

1463: CARDBMAKERS AND WOODBLOCKS ON TRIAL

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Introduction

This note can be considered as a continuation of a previous one, (1) which was structured as a three-stage rocket: we had there the first stage consisting in Böniger book, the second in Jacobsen book, the third in Hartt and Corti article.

The most useful information derived there precisely from the third stage mentioned. This may explain the fact that at the time I only focused my attention on the two pages that in Jacobsen book (2) are dedicated to painters of playing-cards. More information is however provided there in the Anhang part, toward the end of the book. The step backward that I have now to take is precisely to extract further information from that book, using its final part.

Florentine painters of playing cards

Jacobsen deals with the painters active in Florence in early Renaissance and divides them according to their main activity. It appears that many specialised sectors of the handicraft existed, even if one can easily imagine that most painters could be active at the same time in various of these sectors. Understandably, painters of playing cards were not among the most renowned artists of the time, but we can find there specialisations that can be even more unexpected, such as have been for me those of painters of arms or of tall church candles.

As for the painters of our specific interest we find on page 485 of the book the following complete list, to which I add – taken from the same book – their dates of birth and, when we do not know the year of their death, the last date in which they are found still alive.

Baldo di Piero di Antonio di Baldo (1425->1458)
 Donnino di Giovanni di Francesco (1370->1447)
 Filippo di Marco di Simone (1435->1458)
 Francesco di Gabriello di Nuccio
 Francesco di Piero (c1360->1410)
 Franco di Piero (1364->1433)
 Giovanni di Donnino di Giovanni (1405->1433)
 Giovanni di Franco di Piero (1426-1448)
 Iacopo di Poggino di Luca «Paparello» (1398-1481)
 Piero di Donnino di Giovanni (1413->1447)

I am certain that a few names can be added to this list, to begin with those already found by Zdekauer and/or Kristeller more than a century ago. For instance, Antonio di Luca, present in Catasto 1427; Antonio di Giovanni di Ser Francesco, who declared the possession of woodblocks in Catasto 1430; moreover, Benedetto di Antonio Spigliati, who is introduced by Jacobsen himself (see below) but absent in the list, because his activity is concentrated after the time interval studied.

It is likely that some further names can be soon added to the list. In particular, it is evident, as remarked by Jacobsen too, that part of these names can be regrouped into families, in which the sons first worked together with their father and then took his place in the job. Searching further along family members may probably provide further names.

However, I never found a list as long as Jacobsen's one in my studies on this topic. For all these artists, Jacobsen provides additional information, mainly family data derived from Catasto, which were

their estates and possessions, how was their family composed, and so on.

The last pages of the book are dedicated to schematic maps of Florence in various years, with marked the locations where painters lived and had their workshops. On the whole, in this book we find a lot of information collected together that may induce me to make another “step backward” later on, in order to recover further essential data of possible interest.

Now, I wish to halt my attention on a very particular case, involving painter Filippo di Marco, the maker of the triumphs documented in Cambini account books (1), till recently practically unknown to card historians,

Filippo – Benedetto suit

In his *Anhang* on Filippo di Marco, p. 552, Jacobsen reports a verdict (which had been found in notary archives of the time and communicated to him by Doris Carl) concluding a suit that Filippo had with Benedetto di Antonio Spigliati. (3) The date is stated as 28 febbraio 1462, but must be read as 1463, owing to the Florentine use of beginning the New Year *ab Incarnatione*, on 25 March.

Benedetto had been a co-worker of Filippo and their association had functioned for some time. At a given point their agreement breaks down and they come in front of the court. Benedetto requires some money that Filippo owes to him; Filippo demands that no less than seven woodblocks used in card making be given back to him, their owner.

The corresponding judgment is not as simple as we could expect. The judge, Angelo Del Pace, examines the account books of the company and concludes that indeed Benedetto has to receive 15 gold florins from Filippo, who is given one year time for settling this account. *Condemnamus dictum Pippum ad dandum et solvendum dicto Benedicto hinc ad unum annum proxime futurum dictam quantitatem florenorum XV auri.*

As soon as the amount is given, Benedetto must return the seven woodblocks to Filippo. *Item reperto quod dictus Benedictus habet penes se settem tabulas actas ad formandum cartas pro ludendo, vulgariter dicendo naibi, declararnus dictas settem tabulas pertinere et esse dicti Pippi,.. condemnamus dictum Benedictum ad dandum et restituendum...*

If the full year passes without payment, then the seven woodblocks remain as a property of Benedetto. *Et in casu quo dictus Pippus non solveret infra dictum tempus dicto Benedicto dictos florenos XV auri, in dicto casu elapso dicto tempore, ex nunc dictas settem tabulas adiudicamus dicto Benedicto pro dictis florenis XV auri.* (This part of the verdict has been inserted as a marginal note in the page.)

