptural works in the presbytery, which also include four large capitals with *Angels* that can still be seen on the pillars (Fig. 2). As things currently stand only one pair of these capitals, that of lesser quality, can be attributed to one of the documented masters, namely to Jacopo Rodari. It is natural to assume therefore that, as regards to the figurative sculptures, the part he played was limited to integrating work partially already delivered by Amadeo and Del Maino, which, however, was subcontracted to another master to whom can be attributed the eight *Apostles* medallions, the better two capitals and the medallion of *St. John the Evangelist* seen here.

This group of works betrays the hand of a technically very proficient sculptor, characterised by a certain eccentricity, which at times seems to flirt with the bizarre, using a style in Lombard key that only in parts reflects that of Amadeo, which was still dominant in the sculpture of the Duchy of Milan at that time.

Some stylistic details, such as the exuberant and intricate design of the hair, recur in some of the sculptural groups by Alberto Maffioli da Carrara and his many assistants from Tuscany and Lombardy. These include the altarpiece of the Duomo of Parma (circa 1486-1488) and the monks' lavabo of the Certosa di Pavia (1489-1491) (Fig. 3).

It is however another work of the Certosa di Pavia, its high altar frontal (Fig. 5), that provides the most compelling comparisons in its group of *Praying and Musical Putti*, with its correspondence to a similar repertoire of child figures used in the capitals at Ponte in Valtellina (Fig. 2). This was in all likelihood made for the consecration of the church of the Certosa in 1497. The frontal is a mysterious and anonymous masterpiece, undocumented, and that remained almost ignored by historians despite the fact that its high artistic merits had back in the nineteenth century aroused interest with honorific and imaginative attributions to the school of Michelangelo and Cristoforo Solari. It was



not until the late twentieth century that Rossana Bossaglia recognised the relationship between the frontal and some parts of the lunette with *The Washing of the Feet* in the lavabo of the Certosa commissioned to Alberto Maffioli, and the fact that they were most likely carved by the same hand.

Close examination of the frontal indicates that it followed the Tuscan tradition, while there are also precise references to the “cantoria” (singing gallery) of Luca della Robbia for the Duomo of Florence (1431-1438, now in the Museo dell’Opera del Duomo) and the famous statue of *The Young Saint John the Baptist* by Antonio Rossellino for the Baptistry of Florence (1477, now in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello). The central medallion, depicting the *Pietà with Mary, Saint John the Evangelist and the Angels* (already reproduced in an engraving in Charles Perkins’ book of 1868 on Italian sculpture) also stands out as being wholly outside the Lombard tradition, presenting a series of references to the Tuscan paintings of Ghirlandaio, Perugino and Filippino Lippi.

While it seems likely that the frontal is a work designed by Alberto Maffioli, it would seem quite clear that the actual artist had been involved a few years earlier in the production of the scene in the lunette of the lavabo. The state of current knowledge does not enable us to establish whether it was the work of Alberto himself, since his personal signature technique has not yet been identified with certainty in the numerous sculptural parts of the monumental works he executed with several Lombard and Tuscan assistants.

The few works that we are sure are by his own hand have elements of portraiture, such as the profile of Bernardino da Feltre in the altarpiece of Parma, 1486-1488, and the statues of Francesco Sforza and Bianca Maria Visconti in the Museo Civico of Vicenza, built for the facade of the Duomo of Cremona between 1491 and 1494. These do not provide extensive examples of his more general figurative style, nor do they offer examples of basic features of his working style such as the rendition of drapery. The extensive studies by Alessandra Talignani on Alberto Maffioli, part of which published recently and part now going to press, have greatly added to our knowledge of this itinerant artist who debuted, according to present data, with the monumental work of the altarpiece of Parma. In 1489 he received the commission for the lavabo of the Certosa di Pavia, and in 1491 for the renovation of the facade of the Duomo of Cremona, though he abandoned this work before its completion in 1494. No other details of his working life are known until the last record of the artist in Genoa in 1499, when he was about to set sail for Spain. His arrival in Lombardy coincided with a great openness there to the more modern classicism rooted in Venetian art and that of central Italy, encouraged by the taste of Ludovico il Moro. Such work was particularly focussed at the site of the Certosa di Pavia. This setting, in which Bramante and Leonardo lived and worked for some years, also saw the arrival of Cristoforo Solari and Gian Cristoforo Romano, while the monks of the Certosa commissioned altarpieces to Bartolomeo Montagna, Pietro Perugino and Filippino Lippi; this last work, meant for the same high altar of the frontal, was unfortunately never delivered.

All of this explains the strong Tuscan feel to the frontal, and particularly to the medallion with the *Deposition*, replete with references to Florentine painting, horizons to which Pietro Perugino also gravitated at that time. Similarly, in the series of medallions with *Apostles* of Ponte in Valtellina, this newly exhibited *Saint John the Evangelist* embodies references to Tuscan painting, reinterpreted as an extreme extension of the formula adopted by Perugino. The style is very reminiscent of the







reinterpretation by Luca Signorelli in the *Sant'Onofrio Altarpiece* for the Duomo of Perugia of 1484, now in the local museum (Fig. 4).

The medallion of *St. John the Evangelist* can thus be seen as emblematic of that most sophisticated and modern taste in art in late fifteenth century Lombardy, and as a quite unexpected climax of Tuscan art taking place in the Duchy of Milan. Like the other medallions of the series at Ponte in Valtellina, this work reflects the style of the much more famous, numerous and damaged series of busts of *Saints* outside the tribune of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, which, although lacking documentary records, surely dates from the same time as the work in Valtellina and was probably produced in part by the same master or the same workshop.

Vito Zani

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Fig. 1 - Master of the Altar Frontal of the Certosa di Pavia (Alberto Maffioli da Carrara?), Saint Bartholomew, 1495-1497, Ponte in Valtellina, Church of San Maurizio

Fig. 2 - Master of the Altar Frontal of the Certosa di Pavia (Alberto Maffioli da Carrara?), Capital with Figures (detail), 1495-1497, Ponte in Valtellina, Church of San Maurizio





Fig. 3 - Assistant of Alberto Maffioli da Carrara  
*The Washing of the Feet* (detail), 1489-1491,  
Pavia, Certosa di Pavia



Fig. 4 - Luca Signorelli,  
*Sant'Onofrio Altarpiece* (detail), 1484,  
Perugia, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo



Fig. 5 - Master of the Altar Frontal of the Certosa di Pavia  
(Alberto Maffioli da Carrara?) and assistants,  
*Altar Frontal*, circa 1497,  
Pavia, Certosa di Pavia

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