

PIER LEONE GHEZZI – PAINTER, CARICATURIST AND CARD-MAKER

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Painters and Card-makers

Usually, there is a remarkable distinction between the skill in producing playing cards and that required for artistic works in general. Cards are commonly engraved and coloured in such a rough way that no specialist of fine arts would take them seriously into account; they might only attract the attention of some expert, looking for popular images or peculiar folk products. There are exceptions, however, to begin with Visconti tarots – to them many papers have been devoted where the typical jargon of art critics is widely and often haughtily employed. Even if the identity of the real author is under discussion, nobody doubts that a skilled painter was responsible for these works. Later on, the same thing happened several times, from Mantegna tarots to examples by such recent painters as Salvador Dalí.

Here, I would report another case, which does not seem to have become familiar to the experts, even though all the elements involved have already been provided and discussed, separately, in the histories of fine arts and of playing-cards. In the treatises devoted to the Italian painters of the 18th century, Pier Leone Ghezzi is necessarily present. In the histories of playing cards, Albani cards are sometimes quoted and shown. However, I know only a single short article, which somewhat bridges the two fields. Let us therefore begin with a summary of this article, written more than a century ago and fully forgotten now.

After an introduction on the general history of playing cards, Marchese Raffaelli states that Pier Leone Ghezzi should be more widely remembered among so many renowned artists and cardmakers. He was not a simple cardmaker but rather a painter, particularly appreciated as a caricaturist (a collection of 460 sheets with his works having been acquired in an auction by the Cabinet of the Elector of Saxony). He also produced several interesting copper engravings, among which his playing cards should represent one of the first works. They were drawn at request of Cardinal Annibale Albani, his patron. These cards were so successful that Cardinal Albani sent several packs also to Joseph I, the Emperor of Portugal. Among noblemen, this production of cards was much sought after: along with the packs for the Albani family, identical packs were made for other noble families, simply using their own coats of arms as an illustration for the backs.

I have considered useful to gather in the following some further information, and a few examples, on the various artistic productions of Pier Leone Ghezzi (Rome, 1674-1755), from church paintings and caricatures up to the playing cards of our specific interest.

Ghezzi – The Painter

In treatises of the history of painting, there are descriptions of Ghezzi works. Not surprisingly, a few monographs have been published specifically illustrating his artistic activity. From the most recent ones (Lo Bianco, Martinelli), a lot of references can be traced. For our purposes, an old report from *Bryan's Dictionary* may suffice: “This painter was the son of Giuseppe Ghezzi, and studied under his father, whom he surpassed. In conjunction with L.Garzi, F.Trevisani and B.Luti, he was employed by Benedict XIV to paint the Prophets in San Giovanni in Laterano, and other works. He was also employed in several considerable works by the Duke of Parma, who conferred on him the order of the Golden Spur. But he was most celebrated for his talent in caricature, and his works of that description are numerous in the collections at Rome. We have a few etchings by him, executed in a clear, neat style, from his own designs, and after the work of his father.”

Giuseppe Ghezzi came to Rome from the Marches and became a very influential personage in the Roman artistic environment of the time (being for decades the Secretary of the St.Luca

Academy). His son Pier Leone could thus find an easy path for his early artistic activity, including works for churches, portraits, and so on. However, in the course of time the style of Pier Leone became less academic and the number of his works did not increase as much as could be expected. On Ghezzi the painter, the monograph by Lo Bianco describes about one hundred works.



Fig. 1: Pier Leone Ghezzi. Oil painting with a Miracle of San Filippo Neri (Matelica)

As an example of his production in the religious field, Fig. 1 reproduces an oil painting kept in San Filippo church at Matelica (actual dimensions 173x173 cm). The miracle shown is that of San Filippo Neri who is saving Cardinal Orsini during the 1686 earthquake in Benevento. The Cardinal, in the middle-low part of the painting, has not the most clever look; anyway, he was by then archbishop of the town and was thereafter to become Pope under the name of Benedict XIII. The painting can be dated about 1728.

