Grifo di Tancredi

Italian, active 1271 - 1303 (or possibly 1328)

BIOGRAPHY

Grifo must have been active in the profession of painter by 1271: in that year, he rented a workshop in Volterra together with Filippo di Jacopo. Therefore, his birth date probably should be placed before rather than after 1250. The same artist is likely the “Grifo di Tancredi” who was paid for work on painting the Fontana Maggiore in Perugia in 1281. By 1295, when he hired an apprentice for his shop, he had secured his residence in Florence. His enrollment in the Florentine painters’ guild can be placed in the period between 1297 and 1312. In 1303 he executed a now lost painting in the Palazzo Vecchio, commemorating a political event of the day. It seems unlikely that he can be identified with the Grifo, son of the late Tancredi da Montegonzi, cited in a document of 1328,[1] although it cannot be excluded, given the relative scarcity of the name. The fragmentary inscription on a portable triptych in the collection of the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres and now on loan to the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, conjecturally integrated as “…H[oc] OP[us] Q[uod] FEC[it] M[agister] GRIFUS FLorentinus,”[2] has enabled a small group of works hitherto assembled by Roberto Longhi (1974) under the conventional name of Master of San Gaggio to be attributed to the painter.[3] Grifo probably had been trained under the prolific artist strongly rooted in the traditions of pre-Cimabuesque Florentine painting known under the conventional name of the Magdalen Master. The two seem to have worked together in some enterprises.[4] Cimabue’s influence was to prove decisive in Grifo’s more advanced phase. In such late works as the Maestà from the monastery of San Gaggio near Florence (now in the Galleria dell’Accademia), Grifo seems to have been swayed by the influence of the Master of Santa Cecilia, recently identified with Gaddo Gaddi, head of an important workshop and one of the protagonists of fourteenth-century painting in Florence.[5]

Grifo di Tancredi is sometimes considered one of the first followers of Giotto (Florentine, c. 1265 - 1337), but his art exemplifies an alternative approach to that of his great contemporary. He started out from the lessons of Cimabue but developed further, aiming at an art of solemn and realistic composure, capable of expressing complex emotions. Sometimes he shows himself able to confer monumentality on his scenes, as in the fragmentary frescoes in the chapel of San Giacomo at
Castelpulci. His paintings in general do not lack the narrative clarity and the classical spirit that distinguish the works of Giotto, but he never achieved Giotto’s volumetric richness or mastery of perspective; the settings of Grifo’s narrative scenes reveal his difficulty in creating optically convincing settings around his figures.


The present writer has conjectured that the two artists also worked side by side in the fragmentary Maestà in the church of San Remigio in Florence. See also Ada Labriola, "Lo stato degli studi su Cimabue e un libro recente," Arte cristiana 88 (2000): 352 n. 51.


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BIBLIOGRAPHY