Up to here, everything is clear enough. There are however some complications now. The first is that in the course of this whole year Benedetto must allow that Filippo enters his house and uses the seven woodblocks for his work, whenever he so wishes. *Durante dicto anno dicte tabule sint penes dictum Benedictum et quod dictus Pippus durante dicto anno possit ire in domum dicti Benedicti ubi dictus Benedictus haberet dictas tabulas ad formandum cartas prout sibi placuerit, et quod dictus Benedictus non possit denegare dicto Pippo quod non formet dictas tabulas prout sibi placuerit.* (These meetings we can easily imagine as embarrassing enough.)

The second complication is that even if payment has occurred and soon after the woodblocks returned to their owner, the matter is not concluded: Filippo has to provide Benedetto with four woodblocks designed by himself, within eight further months. *Et ultra predicta, in casu quo dictus Filippus rehaberet dictas tabulas et postquam sibi tradite fuerint, condemnamus dictum Filippum ad designandum quatuor tabulas pro formando naibi et dare dicto Benedicto infra otto menses postquam rehabuerit dictas tabulas, videlicet otto menses postquam rehabuerit dictas tabulas.*

This is a rather strange, hardly Solomonic, decision. If the seven woodblocks could balance the fifteen florins in case the money was not given, I don't understand why the same woodblocks are worth

a lot more than the 15 florins if they are given: the final judgment sounds as if Filippo had to confer to Benedetto the 15 florins AND the four woodblocks (which I hardly can imagine that he could set up with special care).

We can stop here with the discussion on the judgment; after all, comments on the various verdicts have always been a recurrent topic for discussion, in every epoch. Let us instead use this debate for extracting a few indications of our specific interest.

Useful information from the verdict

The verdict is for us a useful event, in so far as it can help us in better understanding a few topics that are still debated among the various experts.

1) First of all, we learn that woodblocks were in common use for the production of playing cards. This cannot be considered a great news, because we knew that this was already the case, in Florence at least from the 1430 declaration to *Catasto* of Antonio di Giovanni (or from even earlier documents in Palermo). Here we get however further information, as follows.

2) The woodblocks in use are no less than seven. I am not able to imagine a card pack requiring such a high number of blocks to be printed. I prefer by far to imagine the simpler case that these blocks were used, in different groups, for given kinds of different card packs.

3) The number of four woodblocks that we find at the end of the description above is also indicative. It seems in this case to correspond to a minimum that allows a cardmaker to work with. If my reader knows my comment on Rosenwald cards (4), it is easy to understand how I imagine these four blocks to be; by the way, from Cambini account books, we know Filippo precisely as a maker of triumphs. To satisfy all disbelieving or sceptic experts, I can suggest an alternative possibility: to regard the four blocks as two pairs, suitable for printing two different kinds of “common” naibi packs, as “piccoli” and “grandi”.

4) Interesting is also the fact that the seven woodblocks were kept at home. Filippo had to come to Benedetto’s house if he wished to use the woodblocks. Probably, it had been there too that the same woodblocks had been used earlier, when the companionship was in action. This is an important indication as for the whole production system. Apparently, parts of the production could be “subcontracted”. We do not need now to discover a whole workshop, where playing cards were produced. (I have looked for one of them for years, while “wandering” through Florence in that time.) A given worker could make his part of the job at home, and then pass the object to another worker, who could make his part of the job at home, and so on. This may well explain why until now I could not see a group of these makers at work.

5) Filippo is not only a painter: if he must design four woodblocks for Benedetto, this means that he is able to do it, not only to paint the figures on the paper. Jacobsen reminds us that cardmakers were sometimes matriculated as “lignaioli” or “forzierinai”. Maybe Filippo could complete the job by himself, maybe he could seek assistance from a wood engraver, better probably if coming from South Germany. (It is also possible, on the other hand, that everyone in the job was able to do everything and the specialists were searched only in case of high demand, or for items of higher quality.)

6) In the Latin text, we find two words for indicating playing cards, *cartas* (or better *cartae* for readers familiar enough with correct Latin, and its nominative plural case) and *naibi*. This is neither a surprising, nor a new information. Somewhat interesting may however be the fact that still in 1463 *naibi* is indicated as the more popular word, *vulgariter dicendo*, trivially speaking.

Conclusion

We have extracted from the mentioned book on painters active in Florence an interesting list of

cardmakers for the first half of the 15th century. The main part of the present note deals however with a suit concerning woodblocks. Seven of them belong to Filippo di Marco, but are kept at home by Benedetto Spigliati. The former has to pay at least 15 gold florins to the latter in order to get the woodblocks back. Several parts of the verdict are discussed, and further information deduced, which for card experts may turn out the more useful, the less sceptic they are.

References

- (1) <http://trionfi.com/filippo-di-marco>.
- (2) Werner Jacobsen, *Die Maler von Florenz zu Beginn der Renaissance*. Dt. Kunstverl., München 2001.
- (3) ASFI, *Notarile Antecosimiano*, 19079, c. 212.
- (4) <http://trionfi.com/rosenwald-tarocchi-sheet>.