INTERVIEW TO DR. DI GRAZIA

The chapel that is hosting us today is the Santa Maria a piazza and could be defined as a true Camera picta, being entirely decorated. Among the frescoes, we can identify a huge Archangel Michael, the 12 apostles, and a crucifixion scene. However, there is no clear iconographic continuity in this small chapel, and the space dedicated to each story is not evenly distributed.

Thus, we have the coexistence of a large Archangel Michael compared to scenes that are evidently smaller in size. The frescoes, despite the ambiguity of sources, can be dated to the mid-14th century, around the first and second halves of the 1300s. The ambiguity of sources does not allow for a clear understanding of the origin of these frescoes.

This can be deduced either from an observation of the frescoes themselves or from the study of their morphological evolution.

From this observation, we can practically notice that the master of the stories of Santa Maria a Piazza was undoubtedly a painter who had acquired the new dictates of painting that were emerging around the mid-1300s, paving the way towards the development of the new figurative language that would later explode with Humanism and, consequently, the Renaissance.

We see a complete overcoming of the dictates of Byzantine painting that had characterized art in general until this moment. There is a surpassing of the two-dimensionality, icasticity, and hieratic nature of the figures. The greater awareness that is acquired is precisely related to the concept of THREE-DIMENSIONALITY, meaning that the space to be painted is no longer perceived solely through two dimensions (height and width), but is conceived in its depth.

Clearly, this depth is achieved not through arithmetic or geometric criteria, as it would take until Piero della Francesca in the first half of the 1500s for such treatment to emerge. Instead, this three-dimensionality is achieved through expedients related to both color and design. Hence, we have a darker background, surpassing the golden background, because the dark background allows for a greater perception of the materiality of depth. Similarly, the figures are no longer frontal and two-dimensional but are placed in rotation.

This rotation not only acquires greater naturalism but also conveys a more markedly emotional connotation to the figures. The master of Santa Maria a Piazza is seen as a pupil of Pietro Cavallini.

Pietro Cavallini is an artist who, unfortunately, has been somewhat overshadowed throughout his life. He has been relegated to a niche author, but in reality, this is not the case.

Pietro Cavallini is one of the pioneers and founders of the Roman school, which, along with the Florentine school, contributed to the revolution of the figurative language we mentioned earlier. The two schools were in competition for a long time because each claimed primacy over the renewed language of painting and believed to have influenced the other. In reality, they developed almost simultaneously, and the two schools eventually merged their observations and experiences.

At the most significant and important workshop of San Francesco in Assisi, within the architectural complex of San Francesco in Assisi, Pietro Cavallini is placed as a niche author because the historiography, for a long time, looked exclusively at Vasari.

Vasari’s interpretation of this painter was taken into account because Vasari was Florentine and naturally claimed the primacy of the Florentine school over the Roman school, reducing Cavallini to an epigone of Giotto. Many want to identify Giotto himself as the master who may have inspired the works in Aversa. However, we do not have precise sources to credit either hypothesis.

The point is, when considering a chronological comparison, both hypotheses are plausible. Because Pietro Cavallini, who was slightly older than Giotto, was practically in Naples in 1308, and Giotto would be in Naples in 1328. Pietro Cavallini worked in Naples at the Brancacci Chapel in the Church of San Domenico Maggiore, while Giotto worked at Santa Chiara. So, both could have been sources of inspiration for the painter in Aversa.

It should be noted that during the 1300s, Aversa received significant attention during the reign of Charles II of Anjou, who favored the city’s revival. Charles II promoted the reconstruction of existing churches and invited religious orders to settle in Aversa, creating a conducive environment for artistic production.

In summary, the text describes the Santa Maria a Piazza chapel adorned with frescoes that reflect the new artistic trends of the 14th century, possibly influenced by the painter Pietro Cavallini. During the reign of Charles II of Anjou, Aversa experienced a period of artistic revival.