Massimiliano Soldani Benzi
(Montevarchi, 1656 – 1740)

*The mystical marriage of Saint Rosa of Lima*

Terracotta, 48.5 x 35 cm

Dated, upper margin of the terracotta: *14 Di Settembre Anno 1681*
This terracotta relief portrays the same composition as one of two metal reliefs (most likely bronze lamina) set against an azure background illustrating the *Life of Saint Rosa of Lima*, today held in the Monastery of Las Descalzas Reales, Madrid (fig. 1). Attributed by Jennifer Montagu to the Maltese sculptor Melchior Cafà (1636-1667), these works were published and their iconography analysed by Tomaso Montanari. Drawing on the *Breve ristretto della vita meravigliosa della venerabile serva di Dio Rosa di Santa Maria* by the Dominican Giovan Domenico Leoni (Rome 1665), Montanari identified the subject of the two reliefs as the *Matrimonio Mistico* and the *Visione delle Rose di Santa Rosa da Lima*. The former – the Mystic Marriage – portrays an episode that occurred while the lay Dominican was still a young girl: one Palm Sunday, as Rosa was attending services for the celebration of the feast day, the sacristan who was distributing the palms among the faithful somehow missed the child. Rosa believed it to be punishment for some shortcoming of her own, so as the procession neared the statue of the Blessed Virgin, she prayed for forgiveness. Leoni goes on to narrate that Rosa then saw the Blessed Virgin smile at her and that: ...touched, she took heart and beseeched Mary to give her an everlasting palm. She then saw the Virgin turn to the Child Jesus as if to ask a favour: to grant Him to the girl in lieu of a palm [...] Now, who can truly comprehend, or explain the joy, the ecstasy Rosa felt when she heard Him call her His divine spouse.

In the relief, Rosa reaches out her hand to the Child Jesus in much the same manner as that depicted in traditional iconography regarding the mystic marriage of Saint Catherine. Moreover, exactly as Leoni describes it, it seems that the Child Jesus is being offered by the Blessed Virgin to the child Rosa

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1 The terracotta is perfectly conserved; the vertical diameter of the oval 48.5 cm, its horizontal diameter 35 cm.
3 Jennifer Montagu brought the two reliefs to the attention of Elena Bianca di Gioia who mentioned them in her catalogue regarding 17th sculptures held in the Museo di Roma (*Le collezioni di scultura del Museo di Roma. Il Seicento*, Rome 2002, pp. 180-181); they were then published by Tomaso Montanari (2006 cit.).
4 Excerpt taken from transcript of text by Leoni, provided by Montanari 2006, pp. 133-134.
who accepts as true the granting of her Heavenly Creator as her betrothed in the stead of the eternal palm branch she had requested.

The terracotta here considered re-proposes, albeit with several important variations, the theme of the first of the two Madrilenian reliefs: the primary difference being the presence of a posy of roses lying on the step where the saint is kneeling – an element that makes it possible to identify the saint as the lay South American Dominican. While the corner segments between the rectangular frame and the scene illustrated in the oval abound with rose garlands in the two Madrid reliefs, the here-discussed terracotta presents one solitary spray of flowers lying next to the saint identifying her as Rosa of Lima. Conversely, roses are totally absent from the only other four known versions of this invention: one a terracotta held at the Palazzo Barberini Galleria Nazionale d’Arte antica (Fig. 2); another in marble housed at the Museo di Roma (Fig. 3); a third, a metal relief formerly in the church Santa Maria della Scala in Rome (Fig. 4); and the last, unpublished, once belonging to Carlo Montanaro\(^5\). (Fig. 5)