Ghezzi – The Caricaturist

We have seen that Ghezzi's caricatures were, and are, most appreciated. About them I would report a passage from a rather recent Sotheby's catalogue, "Pier Leone Ghezzi [...] was primarily a portrait and genre painter, and a draughtsman, but also had some success as a religious painter. His fame, particularly today, is due to his caricatures which can be found in many European museums. The caricatures are distinguished by the sureness of their line, typical of an artist with great experience of his medium, but always animated by a witty eye which notes not only the most significant facial details, but also the expressions, the bearing and the dress of the sitters. .. From his work emerges a picture of Roman life of the first half of the 18th Century, a blend of worldliness

and of sentiments, of public and private events, in which the characters, from the most powerful officials to the most humble servants, were involved. [...] his lively drawings complement the study of historical documents.”

Again, an example may be useful to get an idea of his production in this field and a Ghezzi's self-portrait is thus reproduced in Fig. 2. To justify the choice: in general, a self-portrait should represent one of the basic themes for a caricaturist, and the reported one allows us to visualise this card-maker, certainly out of the ordinary.



Fig.2: Pier Leone Ghezzi. Self-portrait (Rome)

In leafing through the art books, my impression has been that the critics of the figurative arts show the following approach to Ghezzi's production: some are interested in his caricatures, and practically neglect his paintings; vice versa, others are interested in his paintings, and neglect his caricatures. On the whole, it seems to me that his “common” production as an academic painter is

better considered nowadays than in the past. As far as I could check, the only common point among all the critics is that *everybody neglects his playing-cards*. I could just find a hint towards his appreciation of friends at card playing (even if with music as a go-between) in Sotheby's catalogue, "Ghezzi loved music and played the violin himself. ... Every Wednesday he opened his house to musicians, composers and singers, transforming it into an academy of music. Occasionally the gatherings were an excuse to play cards with friends, as Ghezzi admits in a note on a drawing in the Gabinetto Nazionale delle Stampe (vol. 2606, F.N.4592)."

Ghezzi – His Playing Cards

Thus, if we wish to know something else about his playing cards, we must turn to "our" books. In fact, in several of the books better known to playing-card collectors, there is some essential description of Albani cards, even though information on their maker is lacking, as we can verify in the following.

London packs. Two Ghezzi packs are kept in the British Museum and have been described several times. Let us review the most relevant evidence and comments on these cards.

Vol. 3 of Lady Schreiber catalogue shows drawings of these cards on pls. 63 and 64 and has on p. 12 the following text, which represents the main source for later descriptions: "*Albani Cards*. This pack of cards is carefully engraved, somewhat in the style of the later Minchiate in Plates 51-55. Each suit consists of King, Cavalier (represented by a horse only), Knave as a man in armour, and 7 to Ace. It was probably therefore for playing at Ombre. On many of the designs the shield of the Albani family appears, azure a fesse between an etoile in chief and a mount in base or sometimes the etoile alone, or the cross of Malta. On the backs of all the cards is the coat of arms of Albani under a coronet with the cross of a Knight of Malta, and the inscription "Urbino," the Roman branch of the Albani family having come from that city. The family was brought into prominence by the elevation of Cardinal Albani to the Papal chair as Clement XI, 1700-21. This back is given at the bottom of Plate 63. There is in the collection another pack from the same plates, but on the backs is a different coat, being that of the Albani impaling a bull passant on a terrace (see Plate 64). This second coat would do for the arms of Ondedei of Pesaro, and we find that Orazio Albani, the Pope's brother, married Bernardina Ondedei, and it is no doubt for him and his wife that these elegant cards were engraved. Two of his sons were created cardinals, Annibale in 1711, and Alessandro in 1721."

