

Baglione's Account

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II

Baglione's Account

Evelyn Lincoln

We saw that the case for considering printmakers as artists rested on their expertise in *disegno*, and their role in making the works of the great(er) masters known to the wider world. Baglione draws painters and printmakers closer together by mentioning that some painters not only had their work made into prints, but perhaps made prints themselves. Although etchers and engravers in copper were the more prestigious printmakers, Baglione showed an unusual interest in woodblock cutting, providing an extended description of that craft in the life of the little-known Giovan Giorgio Nuvolstella. An active member of the Compagnia di San Giuseppe di Terrasanta from 1600 until his death in 1643, Baglione had personally associated with a wider variety of people involved with the arts—*battilori* (goldbeaters), *intagliatori* (engravers, carvers), *librari* (book and print sellers), and *musici* (musicians)—than he would have encountered at meetings of the Accademia, where he was equally deeply engaged.¹² The Compagnia admitted women as courtesy members, so he knew of the artist wives of other *confratelli*, although it is unclear if he ever met them. It is clear, however, that he did not know all the members of the Parasole family, none of whom appear in the confraternity's rosters. He would have met Giovanni Battista Raimondi, the renowned Arabist who ran the Medici Oriental Press, with whom Leonardo worked closely in the last decades of his life.¹³ Raimondi, who was deeply mourned by the confratelli at his death, was a friend of Girolama and Leonardo as well as an employer, and stood as godfather at the baptism of their daughter in 1589.¹⁴ In a few short paragraphs, Baglione not only provided the single notice of the Parasole family in the early modern literature on art, but also scrambled their relationships to each other in a way that deeply misrepresented the character of their work, and their

identities, for centuries to come.¹⁵ But this confusion is productive for understanding Girolama Parasole's conception of her work.

What can we learn about Girolama from Baglione's account, in which he never mentions her? Toward the end of the previous *vita*, he tells us that some of Giovanni Maggi's works had been made into woodblock prints by Paul Maupin, and probably knowing that Maupin and Leonardo Parasole had worked together, Baglione uses this as a bridge to the *Vita di Lionardo, Isabella, e Bernardino Parasoli*. These family members, whom he believes to be relevant to the progression of the arts of *intaglio*, are discussed as a group in his chapter on printmakers, even though Bernardino worked solely as a painter. Baglione writes: "Having mentioned wood carvings, I now present to memory Leonardo Parasole, Norcino, whose works were made in wood, who gained praise because in fact woodcutting is more dangerous and difficult than *intaglio* in copper." He begins with the early herbal, noting that Durante had been the physician of Sixtus V. He says that Leonardo's images were often supplied by Antonio Tempesta, including the pictures for the Arabic Gospels printed at the Medici Oriental Press, with special praise for its scholarly director Raimondi, the "grandissimo Letterato" who was so honored at his death by the artist's confraternity. He writes that Leonardo's son, Bernardino, had studied with the Cavalier d'Arpino, and while citing the frescoes he "colored with his own hand" in San Rocco, he can only say that he had died young, and "great things were hoped from him."¹⁶

In this brief notice, Baglione collapses the sisters-in-law Isabella and Girolama under the name of Isabella. The women were probably known to him only through hearsay, and only

Isabella's name had ever appeared in print. Isabella Catanea Parasole, whom he mistakenly takes to be Leonardo's wife and mother of his youngest son Bernardino, was the second wife of Leonardo's painter brother Rosato. She was one of many marriageable young women in danger of falling into prostitution who, under the modern initiatives of Catholic reform, had been rescued from that life and brought to the Augustinian convent of Santa Caterina dei Funari, where girls were taught needlework and provided with dowries.¹⁷ Rosato applied to the convent to marry Isabella in 1593, understanding the strength of the market for inventive ornamental patterns and the value of a well-educated, talented, industrious, and likely beautiful wife. Baglione seems to be completely unfamiliar with Leonardo's actual wife. As Leonardo was the son of a shoemaker, Girolama was the daughter of a hatmaker, also originally from Visso.¹⁸ Rosato left the family workshop the year after Leonardo to work as a mosaicist and decorative painter.¹⁹ He earned a living in decorative wall painting, making ephemeral decorations for festivals and, from 1602, as a mosaicist for the interior dome of Saint Peter's.²⁰ Although Rosato participated in at least some of the meetings of the Accademia di San Luca, Baglione never mentions him. However, he was the motivating force behind the first gorgeously illustrated model book of lace designs, printed in intricate white geometric patterns against a black background, that carried the name of his wife Isabella as the author (fig. 2.2). Appearing in 1595, it bore the graceful title *Specchio delle Virtuose Donne*, printed "ad'istantia di Rosato Parasole."²¹ Its long and appropriately courteous full-page dedication to the Duchess of Sermoneta shows that the new author was aware of the style and importance of the convention of placing a dedication at the beginning of a book.



Figure 2.2 Isabella Parasole, "Lavoro a punto reticella," in *Specchio delle Virtuose Donne, dove si vedono bellissimi lavori di punto in aria, reticella, di maglia, & piombini, disegnata da Isabella Catanea Parasole* (Rome, 1595), n.p., Bibliothèque nationale de France

It is most likely that the several ultimately famous lace pattern books authored by Isabella were designed, carved, and printed by members of the family and their associates working together. The Augustinian convent in which Isabella was taught specialized in training girls in the lucrative lace design that would make them useful to any artisanal family's economy, but there is no reason to assume that they were taught how to carve hard and dense boxwood with intricate patterns, something Baglione makes a point of saying is dangerous and difficult. The tiny white triangles and circles that make up the lace patterns are cut away from the surface of the block with small, sharp blades. Baglione wrote in his *vita* of Nuvolstella:

*The part that is not needed is excised, and the other, which is used, which remains there like a bas-relief, shows the images and represents stories; and the instrument for doing this is iron, which the Artisan handles to cut the work, and as he diminishes the material, the form grows, and the whole receives its perfection from the absence of these parts.*²²

Baglione says that Nuvolstella assisted Isabella in carving botanical images for Federico Cesi when she had trouble completing them. We know that it was Girolama who carved the botanical images, but Baglione's confusion helps us understand how intertwined the work of the two women would have been as they combined their skills to produce pattern books, explaining the invisibility of Girolama's unsigned but essential contribution to the projects.



Figure 2.3 Ludovico Curione, *Il modo di scrivere le cancellaresche corsive et altre maniere di lettere di Lodovico Curione. Intagliato in legno per Leonardo Parasole, Libro Primo* (Rome, 1586), n.p., Biblioteca Archiginnasio Bologna

The year Rosato left the family workshop, Leonardo contracted with the publishers of the herbal to carve, print, and sell a model book of intricate calligraphy by one of the top writing masters of the period, Ludovico Curione.²³ Curione's dedication to Cardinal d'Este could easily have been the model for Isabella's courteous dedication in her model book almost ten years later. Unusually in a printed handwriting book, some

calligraphy pages are rendered in white against a black background (fig. 2.3). The pages, carved seven years before Isabella joined the family, were framed with twirling flourishes in imitation of tapering and swelling pen lines, and the white-on-black imagery developed for these pages continued to be a

feature of Parasole print design. A picture begins to emerge of a family of woodblock carvers and decorators with connections to illustrated book printing, as well as to papal and aristocratic circles.