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\(^5\) The dimensions of the relief executed in gilt bronze on lapis lazuli, formerly belonging to Carlo Montanaro as a circa 1700 Roman work, are unknown to me. Regarding the other three, see Di Gioia 2002, pp. 176-181 who affirms all three to be derivations of a lost model by Cafà.
The ascription of this invention to Cafà, along with its proper iconographic identification, is to be credited to Antonia Nava Cellini. In her acclaimed 1956 critical essay on the Maltese sculptor, she was the first to identify the relief, at that time still in the sacristy of the Roman church Santa Maria della Scala, pointing out its iconographic similarities to a drawing by Cafà held in the Louvre6. (Fig. 6) Transcripts of the inventory of the Lombard sculptor Ercole Ferrata’s workshop compiled on his death in 1686 provided further crucial information: “two bas-reliefs in wax by Melchior representing Saint Rosa with the Madonna” and again, “a bas-relief of Saint Rosa by Melchior”7. In 1973, Rudolph Preimesberger put forward the hypothesis that the wax models might have been preparatory for two monumental marble reliefs that were to have flanked the Ecstasy of Saint Catherine sculpted by the same Cafà for the high altar of the church Santa Caterina a Magnanapoli (c 1665) in Rome; however, it was not until the following century that Pietro Bracci would execute two reliefs representing Saint Rosa of Lima and Saint Agnes of Montepulciano8.

Rosa was beatified a year after the death in 1667 of the then thirty-year-old Cafà,; in 1671 she is canonised and became the first saint of the New World. As early as 1665 – the same year in which Leoni published his Breve ristretto – the sculptor signed and dated his statue of Rosa executed for the church San Domenico in Lima. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the two compositions can be

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6 A. Nava Cellini, Contributi a Melchior Caffà, in ‘Paragone’, 83, 1956, pp. 17-31
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On the contrary, the terracotta here under discussion presents extremely precise dating, inscribed in clay along the upper margin of the frame: “14 Di Setembre Anno1681”. Assuming that the other examples cited here of this invention (marble, terracotta and bronzes) can be placed on a time line starting in 1665 and ending in 1671 – the year Rosa was officially declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church – this terracotta is instead executed a good ten years after the celebration of the closure of the canonisation process. Seeing as how Cafà had died years earlier, this terracotta can only be traced back to the atelier of the artist who shared work space with the Maltese Maestro during his years in Rome; the heir-apparent to his models: Ercole Ferrata. Nevertheless, it is rather unlikely that
the execution of this terracotta is to be assigned to the Lombard artist by reason of the peculiarity of its inscription, so dissimilar to the majority of other 17th century Roman terracotta works. In all likelihood, it is the result of some artistic exercise; or rather, a study, a variation on a theme or of a model at the time held in the workshop of the sculptor.

In 1673, Ferrata, together with the painter Ciro Ferri – chief pupil and successor of Pietro da Cortona – was charged by the Grand Duke Cosimo III de’ Medici with the task of educating young Florentine sculptors sent to the Eternal City to further their studies and complete their training undertaken at the same School of Art instituted by the Grand Duke himself. In fact, the 1670s saw artists of the calibre of Giovan Battista Foggini and Carlo Marcellini study under the expert guidance and supervision of the then elderly Ferrata. However, the School of Art’s days were numbered. As far as is known, in 1681 only two sculptors are recorded as being in residence in Rome: the relatively unknown Francesco Ciaminghi and the young Massimiliano Soldani Benzi (Montavarchi 1656 – Florence 1740). It is precisely the latter whose authorship is absolutely consistent with the elements that most characterise and best identify the terracotta under consideration. The unique decorative motif of a female head placed in the centre of a shell embellishing the upper portion of the oval frame and modelled from the same clay as that used for the relief is, for example, almost identical to that found in the wooden frames of two wax reliefs portraying episodes from the life of the Blessed Ambrose Sansedoni held in London at the Victoria and Albert Museum; two reliefs executed during the 1690s (Figs 7-8).
The complex architectonic setting is equally important: inscribed with a stylus in the background of the oval, this element is practically nonexistent in all other known versions of this composition, but one which does appear quite frequently in many works by the Florentine sculptor and precisely in the above cited London Sansedoni reliefs. Here a few, deft strokes are sufficient to create gracefully elegant architecture; masterfully incised, they define depth without resorting to lines of projection. No less eloquent is the management of the drapery: where Cafà’s execution is edgy and almost taut, our sculptor betrays a more fluid, considered approach. Lastly, even the two *puttini* holding the cartouche as they flutter among the clouds seem to be an adjunct if compared to Cafà’s original prototype – at least as can be discerned from the Madrid reliefs. However, and in all honesty, the possibility that there were putti among the clouds in the missing wax model by Cafà cannot be excluded. In fact, they appear – even if resolved in a different manner – in a second drawing by Cafà of the this same subject today held at the Albertina in Vienna⁹ (Fig. 98); while those in the relief formerly housed in *Santa Maria della Scala* and in that held by the *Museo di Roma* appear quite similar to the putti in our terracotta. The latter presents many similarities to our work in the architecture, albeit more simplified in nature. One is tempted to wonder if this marble relief might even be a derivation of our terracotta relief. In any case, the two putti in the terracotta can easily be likened to analogous passages that appear in many other reliefs executed by Soldani; beginning with those in his bronze *Transito di San Giuseppe* held in the Bargello Museum and continuing with others in a set representing Allegories of the Four Seasons – bas-relief like ours – executed between 1708 and 1711 for Prince Ferdinando de’ Medici to present to the Elector Palatine, today housed at the Bayerische Nationalmuseum in Munich (Fig 10). Massimiliano arrived in Rome in March 1678; in February 1681 he made the acquaintance of Queen Christina of Sweden through Baciccio – the painter had asked Soldani to execute “a portrait of the Queen of Sweden”. In the following months the Florentine did, in fact, execute a medal with the portrait of the Queen. However, later that same summer, in deference to Grand Duke Cosimo III de’ Medici, the sculptor severed all professional ties with the Queen¹¹.