O'Donogue lists the two packs on pp. 18-8 among Italian cards. "No. 79. Urbino; 17th century. Complete pack, artistically engraved, with ornamental borders, the subjects treated in a fanciful manner. The knights are riderless horses and the knaves soldiers. The arms of Albani are represented on all the coin suitmarks, also on the shield held by the knave of clubs. No inscriptions. Backs decorated with the arms of Albani and inscribed "Urbino." 3 ½ x 2 in. No. 80. Urbino; 17th century. Complete pack, identical with the last in every respect except the arms on the back, which are Albani impaling Ondedei [These cards were probably engraved for Orazio Albani, brother of Pope Clement XI, and his wife Bernardina Ondedei.]"

Hoffmann reproduces in Fig. 69a the king of coins (with Albani coat of arms inserted in the suitmark), knave of cups, two of swords and two of clubs. The pair of vertical suitmarks in both the last cards are held by infants behaving in a way usually not pictured on playing cards, nor by church painters, but these were devoted to nobles and thus could well be somewhat out of the ordinary. Apart from the note with references, the only comment on Albani cards which I have been able to find in this valuable book, between pp. 17 and 18, says that the renowned Mitelli cards were not the only fine copper engravings of the 17th century.

Cincinnati pack. There is another Ghezzi hombre pack, which is for me easier to study, although kept so much more distantly. A brief description can be found in the book by Hargrave, p.

234: "A series of these hombre cards of the late 17th century are somewhat in the manner of the later minchiate cards. In each suit is a king, a cavalier represented by a horse only, and a knave as a man in armor, together with the numerals one to seven. On many of the designs the shield of the Albani family appears; it is also on the backs under a coronet with a cross of a Knight of Malta and the name Urbino. The cards are supposed to have been made for the Albany family. They are etchings, uncolored, and on many of them the artist's name is to be found, 'Pier Leone Ghezzi.'" Three cards are reproduced by Hargrave, and particularly the cavalier, valet, and king of clubs. The first is a riding horse, the clubs are of the Italian type looking like long sceptres, different from actual cudgels.



Fig.3: Pier Leone Ghezzi. Hombre cards (Cincinnati)

A few further specimens are reproduced here, Fig. 3. They have been selected first of all to show the inscription of the artist's name. As Hargrave noted, on many cards it is possible to read, *Pietro Leone Ghezzi inventò delineò e sculpi*, even though in some cases the writing is covered by the lower border. It is the Italian version of the more usual Latin expression (and this might explain the presence of *sculpi* – more similar to *sculpsit* – instead of the more correct *scolpi*). The inscription is seldom written in full, as in sword 3; more commonly it appears more or less abbreviated. This is a first difference with respect to the London cards. A second difference, not indicated by Hargrave, is that here the backs and fold-over borders are plain.

Marches packs. The link between Ghezzi and the Marches must be further emphasised – there were in Rome a succession of natives of the Marches following Pope Clement XI and his family. From the same region come, in 1880, Filippo Raffaelli, the writer of the article mentioned above, and Carlo Lozzi, the editor of the journal. Both of them directly knew Ghezzi's playing-cards and this further witness may be useful, even though I was not able to find out the actual packs involved. Lozzi owned in his private collection a pack of Ghezzi cards, well pictured and in fine conditions, bearing the arms of the Farnese family on their backs; I have no idea where this pack can be found now. On the other hand, Raffaelli was writing as the Librarian of Biblioteca Comunale (Public Library) at Fermo, where another pack was kept. In the article, this is described as very well preserved and, again, with backs different from the standard ones – showing the coat of arms of a family of princes unknown to Raffaelli. I have asked the Library for reproductions, but unfortunately nothing seems now to be known there about this Ghezzi pack.

Acknowledgements

This time, I must apologise for having lazily borrowed as much as I could from texts already written in English (be it recent or old, British or American). Figures are taken in case of art items from reproductions existing in *Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz*; in the case of cards, from originals in Cincinnati. Thanks are due to Gustavo Bertoli and to Ronald Decker for useful help.

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