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¹¹ A letter sent from Rome to Florence on 13 August 1681 informed the Medici court that the artist had ceased to be in the employment of the Queen, specifying that Soldani: “was no longer to be seen at the Queen’s Palace, nor was he called to attendance by Her Highness” (cf. Lankheit 1962, p. 261, doc. 179).
Nevertheless, it is highly probable that during his service to Christina the artist had the opportunity to admire among the Queen’s collections a particularly important version of the *Mystic Marriage of Saint Rosa of Lima*, one very likely traceable to a model by Cafà; i.e.:

a portrait of Saint Rosa and the Most Blessed Virgin holding our Lord Jesus Christ in her arms, cast in silver; set on aventurine stone; a palm and a half tall, a quarter and a palm wide; its frame in ebony with silver filaments; mixed porphyry; four silver, rose-shaped fastenings – one placed centre of each of the four sides of said frame\(^{12}\).

In Rome, in Ferrata’s workshop, Soldani most assuredly had the chance to study this important composition in its wax model form by Cafà, as well he must have seen its version in precious metal, part of the Queen’s private collection. In fact, one of the sculptor’s earliest biographers, Prospero Maria Conti, described Soldani during his sojourn in Rome as: “indefatigable he was in his Study, untiringly he worked, drew and modelled the most precious works of Art that can be found in this city, Caput Mundi”\(^{13}\).

\(^{12}\) The passage is taken from the inventory of the properties and possessions of Christina upon the death of the queen in 1689, cf. Montanari 2006, p. 137.

\(^{13}\) cf. Lankheit 1962, p. 241, doc. 51.
Currently, the only evidence we have of Soldani’s years in Rome are in the form of medals\textsuperscript{14} while his earliest sculptures are to be dated to the years following this Roman interlude when he had already returned to Florence, after an important sojourn in Paris in 1682. Sources indicate various sculptures executed during his youth, such as the “arm-long putto in terracotta modelled from real-life” completed before he set off for Rome\textsuperscript{15} or also the “model in Wax of a Saint Benedict” a bas-relief sent from Rome to Florence a few short days after the execution of the relief here discussed: 20 September 1681\textsuperscript{16}. Furthermore, in the months immediately following this event “Soldani having, much to his regret, returned to Florence, executed for his Prince several Bas-reliefs, among which the most beautiful Beheading of St. John the Baptist, for which the Grand Duke awarded him Quarters in the Casino of S. Marco”\textsuperscript{17}. All of these works are long lost, leaving the Mystic marriage of Saint Rosa here presented as the sole candidate for the honour of earliest sculpture by Massimiliano Soldani known today.

Edited by Prof. Andrea Bacchi

\textsuperscript{15} cf. Lankheit 1962, p. 241, doc. 51
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